

Toilet training

Developing a philosophy about toilet training

As with every aspect of child-raising, there are several methods of helping your child become toilet trained. But picking a good time to toilet train is just as important as which method you use. Don't start toilet training too soon. Also, be aware of family stress. Don't start toilet training around holidays, when moving to a new house, or other busy times. You should also avoid toilet training when the child is adjusting to changes like a new bed, bedroom, day care, or a new baby in the family.

When you are ready to begin toilet training, use a method that fits best with your style and your child's personality. One method is to let children train themselves. Put out a potty chair and teach your child how to use it. Give encouragement along the way, but basically leave it up to them to use when ready. Children left on their own usually train themselves by age three.

Another method is to start toilet training when you think your child is ready, sometime around 2 years of age. Spend a few days working very closely with your child. Give plenty to drink and watch carefully for signs of a need to urinate. Give verbal (talk) and physical (lead them by the hand) guidance when you recognize the signs. Point out the signs to children so they can learn to listen to the body's cues. Praise each success. Do not punish for accidents.

You may develop your own method using ideas based on both philosophies. Remember that toilet training is for the child and not you. Many a parent has become trained to put a child on the toilet every 20 minutes. That is not training the child!

Consider the child's independence.

A complicating factor that needs to be considered is that the age when children usually become physically ready to be toilet-trained – around 18 to 24 months – is an age when they are declaring their independence in many other ways. They want to feed themselves, brush their teeth, and dress themselves entirely without help. When they succeed in doing things independently, they feel very proud.

They may become frustrated when the things they try to do are difficult. They often respond by getting angry – and getting more angry if adults, brothers, or sisters try to help. To deal with this behavior, you may want to work on easy tasks that you know they can do successfully – like picking up a few toys and putting them away.

At this age, children are learning to follow simple instructions, like sitting down in a chair, taking something to another room, or bringing a familiar object to someone. They can also point to parts of their bodies and begin to name them. They are able to pull their pants up and down. As you help children do these things, you are also helping to prepare them for toilet training.

Preparing for toilet training

Watch to see how often your child wets the diapers. Is the diaper dry after a nap? Is it dry for a couple of hours at a time when your child is awake? This will give you an idea of physical readiness. If a child seems wet all of the time, wait a month or so and check again.

Another way to help prepare your child is to teach the words needed to talk about toilet training. Start by pointing out when the diapers are wet and when they are dry. If children urinate while naked (just before getting in the tub or during changing time), point out that this is “peeing,” using whatever word you feel comfortable with. When a child has a bowel movement, talk about the “BM” or “poopy diaper” as you change it. Do these things in a matter-of-fact and positive way. Avoid giving your child the idea that these functions are unpleasant and silly. If possible, let your child see siblings or other children use the toilet.

Beginning toilet training is also a time to let children know that the human body is special, and that they have private areas. Again, use the words you are comfortable with.

Several weeks or months before you begin potty training, you will need to get a potty chair or a child’s seat to fit on the toilet. Generally, a separate potty chair is easier to manage. A toilet seat works if there is a step stool to make it easy to climb up. To help children become familiar with the potty chair, put it in the bathroom and let them sit on it with clothes or whenever they want for several weeks. Then encourage them to sit on it after a bath or before getting dressed in the morning. About this time, you can also get some training pants that are large enough to pull up and down easily. Explain that these are what older people wear.

Starting toilet training

When you feel your child is ready to begin potty training, you can put on the training pants and start using the potty chair at frequent intervals during the day. At first you need to watch carefully. When you see the signs that a child needs to urinate or have a bowel movement, take him or her to sit on the potty, physically guiding the child there and helping pull down the pants. Once there are some successes, you may not need to guide the child physically, but it is important for you to walk with your child to the potty chair and to help if needed.

When children go in the potty, give praise and perhaps some kind of reward. You may find it easier to give words of praise and a hug for a reward, rather than a treat, such as candy. When your child is in a cooperative mood, you may want to give extra liquids to increase the opportunity for success. If children refuse to use the toilet or have a series of accidents, then it is probably best to stop toilet training for awhile and try again in a few days.

Bowel training is easier

Bowel training may come first because it is easier to control. The signal the body gives allows a child more time to react than the signal given when it is time to urinate. It is also easier for children to control a solid mass than a liquid.

Because of this, bowel training often comes first. If not, it usually follows shortly after bladder training.

Sometimes children love to flush bowel movements down the toilet, but more often it upsets them. If it upsets your child, just wait and flush it later.

Accidents will happen

Response to accidents varies from person to person. Most people feel that saying something like, “That’s too bad, you’ll do better next time” is enough. Others feel that it is better to express disappointment. Again, you will need to do what you are comfortable with and what works for your child. It is generally agreed that punishment for toileting accidents during the time the child is being trained is not good. Children cannot help it, and the punishment doesn’t help with self-esteem. Always try to give children the message that you love them and are trying to help them.

After bowel and bladder training have been accomplished, children still have occasional accidents. They may get involved in playing and forget to stop long enough to go to the bathroom. They are usually unhappy when this happens. Treat them with understanding and encouragement.

If a child has been dry for several months and begins frequent daytime wetting, several things should be considered. There may be something going on in the child’s life that is a change – a new sibling in the home, illness, or a new day care.

Frequent daytime wetting can also be a sign that the child has a urinary infection. These are much more common in girls. The signs of this may include a decreased appetite, complaint of a stomachache, pain with urination, or a fever. Your doctor or nurse practitioner can help you decide whether your child needs to have a urine test.

Nighttime dryness is the next step

Nighttime wetting usually ends after daytime bladder control is achieved. In about 15 percent of children, it continues until they reach 6 years of age. Work with your child's doctor or nurse practitioner to prevent it from becoming a problem for your child and you.

Treat constipation with diet

Constipation sometimes causes discomfort for children when they have a bowel movement. If this discomfort becomes too severe or happens too frequently, your child may begin to hold the BM until the normal urge to pass it goes away. Occasionally children get into a pattern of holding their BM for several days or weeks at a time. The best way to avoid this problem is through diet. If your child is constipated, cut down on the amount of milk products eaten and given extra water, fruit, fruit juice, vegetables, and whole grain products such as bran cereal. If this doesn't help, ask your doctor, nurse practitioner, or nurse for suggestions about dealing with constipation.

Family Focus is a series of positive parenting tips and information sheets developed by specialists at Children's Hospitals and Clinics, Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN. For a complete list of topics, visit our Web site: <http://www.childrensmn.org/>, and click on "For Families and Patients" then "Positive Parenting."

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