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Guide to Toilet Training

American Academy of Pediatrics

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Description

Toilet training is an important developmental milestone for children, and it also can be one of the greatest challenges for parents. Not all children are ready at the same age, and they often respond differently to the various training methods. With conflicting advice from friends, relatives, and the media, parents can quickly become confused and frustrated. The AAP *Guide to Toilet Training* cuts through the confusion to provide practical information, proven techniques, and expert advice to ensure the best toilet-training experience for children and parents—must reading for every new parent, from the organization representing the nation's finest pediatricians. A complete guide to every phase of the toilet-training process

- Recognizing when your child is ready
- How to choose and install a potty
- What to do when a child resists
- Positive responses to the inevitable "accidents"
- Handling constipation and other common problems
- Toilet training for children with special needs
- Special tips for boys, girls, and twins
- Coping with bed-wetting and soiling
- And much more!

About the author

American Academy of Pediatrics

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is an organization of 60,000 member pediatricians dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults. One of the major activities of the AAP is providing reliable educational materials for parents and caregivers. Under the direction of a medical editor, content developed by the AAP is rigorously reviewed by appropriate committee members to ensure compliance with the organization's current policy and recommendations.

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Potty training: How to get the job done

By Mayo Clinic staff

Original Article: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/potty-training/CC00060>

Potty training: How to get the job done

Potty training is a major milestone. Get the facts on timing, technique and handling the inevitable accidents.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Potty training is a big step for kids and parents alike. The secret to success? Patience — perhaps more patience than you ever imagined.

Is it time?

Potty-training success hinges on physical and emotional readiness, not a specific age. Many kids show interest in potty training by age 2, but others might not be ready until age 2 1/2 or even older — and there's no rush. If you start potty training too early, it might take longer to train your child.

Is your child ready? Ask yourself these questions:

- Does your child seem interested in the potty chair or toilet, or in wearing underwear?
- Can your child understand and follow basic directions?
- Does your child tell you through words, facial expressions or posture when he

or she needs to go?

- Does your child stay dry for periods of two hours or longer during the day?
- Does your child complain about wet or dirty diapers?
- Can your child pull down his or her pants and pull them up again?
- Can your child sit on and rise from a potty chair?

If you answered mostly yes, your child might be ready for potty training. If you answered mostly no, you might want to wait awhile — especially if your child has recently faced or is about to face a major change, such as a move or the arrival of a new sibling. A toddler who opposes potty training today might be open to the idea in a few months.

There's no need to postpone potty training if your child has a chronic medical condition but is able to use the toilet normally. Be aware that the process might take longer, however.

Ready, set, go!

When you decide it's time to begin potty training, set your child up for success. Start by maintaining a sense of humor and a positive attitude — and recruiting all of your child's caregivers to do the same. Then follow these practical steps.

Pull out the equipment

Place a potty chair in the bathroom. You might want to try a model with a removable top that can be placed directly on the toilet when your child is ready. Encourage your child to sit on the potty chair — with or without a diaper. Make sure your child's feet rest firmly on the floor or a stool. Help your child understand how to talk about the bathroom using simple, correct terms. You might dump the contents of a dirty diaper into the potty chair to show its purpose, or let your child see family members using the toilet.

Schedule potty breaks

If your child is interested, have him or her sit on the potty chair or toilet without a diaper for a few minutes several times a day. For boys, it's often best to master urination sitting down, and then move to standing up after bowel training is complete. Read a potty-training book or give your child a special toy to use while sitting on the potty chair or toilet. Stay with your child when he or she is in the bathroom. Even if your child simply sits there, offer praise for trying — and remind your child that he or she can try again later.

Get there — fast!

When you notice signs that your child might need to use the toilet — such as squirming, squatting or holding the genital area — respond quickly. Help your child become familiar with these signals, stop what he or she is doing and head to the toilet. Praise your child for telling you when he or she has to go. Teach girls to wipe

carefully from front to back to prevent bringing germs from the rectum to the vagina or bladder. When it's time to flush, let your child do the honors. Make sure your child washes his or her hands after using the toilet.

Consider incentives

Some kids respond to stickers or stars on a chart. For others, trips to the park or extra bedtime stories are effective. Experiment to find what works best for your child. Reinforce your child's effort with verbal praise, such as, "How exciting! You're learning to use the toilet just like big kids do!" Be positive even if a trip to the toilet isn't successful.

Ditch the diapers

After several weeks of successful potty breaks, your child might be ready to trade diapers for training pants or regular underwear. Celebrate this transition. Go on a special outing. Let your child select "big kid" underwear. Call close friends or loved ones and let your child spread the news. Once your child is wearing training pants or regular underwear, avoid overalls, belts, leotards or other items that could hinder quick undressing.

Sleep soundly

Most children master daytime bladder control first, often within about two to three months of consistent toilet training. Nap and nighttime training might take months — or years — longer. In the meantime, use disposable training pants or plastic mattress covers when your child sleeps.

Know when to call it quits

If your child resists using the potty chair or toilet or isn't getting the hang of it within a few weeks, take a break. Chances are he or she isn't ready yet. Try again in a few months.

Accidents will happen

You might breathe easier once your child figures out how to use the toilet, but expect occasional accidents and near misses. Here's help preventing — and handling — wet pants:

- **Offer reminders.** Accidents often happen when kids are absorbed in activities that — for the moment — are more interesting than using the toilet. To fight this phenomenon, suggest regular bathroom trips, such as first thing in the morning, after each meal and snack, and before getting in the car or going to bed. Point out telltale signs of holding it, such as holding the genital area.
- **Stay calm.** Kids don't have accidents to irritate their parents. If your child has an accident, don't add to the embarrassment by scolding or disciplining your child. You might say, "You forgot this time. Next time you'll get to the bathroom sooner."

- **Be prepared.** If your child has frequent accidents, absorbent underwear might be best. Keep a change of underwear and clothing handy, especially at school or in child care.

When to seek help

Occasional accidents are harmless, but they can lead to teasing, embarrassment and alienation from peers. If your potty-trained child reverts or loses ground — especially at age 4 or older — or you're concerned about your child's accidents, contact his or her doctor. Sometimes wetting problems indicate an underlying physical condition, such as a urinary tract infection or an overactive bladder. Prompt treatment can help your child become accident-free.

References

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Cognitive and Verbal Skills Needed for Toilet Training

If you know how to drive a car with a manual transmission, you probably remember how hard it was to master this skill. First, you had to locate the stick shift, the clutch pedal, and the gears. Next, you had to get a feel for when it was time to shift gears, and learn how to do so smoothly while easing the clutch pedal down and up again.



During the toilet-training process, your child must learn to coordinate an equally complex combination of physical and cognitive tasks. She must familiarize herself with the necessary "equipment" (her body and its functions), associate physical sensations with the proper responses, picture what she wants to do (use the potty), create a plan to get there, begin using it, and remain in place long enough to finish, which requires both memory and concentration. Throughout this learning process, she must be able to understand your explanations, commands, and responses to some extent, and express her own feelings about toilet use.

Body Awareness

Clearly, all of this learning takes time. The first steps in this process involve bodily sensation—the ability to associate an inner feeling of fullness with the bowel movement or urination that results—and usually take place at around twelve to eighteen months. Your efforts to reinforce this awareness by remarking on the poop or pee to come are among the first productive actions you can take to start your child thinking about potty use.

As time passes, your child may demonstrate discomfort over a dirty diaper, try to remove her diaper or resist being diapered, and otherwise show that her awareness of her physical state is expanding. She may start to enjoy (and even insist on) spending a substantial amount of time without clothes on, and by age two will have become quite interested in all of her body parts, especially the "private" ones used to eliminate. This is the age when boys commonly begin to talk about their penis, or comment on Dad's, while girls start to explore and ask questions about the vagina and its uses. Such interest in the body indicates a new openness to your explanations of how the body works and a desire to "name the equipment." Acquiring simple words to describe her body and its workings helps your child think more fully about the process of elimination. It also sets the stage for learning through experience. Just letting her sit on the potty until she happens to have a bowel movement—and then hearing you say how pleased you are by what she did—is likely to help your child connect the need to poop with potty use more effectively than any long-winded explanation.

Making Plans and Carrying Them Out

Understanding the link between needing to eliminate and doing so is an important first step in toilet training readiness. Still, more development is necessary before your child can begin picturing the potty when she needs to go, plan how she will get to the bathroom and urinate into the potty, and remember her plan long enough to carry it out. These next steps in the developmental process require the capacity for picturing actions (*symbolic thought*), planning (*problem solving*), and memory—abilities that begin to surface at age one but become much better established by age two or even later.

One of the first signs that your child is able to think of an object when it isn't there, for example, is at around twelve months, when she begins to wail every time you leave the room. For the first time, she can picture you and know that you continue to exist even though she can't get to you, and it is the frustration caused by this understanding that makes her cry. In the coming months, her brain will develop to the point where she realizes she can crawl or toddle to the next room to find you—and walk to the bathroom to find her potty.

By age two, she may routinely picture her potty when she needs to use the bathroom. She may even know how to find the potty when she wants to. She may still need your support, however, in making the associations required to *decide* to go to the potty when she feels the urge and accomplishing her mission before other thoughts or events distract her.

By age two and a half or three, your child's evolving interest in problem solving will support her ability to accomplish this series

of actions on her own. Solving problems requires picturing a solution and planning a way to achieve it, and seeing these skills develop is perhaps one of the most pleasurable ways of noting that your child is approaching toilet-training readiness. As your child moves from her second to her third birthday, you will be able to observe her solving problems over and over, all day long—from how to get her toy shovel back from another child in the sandbox to how to get you to give her an extra piece of candy after dinner. The sight of your child's pensive face, pondering how she will obtain the current object of her desire, is a sure sign that she is also cognitively mature enough to figure out how to solve the problem of staying dry without diapers (go to the bathroom and sit on the potty—now!).

More-Complex Thinking

A number of other cognitive developments greatly facilitate your child's ability to use the potty successfully beginning at around age two and a half or three. Her memory will have improved a great deal, enabling her not only to remember where she is headed when she starts toward the bathroom but to recall previous toilet-training experiences and benefit from them. Her imagination has expanded, allowing her to explore potty use through imaginary play with stuffed animals, dolls, and puppets. (An expanded imagination may also create new problems in toilet training, leading to such anxieties as the fear of a flushing toilet or the fear of being flushed away.)

By age three she will have grown somewhat better at interrupting her focus on another task to go to the bathroom and resist distraction on the way. Chances are she will have achieved the verbal sophistication necessary, too, to communicate any problems or confusion she is experiencing, to express any fears that may have developed, and to ask for adults' help and guidance when she needs it.

These essential cognitive and verbal developments, just as important to toilet training success as physiological growth, are the reason why most parents find that waiting until age two and a half or three to begin training usually makes the process much easier. Particularly if you have begun laying the groundwork at an earlier age, waiting for your child's natural development to fall into place can be a wise decision.

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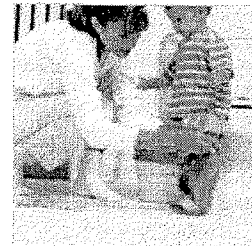
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Encouraging Your Child's Progress

"Mommy, I did it!" Trevor appears in the bathroom doorway, beaming proudly at his mother. Suzanne looks up from her vacuuming, hardly daring to hope. "You used the potty, Trevor?" she says, turning off the vacuum cleaner and hurrying toward the bathroom. "Let Mommy see!" Suzanne moves past her son to take a look at the bathroom. The scene she confronts is not quite what she'd expected. Toilet paper is draped around the sink, toilet, and potty. The books Trevor was looking at while sitting on the potty are strewn across the floor. Trevor has urinated, Suzanne notes—but on the floor *next* to the potty rather than in the bowl.



Suzanne takes a deep breath. This is the third such accident in two days, and if there's one thing she doesn't like to do it's clean up after one of these messes. She knows, however, that a positive response is the only productive one, and adjusts her expression before turning to her son. "Pretty good job, Trevor," she says in an encouraging voice. "You tried to pee in the potty, and you almost did it. You just stood up a little too early." She gives him a quick hug.

"Now, help me clean up, okay? Let Mommy show you. . . ."

Whether your child is eighteen months or three years old, eliminating into a potty rather than a more convenient diaper is likely to seem quite strange at first—a big-people's ritual with no obvious benefits aside from a parent's praise and perhaps a small treat.

It is amazing to consider, then, how hard young children try to comply with their parents' need to potty-train them, simply out of a desire to please. At times, their efforts may disappoint, irritate, or even puzzle you. But try to keep your child's stage of development in mind as you respond.

His attempts to cope with this new self-care concept, his natural anxiety over redirecting a natural body function, and his efforts to follow quite a complex sequence of actions are bound to lead to errors now and then. Do your best to applaud his efforts and maintain a sense of humor as he masters this difficult new skill.

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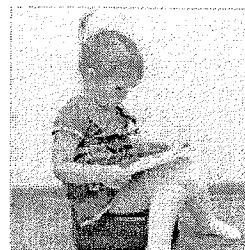
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A Natural Part of Growing Up

"We've only just started toilet-training our son, Andrew, and already I'm confused," writes Linda, the mother of a two-year-old. "As far as I can tell, we've done everything right. Four weeks ago my husband and I bought Andrew his own potty, explained what it was, and put it in the bathroom. He didn't show any interest in using it—except as a hat—and we were careful not to pressure him. But this morning when he woke up, I finally gave in to temptation and asked him if he might want to use the potty today. He looked at me and then started to cry! I couldn't understand what I'd said to upset him. I didn't know how to react, so I just gave him a hug and said, 'Okay, honey, you don't have to.' But I wish someone could tell me what's going on."



If you are the parent of a young child in diapers, you may share Linda's uncertainty over how best to begin toilet training. You are probably concerned about putting too much pressure on your child by starting too early, or letting him down by starting too late. You may be confused by conflicting advice in the media and from relatives and friends—telling you that you can toilet-train your child by his first birthday, or that you should wait until he is three or four; that you can "train in a day," or that training should take place gradually over several months to a year; that a parent-enforced routine of regular potty sessions is the best way to train a child, or that it's better to let the child decide when, where, and how he will go. As if this weren't enough, your child's own evolving urges and needs can suddenly derail even the simplest, most positive training program. Your family situation—marital stress, a recent move, a new baby in the family—may affect your child's progress in ways you hadn't predicted, while your own feelings or memories from childhood may color your attitude toward toilet training and, indirectly, that of your child.

Most likely, what you are looking for when approaching the toilet-training process are simple answers to two basic questions: "When should I start?" and "What method should I use?" Many people you ask are willing to provide you with cut-and-dried responses to these questions. However, their advice may not be appropriate for your family or your child. Some children are ready to start toilet training at eighteen months, while others would learn more quickly and easily if they waited until age three or four. Many children respond well to a regular potty routine, but yours may resist using the potty at the same time every day and prefer to wait until he feels the need to go. The truth is that nearly any nonpunitive approach to toilet training will get the job done sooner or later, but an approach specially tailored to your child's stage of development and learning style will take you both through the process in the most positive, efficient way. By learning how to evaluate your child's readiness for toilet training, you will be able to start the process at the best possible time for her.

You will learn to find *your own* answers to the questions "When should I start toilet-training my child?" and "What method should I use?" You will learn which basic skills your child must acquire before true bathroom mastery can occur. You will become familiar with a variety of verbal, physical, social, and other approaches to teaching your child about potty use, and discover ways to mix and match these techniques to suit your child's personality, temperament, and evolving needs. If you find yourself stymied by your child's resistance to training, you will find information about what may be causing the problem—along with encouragement to discard methods that aren't working and try a new approach.

Above all, you will be encouraged to look at toilet training not as a grueling if necessary part of parenting a young child, but as an early opportunity to familiarize yourself with your child's developing personality and to find out *how he learns best*. When you think about it, toilet use is one of the first and most significant skills your child must acquire consciously, rather than in response to the kinds of instinctive urges that prompted him to learn to walk or talk. There is nothing instinctive about using the potty. It is a practice that your child adopts for no other reason than that you want him to and that he wants to please you and to be like you. To teach him this habit, you must consistently encourage him, monitor his progress, and reward him for success.

You must observe his responses to your training techniques and adapt your approach accordingly. You must support your child in his earliest efforts to set goals for himself and consistently meet them. In the process you may discover that your child learns best through verbal interaction (talking about potty use rather than simply imitating and practicing) or that he responds to learning by doing (sitting on the potty at scheduled times so that potty use becomes a regular part of his routine). You may find that he appreciates tactful reminders or stubbornly resists them, that he is happiest when allowed to demonstrate every step of

his progress or prefers practicing behind closed doors.

These discoveries, which enhance your understanding of your young child and help you to teach him how to learn, offer benefits beyond just learning to use the toilet. They lay the groundwork for you to connect with your child in positive ways—and set the tone for efficient learning in the years to come. The key to toilet training—and, yes, the fun of it—lies in choosing the time and techniques that work best in your family, teaching yourself to use them effectively and consistently, and observing your child's amazing progress as he responds to a lesson plan designed for him alone.

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