

The Latrine Training Mat: A Perfect Fit When One Size Doesn't Fit All

By

Sarah Gilman, Silantoi Kisoso, Gabriella Lockhart, Sarah Melgen, and Clair Null

In many parts of the world, children defecate in the open because there are no latrines. But what is one to do when there are plenty of latrines, but not enough children who want to use them?

In 2010 the WASH Benefits Project team at Innovations for Poverty Action in Kenya investigated why children in rural communities weren't using latrines. Mothers had the answers. Pit latrines can be dirty, smelly, and unsafe. [Quote 1 here]

Ironically, cleaning the mud latrine floor only makes the hole bigger. Straddling a wide hole or balancing on wobbly floor boards can be physically challenging, especially for the youngest children.

Some mothers said they didn't encourage their children to use the latrine because their messes made the latrine unpleasant for other families.

After brainstorming about how latrine flooring could be more child-friendly, WASH Benefits Research Coordinator Silantoi Kisoso had a simple, remarkably innovative idea -- the Latrine Training Mat. The mat's primary function is to safely reduce the size of the latrine hole, eliminating the fear factor. By surrounding the hole with an easier to clean surface, moms don't have to worry as much



about young children's messes ruining the latrine for the rest of the family.

The Latrine Training Mat is a flat square made of plastic or treated wood, approximately 60 cm across with a tapered hole about 13cm at the center. It is elevated a few centimeters from the ground on risers and fits over the existing latrine hole. This cheap and durable tool facilitates good sanitation practices from an early age and fosters a life-long habit of latrine use by converting the latrine floor into a child-friendly, easy to clean surface. The mats can be used in



virtually any latrine.

The next step was to research whether mothers and young children would actually use the mats. The answer is YES! According to mothers in Western Kenya and Northern Uganda, once children get used to the idea, the mats make them feel safer in the latrine, so they use them more more regularly than before. Mothers also explained that the mats are helpful during the initial stages of toilet training.

Children become independent more quickly when the family uses a mat. [Quote 3 here]

Children sometimes even invite children from neighboring families to come use it. [Quote 4 here]

The WASH Benefits Project team heard many examples of how the mats contribute to a cleaner compound, with fewer flies and odors. Mothers say having a mat reduces their workload

because they do not have to clean up when the children miss the hole or defecate outside. [Quote 5 here]

Bolstered by mothers' and children's reports on the benefits of the Latrine Training Mat, the WASH Benefits Project team has been investigating various ways to make them more available as one tool for reducing unsafe waste disposal in areas where pit latrines are common.

The team has explored the feasibility of selling the mats with such innovative financing possibilities as microloans to help families who do not have even a few dollars to purchase them.

They have also piloted community workshops in Uganda to see whether homemade versions would be an attractive option. Community members came up with many creative ways to make the mats from low-cost local materials.

The team's next step is to develop a simple set of training materials and safety guidelines that can be integrated with Community Led Total Sanitation campaign activities.



Villagers in Northern Uganda showing off their home-made Latrine Training Mats

Initial experiences with the Latrine Training Mats shows their potential as tools for toilet training and safe feces disposal for children under the age of five. The team is optimistic that parents will be excited enough to buy a mat or make one for themselves.

Acknowledgements: This project has been funded by a Grand Challenges Exploration Award from The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

References: Reese, H. and C. Null. 2012. "Estimating the Scope of Improved Child Feces Disposal in Low- and Middle-Income Countries" Emory University Masters of Public Health

Additional quotations about the project

1. One mother said "[My child] had not begun using the latrine...because that latrine hole was big...Children now train to use the latrine because the hole used to be big but now this thing has narrowed it." (No longer appears in edited text.)

2. One mother explained, "I left it in the latrine because the children do use it by themselves whenever I am not around. I had already shown them such that even the youngest one here can just use it. The older one goes with her, places it, she uses it and then the older child removes it and places it leaning on the latrine wall."