

Toilet Training: Children Step Up to Independence

by Karen Stephens

Are words like pee, tinkle, poopy, and “BM” staples of your vocabulary? Have you found yourself — stone serious — holding a child’s hand as you both look down and wave “bye-bye” to a swirling toilet bowl and its new fallen stool? If so, you’re a caregiver of toddlers (which, in this article, means kids 18 months to age 3).

Other professions may find it embarrassing and silly to talk openly about such things, but you and I know potty talk is serious business. Mastering the toilet is a significant step for young children. In fact, it’s one of childhood’s earliest rites of passage, chasing the heels of learning to walk and talk. By learning to control body functions, toddlers step toward independence, self-reliance, and personal responsibility. Pride in newfound autonomy is children’s rightful reward.

Diaper freedom has perks for parents and caregivers, too. It frees up a chunk of the family budget. The time crunch in your classroom daily routine eases up, too.

Developmental Road Markers

It can be a challenge to decide if a child is ready for toilet training. After all, it is hard to access the internal physical growth that affects muscular control. However, there are developmental milestones that parallel the ability to be toilet trained. By keeping a watchful eye on children’s behavior, we can surmise the most promising time to begin toilet training.

Road markers include the ability to verbally describe sensation. Ready children can tell caregivers when their diaper is wet, full, or even when they need a new one. Likely candidates for toilet training include

children who have regular bowel movements, stop playing during a BM, stay dry for two or more hours at a time, are dry after naps, can pull pants up and down, and express a preference for being clean and neat.

Physical development reveals itself in better control, coordination, and balance. Such abilities even prompt some children to begin taking their own diaper off when they notice it is dirty!

Self-help skills also emerge, showing children are interested in greater control over what happens to them. An intrinsic drive for achievement stirs during toddlerhood, thus working toward a goal and being cooperative with others provides motivation for toilet training. Praise and encouragement take on greater significance.

Those developmental road markers reveal toddlers’ internal drive for



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autonomy. Alert caregivers will capitalize on the *window of opportunity* for toilet training. Muscular and intellectual development for the ONSET of training is typically sufficient in most children by age two. Unless there are special needs or physical problems, almost all children are physically and mentally ready to begin toilet training by age three. Spotting the teachable moment when children are eager to please is the biggest hurdle. Once the desire is mutual, toilet training is mostly a matter of focus, patience, and consistency.

Toilet Training: It Takes Partnership

The steps of toilet training are pretty simple. The biggest challenge I hear about relates to caregivers and parents coming to agreement as to when to expect toilet mastery. For parents and caregivers, both tired from heavy work schedules, it can be an emotionally charged, frustrating time. Stalemates can delay and draw out the toilet training unbearably. However, caregivers agree that with specific planning, clear expectations, and consistent cooperation between parents and child care staff, toilet training can occur naturally and smoothly, leaving children with a sense of pride rather than disapproving pressure.

The key is a working partnership between parents and caregivers. That partnership should be based on mutually agreed upon toilet training strategies. It must be nourished by ongoing communication between parents, caregivers, and the child. Prior to initiating any toilet training, schedule a parent conference to determine if parents, too, have seen readiness signs. If parents and caregivers agree toilet training should start, explain strategies that have been successful for you before. Make a cooperative plan of action,

including times for daily communication regarding progress. Some programs even ask parents and caregivers to sign a *Toilet Learning Orientation* form. The form documents mutual agreement to cooperative toilet-teaching strategies (see *Child Care Information Exchange*, May 1997, page 87).

There are other ways to engender parent cooperation. At parent groups, encourage parents to share toilet-training tips with each other. It often helps parents to know they are not alone in their parenting struggles. Also share toilet-teaching articles or books from your lending library. They can reinforce information you give. Lend relevant children's books so parents can read them at home with their child. (Resources are provided at the end of this article.)

Toilet-Training Particulars

Toilet mastery requires more complex skills than you think. We can't remember how we got ourselves out of diapers, so it's easy to forget how involved the task actually is! The average age (though there are exceptions) of girls fully toilet trained is 29 months; for boys, it is 30 months.

Here's what children do in order to use a toilet. Children must: (1) feel the urge to eliminate; (2) understand the urge is a *signal* to eliminate — "Hey, I gotta go, NOW!"; (3) suppress the immediate urge; (4) get to the toilet (quick!); (5) pull clothing out of the way; (6) situate and balance on the potty; and (7) relax urinary or sphincter muscles to eliminate.

That's all a major accomplishment when you're used to letting nature take its course in a diaper! And, of course, children must also learn to wash hands after using the toilet.

(In initial potty training, children flushing can be a secondary goal.)

Toilet Training: How Long Does It Take?

There isn't a lot of mystery to toilet training. We know children's urinary and sphincter muscles **MUST** develop sufficiently to control elimination. After muscular development is a reality, cooperation between caregivers and parents is a prerequisite. If time and cooperation is right, successful training can occur within a two to four week period. However, for that to happen, training must be **FOCUSED ON** and **CONSISTENTLY** carried out.

And when I say consistently, I mean *consistently at home and child care*. Haphazard potty training confuses children and ends up stretching the training period out much longer than need be. It can even result in larger problems like power struggles, constipation, and fear of failure leading to apathy.

During the early stages of toilet training, be prepared to have toilet training be the focus of the child's classroom and the family's household schedule, no exceptions. For up to a month, daily schedules and activities will revolve around toilet-training details.

While two to four weeks is possible, don't be discouraged if training isn't achieved within a month. It's not unusual for some children to take up to four months to attain complete daytime toilet mastery. If after two weeks children show **NO** interest in cooperating with your toilet-training attempts, it is best to wait a while longer. It can be a sign that you misjudged the child's readiness. Or it could be time to schedule a chat with parents to see how the consistency of training is going at home.

Toilet-Training Basics

Setting the stage for toileting requires three basics: a warm, well-lit bathroom; an accessible toilet; and an encouraging adult. If you don't have toddler-size toilets, a seat adapter or potty chair will be easier for children. If you use an adult-size toilet, provide a step stool for feet to rest on. It will take time for children to be comfortable using the toilet alone. In the beginning stages, a trusted adult should stand nearby to bolster children's confidence. Don't pressure, but do encourage. Coach them with what you know about toileting. Don't assume children understand what's happening; if they did, they wouldn't need training!

Children can't *automatically* potty, so set out a basket of children's books to help pass the time. You can provide a washable teddy to make the wait more bearable (pun intended!!). If you want to get cuteness, prop a doll nearby on a potty chair of its own.

From Diapers to Underwear

When children are still using diapers, change them frequently so children experience a dry feeling as much as possible. Talk about how pleasant it is to have a clean, dry diaper.

When diapering children, tell them why you are doing it. Talk about being wet or having a full diaper and how uncomfortable that can be. By talking about this during diapering, you are helping children learn to notice sensations.

Before switching children from diapers to underwear, let them *practice* sitting on the potty so they become used to it. It takes more balance than adults realize! Some children balance best by sitting sideways.

Others find it more stable to sit backwards on the toilet so they don't feel like they can fall back into the stool. In the beginning, it's easier if boys sit on the toilet to urinate just as girls do. After toilet mastery, boys learn to urinate standing up, just like good ole dad.

Once readiness signs are in full bloom, make the switch to underwear during the daytime. Ask that parents do the same at home. Children should arrive at child care diaper-free, and remain so even during naps. However, diapers at night may be required longer until children are able to wake to sensations from a very deep sleep.

To Pull-Up or Not to Pull-Up

While new parents tend to accept advertisers' suggestions that Pull-Ups® are a necessary part of toilet training, caregivers I know disagree. Without exception, caregivers have said they find Pull-Ups® counterproductive to toilet training. In fact, many programs have a "no Pull-Ups® policy." The problem? Pull-Ups® are just too good at wicking away moisture from little bottoms. Children in Pull-Ups® don't benefit from a major toilet training motivator — the uncomfortable feeling of wetness!

Pull-Ups® also give children a false sense of wearing pants like the "big kids." Wearing underwear like "big kids" should be reserved as a motivator for toilet training. If children believe Pull-Ups® serve the same purpose, they are less interested in learning to use the toilet.

Specific Steps on the Toilet-Training Trail

1 Tell the little one you've noticed how grown up he/she is getting. Explain that part of being a "big boy or girl" is learning to use

the toilet (or potty) instead of wearing diapers.

2 Children learn through imitation, so take advantage of peer learning. Leave bathroom doors open so children can see each other use the toilet. Encourage parents to be good role models. This is no time for modesty. At home, suggest that parents casually leave the bathroom door open so children can see how siblings (with their permission) and grown-ups handle toileting routines. Eventually children will learn a closed bathroom door is proper toileting etiquette.

3 Ask parents to dress children in clothing that can be removed FAST. Pants and shorts with elastic waist are best. Bib overalls and clothing with lots of zippers, buckles, buttons, and snaps slow things up and needlessly contribute to potty accidents. (Dresses should be avoided, too. They make it too hard for girls to see and manage panties.)

4 Watch for signals children give when they have to potty. Signals may include *dancing* on tiptoes, holding legs together, pulling at pants or body parts, becoming red in the face, or passing gas (you get the picture). Point those signals out so children can recognize them, too. Say, "That feeling means you need to use the potty. Let's go to the bathroom now." Noticing cues means you become *trained* before the child. It works, so observe closely and follow your intuition when you think a child needs to potty. Eventually children tune into the signals themselves, but they need your help first.

5 Use natural routines to establish regular potty times. This helps make toileting a habit. Good times to potty include: upon waking, after meals and snacks, upon child care arrival, before and

after indoor or outdoor play, before and after naps, before getting into a van or car to run errands or for a field trip, and before child care departure.

6 At the beginning of toilet training, have the child try to potty about once each hour (some do so every half hour). Some children will resist going each hour. Don't phrase your request as a question, i.e., "Would you like to potty now?" That leaves the door WIDE open for "No!" Simply and casually say, "It's time to use the toilet now." Tell children they only have to try. If they indeed don't have *to go*, reassure them they can go back to play after at least making an attempt to use the potty.

7 When children sit on the toilet, genuinely praise them for their efforts. Don't go overboard with praise. Overly exuberant praise rings as pressure and is stressful. Be encouraging but not overeager. Simply tell children you are proud of them and they should be proud of themselves, too. Do this even if they don't eliminate every time they sit on the toilet. Be calm, upbeat, and positive, and respectfully thank children for trying their best. Reassure them you have faith they'll learn to use the potty soon.

Providing Motivation

Using a toilet isn't a natural behavior. In fact, if you observe animals in the wild, it's the most unnatural thing in the world! So providing children with incentive to become toilet trained is helpful. And I'm not talking stickers or candy. (Why treat children like they're being trained like animals in a zoo?)

Most children take pride in maturation and are motivated by a new privilege they believe is enjoyed by grown-ups. Being able to wear

grown-up underwear is a natural and practical motivator for toilet training. Make the transition from diapers to underwear a *right of passage* to be achieved and admired. This helps children realize con-trolling elimination is an important and respected skill.

Suggest parents take children to the store with them to buy a new supply of *big boy or girl* underwear. Children will love choosing underwear decorated with their favorite animals or cartoon characters. Some children are so thrilled with their *grown-up* underwear that they pull down jeans just to show them off. One little girl began using the toilet when her mother said, "Be sure to use the potty because you wouldn't want to pee on Mickey Mouse, would you?" That simple comment did the trick!

Handling Toilet Accidents

Children learn to control body functions gradually, so accidents are bound to happen during toilet training. One or two accidents a day aren't uncommon in the beginning. It takes time for children to notice elimination cues, especially when they are engrossed in play.

Children must also learn to gauge how much time it takes to get to the potty. They never fail to underestimate how long it takes to get from the sandbox to the inside bathroom!

Anticipate accidents by asking parents to provide at least three pairs of extra LABELED underwear, pants/shorts, and an extra pair of shoes. When accidents occur, don't spank, threaten, ridicule, tease, or otherwise punish a child. Reassure them that every boy and girl has accidents when learning to use the toilet.

So children learn from consequences, help them put soiled

clothes in the washer (or plastic bag for parent pick up) and teach them to wash and dry themselves off. They should do the major part of changing into dry clothes. Provide paper towels or sponges so children can help clean the floor. (Teach proper sanitation at the same time.)

Coping with Children's Fears During Toilet Training

Using the toilet and exerting self-control are new experiences for toddlers, so some fear toilet training. Since language is an emerging skill, toddlers often have trouble verbalizing fears. This means parents and caregivers must guess what's going on in a child's mind (no easy feat!).

Addressing children's fears openly prepares them for toilet training. For instance, some children fear sitting on a cold seat. If so, let them know their skin will warm up the plastic very fast. Some children are afraid of having the door closed when they potty. If so, by all means leave the door open.

Other children fear falling into the toilet. They think they might be *swallowed* up. Children can also worry that a snake or animal will come up the toilet to *grab* their bottom. A child-size potty chair can help allay those fears. Also reassure children that the swirling *tornado-like* water doesn't pull people into potties. If their expression is skeptical, tell them if they begin to slip, you'll always help them up. You can also allay fears by showing children how to brace themselves so they balance on the potty seat.

The sound of the toilet flushing may scare a child. If so, don't make flushing part of toilet training; it can be taught after fears subside. Some children are frightened when urine or poop *just disappears*. They think the house floor is filling up with

nasty stuff! Explain that pee or BM goes into pipes and travels into sewers in the ground to be carried far away from the house or center.

Some children experience pain during elimination. If this happens often, it could be due to a bladder infection, and it's best to have a doctor check it out. Constipation is a more common cause of pain. It's countered best by giving children lots of liquids, fiber, and exercise. Chronic constipation warrants a doctor visit.

There's one more fear I've heard of. And I know it sounds peculiar. But some children view their urine or BM as part of their body. These are NOT the children who like to wave "bye-bye" after doing their duty. No, they see "a part of me!" flushed down the toilet, and they become distraught! If a child fears this, simply flush when they are out of ear-shot. Eventually, children will figure out that poop is poop, and it's best to get it into the sewer as fast as possible.

Wrapping It Up

For more tips, turn to experienced child care providers and parents who have successfully toilet trained children. The resources listed below can be helpful. Best of luck: I hope dry days aren't far away!

Parent Lending Library Resource Article

"Toilet Learning" by Karen Miller, *Child Care Information Exchange*, May 1997

Parent Lending Library Resource Books

Parents' Book of Toilet Teaching
by Joanna Cole
Toilet Training Without Tears
by Charles Schaefer and Theresa DiGeronimo (this book addresses potty training especially with

resistant children and those with disabilities)

Practical Parenting Toilet Training

by Vicki Lansky

Toilet Learning: The Picture Book

Technique for Children and Parents

by Alison Mack

Children's Books for Lending Library

Annie's Potty by Judith Caseley

Once Upon a Potty by Alona Frankel

(one book for boys, one for girls)

Your New Potty by Joanna Cole

KoKo Bear's New Potty by Vicki Lansky

The Toddler's Potty Book by Alida Allison

Bye-Bye, Diapers by Ellen Weiss

What Do You Do With A Potty?

by Marianne Borgardt

I Want My Potty by Tony Ross

On Your Potty! by Virginia Miller

Princess and the Potty

by Joae Graham Brook

Everyone Poops by Taro Gomi

The Gas We Pass: The Story of Farts

by Shinta Cho