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Toilet Training Your Child: The Basics

by Barton D. Schmitt, M.D.

Your child is toilet trained when, without any reminders; he or she walks to the potty, pulls down his pants, urinates or passes a bowel movement (BM), and pulls up his pants. Some children learn to control their bladder first; others start with bowel control. You and your child can work on both kinds of control at the same time. Bladder control through the night normally happens several years later than daytime control. The gradual type of toilet training described in this guide usually can be completed in one to three months—if your child is ready.

Toilet Training Readiness

Don't begin toilet training until your child is clearly ready! Readiness doesn't just happen; it involves concepts and skills you can begin teaching your child at 18 months of age or earlier. Almost all children can be made ready for toilet training by 3 years, most by 2½ years, many by 2 years, and some earlier. Ways to help your child become ready include the following:

18 months: Begin teaching about pee, poop, and how the body works.

- Teach the vocabulary (pee, poop, potty).
- Explain to your child that everyone makes pee and poop.
- Point out when dogs or other animals are doing pee or poop.
- Clarify the body's signals when you observe them: "Your body wants to make some pee or poop."
- Praise your child for passing poop in the diaper.
- Don't refer to poop as "dirty" or "yucky".
- Make diaper changes pleasant for your child so she will come to you.
- Change your child often so she will prefer a dry diaper.
- Teach her to come to you whenever he is wet or soiled.

21 months: Begin teaching about the potty and toilet.

- Teach what the toilet and potty chair are for ("the pee or poop goes in this special place"). Demonstrate by dumping poop from diapers into the toilet.
- Portray using the toilet and potty chair as a privilege.
- Have your child observe toilet-trained children use the toilet or potty chair (An older toilet-trained sibling can be very helpful).

- Give your child a potty chair. Encourage your child to sit on it with clothes on for fun activities, such as play, snacks, and watching television. Help your child develop a sense of ownership (my chair).
- Put the potty chair in the bathroom and have your child sit on it when sitting on the toilet.

2 years: Begin using teaching aids.

- Read toilet learning books and watch toilet learning videos with your child.
- Help your child pretend to train a doll or stuffed animal to use the potty chair. It doesn't have to be an expensive doll that pees water.
- Introduce wearing underwear as a privilege. Buy special underwear and keep it in a place where your child can see it.

The potty chair

Buy a floor-level potty chair. You want your child's feet to touch the floor when he sits on the potty. This provides leverage for pushing and a sense of security. It also allows him to get on and off whenever he wants to. Take your child with you to buy the potty chair. Make it clear that is his own special chair. Have him help you put his name on it. Allow him to decorate it or even paint it a different color. Then have your child sit on the potty chair fully clothed until he is comfortable with using it as a chair. Have him use it while eating snacks, playing games, or looking at books. Keep it in the room in which your child usually plays. Never proceed with toilet training unless your child clearly has good feeling towards the potty chair.

Steps in Toilet Training

Encourage practice runs to the potty.

A practice run (potty sit) is encouraging your child to walk to the potty and sit there with her diapers or pants off. You can then tell your child, "Try to go pee-pee in the potty." Only do practice runs when your child gives a signal that looks promising, such as a certain facial expression, grunting, holding the genital area, pulling at her pants, pacing, squatting, or squirming. Other good times are after naps, after two hours without urinating, or 20 minutes after meals. Say encouragingly, "The pee or [poop] wants to come out. Let's use the potty."

If your child is reluctant to sit on the potty, you may want to read her a story. If she wants to get up after one minute of encouragement, let her get up. Never force your child to sit

on the potty. Never physically hold your child on the potty. Even if your child seems to be enjoying it, end each session after five minutes unless something is happening. Initially, keep the potty chair in the room your child usually plays in. This easy access markedly increases the chances that she will use it without your asking. Consider buying two potty chairs. During toilet training, children need to wear clothing that makes it easy for them to use the potty. That means one layer, usually the diaper. Avoid shoes and pants. (In the wintertime, turning up the heat is helpful). Another option (though less effective) is loose sweatpants with an elastic waistband. Avoid pants with zippers, buttons, snaps, or a belt.

Praise or reward your child for cooperation or any success.

All cooperation with practice sessions would be praised. You might say, for example, "You're sitting on the potty just like Mommy," or "You're trying real hard to go pee-pee in the potty." If your child urinates into the potty, you can reward him with treats, such as animal cookies, or stickers, as well as praise and hugs. Although a sense of accomplishment is enough to motivate some children, many need treats to stay focused. Reserve big rewards (such as going to the toy store) for occasions when your child walks over to the potty on his own and uses it or asks to go there with you and then uses it. Once your child uses the potty by himself three or more times, you can stop the practice runs. For the following week, continue to praise your child often for using the potty. (Note: Practice runs and reminders should not be necessary for more than one or two months.)

Change your child after accidents as soon as convenient.

Respond sympathetically. Say something like, "You wanted to go pee-pee in the potty, but you went pee-pee in your pants. I know that makes you sad. You like to be dry. You'll get better at this." If you feel a need to criticize, restrict criticism to mild verbal disapproval and use it rarely ("Big girls don't go pee-pee in their pants," or mention the name of another child whom your child likes and who is trained.) Change your child into a dry diaper to training pants in a pleasant and non-angry way as possible. Avoid physical punishment, yelling, or

If your child resists training

Request the parent guide on toilet training resistance if:

- Your 2 ½ year-old child is negative about toilet training.
- Your child is over 3 years old and not daytime toilet trained.
- Your child won't sit on the potty or toilet.
- Your child holds back bowel movements.
- The approach described here isn't working after six months.

Books on Toilet Training for Parents

Parent's Book of Toilet Teaching, by Joanna Cole (New York, Ballantine Books, 1999)
Mommy! I have to Go Potty! A Parent's Guide to Toilet Training, by Jan Faull (Raefield-Roberts Publishers, 1996)
Toilet Learning: The Picture Book Technique for Children and Parent, By Balison Mack (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1983)
Toilet Training Without Tears, By Charles E. Schaefer (New York, Signet, 1997)
Potty Training for Dummies, by Diane Stafford and Jennifer Shoquist (New York, Hungry Minds, 2002)
Potty Training Your Baby, by Katie Van Pelt (New York, Signet, 2002)
The American Academy of Pediatrics Guide to Toilet Training (New York, Bantam Books, 2003)
Keys to Toilet Training, by Meg Zweiback (Hauppauge, N.Y., Barron's Educational Series, 1998)

scolding. Pressure or force can make a child completely uncooperative.

Introduce underwear after your child starts using the potty.

Underwear can increase motivation. Switch from diapers to underpants when your child is cooperative about sitting on the potty chair and has passed urine into the toilet spontaneously 10 or more time. Take your child with you to buy the underwear and make it a reward for his success. Buy loose-fitting underpants that he can pull down easily and pull up by himself. Once your child starts wearing underpants; use diapers only for naps, bedtime, and travel outside the home.

Overcoming Toilet Training Inertia: The Bare-Bottom Weekend

If your child is over 30 months old, has successfully used the potty a few times with your help, and clearly understands the process, committing six hours or a weekend exclusively to toilet training can lead to a breakthrough. Avoid interruptions or distractions during this time. Younger sibling must spend the day elsewhere. Turn off the TV, and don't answer the telephone. Success required monitoring your child during raining hours.

The bare-bottom technique means that your child does not wear diapers, pull-ups, underwear, or any clothing below the waist. This causes most children to become acutely aware of their body's plumbing. They dislike pee or poop running down their legs.

You and your child must stay in the vicinity of the potty chair; which can be placed in the kitchen or another room without carpet. A gate across the door way may help your child stay on task. During bare bottom times, refrain from all practice runs and most reminders. Allow your child to learn by trial and error with your support.

Create a frequent need to urinate by offering your child lots of her favorite fluids. Have just enough toys and books handy to keep your child playing near the potty chair. Keep the process upbeat with hugs, smiles, and good cheer. You are your child's coach and ally.

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