Starting toilet training

By Leticia Keighley

Sometimes as a parent you think you have a good handle on things and then at other times you realise you have completely dropped the ball. This moment of realisation came for me when the editor of this fine journal asked me to write an article about toilet training. “Hahahahaha” I said, knowing full well that I have had no success in this area and have almost ignored it, hoping that one day my 3 year old son would walk up to me say, “Don’t worry Mum, I’ve worked this whole thing out on my own...let me just tick it off the list for you!”

Sigh. Once I realised this editor was serious, I decided I had better find out a bit about how I was going to get the ball rolling on this thing.

Toilet training can be difficult for any child as the child needs to:

• recognise the need to do wee or poo
• be able to communicate that need to someone
• have the muscle control to hold on until they reach the toilet
• have the fine motor control to undress
• have the gross motor control to get on the toilet and sit on the seat safely and comfortably.

For children with Down syndrome, who may have low muscle tone and delays in speech, communication, fine and gross motor development, it’s easy to see why this process can take longer to achieve, especially if there are additional diagnoses such as Sensory Processing Disorder or ASD.

My inability to get started comes from the fact that any minor success we have achieved has been one-off and hasn’t happened again. Deep down I think I knew I would need a more consistent approach, but it felt like too many planets needed to align. Partly motivated by a desire to have my son toilet trained so that he can be an active member of society but mostly fuelled by the need to get an article in on deadline, I threw myself into the issue to see what I could discover.

I decided I needed to read some resources, develop a plan and identify some support.

There are some great resources available to parents to approach toilet training a child with additional needs. While each resource has something to offer, the common theme running through them all is to approach the problem as a step by step process, building on each small success, rather than a goal that needs to be achieved in one big hit. I realised that this had been my undoing until now.

The other take home message was that I needed to approach toilet training my son in the same way as I would for any child, but become creative about ways in which to overcome any specific additional barriers that may be in the way.

With my new found inspiration I have decided to make a plan...

1. Determine readiness

Toilet training works best when the child has shown signs of readiness beforehand. These may include:

• showing an interest in the toilet
• trying to remove a nappy
• staying dry for a period time
• communicating before or when they have gone.

If these signs are yet to start, then encourage your child to be aware of them by discussing being wet or dry, showing them the toilet or changing their nappy in the toilet or bathroom area.

2. Identify barriers

• Low muscle tone may make it harder for our kids to feel the need to go to the toilet and to feel a full bladder. It may also mean constipation. Ensure high fluid and fibre intake to make this process easier. Talking about wee and poo when they are going or have gone may help children make the connection more easily.

• Disposable nappies are designed to keep kids dry and that can make it harder for kids to know when they are wet. Putting undies under the nappy or removing the nappy altogether could help that awareness. There are also alarms available that sit inside the nappy to sense wetness and emit a sound to help children make that connection.

• Communication and speech delay can make it harder for a child to express the need to use the toilet. Combining a sign with the word and introducing it early, whenever you change the nappy, can give...
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children a tool to use down the track. Using consistent words for toilet, wee and poo can also make the process easier but in the end, using your child’s preferred communication method will be most effective.

- Gross motor skill delay may affect a child’s ability to sit comfortably on a full sized toilet or to climb a toilet ladder. Using a potty in the early stages may make this easier to remove the frustration or negative experience of a toilet. Bear in mind that transitioning to a toilet will be another step to achieve down the track and may bring extra challenges. Stools, seat inserts and ladders can all be used to help a child sit comfortably on a full sized toilet instead.

- Fine motor skill delay means our children may take a long time to dress and undress themselves. Consider using easy to pull up clothing such as track suit pants or leggings. Buttons and zips may be too difficult and time consuming leading to unnecessary accidents and frustration.

- Sometimes having a child with Down syndrome means our weeks can be full of appointments. This can be a barrier to having consistent training in a familiar environment so it might be necessary to schedule a week or two at the beginning of toilet training with as few trips out of the house as possible.

3. Identify motivators

My son loves Elmo but not the toilet, so I am going to decorate the toilet with posters so that he might actually enjoy being in there. He also loves the iPad so I can save up his screen times for when he is sitting on the toilet. Little things like making sure the room is warm or the seat is warm may also help a child who is unwilling to sit on the toilet. Having a special reward only reserved for a success on the toilet is another option.

Many resources suggest the use of picture books or visual aids to encourage the child to learn each step of the process. Kids also love seeing themselves on video so maybe consider making them the star or their own toileting movie!

4. Embracing the accidents

For me, one of the biggest barriers to embracing toilet training is the constant cleaning up. Taking the child to the toilet at regular intervals (toilet timing) may decrease the chance of accidents on the carpet. Putting away rugs or buying some cheap ones to cover floors may also eliminate some mess. Cloth mattress protectors to put on the couches can also help ensure that accidents are not met with frustration from me, which could in turn make the experience a negative one for my son. The concept of keeping my reaction to accidents neutral rather than getting upset makes a lot of sense to me, although this can sometimes be easier said than done.

5. Decide on a routine

After reading through the resources I can see that it doesn’t matter too much which approach I take as long as it is consistent and designed to make it a pleasant experience for my child. The things that will work for my child may not work for other children. It is also important to modify strategies along the way if they are not working or are proving to be counterproductive.

Once the plan is developed, think about the support you may need to achieve it:

- Obtain a few of the resources (info box) and have a read before deciding to start.
- Talk to friends and find out what worked for them and what pitfalls to avoid.
- Discuss your plan with everyone who spends time with your child on a daily basis, including carers and educators, to ensure a consistent approach.
- Stock up on extra clothing that is easy to pull on and off during this time.

By thinking about toilet training as a step by step process I am feeling a lot less overwhelmed and more empowered to give it a go. A series of small steps to master instead of one giant goal feels a lot more achievable for both of us.

Wish me luck!

Useful Resources

- Contact your local Down Syndrome Association to see the resources available in their libraries.
- The Raising Children Network has a great page aimed at children with ASD, but with tips that can be used easily.
- The Victorian Continence Resource Network has a page outlining some of the state and federal funding options for continence issues that you may be eligible for or ring the National Continence hotline on 1800 33 00 66.
- Centrelink Continence Aids Payment scheme for children over 5 years.
- One Step at a Time is a comprehensive toileting guide for children with special needs produced by The Victorian Continence Resource Network. This booklet emphasises the need to take the process one step at a time and do prep work leading up to each step. Also on the website there are great tip sheets that explain common hurdles in more detail as well as printables for visual aids.
- Children with Down syndrome are often visual learners so using a visual prompt may be more useful. Turn printable photo stories into books or make a movie.
- National Continence Hotline 1800 33 00 66.