

Toilet training

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Learning to use the toilet is an important milestone for toddlers. It is a big step as they learn to understand their body's signals and start being responsible for their own bodies.

Each child is different. Some seem to almost train themselves when they are ready, while others need some help from parents. The most important thing is that your child is ready, and that you are relaxed and patient. Children want to please you so praise and encouragement work best when they are learning new skills.



What is the best way?

Ideas about toilet training have changed over the years.

It used to be popular for parents to decide when it was time for their child to learn how to use the toilet. However it seems to work best when parents follow the child's lead by watching for signals that show they are ready.

Many children follow the same steps when learning to use the toilet, but each will learn at their own pace.

This is because children have different temperaments and ways of learning, and family situations differ.

There can also be different ways to toilet train in different cultures.

Signs of readiness to toilet train are more important than the child's age. It is a big step in your child's development that can't be rushed.



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Are they ready?

While children learn at their own pace, many start to show the 'readiness skills' and physical maturity needed for toilet training between eighteen months and two-and-a-half years of age. This is also a time when they are starting to show signs of wanting more independence.

Some of the readiness skills you might notice are your child's ability to:

- copy your behaviour and follow simple instructions
- say words for wee and poo, and show an interest in others using the toilet
- pull their pants up and down
- stay dry for two hours or more in the day. This shows your child has developed to the point where they can 'hold on' a little rather than their bladder just emptying itself when full like babies and younger toddlers
- tell you they have just done a wee or a poo in their nappy, or when their bladder or bowel is full.

Other signs include:

- having bowel motions at a similar time each day that have a firm consistency
- not wanting to wear nappies, or showing interest in 'big boy' or 'big girl' undies
- trying to pull off wet or dirty nappies or asking to be changed.

Your child does not need to show all of these signs to be ready but it does help to wait until they show many of the signs.

Toilet training works best in a relaxed and supportive environment. It helps when you make it as easy, effortless and fun as possible and progress at the pace your child can manage.

Avoid starting toilet training when your child is coping with other big changes, e.g. starting child care or a new baby arriving.



How long will it take?

Some children take three to four weeks to work out how and when to go to the toilet while some seem to manage within a few days. Some get control over wee first, for others it will be poo.

Quite often girls manage toilet training earlier than boys, but this is not always the case.

If your child is not making progress after about four weeks, they may not be ready. Wait a few weeks and try again.

There are many steps in learning to use the toilet and it takes time to put them all together.

Don't feel pressured to start too early. It takes longer if your child is not ready.

What about becoming dry at night?

Becoming dry at night takes longer because it is not something your child can learn to control like day-time toileting.

While children are asleep they don't have any control over when their bladder empties. It is not something they can stop by 'trying hard'.

Genes are also involved in night-time bladder control so if members of you or your partner's family wet the bed later than others, your child might too.

Bedwetting happens when the bladder becomes full at night but children don't wake up. The bladder empties itself automatically rather than holding the wee.

The 'link' between the brain and bladder needs to develop so the



Getting ready for toilet training

brain is able to 'tell' the bladder not to empty. This happens at different ages.

Often children become dry at night by about three years.

Most are dry at night by five years although some wet until six or seven, or even older.

Most pre-schoolers still have accidents from time-to-time and over 10% of junior primary school children still wet their bed.

If your child starts to wet often after being dry at night, you may want to talk with your doctor or health professional.

Sometimes there can be a medical problem. (See ParentLink Guide 'Bedwetting')

Talk with your partner about what you will do to help your child learn to use the toilet. If your child is going to child care, or spends time with others, make sure everyone knows what you are doing. It helps to be consistent.

To help your child get ready for toilet training you could:

- read a toilet training book or watch a DVD with your child. This helps them learn in a fun way that it is normal for everyone to wee and poo. You can get books and DVDs from your local library
- let your child go with you to the toilet and talk about what you are doing, if you feel OK doing this. Understanding what the toilet is for is the first step in learning how to use it
- teach your child the words needed for toilet training, e.g. wet, dry, wee, poo, it's coming. Choose words you are comfortable with
- make sure the toilet area is safe. Keep household cleaners and toiletries out of reach
- dress your child in clothing that is easy for them to get on and off, and easy to wash. Toilet training can be easier in warmer weather because there are less clothes to remove in a hurry
- learn your child's cues so you can be ready to guide them to the toilet in time. It is important to have the toilet or potty set up ready to avoid accidents.



Potty or toilet?

Before you start toilet training you will need to decide whether to use a potty or the toilet. Many parents use both. It helps to find out which one your child prefers by having both ready.

It is important to not criticise or tease your child about wetting the bed or talk with others about it in front of them. While older children can help by putting sheets in the laundry basket, getting young children to wash their bedding can feel like a punishment.

Toilet

If using the toilet, you will need a toddler toilet seat with a smaller hole that fits inside the big toilet seat. You will also need a step they can climb up on by themselves and rest their feet on while sitting.

They need to feel safe and relaxed sitting on the toilet to be able to let the wee or poo out.

Some toddlers are afraid of being flushed down the toilet, even with the toddler seat in place.

Even though you might want them to use the toilet, using a potty may be easier for them. It can help them get used to the toilet and give a sense of control to flush the toilet so they can see what happens.

Make sure flushing is only allowed after a wee or poo, otherwise it might become just a fun game that isn't linked with using the toilet.

Potty

Many parents start toilet training with a potty. It is easier for a child to get onto a potty without help and they seem to feel safer because it is not so high.

You can put it somewhere they can get to in a hurry because they get very little warning that a wee is going to come out.

When you go out it can be easier to take a potty with you than to make toilets in other places safe and comfortable for your child.

Some parents have a potty out before the child is ready for toilet training. Children get to know how it feels and that it is their potty. You might leave it within easy sight wherever they are playing so they get used to it, or put it in a place they choose.

Your child could sit on the potty at different times through the day with their clothes on without any other expectations.

You could get them to sit teddy on the potty 'to do a wee'. When confident with the potty they can then make the transition to the toilet.

The most important thing is to make it easy and fun for your child. If they are afraid or upset about the potty or toilet, don't pressure them. Put training off for a month or so.



Getting started

If you think your child may be ready to start, choose a time when you will have the time and patience to give it your attention.

Weekends can be good if you are working.

- Start by watching carefully so you notice when a wee or poo is coming out. Say, 'I think you're doing a wee or a poo'. Let them know that wee and poo are good, and doing wee and poo is good for them.
- Encourage your child to tell you when they have done a wee or poo in their nappy. It may not be so easy for them to know if using pull-up nappies which take away the feeling of wetness. Sometimes pull-ups are called 'pull-up training pants' which can be confusing. Training pants are usually made of towelling or similar cloth. They feel wet as soon as a wee comes so it helps children recognise they have done a wee.

- Next watch for signs they are about to do a wee or poo. They may start fidgeting or crossing their legs. As you guide them to the toilet or potty you might say 'Let's see if there's a wee or poo coming'.
- If your child tells you before they do a wee or poo, thank them for telling you and take them to the toilet or potty straight away. You will need to move very fast because there is very little time between them knowing it's going to happen and the wee coming out. If they don't get there in time at first, give praise for whatever they have managed, e.g. trying to 'hold on' or pulling down their pants. Make sure they know the praise is for learning a new skill, not something they have to do to please you. For example you might say, 'You pulled down your pants really quickly' rather than 'You're a good girl'.
- If your child is relaxed about it you could take their nappy off and put them on the toilet or potty at a time when they usually do wee or poo in the nappy, e.g. after a meal or soon after a sleep if they wake up dry.

Don't make children sit on a potty or toilet for more than a couple of minutes. It can feel like a punishment and does not help toilet training. Five minutes is a long time for a young child.

- After a number of successes, try leaving the nappy off and use training pants. This feels very grownup to children. Training pants are easier for a child to get off by themselves, are more absorbent than underwear yet easy to wash. You might even let them go without pants at home.
- While nappies can be 'safer' when going out, try not to switch back to nappies at home as this may confuse your child. Most toddlers will still need a nappy at night.

- Toddlers don't have the skills to wipe their bottom properly so you will need to do this with them until they can get it right. Teach girls to wipe from the front towards the back to avoid getting poo in the vagina.
- When boys are learning to use the toilet some like to start off sitting down to wee, others want to stand up from the start. Some parents find that a ping pong ball in the bowl helps boys aim straight when standing. Teach them to shake their penis after a wee to get rid of any drops. Teach children to wash their hands after using the toilet or potty, and always do this yourself after helping them.
- Leave the toilet light on at night and the door open so they can get to the toilet by themselves.

All children have accidents for some time after they learn how to use the toilet or potty. There is very little warning a wee is coming so there may not be time to get to the toilet.

Also it is easy for them to get interested in doing something and not notice the warning signs.

Mistakes are part of how we learn new skills. Don't make a fuss about cleaning up. If your child feels they've failed they may become anxious and have a set-back.

When children are anxious there will be more accidents.

Children like pleasing their parents. Reward each small step with cuddles and encouraging words rather than offering treats.



Toilet training troubles

Learning to control bowels and bladder is a big task for your toddler and sometimes there can be problems caused by:

- starting too soon – may be because of pressure from relatives or friends, e.g. 'Surely Tom isn't still in nappies?'
- parents feeling they must get their child trained by a certain age or date. If the child feels tension and pressure they may become afraid of making a mess, and it will be hard for them to get it right. Toilet training works best when there is no pressure for either the parent or the child
- children and parents getting into a battle over toilet training. Toilet training should not become a power struggle

- changes or stress in your child's life, such as a new baby in the family. They may see you happily changing the baby's poo-ey nappies and feel cross or insecure about the new baby. If your child asks to wear a nappy again, let them for that day. Ask them the next day if they could manage without one. This can happen on and off for several weeks until they feel secure again
- a child being unwell. Temporary loss of control is also common when a child is sick.

It is common for toddlers to relax and 'let go' as soon as they stand to walk away from the potty or toilet. They may not be fully ready for toilet training if this is happening a lot.

If you think your child is not trying to use the potty or toilet you may find yourself becoming angry and even wanting to punish them.

Try again in a few weeks when things are less tense. Spend extra time making them feel special before you start again.

Don't get into battles over toilet training. Punishing a child when they are trying to learn this new skill doesn't help.

Constipation

Although most children poo every day, it is normal for some children to poo less often.

Constipation is when it is difficult for your child to poo, when the poo is dry and hard, or when they poo less than three times a week.

Your child might have tummy ache or hold on because it hurts when hard poo comes out — it can even cause tears around the anus.

The causes of constipation can include:

- the food your child eats (make sure they get plenty of fibre from fruit, vegetables, bread, cereals, beans, lentils)
- not drinking enough fluids (make sure they drink plenty of water during the day)
- some medicines
- not enough active play
- fear of going to the toilet or being alone in the toilet.

Sometimes the bowel gets used to being full of poo all the time and loses some of the feeling of fullness.

The child will find it hard to know when they need to go to the toilet — they don't get the message they need to go.

Medical help can be needed to get it started again.

Talk with your doctor, child health nurse or dietician before using laxatives or other treatments.

Bladder infections

If a young child has a bladder infection they will not be able to stay dry all the time. You should see your doctor if your child is:

- doing wee very often, or starting to wet their pants again after being toilet trained
- pain when doing wee, or blood in the wee
- wetting frequently during the day after the age of two, or not being toilet trained by the age of four
- your child's wee changes in smell.

Children with a disability

It may take longer for children with developmental delay, health or mobility difficulties to become able to use the toilet reliably. They sometimes need a lot of help from you and in some cases, special equipment.

Talk with your doctor or a health professional if you need extra support.

Other parents who have children with similar difficulties may have some very practical and useful ideas.

Toilet training

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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