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Toilet Training Guidelines for Parents

Bowel and bladder control is a necessary social skill. Teaching your child to use the toilet takes time, understanding, and patience. The important thing to remember is that you cannot rush your child into using the toilet. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed this brochure to help you guide your child through this important stage of social development.

When is a child ready for toilet training?

There is no set age at which toilet training should begin. The right time depends on your child's physical and psychological development. Children younger than 12 months have no control over bladder or bowel movements and little control for 6 months or so after that. Between 18 and 24 months, children often start to show signs of being ready, but some children may not be ready until 30 months or older.

Your child must also be emotionally ready. He needs to be willing, not fighting or showing signs of fear. If your child resists strongly, it is best to wait for a while.

It is best to be relaxed about toilet training and avoid becoming upset. Remember that no one can control when and where a child urinates or has a bowel movement except the child. Try to avoid a power struggle. Children at the toilet-training age are becoming aware of their individuality. They look for ways to test their limits. Some children may do this by holding back bowel movements.

Look for any of the following signs that your child is ready:

- Your child stays dry at least 2 hours at a time during the day or is dry after naps.
- Bowel movements become regular and predictable.
- Facial expressions, posture, or words reveal that your child is about to urinate or have a bowel movement.
- Your child can follow simple instructions.
- Your child can walk to and from the bathroom and help undress.
- Your child seems uncomfortable with soiled diapers and wants to be changed.
- Your child asks to use the toilet or potty chair.
- Your child asks to wear grown-up underwear.

How to teach your child to use the toilet

Decide what words to use

You should decide carefully what words you use to describe body parts, urine, and bowel movements. Remember that friends, neighbors, teachers, and other caregivers also will hear these words. It is best to use proper terms that will not offend, confuse, or embarrass your child or others.

Avoid using words like “dirty,” “naughty,” or “stinky” to describe waste products. These negative terms can make your child feel ashamed and self-conscious. Treat bowel movements and urination in a simple, matter-of-fact manner.

Your child may be curious and try to play with the feces. You can prevent this without making him or her feel upset by simply saying, “This is not something to be played with.”

Pick a potty chair

Once your child is ready, you should choose a potty chair. A potty chair is easier for a small child to use, because there is no problem getting on to it and a child’s feet can reach the floor.

Children are often interested in their family’s bathroom activities. It is sometimes helpful to let children watch parents when they go to the bathroom. Seeing grown-ups use the toilet makes children want to do the same. If possible, mothers should show the correct skills to their daughters, and fathers to their sons. Children can also learn these skills from older brothers and sisters, friends, and relatives.

Help your child recognize signs of needing to use the potty

Encourage your child to tell you when he or she is about to urinate or have a bowel movement. Your child will often tell you about a wet diaper or a bowel movement *after* the fact. This is a sign that your child is beginning to recognize these bodily functions. Praise your child for telling you, and suggest that “next time” she let you know in advance.

Before having a bowel movement, your child may grunt or make other straining noises, squat, or stop playing for a moment. When pushing, his or her face may turn red. Explain to your child that these signs mean that a bowel movement is about to come, and it’s time to try the toilet.

It often takes longer for a child to recognize the need to urinate than the need to move bowels. Some children do not gain complete bladder control for many months after they have learned to control bowel movements. Some children achieve bladder control first. Most, but not all, boys learn to urinate sitting down first, and then change to standing up. Remember that all children are different!

Make trips to the potty routine

When your child seems to need to urinate or have a bowel movement, go to the potty. Keep your child seated on the potty for only a few minutes at a time. Explain what you want to happen. Be cheerful and casual. If he protests strongly, don’t insist. Such resistance may mean that it is not the right time to start training.

It may be helpful to make trips to the potty a regular part of your child’s daily routine, such as first thing in the morning when your child wakes up, after meals, or before naps. Remember that you cannot control when your child urinates or has a bowel movement.

Success at toilet training depends on teaching at a pace that suits your child. You must support your child’s efforts. Do not try to force quick results. Encourage your child with lots of hugs and praise when success occurs. When a mistake happens, treat it lightly and try not to get upset. Punishment and scolding will often make children feel bad and may make toilet training take longer.

Teach your child proper hygiene habits. Show your child how to wipe carefully. (Girls should wipe thoroughly from front to back to prevent bringing germs from the rectum to the vagina or bladder.) Make sure both boys and girls learn to wash their hands well after urinating or a bowel movement.

Some children believe that their wastes are part of their bodies; seeing their stools flushed away may be frightening and hard for them to understand. Some also fear they will be sucked into the toilet if it is flushed while they are sitting on it. Parents should explain the purpose of body wastes. To give your child a feeling of control, let him or her flush pieces of toilet paper. This will lessen the fear of the sound of rushing water and the sight of things disappearing.

Encourage the use of training pants

Once your child has repeated successes, encourage the use of training pants. This moment will be special. Your child will feel proud of this sign of trust and growing up. However, be prepared for “accidents.” It may take weeks, even months, before toilet training is completed. It may be helpful to continue to have your child sit on the potty at specified times during the day. If your child uses the potty successfully, it’s an opportunity for praise. If not, it’s still good practice.

In the beginning, many children will have a bowel movement or will urinate right after being taken off the toilet. It may take time for your child to learn how to relax the muscles that control the bowel and bladder. If these “accidents” happen a lot, it may mean your child is not really ready for training.

Sometimes your child will ask for a diaper when a bowel movement is expected and stand in a special place to defecate. Instead of considering this a failure, praise your child for recognizing the bowel signals. Suggest that he or she have the bowel movement in the bathroom while wearing a diaper. Encourage improvements and work toward sitting on the potty without the diaper.

Stooling patterns vary. Some children move their bowels 2 or 3 times a day. Others may go 2 or 3 days between movements. Soft, comfortable stools brought about by a well-balanced diet make training easier for both child and parent. Trying too hard to toilet train your child before she is ready can result in long-term problems with bowel movements.

Talk with your pediatrician if there is a change in the nature of the bowel movements or if your child becomes uncomfortable. Don’t use laxatives, suppositories, or enemas unless your pediatrician advises these for your child.

Most children achieve bowel control and daytime urine control by 3 to 4 years of age. Even after your child is able to stay dry during the day, it may take months or years before he achieves the same success at night. Most girls and more than 75% of boys will be able to stay dry at night after age 5.

Most of the time, your child will let you know when he is ready to move from the potty chair to the “big toilet.” Make sure your child is tall enough, and practice the actual steps with him.

Your pediatrician can help

If any concerns come up before, during, or after toilet training, talk with your pediatrician. Often the problem is minor and can be resolved quickly, but sometimes physical or emotional causes will require treatment. Your pediatrician’s help, advice, and encouragement can help make toilet training easier. Also, your pediatrician is trained to identify and manage problems that are more serious.

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