

Man of the House by Chris Erskine

Housebreaking the toddler

Hey, little pal, time to ditch those diapers.

THE TODDLER slept late on Saturday, his little gift to the rest of the family so tolerant of his toddler quirks. Like when he filled in some spots on the beagle one morning with pink Magic Marker. Or the occasional missed appointments with the potty.

He's trying, that's the important thing. I mean, who gets everything in life right the first time?

"Just look at all those Kennedy kids," I tell the toddler.

"OK, Daddy."

"You'll do better," I tell him.

"I will?" he asks.

"I was a slow starter myself," I say.

This doesn't comfort him as much as you might think. He worries that he's not carrying his own weight around the house, worries that — though he can now dress himself — he has no great feel for tying his shoes. When he squirts toothpaste on the brush, he makes a mess of things, getting blue Sesame Street toothpaste in the grout his mother just scrubbed.

With a toddler, there is rarely a quiet moment, a minute of repose or reflection. If he stands still a second, someone will approach him with a washcloth or a comb and attempt to groom him to an unrealistic degree. At which time he will let out the orneriest howl.

"Quiet!" someone yells, usually his brother.

"OK!" the toddler yells back.

"You know, he was 3 once too," I assure the toddler.

"He was 2?" he asks, not quite understanding.

"And 3 also," I say.

Then there are the potty problems. Someone gave him this handsome new book "Tinkle, Tinkle, Little Tot," full of little rhymes to help toddlers understand potty training missteps. Maybe you've seen it in the bookstores. Maybe not.

One of the authors is Bruce Lansky, who also penned the constipation classic "Mary Had a Little Jam."

Lansky has written 13 other popular children's books. I haven't read them all. But if you liked "The Da Vinci Code," you'd probably love "Tinkle, Tinkle, Little Tot."

*Tinkle, tinkle, little tot,
sitting there upon the pot.
Any second now, you'll see . . .
Sprinkle, splash, you'll go pee!
Tinkle, tinkle, little tot,
sitting there upon the pot.*

If you ask me, that's just great writing. It's involving and dramatic with an economy of language you won't get from,

say, Norman Mailer. The toddler giggles when I read him the poems, not to mention his mother, who could use a good giggle these days, living with us, no happy ending in sight.

But this book brings us hope and laughter. My own favorite is a poem full of ambivalence and imagery. It's called "The Pee-Pee Dance," sung to the tune of hokeypokey:

*You cross your right foot left.
You cross your left foot right.
You squeeze your knees together,
And you hold them really right.
You tiptoe to the potty
So you will not wet your pants.
You're doing the Pee-Pee Dance.*

There's more, but I won't ruin it for you. Obviously what this book seems to have, sorely lacking in much of today's literature, is a sense of forgiveness. It also has cool little cartoons on every page.

"He went all day Friday without an accident," his mother announces at dinner (in our house, there is no inappropriate time to discuss toddler bathroom progress).

"Great job, buddy," I say.

"You've worked really hard."

"What about me?" his mother says.

"You went all day too?" I ask.

Hey, we're making some real progress around here. Soon, I will never have to lug along a diaper bag to the hardware store. I figure that, with four kids, I've spent approximately \$12,000 on diapers over the years.

With this last kid, I've become more casual about dragging along supplies. In a pinch, I once crafted an emergency diaper out of a Sports section and duct tape. Try that with your stinkin' laptop. The diaper was remarkably absorbent, compared to most other media. Plus, there's something very satisfying about seeing Barry Bonds' photo on someone's little tush.

But I digress. The important thing is that, despite no real role models, the toddler is making giant strides to improve himself every way he can — as an artist, as an entertainer, as a man.

With me at his side, singing the classics:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on the
pot,
Humpty Dumpty tinkled a lot,
Now all the king's horses
and all the king's men,
Will never dress Humpty in
diapers again.*

Chris Erskine can be reached at chris.erskine@latimes.com.