

All About Potty Training

All About Learning to Use the Toilet

When and how to help your child learn to use the potty depends on how ready your child is, as well as your own beliefs and values about toilet training. There is not one “right” way or one “right” age to learn. Here are some questions and thoughts to keep in mind as you help your child learn to use the toilet.

Signs That Children Are Ready for Potty Training

Most children develop control over their bowel and bladder by 18 months. This skill is necessary for children to physically be able to use the toilet. How ready a child is emotionally to begin learning to use the potty depends on the individual child. Some children are ready at 18 months, and others are ready at 3. While every child is different, about 22 percent of children are out of diapers by 2 1/2, and 88 percent of children are out of diapers by 3 1/2.

Your child is ready to learn to use the toilet when he or she:

- Stays dry for at least 2 hours at a time, or after naps
- Recognizes that she is urinating or having a bowel movement. For example, your child might go into another room or under the table when she has a bowel movement. This is important—if you child does not realize she is having a bowel movement, she won’t be successful at potty training.
- Is developing physical skills that are critical to potty training—the ability to walk, to pull pants up and down, and to get onto/off the potty (with some help).
- Copies a parent’s toileting behavior.
- Can follow simple instructions.
- Most importantly, your child wants to use the potty. He may tell you that he wants to wear “big boy” underpants or learn to go potty “like Daddy does.” He may feel uncomfortable in a soiled diaper and ask to be changed, or ask to use the toilet himself.

When Not to Start Potty Training

There are some issues that can sometimes get in the way of successful potty training. For example, when children are going through a significant change or several changes at once (see list below) it might be smart to hold off on adventures in potty training. At these times, children often feel overwhelmed

and sometimes lose skills they have already learned or were making progress on, like potty training. Common situations that can cause stress and are generally not good times to start training include:

- An upcoming or recent family move.
- Beginning new or changing existing child care arrangements.
- Switching from crib to bed.
- When you are expecting or have recently had a new baby.
- A major illness, a recent death, or some other family crisis.

If your child is in the middle of potty training during a stressful time and seems to be having more accidents than usual, know that this is normal. Your child needs all of your patience and support right now. She will return to her previous level of potty training once things have gotten back to normal.

Starting Potty Training

It can be helpful to think of potty training as a process in which both you and your child have your own “jobs” to do.

It is the **parent’s** responsibility to create a supportive learning environment. This means that you:

- Recognize that your child is in control of his or her body
- Let your child decide whether to use the potty or a diaper/pull-up each day
- Teach your child words for body parts, urine, and bowel movements
- Offer your child the tools she needs to be successful at toileting (such as a small potty, potty seat, stool, etc.)
- Expect and handle potty accidents without anger
- Avoid punishment as well as too much praise around toilet use. (This can make children feel bad when they aren’t successful.)

It is your **child’s** responsibility to:

- Decide whether to use the toilet or a diaper/pull-up
- Learn his body’s signals for when he needs to use the toilet
- Use the toilet at his own speed

Finding a toilet training method that works for your family is the key. No matter how you do it, remember this is a learning process that takes time, with many accidents along the way. Being patient is the best way you can support your child as she learns.

Keep in mind that children with special needs may take longer to learn to use the potty. They may also need special equipment, and a lot of help and support from you. If you need assistance with your child's toilet training, talk with your child's health care provider or community service coordinator.

What to Avoid When Potty Training My Toddler

Toddlers are all about trying to gain some control over their world. They are using their growing physical, thinking, and language skills to gain some power over themselves, their bodies, and their surroundings. This natural and healthy desire for control can lead to power struggles, as children quickly figure out that one way to feel in charge is by refusing to do something they know their parent wants them to do. And for better or worse, learning to use the potty is way up there on most parents' list of what they really, really, really want their children to do—and children quickly pick up on that. (Just picture mom and dad clapping and jumping up and down when they see their child's first bowel movement in the potty.) Toilet training is particularly ripe for power struggles because it is so tied up with toddlers wanting to have control over their own bodies.

So it's important to approach toilet training matter-of-factly and without a lot of emotion. Think of it as just another skill you are helping your child learn. If you show anger or disappointment when it's not going well, or overwhelming joy when it is, it lets your child know this is something you want him to do badly. Refusing to do it becomes a very powerful way for your child to feel in control. The more emotional you are, the more it shows your child how much it matters to you that he use the potty.

It is also very important not to force your child to use the potty because it can cause intense power struggles. These power struggles sometimes lead to children trying to regain control over their bodies by withholding urine or bowel movements. This can create physical problems, like constipation. So if you are starting to see power struggles developing over potty training, it might help to take the pressure off. Stop talking about potty training or doing anything about it for a little while, until your child shows signs of readiness and interest again.

To Use Rewards for Potty Training or Not

Many parents wonder about offering rewards for using the potty—a sticker, an extra sweet, or a little toy every time their child is successful on the toilet. While these kinds of rewards may encourage progress in the short run, the concern is that for some children, the pressure of “success” in the form of the reward creates anxiety or feelings of failure when they have a (very normal and even expected) potty accident. The other risk is that the use of rewards for toileting can lead children to expect rewards for doing almost anything—finishing a meal, brushing teeth, etc. When parents are matter-of-fact about potty training and don't make a big deal about it, children are more likely to follow their own internal desire to reach this important milestone.

When Preschoolers Are Still Not Interested in Potty Training

Reach out to your child's health care provider with your questions or concerns about potty training. Occasionally, children have physical issues that make potty training more difficult, so a check-up is always a good idea. You may also want to sit down with a child development specialist who can help you figure out what the challenges around potty training might be for your individual child, and help you identify toilet learning strategies that might be more successful.

References

Signs That Children are Ready for Potty Training:

Children's Hospital Boston, Woolf, A., Kenna, M., & Shane, H., Eds. *Children's Hospital Guide to Your Child's Health and Development*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2001.

Community Paediatrics Committee, Canadian Paediatric Society, (2000). Toilet learning: Anticipatory guidance with a child-oriented approach. *Pediatrics & Child Health*, 5(6), 333-335. Available online: www.cps.ca/english/statements/CP/cp00-02.htm

Resources used to develop signs of readiness list:

http://www.aap.org/publiced/BR_ToiletTrain.htm

http://www.healthykids.us/chapters/toilet_pf.htm

http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/parenting_tips/potty_training/potty_training_readiness.html

When Not to Start Potty Training:

List adapted from: http://www.aap.org/publiced/BR_ToiletTrain.htm