

Position Statement on Inclusive Toilet Learning

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University
of Victoria

Scope and Context

The Position Statement on Inclusive Toilet Learning is intended primarily for child care providers, including early childhood and after school care, as well as managers, directors, and owners of child care programs. It could be beneficial for anyone involved in the care of children of all ages and stages.

While the focus is on child care, the term ‘the learner’ is used throughout rather than ‘the child’ or ‘children,’ as it is inclusive of all people learning to use the toilet, regardless of age. There is no set age for the learner to begin, or to become independent, in toileting. Acknowledging this helps create a more inclusive environment for adults who are involved in teaching learners at different ages and in different settings.

Much of the literature on this topic refers to the conventional approaches of toilet learning as ‘child-initiated’ or ‘child-led;’ however, in the context of this resource these types of approaches are referred to as ‘learner-initiated.’

Language around toileting varies depending on personal preferences, culture, background, etc. Generally, the term ‘toilet learning’ is used as people are *learning* a valuable new skill. This is the language chosen for the Position Statement.

Introduction

Inclusive child care means children of all abilities have equitable access to quality child care. Every child should feel empowered to actively engage and to meaningfully participate in their local child care programs and its activities. All children are supported to learn and to receive the services needed to reach their full potential. To feel included is to be supported.

People develop and learn new skills at different rates and in unique ways. The individuality of each person and their personal strengths, interests, and abilities requires different learning approaches. Toileting is no exception. Because each person is different, a variety of approaches and strategies for toilet learning should be considered.

Literature on this subject often places significant focus on more learner-initiated and interest-oriented approaches to toileting. Although these approaches may work successfully with some learners, it is not always possible for everyone to learn using these more conventional methods. Different approaches for toilet learning can accommodate different learning styles and abilities, thus supporting people to be as independent and successful as possible. Toilet learning is a valuable skill benefiting health, safety, well-being, and self-esteem.

The skills, abilities, and interests of the learner need to be taken into consideration for toilet learning – such as mobility and communication. There is a developmental period where many learners self-initiate or demonstrate interest in toilet learning, typically between 24 to 48 months. However, not everyone will demonstrate interest during this age range nor progress through the stages of toilet learning at the same rate. For some learners, an adult may consider initiating and facilitating a more goal-oriented approach.

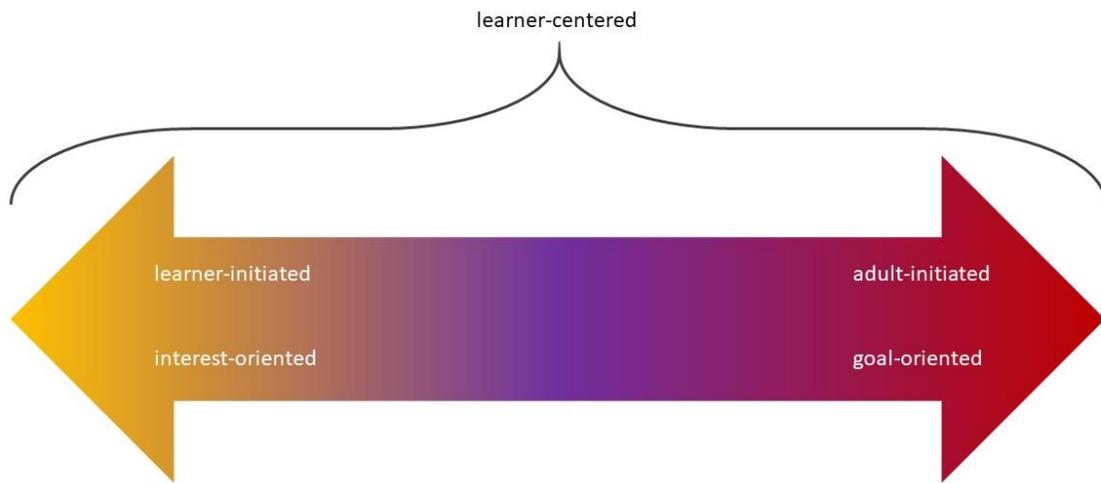
This Position Statement outlines a number of principles and practices for inclusive toilet learning in child care settings, and lays the foundation for a positive learning environment.

Toilet Learning: An Inclusive Approach

A **learner-centered** approach honours the learner and their developmental needs, skills, abilities, and interests and begins with understanding that no universally appropriate or successful strategy exists. While the bodily mechanics of toileting are relatively similar for all people, approaches to toilet learning vary based on cultural norms, beliefs, and attitudes. Putting the learner first and getting to know their family and their background can help guide discussions about toileting and successful toilet learning.

In terms of toileting, a learner-centered approach considers the necessary level of support from adults to ensure the best possible outcome. **People learn to use the toilet in their own way, on their own time, and with varying levels of support.**

Different approaches to toilet learning exist on a spectrum based on initiation and orientation.



Some learners will feel empowered to begin toileting out of their own interest and curiosity. These learner-initiated and interest-oriented approaches are on the left side of the spectrum. For example, a learner may show interest in toileting, and when adults provide instruction and light encouragement, the learner will gradually use the toilet more frequently as they become familiar with the process. Moving towards the right side of the spectrum, the adult has more of a role in initiating and guiding toilet learning.

The right side of the spectrum includes adult-initiated approaches for toileting with a clear goal in mind. For example, a learner may have a schedule with precise times to go to the toilet throughout the day. All adults involved in teaching follow the toileting schedule and provide the same type and level of reinforcement. As the learner builds an association between sensations in their body and use of the toilet, the emphasis moves towards self-initiation. Some approaches on the right side of the spectrum may require additional support from professionals.

In some cases, a learner may benefit from a combination of different approaches. For example, the learner may use an interest-oriented approach to learn how to urinate in the toilet and benefit from a more goal-oriented approach to learn how to have a bowel movement in the toilet. The effectiveness of an approach may also vary depending on location – such as between home, child care, or school.

Across the spectrum, the focus should always be on the learner's best interests and strengths, thus regardless of the level of support, all approaches are learner-centered. There are many strategies for toilet learning with learners responding differently to each of the approaches. What works for one learner might not work for another. Therefore, it may be appropriate to begin with a learner-initiated approach and move towards the right of the spectrum as needed.

How do I know if the learner is ready?

You may have heard about the 'signs of toilet learning readiness.' They are referenced in a number of resources that provide information about toilet learning. While these signs may be helpful for many, they do not apply to everyone and, in particular, may not apply to some learners with support needs. For example, some may show signs such as staying dry for several hours, approaching the toilet, asking to use the toilet, and/or showing discomfort in diapers, etc. **These signs are not universal and attempting to apply them to all learners can create some challenges.** Therefore, it is recommended to think critically about the use of readiness criteria and rather focus on the skills and abilities of the learner.

Age guidelines or other pre-requisites may indicate when the learner *may* be ready to begin toileting. However, a learner who does not show these signs may still be ready for and capable of toilet learning; this is often the case for some people with support needs. At a minimum, a learner should be comfortable sitting on the toilet for a few minutes and have proper positioning when seated. In addition, some learners may benefit from, or require, adaptive aids and equipment to support positioning on the toilet.

The learner is discovering more than just how to use the toilet. They will also be developing 'interoception,' the ability to sense and feel internal body states. Recognizing and responding to these sensations tells them when to urinate or have a bowel movement. They physically practice controlling the urge and waiting until they are seated on the toilet, strengthening neural connections in their brains allowing them to control these actions. The development of verbal and/or non-verbal communication skills may help express what is about to happen and whether help is needed.

Inclusive Toilet Learning in Child Care

In some instances, children are denied access to a child care program on the basis of 'toilet learning readiness' or whether they can toilet independently. This barrier is a challenge for many families in desperate need of child care, especially when a child does not display typical signs of toilet learning readiness. Because children learn at different rates and benefit from different strategies, child care providers can play an important role in a child's development by assisting with toilet learning.

For some learners, peer modeling and being around other learners can support interest and skill development for toileting. The amount of support from child care providers depends greatly on the learner and their family. The adult's role is to gauge the learner's abilities and create a supportive environment for learning.

When introducing the process of toileting, it is important to use proper terms for anatomy and bodily functions. Select specific terms and use them consistently. Consistent communication strategies, such as

pictures, symbols, visual cues, or sign language, can help remind the learner of the stepwise process of toileting.

A positive learning environment includes adaptations for the learner's individual needs including considerations for sensitivities such as sounds, smells, textures, and lighting. Understanding the strengths and needs of each learner and working with families can help identify potential learning strategies.

Being safely and properly positioned on the toilet helps the learner feel more secure and stable when toileting. This also facilitates the adults' role in teaching the process. Sturdy toilet step stools and toilet seat adaptations are example of strategies to make the bathroom more inclusive.

Praise and encouragement fosters a positive learning environment. Avoid shaming or disciplining any natural part of the learning process including:

- Accidents
- Regression
- Night time incontinence
- Needing to stop the learning process and start again

Supporting Families in Toilet Learning

Child care providers are uniquely positioned to apply this Position Statement in their practices; supporting and empowering families to do what is best for each learner.

There are some fundamental principles of toilet learning, including safety, communication, clear direction, consistency, and respect. A positive relationship between adults and learners provides a solid foundation for toilet learning. When child care providers and families work in partnership and have a positive relationship, discussing more challenging topics – such as toileting – can be easier.

In collaboration with the family, establish an effective and positive learning environment. This might involve agreeing on specific language, selecting how to celebrate successes, and/or identifying a consistent supportive response when accidents occur. For example, some goal-oriented approaches recommend a significant reward reserved specifically for toilet success –such as a treat or iPad time. Child care providers can support the family by offering this reward to the learner at the program and maintaining consistency. In other instances, learners may be curious and interested in toileting, and child care providers may read stories about toileting with them and help them to practice and master the steps.

Opportunities to support families with toilet learning include:

- Sharing information and resources about toilet learning (see the Toileting Resource Evaluation Tool)
- Helping families to identify the most appropriate strategies for a learner
- Teaching families how to initiate toilet learning in a learner-centered manner
- Supporting parents/caregivers with teaching the learner how to toilet
- Maintaining consistency in language and approach between the home and the child care setting
- Facilitating access to supports and programs, when necessary

Working Collaboratively with the Community

Begin by discussing any concerns related to toileting with the family in a positive and respectful manner. It may be appropriate to take time to meet with them privately and discuss potential strategies. Work together throughout the process and openly discuss any challenges.

Families may need to consult with a health care professional – such as a family physician – to ensure there are no health concerns related to toileting challenges. In some cases, diet, intake of water, and exercise may be factors influencing toilet learning. A high fibre diet, regular hydration, and exercise can make a difference.

Child care providers are part of an interconnected network of programs and services. They play a role in identifying and guiding families to more specialized supports for those who need them. To help identify the services available to support the learner and your program, Child Development Centres (CDC) can serve as a guide.

Supported Child Development (SCD), Aboriginal Supported Child Development (ASCD), and Early Intervention Therapy (EIT) Programs offer supports and programs for toilet learning. EIT include occupational therapists and physiotherapists supporting individual needs in a range of settings. Other professionals such as behaviour consultants, toileting experts, community groups, and private practitioners, may also offer support. Access and delivery of these programs and services may vary depending on the geographic location.

Conclusion

This Position Statement lays the foundation for a deeper understanding of inclusive toilet learning practices. The intention of the Position Statement is to be as inclusive as possible and provide meaningful guidance for those involved in supporting the learner. A learner-centered approach to toileting focuses on individual strengths and abilities, and considers which approaches and strategies will support the best possible outcome.

Toilet learning is an ongoing, dynamic process. You may need to monitor responses to different approaches and adapt by changing strategies. The cornerstones of successful toilet learning include positive relationships, active collaboration, and effective communication. During the toilet learning journey there may be setbacks, but know that there are supports available in the community.

The potential challenges associated with the toilet learning process are outweighed by the overall benefits to the health, safety, well-being, and independence of the learner.