

A Montessori Approach to Toilet Training

(As taken from Michael Olaf Lectures)

What is Montessori about?

What are we trying to do as educators?

“Follow the child.”

“Give the child the independence on the levels they can handle.”

The parent and teacher are there to assist the child. The Montessori Teacher trained at the 0-3 level is called the Assistant to Infancy. This is an appropriate label for all teachers of Montessori pedagogy. We are the **link** between the child and his or her environment. We are there to assist the child, not to do it for them.

What does this have to do with toilet training?

Moving away from Montessori and any other theory for a moment—

If we look to nature and to “following the child”, there are three things that no one can control, no matter how old you are: **sleep, eating, and toileting.**

Modern day living and technology, unfortunately manipulates and sometimes controls these patterns, causing all sorts of behaviour problems and nervous disorders. **We must look to the child.**

What will help the child to be successful?

Feeling wet

- The child must feel wet. Children never feel wet due to modern nappies.
- Cotton nappies and cotton pants allow the child to feel wet.
- Children have the ability to control their bladder from the time they can sit up. At this point the process of myelinization has taken place around the sphincter.
- Children who feel wet and dry (cotton pants/nappies) learn that the preferred condition is to be dry. Therefore they start to hold their urine for longer periods.

Changing children in appropriate locations

Always keep the potty and toileting activities in the same place. A potty that moves around the house confuses the child’s sense of order, making it unclear where the appropriate place to go to the toilet is.

Keeping them in touch with the reality of the situation

Show the children the dirty pair of pants/nappy, showing them where it should go. Very quickly they will begin to associate and understand the process. Often when adults change children it is all done so quickly that the child is not even aware of their bodily function. Therefore, taking time is necessary and the child should never be rushed.

Children need to be involved in this process

The child should assist in getting the clean pants/nappy and putting dirty pants/nappy in appropriate place. This gives the child the feeling of some power or control in this area. "I can do it, I can master my own body".

"Help me to help myself."

What should the adult do?

- We as adults must take ourselves out of this process once the child has the ability to do it for themselves.
- We must find ways to make them successful and feel confident, i.e. for children who walk, change them standing up, and use a low potty so the children can feel grounded, safe, and comfortable.
- We must never force a child to use a potty or toilet.
- We must never scold or over-congratulate.
- We must allow them the time to be successful. They need to learn through experience.

Going to the toilet is the most natural thing in the world to do. We must keep it in its proper place, e.g. avoid clapping and celebrating. Stick to **reality**: wet and dry, dirty and clean.

Toilet training does not start at age 2 or 3 as the advertising would have us believe. Toilet training starts at birth. It is preferable to use cotton pants/nappies so the baby feels wet and dry. Through this the baby internalizes and understands the process of going to the toilet. Unfortunately society does not find the use of cotton nappies acceptable anymore. We live in a disposable age of throw away and convenience.

What can we do as Montessorians to assist the child?

- Encourage parents to use cotton pants/nappies.
- Provide nappy services.
- Suggest manageable solutions.
- Use cheap disposable nappies, so the child feels wet.
- When people refuse to use cotton nappies, suggest cotton pants under the disposable nappy.
- Use disposable nappies for long journeys and sickness. Maybe bedtime?
- The use of cotton training pants for older children at bedtime.
- When children are learning to walk the use of cotton training pants will facilitate their movement.

Feeling wet and being wet allows the child to understand the process

Bedtime Training

Even at bedtime the child needs to feel wet and to understand the feeling of peeing at night. This is not always desirable for parents/carers.

Manageable solutions

- Waterproof sheets and towels on bed.
- Set up the situation so it is manageable for the child and parent.
- All situations should allow the child to “help themselves.”
- The more the adult is taken out of the process the less stress is put on the child allowing him or her to master this process when they are ready, in their own time and pace.

Disadvantages of Disposable Nappies

- The child never feels wet.
- Understanding of bodily functions is not clear.
- The warm humid condition created by synthetic nappies is not good for the child. It also creates the wrong understanding of this area of his or her body.
- Nappy rash is often worse as the child stays in a disposable nappy for a longer period of time. Chemicals in nappies react with urine and can irritate the skin. (Advertising “This nappy can hold a litre of water!!!”)

When children are allowed to control this area of development themselves, they are successful—usually earlier than children who wear disposable nappies. But most of all they do it when they are ready.

“I can do it. I can master my own body.”

We should bear in mind the following points as we help to raise children in our modern day world:

- Present the child with the reality of the situation.
- Give control to the child on a level he or she can handle.
- “Help me to help myself”.

This is what Montessorians can give to a child when assisting them in this developmental process. No one should control or manipulate any developmental process of a child, especially in the areas of sleeping, eating, and toileting.

We must note that these guidelines are for children who have no medical or sensitive developmental needs. In such cases we should adapt our approach in light of the medical advice and psychological guidance which has been provided.