

Living With Children

By John Rosemond
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"Potty training is a nightmare." So begins advice from Meghan Leahy, advice columnist for The Washington Post. More accurately, potty training has, of late, BECOME a nightmare, thanks to advice of the sort Ms. Leahy dishes. Her approach? Do nothing. The child will eventually use the potty on his own. That may be true, but what Leahy fails to add is "after the child's mother has had a nervous breakdown."

In the mid-1950s, Harvard and several other prestigious institutions found that nearly 90 percent of 24-month-old American children had been accident-free for a month,

meaning the mean age for successful toilet training when Grandma was the parenting expert was 20 to 22 months.

This miracle was accomplished by parents – mothers, mostly – simply telling their children what to do. They did not ask said children if they wanted to use the potty, offer rewards, sing potty songs, play potty games, sit with their children while they got used to the idea, follow them around the house asking every three minutes if they wanted to try and use the potty, scream, weep, threaten Inquisitional beatings for wet or soiled clothing, much less consult lists of "readi-

ness signs" pulled out of thin air by a nationally-known pediatrician who ended his career as a spokesperson for Pampers.

They simply and straightforwardly told their children, "You are no longer wearing diapers. You are going to use the toilet like the rest of us. Any questions?" To that end, they provided minimal structure, scolded (sans drama) "mistakes," and voila! Within several days to a week, their kids were using the toilet reliably. I was one of those kids. My mother, as is the case with many moms of her day, did not even remember toilet training me. That's how easy-peasy it was before people with capital letters after their names began opining on the subject.

The toilet-babble of said pediatrician became the gold standard in the 1970s and has prevailed since. He said

toilet training a child before 24 months required "force" and would result in a psychological apocalypse. Ironically, he admitted that he was trained before age two (demurring, however, that it was his mother who had been trained). He was unable to identify how he had been traumatized by this abuse. That is because he had not been traumatized at all. Before his second birthday, his mother had liberated him from messy diapers and contributed greatly to his socialization. How that amounts to "my mother was trained" is beyond me, but that is the sort of thing one says when one's lack of logic is exposed.

Ms. Leahy tells her audience that "...many of the timelines we place on our children (pooping in the potty) are not in line with their development." She means

parents expect too much. No, they expect too little, but understandably so. They've been led to believe, after all, that expecting what is historically normal will induce a life-long phobia concerning white porcelain objects.

As the result of expert-advice-induced anxieties, today's all-too-typical mom waits for her child to wake up one morning and announce, "Good news, Mom! I'm ready to use the potty!" This mom does not know that research has found what Grandma intuitively knew: Waiting past his or her second birthday INCREASES the likelihood that a child will resist using the toilet. This problem has become so ubiquitous that pediatricians have come up with a name for it: Bowel-retention syndrome.

Ms. Leahy concludes her advice with "Good luck."

Wrong again. Luck has nothing to do with it. Toilet training success is nothing akin to throwing dice. Like 95 percent of parenting matters, it is a matter of the proper presentation of parent authority – a calm, straightforward authority that contains the subtext "I know what you need to do, and I am confident that you are going to do it." This is about obedience, not bogus "readiness." And make no mistake, everyone benefits from pre-two training.

The operative principle: If you want a child to do what he is told, simply TELL.

Isn't that brilliant? Not really. Your great-grandmother could have told you that. There is, after all, no new parenting insight under the sun.

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