

**BEHAVIOR  
GUIDELINES  
FOR PARENTS**

# Toilet training without tears

**By Barton D. Schmitt, MD**

You can consider your child to be toilet trained when he can walk to the potty, undress, urinate or defecate, and pull up his pants without an reminders or help for anyone. Some children learn to control their bladders first; other start with bowel control. Both can be worked on together. Most children become toilet trained between 18 and 30 months of age. The gradual type of toilet training discussed here can usually be completed in two weeks to two months. Most children achieve daytime bladder control first, followed one to three years later by bladder control through the night.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESS

*Don't begin toilet training until your child is clearly ready.* Readiness doesn't just happen. It involves concepts and skills you can teach your child from 12 months of age onward. Reading special toilet learning books to you child can help (see the books by Lansky and Mack in the recommended reading list below). Most children with normal development can be made ready for toilet training by 24 months, many by 18 months. By 3 years of age, your child will probably have trained herself. Your child is ready for toilet training if the following indications are present:

- She understands what pee, poop, dry wet, clean, messy, and potty mean. Teach her the vocabulary.
- She understands what the potty is for. Have her watch parents and older siblings use the toilet correctly.
- She prefers dry, clean diapers. Be sure to change her frequently.
- She likes to be changed. As soon as she is able to walk, teach her to come to you immediately whenever she is wet or dirty to have her diaper changed. Praise her for telling you.



- She understands the connection between dry pants and using the potty: “If you go pee-pee in the potty, your pants will stay nice and dry.”
- She can recognize the sensation of fully bladder and the urge to have a bowel movement— that is, she paces, jumps up and down, holds her genitals, pulls at her pants, squats down, grunts, pushes or tells you. Explain to her what these signals mean: “The poop (or pee) wants to come out. It needs your help.” Try to teach her to come to you at these times.
- Your child can postpone briefly the urge to go. She may go off by herself and come back wet or soiled, or wake up from naps dry.

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## Toilet Training Basics

*Adopt a positive, loving approach to toilet training*

The keys to successful training are encouragement, patience, praise, and making the process fun. Don't act overconcerned about this normal body function. Maintain a relaxed (even casual) attitude and a sense of humor throughout the training process. Avoid any pressure or punishment. Your child must feel in control of the process. Do not start toilet training when your child is in a negative phase. If you start training and your child reacts negatively, simply back off and try again in a month or two.

*Buy a potty chair.* You will need a potty chair of the floor-level type. This type of potty allows your child's feet to reach the floor, which gives him leverage for pushing and a sense of security during training. It also allows him the freedom to get on and off at will and is portable. (Children can generally make the transition from the floor-level potty to the toilet between 2 1/2 and 3 1/2 years of age. Let your child decide when he is ready to make the change.) The only other supplies you'll need are your child's favorite treats (such as fruit slices, raisins, animal crackers, or cookies) and stickers or stars for rewards.

*Make the potty chair one of your child's favorite possessions.* Several weeks before you plan to begin toilet training, take your child with you to buy a potty chair. Make it very clear that this is her own special chair. Help her put her name on it. Allow her to decorate it or even paint it. Then have your child sit on it fully clothed while watching TV, eating snacks, playing games, or looking at books until she is comfortable using it as a chair. Keep it in the room where she usually plays—often the kitchen. After she is clearly friendly toward the potty chair for at least one week, you can proceed to actual toilet training.

*Synchronize practice runs to the potty with your child's body signals.* Watch your child for any signal that looks promising, such as a certain facial expression, grunting, holding the

genital area, pulling at his pants, pacing, squatting, squirming, or passing gas. Other good times are after naps or 20 minutes after meals. Say encouragingly, "The poop (or pee) wants to come out. Let's use the potty." Encourage your child to walk to the potty and sit there with his diaper and pants off. He can then be told, "Try to go pee-pee in the potty."

If your child is reluctant to cooperate, he can be encouraged to sit on the potty by doing something that is fun—you might read a story to him, for instance. If he still wants to get up after one minute of encouragement, let him do so. Never force him to sit on the potty. Never physically hold him on the potty. Even if your child seems to be enjoying it, end each practice run after five minutes, unless something is happening. Make sure that all adult caretakers are consistent in their approach.

*Reward your child for cooperation or success.* Praise your child when she cooperates with practice sessions: "Mary is sitting on the potty just like mommy," perhaps, or "I know that you're trying very hard to make pee-pee on the potty."

If your child urinates or defecates into the potty, you can reward her with treats, such as fruit or cookies, or stickers, as well as praise and hugs. While a sense of accomplishment is enough for some children, others need treats to stay focused. The big rewards (like going to the ice cream store) should be reserved for times when your child spontaneously walks over to the potty and uses it or asks to go there with you and then uses it.

Once your child has used the potty spontaneously on two or more occasions, you can stop the practice runs. For the following week, continue to praise her frequently for dryness and using the potty. Do not continue practice runs and reminders for more than one or two months without taking a break or talking with your child's physician. While you're potty training your child, you can teach her early the good habit of rinsing her hands each time she finishes using the toilet.

*Introduce training pants after your child starts using the potty. Switch from diapers to training pants once your child is cooperative about sitting on the potty chair and passes about half his urine and bowel movements there. He definitely needs training pants if he comes to you to help him take off his diaper so he can use the potty. Take your child with you to buy the underwear, and make it a reward for his success. Buy loose-fitting pants that he can easily lower and pull up by himself. Disposable pull-ups are handy for travel. Once you start using training pants, use diapers only for naps and nighttime.*

*When your child has an accident, respond sympathetically and change her as soon as it's convenient. You can say something like: "You wanted to make pee-pee in the potty, but you made pee-pee in your pants. I know you like to be dry. You'll get better at this. " If you can't help expressing some disapproval, keep it to mild verbal comments and do it rarely. You might say, "Big girls don't go pee-pee in their pants." Then change your child into a dry diaper or training pants, maintaining a neutral attitude. Even after your child learns to use the toilet, don't expect perfect performance. Some accidents occur for months.*

Avoid physical punishment, yelling, or scolding. Avoid battle and showdowns as well. Pressure or force can make children this age, who are normally negative to begin with, completely uncooperative. In other words, if you escalate your response, you will lose. Keeping your child in wet or soiled pants for

punishment is not helpful; it sends a confusing message about what is desired.

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#### **Call our office during regular hours it:**

- Your child won't sit on the potty or toilet.
  - Your 2-year-old child is very resistant to toilet training.
  - Your child holds back bowel movement.
  - You begin to use force or punishment.
  - Your child is over 3 years old and not toilet trained during the day.
  - This approach isn't working after two months.
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#### **RECOMMENDED READING**

1. Cole J: Parents Book of Toilet Training. New York. Ballantine Books. 1986
  2. Lansky V: Koko Bear's New Potty. New York. Bantam Books. 1986
  3. Mack A: Toilet Learning: The Picture Book Technique for Children and Parents. Boston, Little Brown, 1983
  4. Van Pelt, K: Potty Training Your Baby: Early Potty Training for Babies and Toddler. New York, Avery, 1988
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Adapted from Schmitt BD: Your Child's Health, ed 2. New York, Bantam Books, Inc., 1991.

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