

The Five Questions of Toilet Training

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As a parent of a toddler, you may be wondering if your child is ready to begin toilet training, and if so, how to proceed. An occasional child, generally an older one who has been watching and waiting for the right time, resolutely announces his or her intention to sit on the potty, put on “big kid panties” and never need another diaper change. However, this “toilet training in a day” is rare, and is certainly not the only approach to the task. Whatever approach is used, punishment or belittling has no place. If the child has excessive pressure applied, or is too young and becomes frightened or made to feel uncomfortable, he may be too worried about failing, and too worried to even try it again in a few months. Battling with a child who is not interested or who is afraid can lead to constipation, long-term soiling problems (encopresis) and a resentful, anxious child.

Fortunately, every child has a natural, inborn desire to grow up, emulate his parents, classmates or siblings, and an interest in obtaining more independence. Making an alliance with the child’s natural desires to progress can enhance growth and gives your child the subliminal message that you are on the side of personal responsibility and eventual maturity. The approach we outline here takes patience and confidence in your child. It is flexible, and can be started and stopped for a few weeks to accommodate a new baby in the family, a move or a vacation away from home. It can be encouraged one day, and take a back seat the next for the convenience of the rest of the family’s activities. We have been recommending it now for well over a decade, and many grateful parents have given us positive feedback. HAVE FUN. Toilet training is as much a milestone for your child as walking, eating solid food, or sleeping through the night!

WHO IS READY TO BEGIN?

A child who has good receptive speech (i.e. he or she understands what you are saying), is interested in pleasing his primary caretakers, and is showing signs of wanting his hands cleaned up promptly after a messy playtime with paints, sand or clay, for example, is often psychologically ready to begin toilet training. The child must be able to recognize his body’s signals and voluntarily use the pelvic muscles involved in bladder and bowel control. A child who goes to hide for a bowel movement is clearly aware of his body’s functioning, for example. Because girls’ speech and social awareness develop earlier than boys’, they are likely to be ready earlier. In general, for most children, somewhere in the year between 2 and 3 is the right time to try.

WHERE TO TOILET TRAIN?

A child needs easy access to a child friendly toilet (with or without a child’s seat inserted) or a potty. A footstool can help the small child’s feet remain planted while he sits on the toilet, making him feel more secure. Picking a safe place where messes won’t matter is crucial. Of course, you don’t want to rehearse any new skills over an oriental carpet or in the formal living room or newly upholstered white couch. Hanging out in the kitchen, the bathroom, or a bedroom or playroom without carpet are all fine places to start. Use plastic coverings liberally (e.g. have a short, pretend picnic on the old plastic tablecloth spread out on the floor if it is carpeted or it will be difficult to clean).

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WHEN TO TRY?

The season has little to do with toilet training readiness. Since clean toilets are less common in the backyard or at the beach, contrary to popular folklore, summer at the beach is actually a more difficult time to try. Of course, if a child has to take off multiple layers of clothing to reach his birthday suit, training is unlikely to succeed. But in most of our houses, children can run around with one layer of loose clothing comfortably all year, so snow outside is not an issue.

HOW TO BEGIN?

First encourage your child to tell or show you when he is wet or needs a diaper change. Suggest that sitting in a “dirty diaper” is unpleasant and not necessary to do for long. Leave a pile of clean diapers within his reach for him to bring to you when he needs to be changed. At this stage, the expressive language skills do not have to be well developed (i.e., he does not have to say much). If he does well identifying when he has had a bowel movement and needs changing, it is appropriate to try the next step. The goal at this stage is to give your child a sense of knowing where and when it is socially acceptable to release his bowel and bladder contents and when it is not, and help him exert some control over the process. Whether the urine or feces is deposited in a diaper or a potty is of no real importance.

Begin by taking the diaper off for 30 minutes at a time when you think that the child will actually likely stay dry and NOT have to go. A good time would be just AFTER he’s urinated or had a bowel movement. Once

you have taken the diaper off and cleaned him up, tell him that you are going to wait a little while to put the diaper on and let him run around like that. He can be wearing some loose fitting sweat pants, pajamas, or shorts when the diaper is off. Since this method of toilet training requires that the young child can tell whether he is in or out of the diaper at any given time, tight fitting underpants or pull-ups are confusing and should not be used.

Explain that if he needs to “go pee”, he should come and get you so you can either help him use the potty or you can put a diaper back on him immediately. At the end of the 30 minutes of staying dry without a diaper, if he has not asked for one, congratulate him on an excellent job staying dry, and put the diaper back on. Explain that you are quite sure there will be urine there ready to come out soon. If he would like to tell you when he urinates, you can try again at that time out of the diaper, or offer to play the game again the next day. Over time, you can build up to two hours out of the diaper. Since accidents will happen occasionally, remember to practice where a mess will be “no big deal.” If the child fails to ask for a diaper or use the potty at the correct time, which should automatically be the end of the game for the day, without punishment. If things go well, the two hour stretch can be repeated several times a day, so that ultimately the child is out of diapers more than in. Of course if the child chooses the potty correctly most times, you can soon offer to leave him out of the diaper for another two hours as a reward for success.

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MOST COMMON ERRORS

- **TRYING FOR TOO LONG A PERIOD**

If there are repeated accidents a few days running, either shorten the time periods out of a diaper to reinforce successful dry periods or stop the attempts and try again 2 months later.

- **FORCING THE CHILD TO CHOOSE THE TOILET**

Do not pressure him to choose the toilet; asking for a diaper when he feels he needs it is a perfectly acceptable alternative early in the training stage, as asking for it at the appropriate time indicates your child has the ability to know that “something is coming”.

- **ADDING BRIBERY, OR EVEN WORSE, PUNISHMENT**

With this method, the reward for success is being able to spend more time out of a diaper. The only consequence for failure to succeed is being left in a diaper for longer. Thus, we correctly align interests, and are not using chocolate to bribe a child out of diapers, which can backfire.

WHY BOTHER?

Why work so hard? Why not wait until the child does it himself? There is no benefit to forcing a child who is not ready, but there is absolutely no benefit to holding back a child who is ready, either. Many parents object to the expense of an unnecessary year of diapers and to having to carry them everywhere. Many preschool programs will not accept 3 year olds in diapers. And if you feel that just waiting until the child asks, that is an acceptable option. Diaper rashes and chafed skin from contact with stool or urine are unpleasant, as are the potential urinary tract infections in girls who sit in stool. Of course pressure from grandparents and friends factor in to the decision, as does the desire to have the child accompany the parent into a swimming pool hygienically, as many community pools exclude children in diapers in all but the baby pool. But the best reason to begin is the desire to allow and encourage your child to mature at the appropriate time. The message that there is a wonderful and exciting world out there that is his to enjoy as he is ready is a powerful one that will echo through many stages of his childhood.

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ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **NEW SIBLINGS**

New siblings can often slow things down a bit because just as your two and one half year old begins to show interest in the toilet naturally, he squelches his curiosity because of all the attention suddenly given to the new baby in diapers. One way to handle this almost irresistible urge to remain a baby in diapers is to use the mirror image of the technique outlined above. That is: allow your child to remain in a diaper all day long, but encourage him or her to take it off just long enough to use the potty to keep the same diaper on and dry all day long. It allows the concepts of toilet-readiness to continue, but permits them to feel “babied” rather than pushed out in the unknown world of the big people until the disruption from the new baby settles down a bit.

- **NIGHT-TIME DIAPERS**

Do not rush to move on and discard the sleep-time diapers until the daytime routine is all established and the child wakes up dry frequently. Naptime dryness of course comes first. This is a different skill from the daytime training and much of it is truly out of the child’s conscious control.

- **PULL-UPS**

In our opinion, pull-ups give a very confusing message to a child. Either he needs diapers for security or he does not. When he does not, he can pick out “big boy underpants” of his choice. Until then, he should remain in diapers.

We will be happy to discuss issues with you as they pop up. Losing one’s dependence on diapers is a pivotal milestone in your child’s emotional and physical development. Like walking, talking, or sleeping through the night, it should be anticipated and celebrated with great pride by both of you at the appropriate time for that child.