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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Toilet training is 'finished!' ...and I miss it

When the Dooley household are on edge. We are trying to carry on as normal, but it is simply not an option. No sooner have we started a task when we hear the jubilant exclamation: 'Finished!'

Delay for even a second and catastrophe is inevitable.

As his parents frantically scramble to reach the bathroom, our youngest is parading around as though he just won the lottery. 'Look, I just flushed the toilet,' he says so sweetly that you almost forget the tough task at hand.

The deed complete and you breathe a sigh of relief. Some 30 seconds later: 'Finished!'

Yet another scramble, more congratulations and a further sigh of satisfaction.

And so it is from dawn to dusk: Short periods of calm punctuated by elated exclamations. Finally, when little snores fill the house, you still find yourself anticipating the next summons.

You sit jittering at the edge of your seat, fearing the bathroom has become a war zone.

As an only child, I lived a calm and orderly existence. Chaos was not something I was used to before having children. Even now, I still find it difficult to cope when order descends into anarchy.

That is why, for me, toilet training is something akin to an earthly purgatory. I had no problem changing nappies, simply because I was in control of the situation. Now, however, I have relinquished control to a three-year-old who thinks the bathroom is a theme park.

Taking it all in her stride, Mrs Dooley is the consummate toilet trainer. 'We'll be done and dusted in three days,' she assured me. Seeing the horror creep across my face, she quickly reminded me of how fast our older boys adapted.

Not much consolation when you are so compulsive about cleanliness. Still, I realise it is during such transitional phases that I have experienced the true beauty of human life. Such stages have taught me the real meaning of patience, compassion and service.

In those moments, I have been forced to confront my own inhibitions, forced to let go of all reservation and embarrassment.

Helping such a vulnerable little child, you quickly learn the virtue of empathy.

You come to understand we are all mutually dependent.

Despite all its trials and traumas, toilet training is a fascinating study in moral education. Superficially, it is an attempt to take a child out of nappies. As I have discovered, it is much more than that.

Toilet training is the best answer to

those, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who say we are born free but are everywhere in chains. A child in nappies is a child in chains. Teaching him how to use the toilet liberates him from those shackles, thus enabling him to enjoy independence.

This, however, is not freedom from all constraint. Toilet training imposes discipline on a child. It teaches that independence comes at a price, which is respect for privacy, order and control.

Watching my little son these past few days, I see a human being experiencing his first real taste of moral development. While relishing newfound freedom, he is also learning that liberty is not a matter of doing whatever you want. It is not comprised of endless 'experiments in living', irrespective of the cost to other people.

Genuine liberty recognises boundaries because the alternative is lawlessness.

When we started toilet training last Friday, it felt as though we were living in anarchy. Today, there is a recognition that freedom must be tempered with responsibility if everyone is to live in peace.

Slowly but surely, it is dawning on our son that the bathroom may not be the pleasure park he initially imagined. Judging by his father's frenzied reaction, he now knows it is improper to simply abandon your trousers on the toilet floor.

WHEN my wife was expecting our first child, someone told me that nothing could possibly prepare a person for the changes children bring. She was correct, of course, for great and irreversible changes have occurred in our lives.

My children have taught me to let go of my compulsions, to savour vital moments and not to be so critical when others fail to satisfy my standards. In a word, they have taught me how to be human.

That is why, as we near the end of this final phase of toilet training, I cannot help being somewhat nostalgic. It is true that I won't miss the mayhem, the nervous anticipation of yet another little accident, the endless disinfecting and the half-naked waltzing through the house.

What I will miss is the infectious joy that radiates from those little eyes, as one little boy makes a break for freedom.

I will miss his beaming smile, which seems to say that life really could not be this good. I will miss helping him become an independent person, yet one who recognises that no person is ever completely self-reliant.

Believe me, toilet training is certainly not for the fainthearted, but what it teaches is a great lesson in life. I now know, in our various ways, we never stop shouting: 'Finished!'

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