

Positive toileting and nappy changing

By Anne Stonehouse

When you work with young children, particularly groups of babies and toddlers, you may sometimes feel as though the whole day has been taken up with routines and experiences such as dressing, resting, sleeping, eating, arriving, leaving, handwashing, toileting and nappy changing.

Rather than seeing these experiences as time away from important learning experiences, it is valuable for child care professionals to recognise these times as wonderful opportunities to promote children's learning, to meet their individual needs and to develop strong relationships with children. This *Factsheet* explores ways to do this during nappy changing and toileting experiences in long day care.

Why do nappy changing and toileting routines matter?

In addition to meeting children's physical needs, nappy changing and toileting are an important time to:

- have one to one interactions with children, and to give them your full attention;
- build trusting and caring relationships with children;
- interact with children using verbal and non-verbal communication, and respond to children's communication;
- engage in simple play activities with children, such as singing, saying rhymes and doing finger plays;
- build children's understanding of what is happening now and promote their ability to predict what will happen next in the routine; and
- help children begin to develop and extend their self help skills, for example handwashing and dressing, and to encourage them to recognise the feelings of achievement and satisfaction that come with these.

Having their needs met quickly and in a caring responsive way builds children's sense of trust and security. Children also benefit from having the pleasant sensory experience of being free of a nappy and the comfort of having a fresh, dry one. It is also important to remember that the way that child care professionals react to soiled or wet nappies, toileting needs and accidents give children powerful messages about themselves and their bodies.

Health, hygiene and safety

Supporting children's health and safety by ensuring that practices are hygienic is fundamental to good quality care. Child care professionals need to regularly update their knowledge of currently recommended practice in the areas of health and hygiene. These should be reflected in written

policies and specific procedures and displayed in the nappy change or toileting areas as reminders. Staff can help each other carry out procedures in a safe and hygienic way. Policies and procedures should be regularly reviewed and updated when necessary.

Nappy changing. Nappies should be changed in a designated place. The nappy change table must have a surface that can be cleaned easily and thoroughly after each nappy change and there should be a sink nearby for adults and children to wash their hands. Both adults and children should wash their hands after a nappy change.

Nappy change and toileting supplies should be easily accessible to adults, but out of reach of children. Child care professionals need to consider the use of high shelves or child proof cupboards to store dangerous items such as nappy pins, barrier creams, cleansers and plastic bags.

To minimise the risk of injuries from falling, it is critical that child care professionals keep a hand on the child the entire time they are on the nappy change table.



To protect their own health and wellbeing, as well as to promote children's autonomy, many child care professionals find it helpful to use a set of portable steps for older babies and toddlers to climb onto the change table without being lifted. However, children must be effectively supervised and supported when using these, and steps should be stored where children cannot access them at other times. It is also important to remember to support children to dry their hands effectively and hygienically.

Toileting. Toddlers need close supervision to maintain hygiene when they are learning to use the toilet. Careful handwashing by both adults and children is essential after using the toilet, and child care professionals may need to remind and support children to do this effectively.

Many toddlers have a drive to do things for themselves. Child care professionals should respect and support children's independence, while also using sensitive strategies to ensure that children are clean when they have finished using the toilet. The toilet area itself must be kept clean, and the floor surface dry to prevent slipping.

Children need to feel safe and comfortable, and not worried that they are going to fall into the toilet. Toilet seat inserts and small steps are useful items to support younger children to use the toilet independently. If toilets are not at a height that children can easily get on and off, a step is particularly helpful as it will allow the child to access the toilet easily, and prevent their feet from dangling in mid-air. A step will also assist the child to reach to flush the toilet themselves.



Supportive practices

Child care professionals can use a range of practical strategies to support positive nappy changing and toileting experiences for children. These include:

- Allowing children to take their time. It is important that child care professionals slow down to the pace of a baby or toddler.
- Responding to children's cues and allowing them to be active participants in the process. This should be in line with individual children's skills and interests, and should avoid pressuring them.
- Where possible, using the correct terms for going to the toilet. Ask families what words they use at home, as consistent language between home and care will help children to understand and learn more easily.
- Being sensitive to individual children's needs and styles, and tailor individual nappy change and toileting procedures to each child.
- Changing nappies or helping children to use the toilet on a needs basis, as well as having times during the day when each child's nappy is checked. While some children will let adults know when their nappies are wet or soiled, others don't seem to mind if their nappy needs to be changed.
- Speaking respectfully with children about what you are doing. For example, tell children that you are checking their nappy, and talk with them about what is happening as you are changing their nappy or assisting them to use the toilet.
- Asking or reminding children about using the toilet. Child care professionals should be alert to signs that a child is uncomfortable, and for older children be especially sensitive to any signs or communications that they need to use the toilet.
- Responding as quickly as possible when a child indicates a need to use the toilet. Don't make children wait to use toilet.
- Taking full advantage of every opportunity for a focused, positive interaction with children during toileting and nappy change times, however brief these might be.
- Encouraging families to provide children with clothes that assist them to toilet independently, for example, elastic waisted pants that are easy to pull up and down.
- Never showing displeasure or negative reactions to a child's bowel movements, no matter how messy or smelly they are.

When and how to begin helping children to use the toilet

Decisions about when to begin to help children to learn to use the toilet are usually made by families, or occur through shared decision making between families and child care professionals. This is an aspect of the child's experience where mutual respect and open communication are crucial for a good outcome. Families may have strong views and preferences about when and how their child learns to use the toilet, which may come from their cultural background or individual preferences. Child care professionals may also have strong views that come from their own cultural background or past experiences.

Different perspectives need to be treated respectfully and worked through constructively. Always keep in mind that the priority is the child's wellbeing, and that a decision to begin helping the child learn to use the toilet should be based on signs of readiness from the child.

Early signs of readiness, often appearing when children are around 18-24 months, include the child:

- showing interest in the toilet, including having an interest in others using the toilet;
- indicating a need to go to the toilet either before, or while they are doing it; and
- staying dryer for longer.

Talking to children about using the toilet, letting them pull their pants down and up again (the latter is more difficult) and letting them sit on the toilet or potty if they want to are all ways of providing gentle encouragement.

Using the toilet is a rather complex process. It has several steps, all of which require skills that children need to learn. These include:

- recognising the need to use the toilet;
- pulling down pants;
- sitting on the toilet or potty chair and maintaining balance;
- wiping their bottom;
- getting off the toilet or potty;
- pulling up pants; and
- washing and drying hands.

However, when adults have reasonable expectations and children are ready, the process of learning to use the toilet is easy. It isn't then a matter of training or teaching, but rather a process of supporting the child's learning.

Give just enough help to encourage the child to persevere and be successful. The child care professional's role is to be helpful and encouraging.

Some helpful tips to keep in mind when supporting children to learn to use the toilet include:

- Keep the process low-key, with a minimum of fuss. Avoid calling unnecessary attention to it or putting pressure on the child to succeed. Don't allow learning to use the toilet become an area for a power struggle between an adult and child.
- Try to get to know each child's usual time(s) for bowel movements.
- Acknowledge children's successes, no matter how infrequent or small.
- Expect accidents and setbacks and treat them in a matter of fact and supportive way. Children, like adults, rarely learn a new skill all at once, without any setbacks.
- Do not embarrass, shame or punish children, or in any way make the child feel bad about any aspect of using the toilet.
- Share information with families about how the toilet learning is going, both in care and at home.
- Support children when they want to become more independent, by making tasks manageable and being present to provide help and encouragement as needed. Allow children to do things such as toileting, washing hands, flushing the toilet, keeping the bathroom environment clean independently, while at the same time keeping in mind the importance of hygiene and providing assistance when needed.
- Give help in ways that empower children. Give just enough help to encourage the child to persevere and be successful. The child care professional's role is to be helpful and encouraging.
- Although learning to use the toilet varies for individual children, take advantage of the child being in a group and the many opportunities that provides for learning from each other. Avoid comparing children but at the same time capitalise on children's interest in other children using the toilet.

The physical environment

As with all aspects of the program, the physical environment plays a big role in how well nappy changing and toilet learning go, both for child care professionals and for children. Some points to keep in mind include the following:

- The nappy change area should be positioned to allow adults to supervise all children while they are changing a nappy.
- The nappy change area, bathroom and accessories such as change mats, potties and toilet seat inserts must be easy to keep clean.
- Make the area attractive to children to make it a pleasant place for children to be. Clutter not only detracts from the attractiveness of the area but can also create safety and hygiene hazards. Older children may benefit from the use of pictorial sequences to show how to use the toilet or wash hands.
- Have everything that is likely to be needed within reach of the nappy change table and/or easy to access in the bathroom so that children can be supervised effectively, and child care professionals are able to be present to promote positive experiences.

- The nappy change bench and mat should be big enough so that every child who uses nappies can lie there comfortably.
- Toilets should be child height. Toilets and potty chairs must be easy for children to access under supervision, comfortable, and easy to keep clean.
- Sinks need to be an appropriate height for children to wash their own hands comfortably while standing on the floor, fitted with taps that are easy to grip and turn or levers that children can control and have a low water flow that stays at a comfortable temperature.

Taking time, paying attention to children, keeping in mind the power of caring relationships and using what you know about effective teaching and learning for other skills will make nappy changing and learning to use the toilet one of the many positive experiences a child has in care ■

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

Principles: 1.1, 1.3, 5.3, 6.3 and 6.4

References and further information

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- National Health and Medical Research Council. (2006). *Staying Healthy in Child Care. Preventing Infectious Diseases in Child Care* (4th edition). Retrieved 20 March, 2008, from http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/_files/ch43.pdf
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Useful websites

- Child and Youth Health: www.cyh.com.au
- Raising Children Network: www.raisingchildren.net.au



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