

## Toilet Training<sup>1</sup>

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### Are You Both Ready?

Are you thinking about toilet training your toddler? Don't rush your decision. Perhaps you feel pressure from friends or family to train your child, or perhaps you are tired of changing diapers and feel your child needs more independence. However, before beginning the training, be sure your child is ready.

Toilet training is a developmental milestone, not an indicator of your child's intelligence or your parenting skills. Some children are able to start the training process at the age of two, other children might not be ready until they are three.

Your child will let you know in indirect ways when he\* is ready to start learning to use the toilet. Starting before your child is ready will only make the process more frustrating for both of you. Be patient with your child's development, and toilet training will be much easier.

### Signs Your Toddler is Ready

To make toilet training a smoother process, make sure your child shows signs of readiness. The more signs of readiness your child displays, the easier the

process will be for both of you. Your child is probably ready if he\*

- is able to help dress and undress himself.
- is able to sit down and play quietly for about five minutes.
- has bowel movements at regular times every day.
- is able to remain dry for about two hours at a time.
- has a name for urine and a name for a bowel movement.
- desires independence.

If your child is facing stress from another situation, such as a new baby in the home or a change in daycare arrangements, it is better to start toilet training at a later time. Allow your child four to six weeks after such an event before beginning the training process.

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## How to Begin: Pre-Toilet Training

Once a child shows signs of readiness, he should spend at least one week in a pre-toilet training stage. During this time, parents need to:

- Tell the child he has wet or soiled his diaper and use a specific name for urine and bowel movements.
- Tell him how uncomfortable a wet or soiled diaper can be. This helps your child notice sensations.
- Allow the child to watch family members use the bathroom to help him understand the steps involved. This gives him the opportunity to ask questions.
- Change dirty diapers immediately. This will keep the child from becoming comfortable with wet or dirty diapers.

Some children need more than a week to complete this pre-training stage. It is common to spend a month in the pre-training phase. Don't worry about speed. How comfortable your child feels is more important than how quickly the process goes.

## Actual Toilet Training

Once your child is ready for actual toilet training, keep a log of the child's bathroom activities. After keeping this log for a few days, you will have a good idea of the times during the day the child needs to use the bathroom.

To introduce your child to the potty, place it in the bathroom and wait for him to ask you about it. Letting a child notice the potty on his own helps him to feel a sense of control over the situation. Once you have explained to the child what the potty is for, encourage him to sit on the potty several times a day, preferably around the times you know he normally uses the bathroom. If your child happens to use the potty during these "practice" times, praise him for his efforts.

Following this practice time, allow your child to spend a block of time each day without a diaper. This helps him learn that he is the source of the

elimination. Explain that when he needs to go to the bathroom, he needs to use the potty. At the beginning, have your child try to potty about once each hour. He will probably resist, especially if he is having a good time playing. Don't state your request as a question, e.g., "Do you need to use the potty?" This leaves room for an automatic "No!" Simply say, "It's time to use the potty." Tell him he only has to try. Reassure him he can go back to his play after he sits on the toilet for a few minutes. Even if he doesn't go, be sure to praise him for trying his best.

## What to Expect

Your child is going to have accidents during this stage, so prepare yourself for the frustration you might experience. Stay calm and continue to give your child encouragement.

When an accident occurs, say to your child, "Accidents happen, it's ok. Next time, try remembering to tell me when you need to go." Let him take part in the cleanup of his own accident.

Avoid demoralizing your child. Putdowns or criticisms can affect his feelings of self-worth. Also, don't punish him. Punishing or spanking him for an accident only can make the situation worse. Recognize that your child ultimately controls whether or not he empties his bowels and bladder, so refrain from getting into a power struggle you can't win.

Genuinely praise your child when he experiences success. Tell him you are proud of him and he should be proud of himself. Once your child has had consistent success, gradually allow him to take on the tasks you were performing for him, such as pulling pants up and down, wiping, flushing the toilet, and washing hands.

You might also want to try these techniques when you potty train your child:

- Let your child have a "potty toy." This is a toy he really enjoys--that he can play with only when he is using the potty.
- Take your child to the store to buy big boy or big girl underwear. Your child will love to choose underwear decorated with favorite animals or heroes.

Acts such as these keep your child interested and help make potty training a fun experience.

## Challenges

If you experience problems during the training process, examine what could be causing your difficulties. Ask yourself these questions:

- Was my child ready when I began the training?
- Is my child experiencing other stresses (a new baby, a new school, a new home, etc.)?
- Did we not spend enough time on the pre-training stage?

When you've figure it out, go back to the last stage your child was successful in. Stay in this stage until your child indicates he is ready to start another stage. Then, slowly work into the next stage.

Avoid allowing yourself or your child to get frustrated. Remember that potty training is not a race! Treat potty training as any other milestone of development (like teething and sleeping through the night). Giving it more importance than any other task will only make it more difficult for you and your child to be successful. Be tolerant, dry days will be here before you know it!

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**\*This publication uses he, his, or him to represent children of both genders.**