



**Wonderfully funny**  
"Tschugger", the co-production between SRF and Sky, is a hit. With potential abroad? **4/5**



**Give a better gift**  
15 Tips for locally produced, sustainable gifts in style. **10/11**



**More than Variety**  
No one danced like her anymore! Josephine Baker receives the highest honor in Paris. **8**

# Wochenende

## Culture & Life

Saturday, 27 November 2021

# Wrongly wound

A toddler needs a good 10,000 nappies these days. It could be a lot less. **2/3**

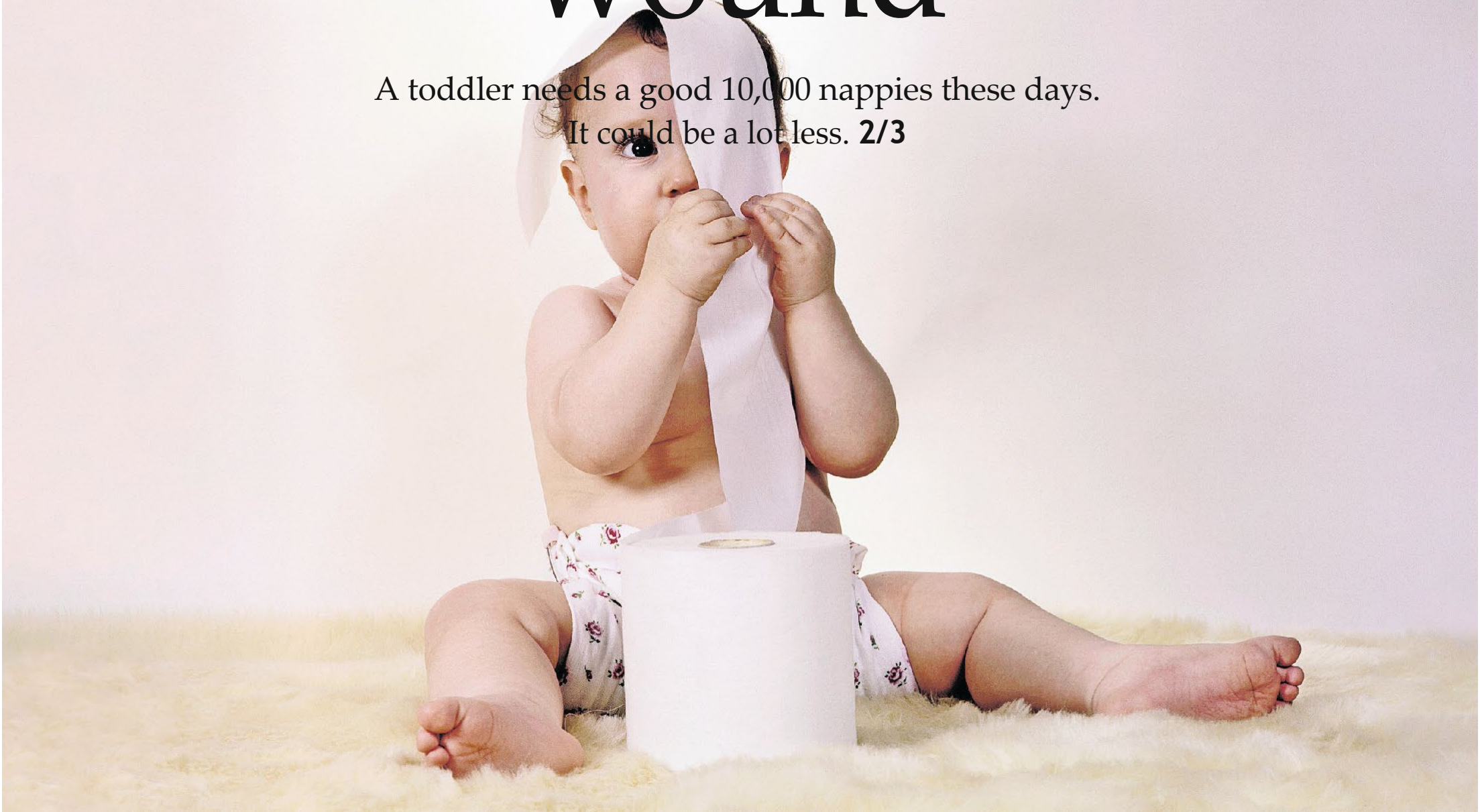


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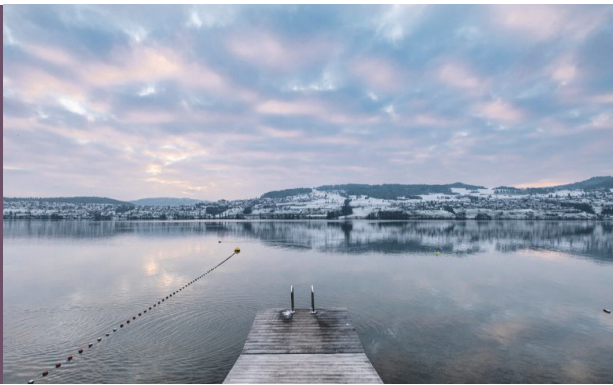
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# This can go in the pants

Some children in Switzerland can read before they get dry. This has to do with super-absorbent nappies - and with our current parenting style.



Sabine Kuster

The boy was six years old, and every time a child came to visit him, he first put away the pile of diapers in the closet. No one was allowed to see that he needed diapers at night. He regularly came home from kindergarten with wet pants. The parents went to the pediatrician about it and finally had him examined at the hospital. They were advised that the boy should drink regularly so that he would feel the full bladder more often, and that they should send him to the toilet regularly. But when they asked him, "Do you have to go to the bathroom?" he would deny it, but would wet shortly after. "Does he just not want to, or does he actually not feel it?" the mother wondered.

This is not an isolated case: Migros reports that it has been noticing a growing demand for larger nappies for around four years. That's why the range has been expanded to size 8 - for children weighing 17 kilograms or more, i.e. from the age of 4.

The problem is also reflected in the feedback from kindergarten teachers, who say that they did not have children with diapers in the past. This may have something to do with the fact that today's children are already enrolled in school at the age of four. But Rita Messmer, a developmental educator from Bern, is convinced that children generally become dry later - because of diapers. She knows many examples of children from her practice and says: "The children really don't feel that their bladder is full. It's no wonder that when a child has been in nappies for five years, and they absorb everything immediately, how can they become aware of this?"

Messmer, 67, has been fighting disposable diapers for years, but it's a lonely battle. She is now getting support because of the waste issue: some parents put cloth diapers on their babies to avoid the plastic mountain.

But opponents of wrapped positions see the solution not in cloth diapers alone, but in so-called holding: Parents watch for signs such as restlessness or crying and hold the babies over a sink and later put them on the potty, especially after waking up and breastfeeding. Messmer is convinced that the window of opportunity lies in the first three months, because without a reaction from the parents, the baby's signals fade.

### Wetting can also have physical causes

In 2018, a large study showed that children in China are also becoming dry later today. A team led by Xi Zheng Wang investigated how many children were still wetting at what time. Nighttime wetting was found in 8.6 percent of children ages 5 to 18 who had always worn diapers, 7.4 percent of those who had only worn diapers at night, and 3.5 percent of those who had never worn diapers. So the earliest potty training cannot completely eliminate wetting. There are also physical factors, such as a bladder that is too small, a weakness in a certain hormone, an extremely deep sleep or psychological stress.

In Switzerland, many parents are still guided by the best-seller "Baby Years" by the developmental pedagogue Remo Largo, according to whose study

A baby is held on the third day after birth.  
Image: Raphael Kuenzle



In the 1970s, 50 percent of boys and 85 percent of girls were dry by the age of three. At the age of four, the curve stagnates: 10 percent of boys and a few girls still go to bed during the day - and one year later they are still doing so.

Are there more of them today? Or are parents simply talking about it more openly? There are few new studies on this. The only evidence is that dryness training starts later, even in China, where parents use disposable diapers more often. Infant psychologist Marga-rete Bolten of the University Psychiatric Clinics Basel (UPK) says that some parents nowadays do not accompany the process of becoming dry intensively enough, because you are no longer looked at askance if a four- or five-year-old child is not yet dry. "Parents are very in-formationed, but often also insecure and don't know what to expect from their child." Karin Bühler Meyer, urotherapist at the Ber-

ner Inselspital, says: "Children need targeted support to become dry."

But because diapers today do not mean any additional washing and have become affordable, the topic only comes up in most families when there are problems. Adults are often not aware that elimination is a complex process - an interaction of brain, organs and psyche, and also a skill that needs to be accompanied like learning to walk and read.

This is a delicate point: young parents should not be burdened with even more. All the experts consulted point this out. Also, because most toddlers are no longer cared for one hundred percent at home, it would be more difficult to provide close support during the drying process. Most of the experts do not believe that holding in the first six months has any influence on development. They do not see it as stimulation, but rather as a simp-

les training that cannot be used to accelerate the maturation of the brain for bladder and bowel control.

"Other developmental delays are also acceptable," says urotherapist Tabea Maag from the cantonal hospital in Schaffhausen. She knows families where only one in three children has a problem with becoming dry.

Largo had also drawn this conclusion: potty training is useless. However, the parents of his studies did not practice potty training from birth, but only started after six months. Rita Messmer is convinced: "Largo's main aim was to take the pressure out of raising children, which was too great at the time." She believes the problem is bigger than the Western world wants to admit: "It's possible that the three-month colic is related to the fact that children have to wet their nappies." Messmer goes further: "Why is the sperm quality of today's recruits decreasing more and more? It's certainly not good for testicles to be in warm plastic diapers for too long."

### Incorrectly conditioned by the diapers

Largo did not believe that becoming dry would happen on its own and wrote that parents could miss the time when children became dry. The child could get so used to it that it only wanted to do its business in nappies. Messmer is familiar with this: "I have children in my practice who can go to the toilet without any problem to do their little business, but when they go to the toilet, their bowels only open when their bottom feels the diapers. That is simply





urologist at the Inselspital in Berne, says that he has seen the

Going potty is a cultural technique that parents can make more or less attractive for the child.  
Image: Getty Images

misconditioned." Messmer has been on the subject for decades and says she knows hundreds of children who were kept from birth. "They were all dry by age two at the latest," she says.

In diaper-free forums on the Internet, however, parents also report that they do not recognize the child's signals or that the method does not quite work. Messmer also points out that an infant excretes up to 20 times a day and that the dogma "completely diaper-free" is an unnecessary stress. For others it really works diaper-free. A mother from Freiburg says that even her oldest child, who was born with a disability, was dry at 17 months, and that there was not even an "accident" when she had diarrhoea when she was just under one year old. "People have the feeling that there is something to be done, but it is not complicated. Otherwise, you're just constantly changing diapers and you have inflamed butts." At daycare, her three children wore diapers.

A father from Prilly, near Lausanne, says his son has only done his big business four times in diapers since birth. "He was really waiting to be stopped. He has peed in his nappies from time to time. You can't always be on your toes." Now he is two years old, he says. "Pee pee" if he had to.

Others resign themselves to interim solutions because grandparents, the daycare centre or their partner won't cooperate. Like Pascal Koehli. His daughter was dry at night at the age of two, and his son is now 21 months old and empties his port himself. Koehli says: "Parents today are trying to re-

act on hunger, sleep and closeness - only the need to excrete is of no interest to anyone. Yet it could be an explanation for the seemingly basic crying in the first months. No animal child makes its own nest."

**The Federal Council sees no need for action**

Yet even these examples leave unanswered the questions: Does the innate excretory reflex influence the maturation of bladder control in the brain? Can problems later on be avoided in this way? SP National Councillor Ursula Schneider Schüttel submitted a postulate on the subject in June and asked whether the Federal Council was prepared to provide information about the negative aspects of disposable nappies and to commission studies to examine the congenital behaviour of babies in the first few months.

The Federal Council referred to a meta-analysis from May. A team led by the Dane Anders Breinbjerg had bundled all studies of the last decades and analysed eight in more detail, including those from China. The conclusion: "The studies show a tendency for diaper use to be related to delayed continence." But no firm conclusion can be drawn because the literature is insufficient.

Why isn't more research being done on getting dry? One thing is clear: there are no economic interests in reducing nappy consumption. And there is a fear that working parents would come under additional pressure.

However, there is a need for action when children start school wearing nappies. Mazen Zeino, a paediatric

In Switzerland, the issue is tackled later. In Austria and Germany, where Zeino has worked, parents would look to get the child sober for the start of school. "Accordingly, they come to therapy earlier. Unfortunately, we always have children who don't come until they're 12 or 14. I don't like to imagine the unpleasant situations they've had to cope with until then." The International Children's Continence Society (ICCS) also recommends a check-up from the age of six.

Zeino has also worked in Pakistan. There, children are usually dry by the age of two and a half. Oskar Jenni, Professor of Developmental Pediatrics at the University of Zurich, also acknowledges the earlier drying out in other cultures. But he says that this Asian or African style of upbringing is based on the fact that caregivers are better able to recognise children's signals because they have close physical contact with them. This is an achievement of the caregiver, not the child. Urotherapist Bühler Meyer, on the other hand, sees it as quite possible that perception can be positively influenced by parents reacting to urinary and faecal signals. However, the maturation process is the starting point for bladder and bowel control.

In their meta-analysis, the Danes were also unable to answer the question about the influence of cleanliness education in the first months. However, they stated: "We speculate that the more comfortable and practical diapers become, the more it takes to motivate children and parents to stop using them."



# Dry at last! 5 tips

**Perceive and trigger timing**  
It is important, as pedagogue Remo Largo warns, not to miss the moment when a child is perceives its excretory needs. Within the time window, the moment can certainly be influenced: there are examples where children suddenly became dry when there were extra-small children's toilets in a hotel, when a nice potty was bought, when the child was allowed to run around naked during the summer holidays, when the remaining nappies could be proudly presented to a newborn neighbour's child... Developmental pedagogue Rita Messmer prepares blocked children for the moment without diapers. And she incorporates elements of self-determination: children are allowed to choose whether they prefer to go to the toilet or the potty in the future. In the case of the potty, they can decide what it should look like. Then the child is simply allowed to sit on it. She shows some of them videos of other children sitting on the potty. "Often the children watch in fascination," says Messmer. The child is then allowed to take as many diapers as they want from a (small) pile, and it's agreed that those will be the last. Messmer then gives the parents a fictional recipe. The day before the diapers run out, the parents pull out the placebo drops, and the child is told that these will make it work. "This prepares the brain for the moment, and the sphincter is no longer blocked," Messmer explains. "The tension has to be taken out of the moment." The first time on the potty or on the toilet should be approached as the first ride on the pedal bike and not taught like an exam date.

**Showing how it's done**  
For adults, going to the toilet is a side business. But children benefit from it, if the parents accompany them: Going to the toilet together and looking at a book can prevent constipation/cramping.

**Regularly "phone" with the bladder**  
The perception of a full bladder can be practiced. This is done by parents ask their children if they need to go to the bathroom - weni-

The most pressing question is how full the bladder is. Older children can be advised to "phone the bladder" regularly during lessons, advises urotherapist Tabea Maag. Some don't want to interrupt their activity or their head doesn't perceive the signals because they are concentrated on something else.

**Take the pressure off, but keep the rules simple**  
The subject of toilets can be discussed between parents and child become too dominant. Breaks in potty training are recommended. Nevertheless, parents can insist that only those who have been to the toilet leave the house. As a compromise (instead of a power struggle), it could be negotiated that the child goes to the toilet immediately on the train or in the nursery.

**Clear stance**  
"Making a clear point is an important basic skill as a parent. child psychologist Margarete Bolten says. Parents today quickly feel pressured by their child's cries. "Our tolerance for crying has decreased," she says. A calm inner attitude would be good, advises Boten. In the sense of: I understand that you want this (for example, the diapers), but it's not good for you.

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