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Introduction

At first look it may seem that there are plenty of books on potty training and absolutely no need for yet another one. Parents of toddlers have a huge array of books on potty training to choose from that all approach toilet training as a home-based activity overseen by parents. Looking closer at the lives of toddlers, however, we see that not all of them are at home with a parent during the day. Many of them are in child care settings, and parents and caregivers alike need specific information on helping children learn this important skill when they are going back and forth between home and child care.

This is what we found at the Child Care Council of Onondaga County in Syracuse, New York. We receive many calls, from programs and parents, about potty training in child care, numbering second only to calls about biting. Administrators are frustrated by the demands of parents, parents are frustrated by the practices of the programs, caregivers are frustrated by inconsistent parent behavior, and toddlers are just plain frustrated!

Both parents and programs asked us to send them written information and resources they could use to make potty training go more smoothly for their toddlers. We found many books and articles on potty training in general, but none that addressed the unique issues arising when children are potty trained in two different places by two different sets of people. The differences between the two settings, we felt, were at the heart of many of the issues we heard about.

When toddlers are home all the time and are being potty trained there, parents can and do use many different methods. The home situation is basically one toddler, one place, one method. In group child care, there may be two, three, even ten toddlers who are all being potty trained. Child care programs may have two, three, even ten different suggested methods from parents about how to potty train their children. Experienced child care providers know that working with parents is extremely important. They also know, however, that it is not possible to have multiple potty training methods going on at the same time in one room. Even the most flexible child care provider would not be able to carry out a plan calling for several different potty training methods at the same time. The situation in group care really does have to be several toddlers, one method. The question then is which method? Certainly some will not work in group care. One that comes to mind right away is the “let-’em-run-around-naked-so-they’ll-notice-they’re-peeing” method. You don’t even have to be a toddler caregiver to cringe at the thought of two, three, or ten naked toddlers running around, chased by caregivers pointing out streams of urine. Another

one that comes to mind is the “sit-’em-on-the-potty-and-entertain-’em-until-they-urinate” method. In group care, this gives a whole new meaning to the term “circle time.”

It quickly becomes clear that for potty training to be successful in group care we need a method that is carefully thought out, appropriate for toddlers, and appropriate for group care. Developing such a method, however, is only part of what we need to do. We must also realize that the children in our care are trying to learn, both at the same time, to use the potty at our programs and in their own homes. Therefore, we need to involve parents in the process so children will have enough consistency to be successful. How would this work? What would it look like?

The Child Care Council of Onondaga County’s Toilet Learning Task Force

In 1994 we asked twenty-five experienced toddler caregivers to form a task force to focus on potty training in group care. We called our group the Toilet Learning Task Force. As the task force examined issues, it became apparent that developing a partnership between parents and caregivers was the key to success. We also realized that even within our own small group there was no consistent understanding or thinking about potty training. This was confirmed by administrators, caregivers, and parents we spoke with. Some administrators had thought about potty training and had procedures in place. Others only thought of potty training as a requirement for moving up to the next room. Some caregivers used a child-centered approach to potty training with the toddlers in their rooms. Others handled the whole process themselves based on whatever worked for them. Some parents based their understanding on what their own parents told them. (Mothers-in-law seemed especially powerful forces here!) Others relied on the latest potty training books or their pediatrician for information.

The task force addressed these issues by creating a booklet called, “Toilet Learning in Group Care: A Resource for Child Care Programs and Parents,” with information, suggestions, and tips on potty training and on developing a partnership between parents and caregivers. In the subsequent years the Child Care Council continued to work with both parents and programs on potty training. We wrote articles, gave interviews to our local newspaper, and offered seminars on potty training in group care for both parents and programs. We made one small change in our approach and discovered one big change in an issue related to potty training.

Here is the small change. We called our original group the Toilet Learning Task Force. We deliberately wanted to avoid the word *training* and to stress the word *learning*. In the introduction to the booklet developed by that task force we stated

We want to acknowledge that this really is a learning process for children rather than something they are “trained” to do. Although at first “toilet learning” may seem awkward, it stresses learning and helps us give the process the serious consideration it deserves.

As we continued to work with both parents and child care programs we found that *potty training* and *toilet training* are the terms almost everyone uses to refer to this process. We also found it was possible to talk about the learning aspect of the skill and all the developmentally appropriate approaches and practices from the original resource even if we called the process *potty training*. It is important that both parents and caregivers feel comfortable talking with us about issues and problems so that they will have confidence in our information and with our suggestions. So we now use a variety of terms including *learning to use the toilet*, *potty training*, and *toilet training*.

The big change we discovered concerns parent-pressure for children to be potty trained. Members of the original task force worked with parents who consistently wanted their children potty trained at very young ages without regard to how ready the children were. This is still an issue, and we still hear from caregivers when parents ask them to potty train a child because “she just turned one, you know.” More and more, however, we started hearing from caregivers that some parents weren’t interested in having their children start potty training even though all indications showed they were ready. These parents often said, “I don’t want to put any pressure on him. When he’s ready, he’ll just go.” Other parents would say, “You know, it’s just easier to keep her in diapers.” The section on readiness (chapter 1) addresses both issues.

Developing a Perspective on Potty Training

Both in the work of the original task force and in our work at the Council since then, we found that there isn’t even agreement among adults about what potty training involves and—more importantly—when a child is considered potty trained. Many toddler caregivers have had parents announce that their child is already potty trained. Then they go on to tell the caregiver what needs to be done for their “completely potty trained toddler.”

Just keep watching his face and notice when he looks like he has to go. Then take him to the potty and get him ready—you know, do his clothes because he can’t undo the buckles or zip the zipper or snap the snap. You should stay with him for about five minutes. When he pees or poops, jump up and down, clap your hands and say, ‘Whee! Whee! Did you ever pee!’ or ‘Whoop! Whoop! Did you ever poop!’ You’ll have to wipe him because he just really can’t do that well enough to be

clean. Then just help him get dressed again and wash his hands. I usually try to take him to the potty about once an hour.

This example is, of course, exaggerated, but many toddler caregivers will recognize bits and pieces of it. The issue here is that the parents may truly consider the child potty trained because he urinates and has bowel movements in the potty. The caregiver, on the other hand, doesn't consider this child potty trained because an adult has to take charge of so much of the process. If we're going to talk about potty training in group care, we need to be clear about what we mean.

This calls for more than a definition of potty training. We need a way of looking at potty training that will guide what we do with children and with parents. The original task force developed a perspective on potty training, and we have expanded it over the past several years. The perspective has two main points:

- Potty training is a process that helps children master toileting as a self-help skill.
- When children are in group care, parents and caregivers must work together so the children can be comfortable, confident, and successful while they learn toileting skills.

This perspective is useful because it provides a framework and a direction for our work with children and parents. When we think of potty training as a process, we don't expect a child to be completely potty trained overnight. We realize that for most children this is a gradual process. So we expect it to take some time, and we look for incremental mastery. Our perspective also guides our instruction and interaction with children. We want to be moving children in the direction of being able to do the following for themselves:

- Realize they need to use the potty without anyone reminding them
- Take themselves to the potty
- Undress enough to use the potty
- Urinate and have bowel movements in the potty
- Wipe themselves
- Pull up their pants
- Flush the toilet
- Wash their hands

We can use this perspective to address many issues related to potty training. A good example is an often-asked question about wiping. Many adults want children to learn to wipe themselves, but worry that either they won't wipe well enough for good hygiene or that their efforts at wiping will end up being rather like smearing. Our perspective helps us look at wiping

as a step in the process, which then becomes a self-help skill when mastered. It points us away from trying to have a one-word answer to the question of who should wipe, and directs us instead to figure out how we can create a process so eventually the child will be able to wipe herself well enough. We now suggest that adults and toddlers take turns wiping: the adult takes the first two turns and then trades off with the child. We also suggest that caregivers help children learn how to tell when they are clean enough by looking at the toilet paper they just used to wipe themselves.

This perspective also helps to clarify our role in the toilet training process. If we accept that children are learning to use the potty gradually with the goal that it will be a self-help skill, then our expectations, actions, and interactions are likely to be appropriate to individual children and effective for them as well. We are also able to put into perspective the inevitable ups and downs of group-care potty training, which helps us remain calm and maintain a relaxed atmosphere for children. This, of course, is important because toddlers do not need a tense environment—especially when they are in the midst of potty training. This book is based on our perspective, and we recommend it to you as you work through toilet training issues in your program.

How to Use This Book

Good Going! is organized into three main sections. The first (chapters 1, 2, and 3) addresses potty training from the child's perspective and offers appropriate program responses and practices. The second section (chapters 4, 5, and 6) focuses on creating a partnership with parents and dealing with hot-button issues—both those that caregivers may have with parents and those that parents may have with caregivers. The last section (chapter 7) focuses on creating policies and procedures about potty training. Program decision makers need the information, perspective, experiences, and suggestions presented in the first two sections of the book to create policies that will work well for their program, the staff, the parents, and the children.

In each section we have shared not only our suggestions, but also the thinking that led to those suggestions. Throughout the book you will find sample letters that you can use with parents to present potty training issues and information from the perspective in this book. We hope you will use them either as they are or as a guide to create your own for your program. You will also find that the potty training readiness indicators and information about clothing are presented in two versions. One version is for child care programs and providers. It contains more details and discussion. The other version is for parents. It is shorter and written in a more personal style. It also makes a great handout for parents.