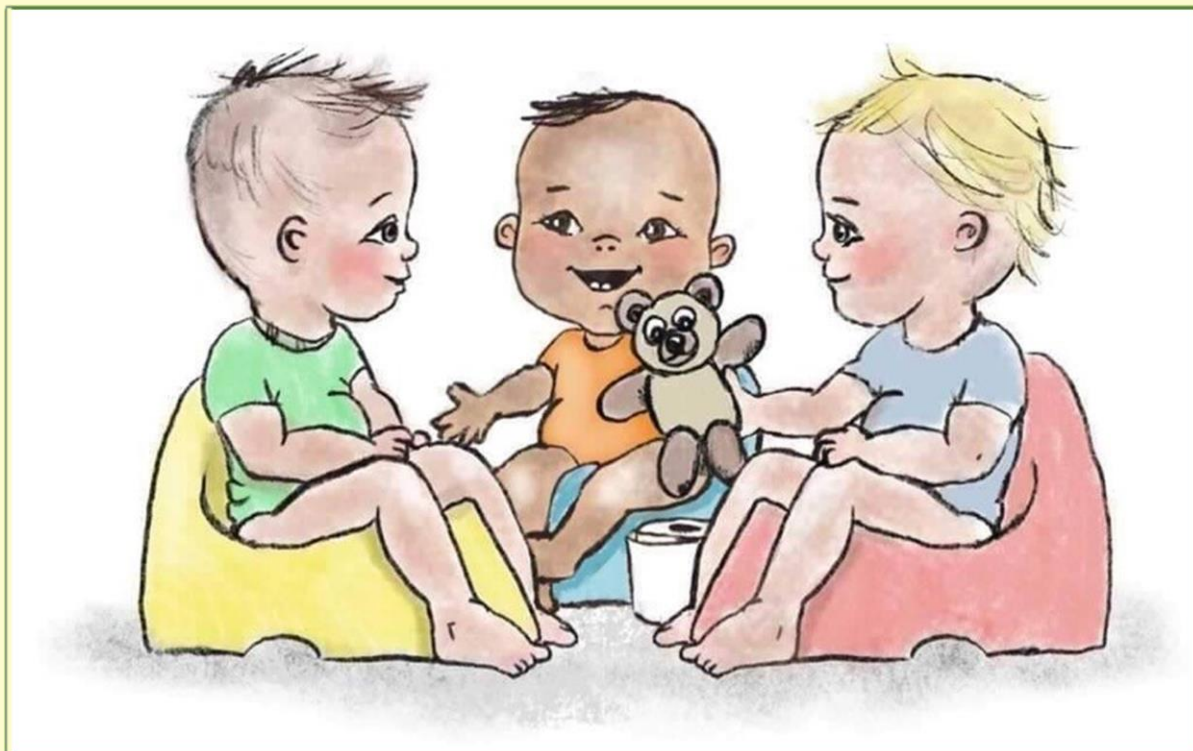


Nappy free children earlier!



Supporting toilet training at home and in preschool

Ingrid Engdahl, Margareta Blennow and Therése Saksø

OMEP Sweden with support from the Swedish Enuresis Academy



Our goal is for children to be nappy free earlier

Children currently use nappies (diapers) much longer than they did previously. In the 1970's, children in Sweden were nappy free at around two. Now, the average age is 3.5 years daytime, and 4 years nighttime. This is not good for the children and it is not sustainable!

" Preschool staff and parents need to develop an understanding that it is in the best interest of the child to become nappy free earlier."

" Giving up nappies marks a tremendous increase in a child's self-esteem and self-confidence. They feel competent and get a sense of belonging."

Toilet training is about two things

- Helping the children becoming nappy free by teaching them to use the potty (or toilet)
- A collaboration between home and preschool focusing on helping children

Preschool survey 2021

The quotes in this pamphlet come from a preschool report (Engdahl, et al., 2021, if no other reference is given). The answers from the preschool staff reflect a consideration of what is in the best interest of the child. Most preschool staff state that it is the task of the preschool to contribute to the potty training, and that it should be planned together with the parents.

This pamphlet has been developed by Ingrid Engdahl, preschool teacher and researcher, and the pediatricians Margareta Blennow and Therése Saksø, all active in OMEP Sweden.

OMEP is an international NGO working in the best interests of the child, focusing on birth to 8 years. We thank the Swedish Enuresis Academy (SEA) for their support. SEA is a group of experts working on issues related to children and enuresis.

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Illustrations: Maria Lyberg, [instagram.com/ritlivet](https://www.instagram.com/ritlivet)



Children's right to development and health

Following the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, children have the right to development and health, to play and education, and to influence their lives. As stated in the **National Curriculum for the Preschool**, the education should be based on a holistic approach to children and their needs, combining care, development, and learning.

Children who need extra support and stimulation, either temporarily or permanently, should be provided with this, structured according to their own needs and conditions, for instance helping them to become nappy free.

This may be compared with how staff support the development of other skills, such as eating, hygiene, the use of a dummy (pacifier), resting or sleeping. The responsibility to teach these skills to children lies with the adults. In preschool education, this is realised during educational, care, and nursing activities.

The child's right to personal integrity and to participation and influence in their daily lives are foundational during these everyday routines.

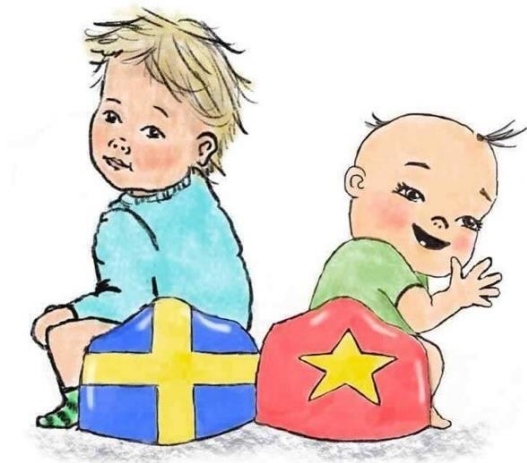
Children are ready early

There is now a wide-spread attitude that one should wait for signs that the child is mature before starting toilet training. This is not in accordance with proven experience, nor with the recommendations from Swedish child healthcare. Modern efficient nappies/diapers and the late start of toilet training have contributed to an increase in the age when children become nappy free.

" We know now that we don't have to wait for maturity. In countries where nappies are not as available, children are nappy free early, before one year of age. This prevents a lot of problems related to the bladder and intestines."

(Borgström, 2021, p. 81)

Cultural differences



A comparison between Vietnamese and Swedish children showed large differences.

The majority of children in Vietnam started toilet training at 3-6 months of age and were nappy free at 12 months during the day. At 24 months, 98% of the Vietnamese children had completely stopped using nappies.

At 24 months, only 5% of the Swedish children had started their toilet training.

(Duong, Jansson & Hellström, 2013)

In large parts of the world, children become nappy free already as infants. In the western world, there has been a movement towards a norm stating that children themselves need to be mature and show an interest before toilet training begins. This tradition has prolonged the period with nappies significantly. Furthermore, mobility and motor development may be negatively affected, as children cannot move as freely when wearing a nappy.



Reduce the nappy pile, spare the environment, and save money

It is also worth noting that delayed toilet training affects the environment and the economy. They are non-biodegradable, thus not compostable, and become an environmental problem. Based on average usage, a child uses approximately 8 000 nappies, which leads to a cost of around 20 000 SEK.

Reduce the risk of urinary tract problems and constipation

Being nappy free earlier would lead to health benefits for many children. Urinary tract problems are often related to not fully emptying the bladder. The bladder is more effectively emptied when you control the bladder yourself, e.g., when you are nappy free.

Constipation is common in children. More than 90% of constipation cases are related to deficient toilet routines rather than to an underlying disease. Emptying bladder and bowel is more complete when the child sits on a potty and the perineum can relax.

These health benefits would thus save resources for families and preschools, as well as for the healthcare system and society.

“ If a child is toilet trained before two, the risk of symptoms from the bladder and the bowel decreases significantly.”

(Borgström, 2021, p. 72)

What to do at home?

Learning to control “pee and poo” is as important for a child as all other routines – it is about managing basic needs!



We have the privilege of a long parental leave in Sweden. Toilet training can start already during this period, when parents spend a lot of time with their child. This would make it easier for the preschool staff to support the process.

Responsive potty training

It is fundamental that the parents pay attention to their child and notice her/his signals. Children pee and poo most often after larger meals (following the voiding reflex), or after sleeping. Adults need to get to know the signs for when the child needs to pee or poo, and when during the day this happens. This is best done through observations of the child’s movements, posture, sounds and what the child does, just before evacuation takes place. A responsive toilet training approach is about noticing the child’s signals and routines and showing a potty or a toilet when they occur.

Elimination Communication (EC) is a method based on responsiveness to the child’s signals, possible to initiate already from birth (Casselbrant, 2014).

How to start:

- A potty may be introduced early, for instance at around six months. A tip is to start when the child can sit on the potty, but before s/he can get up and walk away.
- Let the child sit on the potty a couple of times a day, with or without clothes.
- The next step is to notice the child’s signals and help her/him sit on the potty.
- Let the child sit on the potty after meals and naps/sleeping.
- Try to make the potty-time nice and regular, maybe with some small books, a song, a toy, or a story.
- Parents and older siblings are role models – it is fun to imitate!



The right sitting position is important

Sitting on the potty automatically leads to the right sitting position. It enables the child to sit relaxed, s/he feels secure when seated. A squatting position with the legs spread apart is the model. The knees well above the hips, trousers and underwear should be drawn all the way to the feet, and the body positioned in a slightly forward leaning position.

An older child may want to sit on the toilet. To get the recommended sitting position, use a smaller toilet ring, and support for the feet. Then the child may sit with full support for the thighs in a position where the muscles in the perineum are relaxed, which facilitates the evacuation process.

Responsiveness and togetherness

Keep your child company when s/he is on the potty/toilet. Five minutes on the potty is a reasonable time, if the visit is prompted or suggested by an adult.

The poo habits of infants and babies vary a lot, from many times a day to very seldom. If there has been a long pause, one may suggest sitting on the potty after a larger meal, or before the child is about to go to bed.



The preschool staff should take part in early toilet training

Children's bodies are ready and mature enough even before it is time to start preschool education. That is why preschool staff should not wait for children to show an interest. Helping children becoming nappy free is as important as teaching children to eat, dress, or stop using a dummy.

The collaboration between home and preschool is crucial for a successful result. As the children spend most of their days in the preschool, toilet training must be co-planned between parents and the preschool staff.

The preschool staff should support the parents in starting toilet training earlier than what is common today, in a continuous dialogue, which allows all involved to show respect and understanding.

"The preschool staff ought to review and revise their routines for early toilet training."

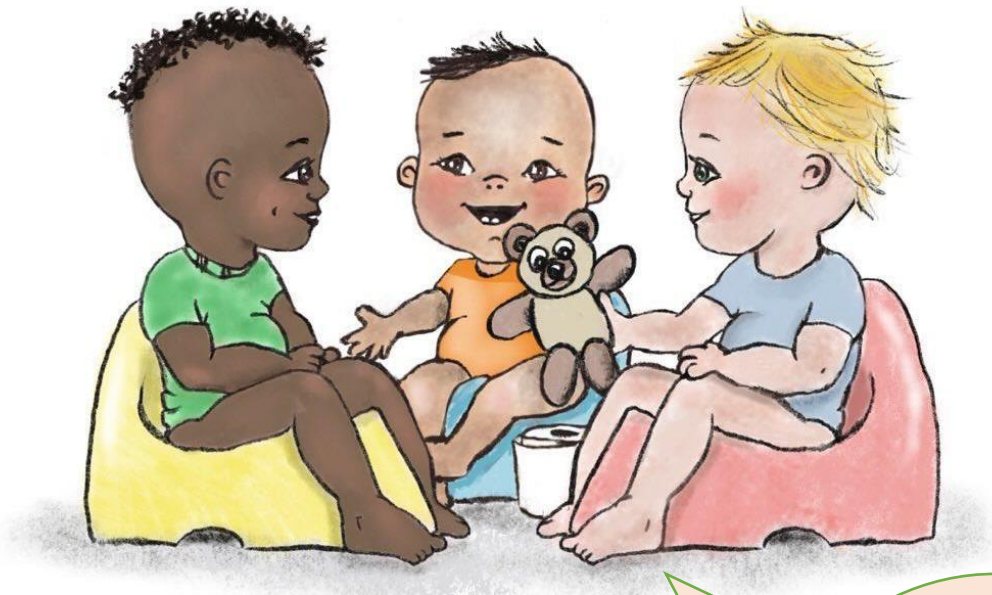
Responsive potty training

Responsive toilet training requires both knowledge and the correct approach. The preschool staff will learn to recognize the signs for when the child needs to pee or poo, and when this usually happens.

Children usually pee and poo after larger meals (following the voiding reflex), or after having a nap.

What to do in the preschool?

- Supporting children to become nappy free starts with creating a positive atmosphere and an encouraging approach.
- Inspect and improve the hygiene facilities in the preschool.
- You will need of potties and good possibilities for them to be cleaned.
- With older children, you may also need toilet rings and support by a footstool which enables a correct sitting position.



- Let the children sit on the potty a few times a day, with or without clothes.
- The next step is to notice the child's signals and help her/him to the potty.
- Let the children sit on the potty regularly, before going out, on returning, and after meals and naps.
- Try to make time on the potty pleasurable, perhaps with the help of small books, a song, some toys, or a story.
- Use responsive toilet training together with the children. Other children are role models to be imitated.
- A reminder about extra clothing during this period can be appropriate.

" We have potty-meetings, positioning the potties in a circle, and inviting the children to sit down. The social aspect encourages more to test it."



The Child Healthcare Centre (BVC) supports families

The objective for child healthcare (BHV) is to contribute to the best possible physical, emotional, and social health. BHV offers frequent appointments at BVC during the child's first year, and then about one visit annually, or more if needed, until the child turns six years and starts preschool class.

At the 10-month-visit, at the latest, the BHV nurse gives information about good pee- and poo-routines: when to start toilet training, what the best way is and what to do if it doesn't work.

Every visit at the BVC offers opportunities for talks with the BHV staff, and for vaccinations, observations, and examinations.

More information can be found in the National Child Health Care Guidelines: [Samverkan mellan barnhälsovård och förskola - Rikshandboken i barnhälsovård](#)

There you can read about the bladder function of young children, toilet training, what to do if there is a problem and many other areas linked to children's health.

In the **BVC-pod** (from April 2021) the pediatrician Therése Saksø talks about toilet training: <https://bvcpodden.fireside.fm/116>

TOILET TRAINING ADVICE

Controlling the bladder and the bowel marks an important step for children and parents. Previously, the advice has been of low priority, amounting to saying that it is time to start toilet training when the child is ready, not before. There were no benefits in starting early.

Now we have more knowledge, and we know that children already from birth may sense when it is time to empty their bladder, and they may influence this. How early you start potty training depends on interest and needs. It takes time to develop functional communication and routines that suit the family.

During parental leave, use the opportunity to get to know the child's needs, by observation and by letting the child be free of nappies during some period of the day.

This advice is given by SEA Swedish Enuresis Academy (A-L. Hellström). More advice at [Swedish Enuresis Academy](http://www.sea.se)

References – Nappy free children earlier

The information in this pamphlet is based on a pilot study by OMEP Sweden in 2021, where you can find references to articles and other studies.

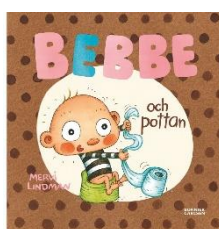
Engdahl, I., Blennow, M., Saksø, T. (2021). *Blöjfria barn: Förskolans roll: En pilotstudie bland förskolepersonal*. Svenska OMEP. www.omep.org.se

Borgström, M. (2021). *Besvär med tarm och urinblåsa hos barn: Behandlingsmetod för barnhälsovården*. GothiaKompetens.

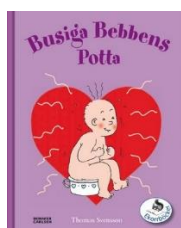
Duong, H., Jansson, U-B., & Hellström, A-L. (2013). Vietnamese mothers' experiences with potty-training procedure for children from birth to 2 years of age. *Journal of Pediatric Urology*, 9A, 808–814.

There are some websites where you can get advice and raise questions: www.blojfribebis.se, www.blojfri.se and www.blojupproret.se.

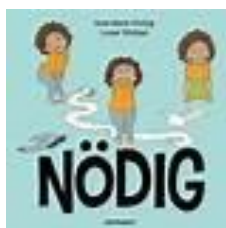
Some children's books ...



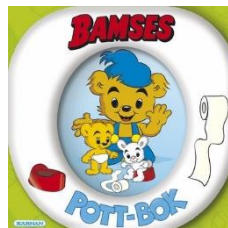
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‘Nappy free children earlier’ brings many benefits for children, families, preschools, healthcare, the economy, and the environment.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states children’s right to a healthy development. A strong collaboration between preschool and home around early toilet training supports such a development. The child’s self-esteem grows. Urinary tract and constipation problems may decrease.

Earlier and improved toilet training has positive consequences for the environment and leads to reduced costs for homes and preschools. Thus, starting toilet training early is an urgent priority which at the same time contributes to a sustainable society.

This pamphlet is written for homes, preschools, child healthcare/BVC, open preschools and family centres. We hope it will initiate many discussions about toilet training that may lead to changed routines, in the best interests of the child.



Svenska OMEP
www.omep.org.se



Svenska Enuresakademien
www.svenskaenures.se

OMEP is an international NGO working in 70 countries for children 0–8 years. OMEP was started within the UN family in 1948 and brings together groups of professionals, working for the best possible living conditions for the youngest children. OMEP promotes children’s rights and education, based firmly in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals.