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Dare to Bare

By MEREDITH F. SMALL

LIKE any American parent, I spent more than two years changing diapers. At the time, I thought it was a necessary evil; after all, you can't have babies or toddlers going whenever and wherever they want.

But, it turns out, there is a group of parents - supported by a pediatrician, some child-rearing experts and, of course, a Web site - who disagree. The diaper-free-by-three movement - and the three here is three weeks, not three years - claims that babies need never wear diapers again.

According to the Web site diaperfreebaby.org, diaper liberation comes as caretakers develop an "elimination communication" with their infants. "Elimination communication" is a fancy term for "paying attention," in the same way we notice other stuff babies communicate like hunger, tiredness or a desire to be picked up.

In this case, parents watch for the kind of fussiness, squirming and funny faces that come before a baby urinates or has a bowel movement. Caretakers should also pay attention to any daily routines that the baby follows, like urinating after feedings or when waking up. At that point, it's a simple matter of holding the baby on the pot, and pretty soon he or she connects the toilet with its function, and the pattern is set.

As an anthropologist, I know that this idea is nothing new. Most babies and toddlers around the world, and throughout human history, have never worn diapers. For instance, in places like China, India and Kenya, children wear split pants or run around naked from the waist down. When it's clear that they have to go, they can squat or be held over the right hole in a matter of seconds.

Parents and caretakers in these cultures see diapers as not the best, but the worst alternative. Why bind bulky cloth around a small child? Why use a disposable diaper that keeps buckets of urine next to tender skin?

The trick is that infants in these cultures are always physically entwined with a parent or someone else, and "elimination communication" is the norm. With bare bottoms, they ride on the hip or back and it's easy to feel when they need to go. The result is no diaper rash, no washing cloth diapers, no clogging the landfill with disposables, no frustrating struggle in the bathroom with a furious 2-year-old.

I am ashamed to admit that, even though I've studied how babies are cared for all over the world, it never occurred to me to focus on how children in other cultures use the potty, or not. I certainly borrowed all the other kinds of child-rearing behaviors that I admired from other cultures like carrying my daughter all the time, co-sleeping and feeding her on demand. And I was against the Western ideology of making my child independent and self-reliant. I rejected the crib, stroller and jump seat, all devices intended to teach babies to be on their own. Instead I embraced the ideology of non-Western cultures and opted for the closest kind of attachment I could get.

So why didn't I use that entwinement to free us both from diapers?

Because child-rearing traditions are culturally entrenched. The use of diapers in particular is so engrained in Western culture that it's almost impossible to imagine life without them.

Thanks to Freud, we also see the bathroom as a snake pit of psychological danger, and believe that the only way to prevent scarring a child for life is to let him or her come to the toilet in his or her own time, assuming there will be a diaper pinned on for as long as it takes. (I'm going to take a wild guess and say that the 75 countries that practice diaper-free training do not have a disproportionately high number of obsessive-compulsive adults. Of course, adults who were raised diaper-free may have other issues to deal with, like a strange sensation whenever anyone makes a hissing sound or the knowledge that at 7 months, a photo of you sitting on the toilet appeared on the front page of this newspaper.)

We are also a bathroom-oriented culture. American houses these days usually have several bathrooms, sometimes one for each bedroom, or each person. And they are often color-coordinated, lavishly decorated shrines to washing up and eliminating waste where everyone, even children, would like to spend a lot of time.

With so much cultural baggage behind the bathroom door, no wonder it never occurred to me that elimination might be a much easier business.

At this point, I haven't changed a diaper in six years, and it doesn't look as if I'll be faced with this issue again. But given the opportunity, I'd certainly go the diaper-free route. Just the thought of a baby's bare bottom bouncing through the house is reason enough to try.

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