

Toilet Training

Helping your child start to use the potty (or toilet) is a big and very exciting step for both of you. The secret is to wait for signs that your toddler is ready.

- Give your child lots of fibre to eat and water to drink so that he doesn't become constipated, which can make toilet training difficult. Your child's diet is the best way to handle this – rather than buying fibre supplements.
- Let your child learn at his own pace – he will get the hang of it when he's ready, and accidents and setbacks are just part of the process.
- Give your child positive praise for each step he accomplishes. You could say 'Well done James for sitting on the potty'. As he achieves each stage, reduce the amount of praise.
- Try to stay calm if it seems to take longer than you expect – sometimes it will take longer than you expect but remain positive about his achievements, it will happen. Too much tension or stress can lead to negative feelings and may result in your child avoiding going to the toilet. Try not to think of toilet training as a hurdle, or a discipline you're teaching your child. If you remain positive and calm, your child will be more likely to settle into things.

When to start?

Children learn to tell when they need to do a poo or wee at different ages. Generally, signs that a child is ready for toilet training appear from about two years on, although some children show signs of being ready at 18 months. Night-time training may be as late as eight years. Before introducing the toilet or potty, it helps a lot if you have an established daily routine with your child. This way the new activity of using the toilet or potty can be slotted into your normal routine.

Your child is showing some signs of being ready if he:

- is walking and can sit for short periods of time
- Is becoming generally more independent when it comes to completing tasks
- is becoming interested in watching others go to the toilet (this can be awkward or make you uncomfortable at first, but is a good way to introduce things)
- has dry nappies for up to two hours. This shows he is able to store wee in his bladder (which automatically empties in younger babies or newborns)
- tells you (or shows obvious signs) when he does a poo or wee in his nappy. If your child can tell you before it happens, then he is ready for toilet training
- begins to dislike wearing a nappy, perhaps trying to pull it off when it's wet or soiled
- has regular, soft, formed bowel movements
- can pull his pants up and down
- can follow simple instructions such as, 'Give the ball to daddy'
shows understanding about things having their place around the home.

Not all of these signs need to be present when your child is ready. A general trend will let you know it's time to start.

Getting ready

First, decide whether you want to train using the **potty or toilet**. There are some advantages to using a potty: it's mobile and it's familiar and some children find it less daunting than a toilet. Try to find out your child's preference and go with that. Some parents encourage their child to use both the toilet and potty. Secondly, make sure you have all the right **equipment**. If your child is using the toilet, you'll need a step for your child to stand on and a smaller seat that fits securely inside the existing toilet seat, as some children get uneasy about falling in.

In the beginning, you might like to read a book or watch a video about toilet training with your child.

Some tips for **getting started**:

- Look for signs that your child is ready to start toilet training (see above).
- Introduce and explain the potty, allowing your child to try it out for size and get familiar with it.
- Allow him to watch others who are using the toilet and talk about what they're doing.
- Begin to use trainer pants on your child – this helps the child understand the feeling of wetness.

You may notice that your child uses his bowels at a certain time of the day. Try putting him on the potty at this time. This doesn't work for all children – true toilet training begins when the child is aware of the sensation of passing urine/bowel motion and is interested in learning the process.

Basic steps for toilet training

- Choose a start day, perhaps when you have no plans to leave the house.
- Stop using nappies (except at night and during daytime sleeps). Begin using underpants or training pants.
- Dress your child in clothes that are easy to take off, for example, trousers with elastic waistbands rather than full body suits. In warmer weather, you might like to leave him in underpants when at home.
- Sit your child on the potty each day at times when he is likely to have a bowel movement, like thirty minutes after eating or after having a bath.
- Give your child food with lots of fibre (fruit and vegetables) and water to help him want to go to the toilet.
- If your child doesn't cooperate or seem interested, just wait until he is willing to try again.
- Give your child praise for his efforts (even if progress is slow) and lots of praise when he's successful.
- Look out for signs that your child needs to go to the toilet – some cues include changes in posture, passing wind and going quiet.
- At different stages throughout the day (but not too often), you might ask your child if he needs to go to the toilet. Gentle reminders are enough – it's best if your child does not feel pressured.
- Five minutes is long enough to sit a child on the potty or toilet. It's best not to make your child sit on the toilet for long periods of time, as this will feel like punishment.
- You will need to wipe your child's bottom at first, until he learns how. Try to remember to wipe from the front to the back – particularly with little girls.
- Teach your child how to wash his hands after using the toilet. This can be a fun activity that your child enjoys as part of the routine.

If he misses the toilet don't comment and just clean it up without any fuss. Toilet training may take days or months. It's not a race (no matter what other parents tell you about their own wonderful children).

The key is to not push your child. Relax and let nature take its course, and encourage your child with gentle reminders and stories. What your child wants most is to please you, and praising him will point out what a good job he's doing.

Wet nights

Even if your child uses the toilet or potty during the day, it's not time to throw away the nappies just yet. Often, children are between three and four years of age before they are dry at night. Some children still wet the bed at six or seven, even older. Make it clear to your child that you will help him in the middle of the night if he wakes up needing to use the potty.

Using training pants

Training pants are absorbent underwear worn during toilet training. Children are more likely to understand toilet use if they are no longer wearing a nappy. After all, the nappy is a portable toilet. After your child has had a few weeks getting used to the potty it's a good time to start with training pants.

'Pull up' training pants are very popular, and are marketed as an aid to toilet training. Research is not conclusive about how beneficial they are for toilet training, but they may help with the transition to underwear.

Training pants are less absorbent than a nappy. They are useful for holding in bigger messes (such as an accidental poo). Generally, **cloth training pants** are less absorbent than **disposable training pants** (or 'pull-ups') and can feel a little less like a nappy. Disposables may be handier when going on outings. This is **a big move for your child**. If you celebrate it, then the transition will be easier. Talk about how grown-up he is and how proud you are. Once your child is wearing training pants, dress him in clothes that are easy to take off quickly.

Setbacks and accidents

Your child has only just developed the amazing physical ability to manage this body process. As a grown-up you may not remember, but this takes a while to get right. You can expect accidents and setbacks – these are all part of the process. If your child gets upset because of an accident, **reassure** him that it doesn't really matter and there's no need to worry.

To help avoid accidents:

- Pay attention to your child if he says he needs the toilet immediately. He may be right!
- If you are sure your child hasn't had a bowel movement or wee in a while, remind him that he may need to go – distractions can occupy his mind until it's too late.
- Check if your child wants to go to the toilet during a long playtime or before an outing. If he doesn't want to go, that's fine.
- Try to ensure that the potty or toilet is always easy to access and use.

Ask your child to wee just before going to bed.

Health problems

You are probably well tuned in to how your child is feeling and how regular he is. It is worth keeping an eye out for possible problems connected with toilet training. Signs to look for include:

- a big increase or decrease in the number of poos or wees
- poos that are very hard to pass
- unformed or very runny poos
- blood in the poo or wee (sometimes appears as cloudy wee)

your child seems to be in pain when going to the toilet.

If you feel there might be a problem or you're worried about how your child is adapting to toilet training, check with your doctor, maternal or family and child health nurse.

All medical information published in the Parent Series Fact Sheets is overseen by the Paediatric Continence Advisory Council.
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