

# I Want to Wear a Diaper Today!

## What We Learned From Child-Led Toilet Learning

by Ksenia Belous Enabi

In 2018, after working for three years in Israeli child care settings, my colleague and I opened Educare Gan<sup>1</sup>, a RIE®- and Pikler®-inspired child care center for children from birth to 3.

And no, we did not just put a Pikler triangle in the room. We studied and brought Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber's ideas to our daily routine and built a real care-based curriculum.

After three years of this wonderful journey, I would like to share an amazing experience of child-led toilet learning, and my discoveries along the way.

At Educare Gan, we did not potty train children. Toilet learning happened from the first diaper change until the

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<sup>1</sup> Gan in Hebrew means – preschool or daycare



My name is Ksenia Belous Enabi. I am an infant/toddler educator and a RIE® intern. Originally from Russia, I now live and work in Israel. I hold a master's in child development from the University of Haifa. I was also trained at Loczy, Budapest in the basics of Pikler® approach.

I have been working in child care settings for nine years, seven of them with infants and toddlers. I am a co-founder and former director of Educare Gan and Studio Kids, both RIE® and Pikler® inspired child care centers for children zero to three in Tel Aviv. I also provide family consultations and child care staff training.

My main focuses are attachment theory and regulation, relationship-based curriculum, socio-emotional and gross-motor development of infants and toddlers.

I believe infants and toddlers deserve to be respected for who they are and my mission is to help people put this respect into action.

moment a child mastered using a potty/toilet. It was completely child-led and worked wonderfully.

It is important to mention that the educational team worked hand-in-hand with parents, and before joining the program, every family had an interview during which they were informed that there is no potty training happening in the child care and there is no support for families who decide to undertake it. We also provided materials to read about why it is important to trust the child to lead this process. As a result, 80 percent of families were on-board with child-led toilet learning, and it was a fantastic experience for the children, their families, and the caregivers at the nursery.

The children whose parents were not able, for whatever reason, to let them lead the process, still were able to come

to the center and use a diaper if they wanted it.

Why were we so insistent about child-led toilet learning?

I have been working in institutional care for young children for nine years and, unfortunately, never witnessed a non-harmful potty training. I saw a lot of damage done as a result of trying to potty train children. I hope one day potty training will be recognized by UNICEF as a procedure that has a harmful impact on the psychological and physical health of children.

These are the most common negative effects of potty training I witnessed:

- Holding in urine and stool
- Wetting underwear
- Stopping drinking (as early as age 2, children understand that if they do not drink, they will not pee)
- Brown urine
- Urinary tract infections
- Constipation
- Anal fissures
- Loss of confidence
- Mood swings

- Increasing tantrums
- Shame

When my colleague and I decided to open our own child care, we decided we never wanted to witness those negative effects again, and we would not compromise. Obviously, everyone eventually learns how to use a toilet. But at what price?

Here are key outcomes of child-led toilet learning:

It is 100% successful. It is each child's own body and only they know when they are ready. So, when they are in charge, there is no chance of failure. It can happen sometimes that a child is more excited about wearing underwear than the actual process of using a potty/toilet. In this case, you will be able to see it in a few days. And if it is so, you just need to support them by saying, "I see you want to wear your underpants, however since you still forget (prefer to not use) the potty/toilet, I want you to wear it on top of your diaper."

Children enjoy it. They want to be like us, and when there is no pressure from adults and they are able to challenge themselves with this new thing that makes them look more like adults, they have a lot of fun.

It boosts their confidence. They are trusted to be in control of their body and to make important decisions regarding it.

They feel extremely proud. Once they start peeing in the potty/toilet they feel their achievement to the maximum, and they begin to glow with pride. That is the first outcome that one parent who I worked with highlighted for me when I asked her to share her feelings about allowing her child to be in charge of such an important decision.

It is healthy. Toilet learning is a long process that takes two to three years. It is not just about being able to hold in urine; it requires a lot of development in different areas—cognitive, emotional, social, physical. All children develop at a different pace and only they know when and how they are ready to do certain things.

It strengthens inner motivation. Since there are no tricks, rewards, and other things involved in the process, children have only one thing that drives them: their own inner motivation to do something they decided to do.

They listen to and trust their body. Because children are not reminded or asked to use a potty/toilet, they learn to listen to and trust the signals their body sends them.

It is a big relief for parents/caretakers. Parents take this burden off their shoulders when they trust their child to be in control of this process. Parents do not need to ask their children if they need or want to use the toilet, read them books about it, or stimulate their interest around the topic. Just make the potty available, let them see you using a toilet, and trust them to listen to their body's cues.

There is one specific outcome I witnessed that I have never seen mentioned anywhere before: children learn to understand their emotional state and to evaluate what they can and cannot handle at any given time.

Here is how I came to understand this. As I already said, toilet learning is a long-term process and very individual. During the children's third year, I was able to witness different scenarios. For a few children it was a matter of one week and a couple of accidents and they never went back to a diaper. For the majority of the children, toilet learning was more gradual. Some children would choose to be without a diaper every other day,

or choose days randomly. Some of them would use underwear for a couple of weeks and then go back to diapers for some time and then return to underwear. Some children would be without a diaper in the morning and then keep it on after their nap or vice versa. Some chose to put a diaper on before pick-up. Some children wanted to put a diaper on to poop.

Eventually all of them stopped using diapers and would choose to wear them on very special occasions. These could be days when a child got a new bed, or mommy went to a hospital to give a birth to a sibling, or when they slept over at grannies, or a parent traveled for work. On those days, they felt less secure and more sensitive than usual, and did not have the emotional capacity to control or to remember to use a potty/toilet. They just could not or did not want to deal with that on those days and we trusted their decision. Witnessing this, I was struck to the core to see:

- how exactly emotional regulation is a part of the process;
- how much more complicated the whole process is;
- how well children know their bodies and minds; and,
- how well they learned to listen to themselves.

I bet a lot of adults cannot brag about possessing these skills. A child who was not using diapers for about four months could just come in the morning and say, "I want to wear a diaper today," and then go to the bathroom and put it on. Then, they could choose not to wear them again for a couple of months after that. Unfortunately, the opportunity to develop these skills is taken away from those children who have no option of wearing a diaper, and it ends up with either wet underwear, a full accident, constipation, or a child being reminded

or put on the potty, which negates the whole idea of listening to any cues from her/his body and mind.

I quite often read in parent support groups the same story about how a child decided to be without a diaper one day and then at some point there was a problem with “holding in” or constipation. I always ask the same question: does the child have free access to a diaper? Does the child know they can still wear it if they want? The answer is usually no. And I wonder if that is the reason.

Here are essential conditions for successful child-led toilet learning:

- Respectful and mindful caregiving, in which the child is invited to participate in self-care as much as she/he wants and can.
- Authentic and simple talking about physical processes happening with the child’s body (“This is your poo, it is orange and mushy today because yesterday you ate a lot of sweet potato.”)
- A child needs to see his parents (caretakers) using a toilet.
- A potty should be visible and available beginning at 15-18 months old.
- The potty a child uses to pee and poo, or at the beginning, just for sitting on, should not be used as a play object.
- Do not praise.
- Do not remind or ask a child to use a potty/toilet, even when he/she just begins to wear underpants—even on the first day.
- Keep the diaper on even if a child regularly uses the potty, until the child asks to be without it. The period between the first potty use and a decision to be without a diaper is fairly long, and is very important

for toilet learning process. During this period, children practice control over their bladder. The interest in using a potty/toilet during this time is usually unstable and can come and go. It is absolutely normal and it is important to be patient.

- If a child keeps having accidents a week after requesting to be in underwear, it means they are interested in underwear not in using the potty/toilet. In this case, explain very calmly that for hygiene reasons you have to put a diaper on them and if they want to wear underwear they can put it on the top of the diaper. A child can disagree and it is important to take charge here and help the child to deal with frustration and disappointment from having to follow the hygiene rules.
- There should always be an option of wearing a diaper from the moment a child is interested in underwear.
- For parents: choose a child care center that respects your decision and goes along with it, and work together with a child care team to see when it is a good time to buy a potty or underwear (let your child choose them).
- Remember you are not in charge of the process, so just observe and enjoy the journey with the child.

Exploring child-led toilet learning opened us up to countless new perspectives. The fact that children learn to be attuned to their emotional state and not to put their body in stress when they are emotionally not able to deal with pressure of performing a new skill of using a potty/toilet opened a new perspective on the whole process of toilet learning to us. And now we know how important it is that a child knows they can say, “I want to wear a diaper today!” and that they will be heard.