

Toilet Training Guidelines: Parents—The Role of the Parents in Toilet Training

Parents play a key role in toilet training. Parents need to provide their child with direction, motivation, and reinforcement. They need to set aside time for and have patience with the toilet training process. Parents can encourage their child to be independent and allow their child to master each step at his or her own pace.

WHEN TO BEGIN TOILET TRAINING YOUR CHILD

There is no right age to toilet train a child. Readiness to begin toilet training depends on the individual child. In general, starting before age 2 (24 months) is not recommended. The readiness skills and physical development your child needs occur between age 18 months and 2.5 years.

Your child will show cues that he or she is developmentally ready. Signs of readiness include the following:

- Your child can imitate your behavior.
- Your child begins to put things where they belong.
- Your child can demonstrate independence by saying "no."
- Your child can express interest in toilet training (eg, following you to the bathroom).
- Your child can walk and is ready to sit down.
- Your child can indicate first when he is "going" (urinating or defecating) and then when he needs to "go."
- Your child is able to pull clothes up and down (on and off).

Each child has his or her own style of behavior, which is called temperament. In planning your approach to toilet training, it is important to consider your child's temperament.

- Consider your child's moods and the time of day your child is most approachable. Plan your approach based on when your child is most cooperative.
- If your child is generally shy and withdrawn, he or she may need additional support and encouragement.
- Work with your child's attention span. Plan for distractions that will keep him or her comfortable on the potty chair. For example, reading a story to

- your child may help keep him or her interested.
- Consider your child's frustration level, and be ready to encourage and reassure him or her at each step.

Before you begin toilet training, have your child examined by his or her health care provider. During your child's check-up, talk with the health care provider about the child's developmental readiness and temperament. Your health care provider can help you determine whether your child is ready to begin toilet training and help you plan your approach.

Timing is important. Toilet training should not be started when the child is feeling ill or when the child is experiencing any major life changes such as moving, new siblings, new school, or new child-care situation.

If your child is feeling too pressured to toilet train or if the process is too stressful, he or she may begin to withhold urine or stool. Withholding can be the result of too much pressure or can be caused by constipation (hard and painful stools).

Try not to feel pressured to toilet train your child. If you are feeling pressured to train your child because of caregiver considerations or family members' views, your anxiety about toilet training can create anxiety in your child.

GETTING STARTED

What to Know

- Toilet training includes discussing, undressing, going, wiping, dressing, flushing, and hand-washing. Remember to reinforce your child's success at each step.
- There are many steps to the toilet training process. The more ready the child is when you begin, the more quickly the toilet training process will go.
- Initial success relies on your child understanding the use of the toilet, not mastering the process.
- Check your child's stools. It is very important that they are soft. Hard stools can be very painful and are difficult to pass. If your child's stools are hard, add fiber to your child's diet and consult your health care provider for a recommended stool-softener. When the stool is softer, reassure your child that now it won't hurt.
- A high-fiber diet and reduced quantity of dairy products can help soften the stool and develop and maintain regular bowel movements. Because children can resist being forced to eat nutritious foods, and because they learn best by example, eating a high-fiber balanced diet yourself will encourage your child to eat well.

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emy of Pediatrics.

What To Do

- Get a potty chair. Many children feel more secure on a potty chair than on a toilet because when they sit, their feet are securely on the floor and they are not afraid of falling off or in.
- Allow your child to become familiar with the potty chair. Let your child observe, touch, and get comfortable with the potty chair before attempting to use it. Also, introduce the potty chair to your child as his or her own chair.
- Place the potty chair in a convenient place for your child. The potty chair does not have to be limited to the bathroom. Keep it in the playroom, in the yard, or wherever your child is playing, so your child can get to it when he or she wants.
- If your child is afraid of the potty chair, don't pressure him or her to use it. Put toilet training aside for 1 or 2 months, and give your child time to get used to the idea of the potty chair and to be comfortable with it.
- Let your child first sit on the potty chair fully clothed once a day as a routine. Also, let your child leave the potty chair at any time, and never force your child to spend time sitting on it.
- After your child is comfortable sitting on the potty chair with clothes on, let him or her sit there without clothes.
- Take the stool from your child's diaper and put it into his or her potty chair so that your child can see where it should go.

HELPFUL TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

Setbacks

Setbacks are to be expected, not to be seen as a failure or regression, but as a temporary step back. Setbacks are normal and may occur when your child feels too much pressure.

Setbacks can be frustrating, but your child needs encouragement and reassurance from you. Try to remember that this is your child's task, not your own.

Coordinating Plans

Make sure to coordinate your toilet training plans with others who may be with your child during the day (caregivers, grandparents, day care staff members). It is important that they know how you want your child to be trained so that the child receives the same message during the day when you are not present as during evenings and weekends when you are.

Parental Encouragement

Make this experience as positive, natural, and non-threatening as possible so that your child feels confident that he or she is doing it on his or her own. Often, what seems like laziness in your child is resistance to pressure or immaturity. Your child is likely to want to be trained as much as you want him or her to be trained.

- Encourage imitation. When you sit on the toilet, allow your child to sit on the potty chair beside you.
- Boys should learn to urinate sitting first, because if they stand first, they may not want to sit to have a

bowel movement.

- Start a routine with regular reminders beginning with one time a day—after breakfast or maybe at bath time when your child is already undressed.
- Watch for behavior, grimaces, or poses that may signal the need for a bowel movement, and ask your child if he or she needs to go.
- Praise your child whenever he or she tells you that he/she needs to go and when your child tells you without being reminded.
- Let your child flush if he or she wants to. Because some children do not like the sound of the toilet or are afraid of the toilet, be sure to determine whether your child is scared. Also, try to reassure your child if he or she becomes upset about the disappearance of the stool down the toilet.

Clothing/Diapers

Keep your child in loose, easy-to-remove clothing. Help your child master the dressing and undressing needed to sit on the potty chair. Once the child is comfortably sitting on the potty chair with clothes on, then try it with clothes off.

When your child is using the potty chair successfully several times a day, he or she may be ready for underwear for part of the day. Because diapers can be very reassuring, do not rush your child out of diapers.

Your child's skin is just as likely to get a rash from wetness or exposure to a stool as it did during infancy. Therefore, keeping your child dry and clean is as important during training as it was when he or she was an infant. Change your child regularly, and do not leave him or her in soiled clothing as a training method.

Disposable or nondisposable training pants may be used as part of the transition from diaper to underwear, but they are not recommended as an initial step. They may be helpful when your child is ready to take over the training process.

Specific Training Issues

- Accidents are common and should be expected in the training process.
- Boys generally take longer to be trained than do girls.
- If you feel you need help in the training process, contact your pediatrician or health care professional to discuss any issues you may have.

Nighttime Training

Nighttime or naptime dryness may occur at the same time as daytime dryness, although it may not occur until a year or so later. Aside from taking your child to the toilet before going to sleep, here are some other tips to help the child stay dry through the night:

- Ask your child to withhold urine a little during the day to gain better control.
- With your child's permission, wake him or her during the night to use the bathroom.
- A nighttime potty chair kept by the bed can make it more convenient for your child when he or she wakes during the night.
- If your child is still consistently wetting the bed 1 year after age 7 years, consult your pediatrician or health care professional.

DEFINITION

Your child is toilet trained when, without any reminders, your child walks to the potty, undresses, urinates or has a bowel movement, and pulls up his pants. Some children will learn to control their bladders first; others will start with bowel control. Both kinds of control can be worked on simultaneously. Bladder control through the night normally happens several years later than daytime control. The gradual type of toilet training discussed here can usually be completed in 2 weeks to 2 months.

TOILET-TRAINING READINESS

Don't begin training until your child is clearly ready. Readiness doesn't just happen; it involves concepts and skills you can begin teaching your child at 12 months of age. Reading some of the special toilet-learning books to your child can help. Most children can be made ready for toilet training by 24 months of age and many by 18 months. By the time your child is 3 years old, she will probably have trained herself. The following signs indicate that your child is ready:

- Your child understands what "pee," "poop," "dry," "wet," "clean," "messy," and "potty" mean. (Teach him these words.)
- Your child understands what the potty is for. (Teach this by having your child watch parents, older siblings, and children near his age use the toilet correctly.)
- Your child prefers dry, clean diapers. (Change your child frequently to encourage this preference.)
- Your child likes to be changed. (As soon as she is able to walk, teach her to come to you immediately whenever she is wet or dirty. Praise her for coming to you for a change.)
- Your child understands the connection between dry pants and using the potty.
- Your child can recognize the feeling of a full bladder and the urge to have a bowel movement; that is, he paces, jumps up and down, holds his genitals, pulls at his pants, squats down, or tells you. (Clarify for him: "The poop [or pee] wants to come out. It needs your help.")
- Your child has the ability to briefly postpone urinating or having a bowel movement. She may go off by herself and come back wet or soiled, or she may wake up from naps dry.

METHOD FOR TOILET TRAINING

The way to train your child is to offer encouragement and praise, be patient, and make the process fun. Avoid any pressure or punishment. Your child must feel in control of the process.

1. Buy supplies.

- Potty chair (floor-level type). If your child's feet can reach the floor while he sits on the potty, he has

leverage for pushing and a sense of security. He also can get on and off whenever he wants to.

- Favorite treats (such as fruit slices, raisins, animal crackers, and cookies) for rewards.
- Stickers or stars for rewards.

2. **Make the potty chair one of your child's favorite possessions.** Several weeks before you plan to begin toilet training, take your child with you to buy a potty chair. Make it clear that this is your child's own special chair. Have your child help you put her name on it. Allow your child to decorate it or even paint it a different color. Then have your child sit on it fully clothed until she is comfortable with using it as a chair. Have your child use it while watching TV, eating snacks, playing games, or looking at books. Keep it in the room in which your child usually plays. Only after your child clearly has good feelings toward the potty chair (after at least 1 week), proceed to actual toilet training.

3. **Encourage practice runs on the potty.** Do a practice run whenever your child gives a signal that looks promising, such as a certain facial expression, grunting, holding the genital area, pulling at his pants, pacing, squatting, squirming, or passing gas. Other good times are after naps or 20 minutes after meals. Say encouragingly, "The poop [or pee] wants to come out. Let's use the potty." Encourage your child to walk to the potty and sit there with his diapers or pants off. Your child can then be told, "Try to go pee-pee in the potty." If your child is reluctant to cooperate, he can be encouraged to sit on the potty by doing something fun; for example, you might read a story. If your child wants to get up after 1 minute of encouragement, let him get up. Never force your child to sit there. Never physically hold your child there or strap him in. Even if your child seems to be enjoying it, end each session after 5 minutes unless something is happening.

4. **Praise or reward your child for cooperation or any success.** All cooperation with these practice sessions should be praised. For example, you might say, "You are sitting on the potty just like Mommy," or "You're trying real hard to put the pee-pee in the potty." If your child urinates into the potty, she can be rewarded with treats or stickers, as well as praise and hugs. Although a sense of accomplishment is enough for some children, others need treats to stay focused. Big rewards (such as going to the ice cream store) should be reserved for when your child walks over to the potty on her own and uses it or asks to go there with you and then uses it. Once your child uses the potty by herself two or more times, you can stop the practice runs. For the following week, continue to praise your child frequently for dryness and using the potty. (NOTE: Practice runs and reminders should not be necessary for more than 1 or 2 months.)

5. **Change your child after accidents.** Change your child as soon as it's convenient, but respond sympathetically. Say something like, "You wanted to go pee-pee in the potty, but you went pee-pee in your pants. I know that makes you sad. You like to be dry. You'll get better at this." If you feel a need to be critical, keep it to mild verbal disapproval and use it rarely (for example,

(Continued on the reverse side)

"Big boys don't go pee-pee in their pants," or mention the name of another child whom he likes and who is trained); then change your child into a dry diaper or training pants in as pleasant and nonangry a way as possible. Avoid physical punishment, yelling, or scolding. Pressure or force can make a 2-year-old child completely uncooperative. Do not keep your child in wet or messy pants for punishment.

6. **Introduce training pants after your child starts using the potty.** Switch from diapers to training pants after your child is cooperative about sitting on the potty chair and passes about half of her urine and bowel movements there. She definitely needs training pants if she comes to you to help her take off her diaper so she can use the potty. Take your child with you to buy the underwear and make it a reward for her success. Buy loose-fitting ones that she can easily lower and pull up by herself. Once you start using training pants, use diapers only for naps and nighttime.

Request the Guideline on Toilet Training Resistance if

- Your child won't sit on the potty or toilet.
- Your 2½-year-old child is negative about toilet training.
- You begin to use force or punishment.
- Your child is over 3 years old and not daytime toilet trained.
- The approach described here isn't working after 2 months.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Joanna Cole: *The Parents' Book of Toilet Teaching*. Ballantine Books, N.Y., 1983.
- Vicki Lansky: *Koko Bear's New Potty*. Bantam Books, N.Y., 1986.
- Alison Mack: *Toilet Learning*. Little, Brown, Boston, 1978.
- Katie Van Pelt: *Potty Training Your Baby*. Avery, N.Y., 1988.