Learning to use the toilet

Observing toilet training practices in the day care environment: A situative design study proposal

Vishakha Parvate, Sandy Speicher
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“Mommy! I go poo poo.”
“What? There’s no poo poo in your diaper!”
“Noooo... I want to go poo poo in the bathoooh!”

ANOUSHKA, 2 YEARS, IN CONVERSATION WITH HER MOTHER

Introduction
For children around the world, the age of 2 typically marks a transition from wearing diapers to using the toilet. This milestone is often challenging for the child, as it is one of the first moments they are taught to do something like the rest of the society. It is a consciously learned behavior, steeped in social conversation, as opposed to behaviors like walking or talking that sprung out of curiosity or influence.

The challenge for the child is to be able to identify the physiological sensation of needing to pee/poo and to subsequently equate that with a particular location (the toilet). This involves acquiring a subconscious control over their bodily functions, and enough awareness to communicate that need. The specifics of this sensation are extremely hard for the adult (teacher) to explain, and the abstract concept is equally hard for the child (learner) to understand.

Potty training is not limited to the home but is also increasingly under the purview of daycare providers. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services (2001), 56% of children attend day care centers. Given this significant number, there is a need for parents to understand potty training practices in the day care center in order for these practices to be successfully reinforced at home. This reinforcement is essential to enculturate the children.

This paper proposes a study of the day care environment to identify common practices around potty training. In the subsequent sections, we present the learning environment, establish criteria for the study, outline a research plan, and discuss potential findings from the investigation.
Learning environment
While the toddler’s home is the primary learning environment, this study chooses to focus on the day care center. Children could spend up to 10 hours at their day care center, where they are under the care of people other than their parents. We use the term “day care center” as defined in the California State Licensing Standards:

"Child Care Center" or "Day Care Center" (or "center") means any child care facility of any capacity, other than a family child care home [...] in which less than 24-hour per day non-medical care and supervision are provided to children in a group setting.

The staff at the day care consists of both teachers and teacher aides. Teachers must be at least 18 years old and have 12 postsecondary units in early childhood education or child development. The minimum child to staff ratio for the 18–36 month age group is 6:1, with approximately 12–20 children per room. The children are from a variety of backgrounds and at different levels of development.

It is the responsibility of the teachers in the room to meet the needs of the children, including, but not limited to, toileting. This may mean changing their diapers, querying the child, taking them to the toilet, helping clean up after accidents, etc.

Design principles
We will analyze the opportunities that a toddler has in a day care setting to participate in social practices around the act of going to the toilet using a situative perspective. We have identified two main categories of principles that have helped us design our study:

Children need a supportive environment:
A sympathetic and flexible framework is essential to learn a new practice
The toddlers’ transition from a diapered community to a toilet using community is foundational to their development of an epistemic identity. The day care center facilitates this. Examples of the practices in this social environment include:

– Using of a consistent vocabulary to refer to the various bodily functions (wee-wee vs. pee-pee vs. shoo-shoo...) so that the child is not confused by what is being asked of them. This creates a discourse that the child becomes a part of.

– Querying the toddlers about their need to go provides an opportunity for them to become aware of their physiological sensations, and helps them formulate the question in their own mind.

– Taking the child to the bathroom at particular times of the day, regardless of need, helps reinforce the act of bodily control.
Children need indicators of success:  
Validation is essential to solidify the new practice

It is important that the day care centers provide ways for the toddlers to assess their progress towards the goal of having a “dry bottom” that was attained through using a toilet. This is an important association so that children learn to go in different environments, such as parks, stores, etc. Toddlers, like learners in any other situation, need to be taught how to best formulate and use feedback mechanisms. It is essential that this feedback be in the form of validation to not instill fear apprehension.

Proposed study: Phase 1
The following methods are designed to build our understanding of the current practices around potty training in day care centers.

The Classroom: Ethnographic Observation
Observation will take place in at least 10 different classrooms, for a period of one year, at least once a week, for a full day. It will be important for the observer to be in the classroom the same day each week to ensure the same children are being tracked throughout the study. The timeframe of one year will allow for seeing various levels of development and success at potty training. Each classroom should be in a different facility, and should include a range of cultural and socio-economic representation.

The interviewer, who will be a participant observer in order to not intimidate the children, should collect extensive video documentation of the environment and interactions, in addition to notes on the following:
– date, time, and place of observation
– number of children and adults in the room
– distance from room to bathroom, location of diaper changing table in relation to bathroom
– Specific words, phrases, questions and conversations around the need to use the toilet in general. Particularly note communication around motivation/need to pee/poo, following trips to the bathroom, and before and after changing diaper.

For each child, record:
– stage of potty training
– whether s/he is in diapers or underwear
– pee/poo times
– eating times
– avoidance behaviors (such as dancing around, holding it in, lying about needing to pee/poo or just having gone in their diaper, etc)
Since the toddler is not likely to be able to fully converse with an interviewer around their pee/poo practices, significant attention should be paid to the individual child through observation. Notes should be taken as to each child’s pattern of behavior around toileted-oriented situations (pee/poo in diaper, announcement of needing to pee/poo, successful use of the toilet, non-successful use of toilet [accident]). Also, attention should be paid to the overall dynamic in the room and the interactions between children.

**The Teachers: Small-group Meetings**
To gain a deeper understanding of both the knowledge within the individual teachers and the shared knowledge of the group, the observers will conduct meetings with 3–5 teachers at a time. The recorded meetings would last approximately 30–45 minutes and will happen twice during the study. The focus will be to record the stated practices and philosophies around toilet training, hear stories of success or challenges in past or current experience, discuss relationship between practices in the day care center versus the home, and to discuss questions raised through the study (from either the teachers or the observers). In addition to information gathering, these meetings will also serve to build trust between the teachers and observers.

**The Families: Observations, Interviews and Surveys**
While this study focuses on the learning environment of the day care center, it is essential to understand the home environment, especially the families, of the children. For this purpose, we propose a series of observations, interviews and surveys.

The families of the children in the observation groups would at minimum be given a survey that gathers information on the following:
- parent philosophy on toilet training
- practices used at home to toilet train (terminology, querying, validation, etc.)

A smaller group will be identified for one set of small-group interviews and in-home observations. The interviews, similar to the teacher meetings will consist of 3–5 parents, and will collect stories of toilet training practices and successes at home, and will serve to build trust with the parents around the purpose of this study.

A series of home observations will be conducted with a small selection of families that are willing to open their homes to the study. The home observation will happen once during the study, and will last a full day. These observations will include video and note-taking as described in the classroom observation study, with the following modifications:
- note number of bathrooms in the house
- note use of toilet vs. child-size moveable potty, and locations within the house
- note ages of siblings and any interaction between siblings and child around toilet activities
Research Existing Cultural Knowledge
In addition to the ethnographic research methods, our study includes research into the general cultural understanding around potty training. This includes research into:

- existing curricular discussions on potty training that day care center teachers have received
- atmospheric messages to parents that may be influencing teaching to the children such as parenting books and magazines, product promotions, etc.

Proposed study: Phase 2
Once the data has been collected, design solutions will be proposed. A second phase of research will be implemented to study the effects of the proposed design solutions.

The preliminary timeframe for the second phase of the study is one year, and would be conducted in the same day care centers with as many of the same teachers as possible. Preliminary metrics for evaluating success or improvement:

- time it takes per child to be potty trained
- number of accidents (children not being able to control when they pee/poo)
- class discussion and level of engagement of children

Potential design solutions
While it is too early to predict the results of the study, we imagine finding that current practices are often successful in teaching children the practice of using the toilet. However, it is likely that they involve a level of embarrassment or self-consciousness for the child, especially if there are any inconsistencies between the home and the day care environment. We do not predict that our research study will result in the of any new practices for training the children, but we anticipate that the following recommendations would make for an easier transition:

Recommendations to establish consistent practices between home and day care.
This solution would include a framework for both parents and teachers. Depending on the research results, it could be in the form of a brochure that is given to parents, a standardized curriculum that is taught to the teachers, or a standard form for the parents to fill out with strategies for the day care to follow. Content may include:

- Strategies for when to start potty training, and how to ensure the day care and the parents are in that conversation with the child at the same time.
- Strategies for how to establish an association of the act of pee/poo with either the potty chair or the toilet.
- Tools (such as diagrams, illustrations, rewards) for both the parents and the teachers to use with the child.
Recommendations to develop a shared communication within the daycare class. This solution would include a framework for the teacher to use in the context of the class. It would be a way to bring the individual conversation around using the toilet to a shared conversation. The goal is to allow the children to see the possibilities other children have discovered, and to influence the suggestible child to emulate their successful peers. This may include practices such as:

- Group conversation. Talk about using the toilet and other aspects of the transition (such as diapers vs. underwear, etc) in front of the entire class. This also may include diagrams or illustrations that hang in the classroom space.

- Activities. Group activities may help keep the children in conversation with each other in addition to keeping the topic light-hearted and engaging.

- Group validation. Applaud a child who uses the toilet in front of the entire class.

References