

Questions and Answers about Toilet Learning

Learning to use the potty is a big event in the life of a preschool child. It's just as important as learning to climb, jump, run, and talk. Like all skills, children learn in their own time. Patience and timing are needed for success. Try to stay calm and not force toilet training.

1. How can I know if my child is ready for toilet training?

Every child is different. Watch for these signs:

Physical signs:

Child recognizes when he or she is urinating or having a bowel movement, can control those muscles (stays dry for at least 2 hours or after naps), can get on and off potty without help, can pull pants up and down.

Verbal signs:

Child can communicate wants and needs.

Following directions:

Child can understand and follow simple instructions.

Motivation:

Child shows interest in potty or feels uncomfortable when diaper is wet or soiled.

2. When are most children toilet trained?

The average age toilet training begins in the United States is between 2 and 3 years of age. Most children in the United States are bowel and bladder trained by 4 years of age. The “perfect time” is when your child is ready, not at any specific age.

3. What are the steps to teaching toilet training?

- Watch for signs that your child is ready (mentioned above).
- Read books with your child about potty training to help them understand the process.
- Teach words for urine, bowel movements, and body parts.
- Talk with your child about a body's physical signals for needing to use the toilet.
- Borrow or buy a potty chair, or a potty seat and step stool, and talk with your child about them.
- Talk with the child's other caregivers so that everyone can work together to make it a positive experience. Ensure that all caregivers have a clean change of clothes for the child in case of accidents.
- Encourage children to sit on the potty for a few minutes, staying with them when they do, but don't force them. They can start by sitting fully clothed, then wearing only a diaper, then without one.

- Be positive. Whether they succeed in using the potty or not, praise them for trying. If they don't succeed, reassure them, *"We'll try again later. If you feel like you need to go, let me know."*
- Establish a routine, reminding children to use the potty regularly (for example, before and after naps, after a meal, before bedtime, before leaving the house, etc.). As they get used to the potty, they will need fewer reminders. This will likely take several months.

Tips for Success:

- Dress children in easy-to-remove pants and avoid onesies that snap below the diaper.
- Let your child watch as you or an older sibling models how to use the toilet, and/or model how to use the potty by placing solids from a used diaper into the potty chair, then let the child watch as you empty it into the big toilet and flush.
- Respond quickly when you see signs that your child needs to use the potty, such as changes in facial expression, squirming, squatting, or holding the genital area. Help the child to become familiar with these signs and learn to stop an activity and head to the potty when they occur.
- Emphasize hygiene—hand washing, wiping front to back, etc.
- Boys may benefit from learning to pee while sitting first, then practicing standing and aiming later.
- Plan for outings. Some children may feel intimidated by public toilets. Some parents keep a potty chair in the trunk of the car, some bring a portable potty seat cover for public toilets, some bring diapers or training pants when leaving the house, etc.

4. What if my child is afraid of flushing?

Some children may enjoy flushing and want to repeat it again and again, watching everything flush away. Other children may fear flushing and prefer for a parent to flush instead. A helpful tip is to make sure children are off the potty before flushing and to reassure them that they are safe and that only waste products like toilet paper will be flushed.

5. How long does toilet learning usually take?

The process of toilet learning usually takes around 3-6 months but can take more or less time. Children with special needs or developmental delays may take longer. It may take additional months or years before children are able to stay dry at night.

6. Are nighttime and daytime toilet training different?

Nighttime accidents remain common even after children master daytime control. Diapers may still be needed for a while for naps and bedtime. Remember, if children are not awake, they are not able to intentionally control the behavior (so neither rewards nor punishment affect it). Plastic mattress covers can be helpful, as can presoaking soiled bed sheets in vinegar to remove ammonia before washing.

7. How should I react to mistakes?

Mistakes and toileting accidents are part of the process. Learning self-control takes time and is often frustrating for children, and occasional relapses are part of the natural path toward success. It's best to treat mistakes matter-of-factly and without anger or disappointment. Punishing the child is ineffective and not recommended. Stay positive and consistent and avoid using negative terms to talk about the process. In addition, avoid using rewards such as candy or stickers; they can distract the child from the process and can cause unneeded stress for both the caregiver and child. Be very intentional with praise and make sure the child knows why you are proud of him or her. You can say, "I'm so proud of you for trying to use the toilet!" Showing your encouragement, support, and affection is important as your child works on this difficult skill.

8. What about regression?

When there are sources of stress (such as a new baby, moving, illness, etc.), it's common for a child to regress and lose some skills (such as toilet training). It's safe to put your child back in diapers, and it will be easier to help the child train again after a regression. If you are concerned there may be a medical issue causing your child to have accidents, talk with the child's health care provider. Sometimes an underlying physical condition like a urinary tract infection can be a factor.

9. What about training pants?

Some people feel training pants such as pullups are a helpful step in case of mistakes and others feel they are confusing to children, who may think they're used just like diapers. Some parents choose to only use pull ups at night. In addition, a plastic mattress protector or nighttime diaper are other bedtime options.

10. When is it NOT a good time to start toilet training?

- You are moving or have moved recently.
- You have a new baby.
- You are transitioning your child to a new sleeping arrangement.
- You are changing childcare arrangements.
- You are traveling.
- Your child is ill.
- Your family is experiencing major life transitions such as serious illness, a death in the family, or divorce.

If any of these things are happening now or will be soon, it may be better to wait since these events can make children feel overwhelmed. If your child has already begun potty training, it is common for the child to have more accidents than usual. Staying calm and patient can help your child get back on track in a peaceful way. Regression is not always a bad sign. It can be a healthy way for children to regulate emotions during big events or family changes.

11. What if it becomes a power struggle?

Power struggles over potty use can lead to the child trying to regain control of his or her body by holding in urine or bowel movements, which can lead to physical problems like constipation. It may help to stop talking about the potty for a little while, going back to diapers instead. You can start again when the child shows signs of readiness and interest again.

Children's Books

Diapers Are Not Forever by Elizabeth Verdick

My Big Boy Potty by Joanna Cole

My Big Girl Potty by Joanna Cole

My Very Own Potty! by Gail Herman

Once Upon a Potty by Alona Frankel

Sarah on the Potty by Pauline Oud

Dinosaur Vs. the Potty by Bob Shea

How to Pee: Potty Training for Boys by Todd Spector

Potty Animals: What to Know When You've Got to Go! by Hope Vestergaard

The Prince and the Potty by Wendy Cheyette Lewison

The Princess and the Potty by Wendy Cheyette Lewison

Potty Time with Pete the Kitty by James Dean

Sources:

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Mayo Clinic. (2014, November). *Potty training: How to get the job done*.

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University of Minnesota Extension. (2015, May). *Child care: Raising children together*.

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Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families. (2014).

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Thompson Center: [A-Parents-Guide-to-Toilet-Training.pdf \(missouri.edu\)](https://extension.missouri.edu/media/wysiwyg/Extensiondata/Pub/pdf/hesguide/humanrel/gh6128.pdf)

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<https://extension.missouri.edu/media/wysiwyg/Extensiondata/Pub/pdf/hesguide/humanrel/gh6128.pdf>

Mayo Clinic: [Potty training: How to get the job done - Mayo Clinic](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/infant-and-toddler-care/expert-answers/potty-training/faq-2016-01)

Zero to Three: [Potty Training: Learning to the Use the Toilet | ZERO TO THREE](#)

St. Louis Children's: [Potty Training Pointers | St. Louis Children's Hospital \(stlouischildrens.org\)](#)

Center for Effective Parenting: [TOILET TRAINING \(parenting-ed.org\)](#)



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