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## **TOILETING, THE PARENT'S FIRST CHALLENGE** **BY AGI PLENK, PH.D.**

*Toilet training* (as it is commonly referred to) is a challenge for parents and an achievement for your child. It is a concept that needs to be replaced by *learning to control the needs of your body*. If handled thoughtfully, later conflicts will be avoided.

The term *training* immediately brings to mind animal experiments, concrete awards, and manipulation by one participant rather than the cooperation of two. The replacement of the word *training* with the word *learning* may increase the availability of development literature and research. The cultural aspects of teaching toileting may be increasing the difficulties. Our culture dictates the time and sequence of the task, whereas in other cultures, the child determines all aspects, often to the embarrassment of foreign visitors. There is no research as to the success of the different approaches.

How to make toileting an achievement depends on several factors. Is your child physically ready to control the necessary muscles? This usually happens between ages two and three; however, it greatly depends on your child's developmental tempo. Variations, even within a family, happen all the time and are not reasons for concern. Readiness also depends upon the parent's attitude towards toileting. Again, we would like to stress the joint challenge the toileting task presents.

As the child's mother is the most frequently selected person for this task, her attitude is the most important factor. This is not a contest between mother and child but a joint task. Both win in time, but if a power struggle is created, it becomes a more complicated task. Therefore, pick a good time for both partners, when stress is low – no parental conflicts, relocation stress, financial stress, health issues with other family members, to name only a few. We now have a relaxed mother who has set aside time for this joint venture, not being pushed by Cousin Mary or other well-meaning family members.

Some of the ideas discussed with particular emphasis on mothers are equally applicable to fathers as participants in the learning process. However, they may be even less comfortable with the concept, embarrassed by unavoidable discussion of sexual body parts. It hinges on cultural taboos, age, family background, and comfort with bodily functions.

How can we help the child become comfortable in this one room of the house whose door is frequently shut? It is a mystery to many children, making it even more interesting. So acquaint "Betty" with the bathroom – not only the toilet seat that goes up and down but all the other fascinating objects, like the shower curtain that moves back and forth, the roll of toilet paper, all the tubes and bottles that families seem to collect, and finally, the "flushing" thing -- all experiences which familiarize the child with objects she will need to be comfortable with. Help her with language skills and remove the tension of thinking only of toileting. You might take this trip to the mystery room before even introducing toileting or you might pick a time when Betty usually "needs to go." But let her make the decision.

Some of these ideas might be new to you, but go ahead and try – and good luck.