



Toilet Training

Few things are as anxiety provoking for parents as toilet training. As if coercing your child to use the potty and dealing with inevitable accidents are not enough, parents also have to deal with comparisons to other children and the feeling that the ability to potty train is not only a judgment on the child's development and intelligence, but also a judgment on the parent's ability to parent.

We have all met, or at least heard of, the parent who proudly shares that her child was potty trained at 24, 18, 12, or even 6 months of age. If you are that parent, congratulations, getting your child toilet trained is something to be proud of no matter what the age. But if you are the parent who feels a slight twinge of failure when confronted with the toilet training accomplishments of your friends, this article is for you.

If you take nothing else from this article, I want you to take home the message that children toilet train on their own time, the age at which a child becomes toilet trained has no relationship to his intelligence, and the age at which a child becomes toilet trained says nothing about how "good" a parent is.

If toilet training happens when the child is ready, when is that? Before children are 12 months of age, they do not have control over their bladder or bowel movements. Some parents are able to recognize the signs that their child is about to urinate or have a bowel movement, and as a result, are able to achieve a form of pseudo-toilet training at a young age. True toilet training, however, cannot occur until a child is able to control her bowels and bladder, which often occurs between 18 and 24 months. However, some may not achieve this control until 30 months or older, which is normal. Even if your child is able to stay dry during the day, it is important to remember that it may take months or years for your child to be dry at night. For most children, the ability to stay dry at night does not come until after they are 5 years old.

Regardless of your child's age, the following are signs that your child may be ready for potty training:

- Your child stays dry at least two hours at a time during the day or is dry after naps.
- Bowel movements become regular and predictable.
- You can tell when 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 knows the difference between wet and dry.



- Your child asks to use the toilet or potty chair.
- Your child asks to wear “big-kid” underwear.

If you have determined that your child is ready to begin the toilet training process, the following tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics can help you achieve success.

1. **Decide what words to use** to describe body parts, urine, and bowel movements. It is best to use proper terms that will not offend, confuse, or embarrass anyone.
2. **Pick a potty chair.** They are logistically easier for a small child to use because there is no problem getting onto it, and a child’s feet can reach the floor. If you use a child-size seat attached to an adult toilet, make sure you provide a stepstool to support the feet so she can push down during bowel movements.
3. **Be a role model.** Children are often interested in their family’s bathroom activities. It is sometimes helpful to let children watch the parents when they go to the bathroom. Seeing grown-ups use the toilet (and wash their hands afterward) 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.
4. **Know the signs.** Before having a bowel movement, your child may grunt or make other straining noises, squat, or stop playing for a moment. When pushing, his face may turn red. Explain to your child that these signs mean that a bowel movement is about to come. Your child may wait until after the fact to tell you about a wet diaper or a bowel movement. This is actually a good sign that your child is starting to recognize these body functions. Praise your child for telling you, and suggest that “next time” he let you know in advance. Keep in mind that it often takes longer for a child to recognize the need to urinate than the need to move bowels.
5. **Make trips to the potty routine.** When your child seems ready to urinate or have a bowel movement, go to the potty. It may also be helpful to make trips to the potty a regular part of your child’s daily routine, such as first thing in the morning, after meals, or before naps. Keep your child seated on the potty for only a few minutes at a time and explain what you want to happen. (It is better for boys to learn to urinate sitting down first.) In the beginning, many children have bowel movements or urinate right after getting off the toilet. It takes time for children to learn how to relax the muscles that control the bowel and bladder. If this happens a lot, it may mean your child is not ready for training.
6. **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 after a bowel movement.
7. **Praise your child.** Encourage your child with lots of hugs and praise when success occurs. When a mistake happens, treat it lightly. Punishment and scolding will often make children feel bad and may make toilet training take longer.



8. **Incentivize staying dry.** If you are going to use incentives to encourage potty training, give them for staying clean and dry, and not for using the potty. Giving rewards for using the potty creates a situation where the child is in control because only she can decide if she pees or poops. If your child should decide she does not care about going to the potty, the incentive becomes useless. By incentivizing staying clean and dry, the parent is in control of the training process and is able to continually remind the child of the importance of staying dry.
9. **Try training pants.** Once your child starts using the potty with some success, training pants can be used. This moment will be special. Your child will feel proud of this sign of growing up. However, be prepared for “accidents.” It may take weeks, even months, before toilet training is completed. Continue to have your child sit on the potty several times during the day. If your child uses the potty successfully, it is an opportunity for praise. If not, it is still good practice. Some children who are not ready for training pants will still feel that they are more “grown up” if they wear disposable training pants (Pull-ups is one brand name) as a step forward in the training process. Some children will want to go back to diapers, especially for bowel movements. Instead of looking at this as a failure, praise your child for knowing when he needs to go. Suggest that he have the bowel movement in the bathroom while wearing a diaper. Encourage improvements, and work toward sitting on the potty without the diaper.
10. **Avoid a power struggle.** Children at toilet training ages are striving for independence and are becoming aware of their individuality. They often look for ways to test their limits, and some may do this by holding back bowel movements. Do your best to stay relaxed about toilet training. Remember that no one can control when and where a child urinates or has a bowel movement except the child.
11. **Understand their fear.** Some children believe that their wastes are part of their bodies, and seeing their stools flushed away may be scary and hard to understand. Some also fear they will be sucked into the toilet if it is flushed while they are sitting on it. To give your child a feeling of control, let her flush the toilet. For those children who are still having bowel movements in their diaper, it may be helpful to empty the contents of the diaper into the toilet and flush it as the child observes. This will lessen the fear of the sound of rushing water and the sight of things disappearing, while reinforcing that bowel movements belong in the toilet.

Hopefully these tips give you the tools you need to approach toilet training successfully and with minimal stress. These tips are helpful for all children and provide an easy introduction into the toilet training experience. There are other more aggressive strategies for toilet training children that take only “three days,” however; these strategies are intended for the child who has already demonstrated some potty training success or ability to control bowel and bladder function.

Should you feel like your child is struggling with toilet training, talk with your pediatrician. Most of the time the problem is minor and can be resolved quickly,



but sometimes physical or emotional impairments will require treatment. The most common physical impediment to successful toilet training is constipation. If your child has frequent accidents, pay close attention to the character and consistency of her bowel movements. If her stools are consistently hard, large, or look like pebbles or rocks, then constipation is likely, and she would benefit from treatment by your pediatrician. You should also keep in mind that major changes in the home, like moving or the birth of a sibling, may result in toilet training regression. Should you notice a change in the home environment affecting your child's toilet training, take the time to address his emotional needs before trying to advance. If you find that all of the tips and strategies that friends, family, and your pediatrician provide are not helping, consider reading the book **Stress-Free Potty Training: A Commonsense Guide to Finding the Right Approach for Your Child** by Sara Au and Peter L. Stavinoha. This book is unique in that it does not provide a singular approach to toilet training. Instead, it provides five different approaches specific to different personality types. For the child who is resistant to conventional toilet training strategies, this book can be very helpful.

Good luck!