

Toilet Learning

A New Look at Potty Training

By Karen DeBord, Ph.D.

There are many potential signs of readiness:

- Parents may be able to recognize some signs that the child is ready to have a bowel movement and respond. As soon as signs of pushing and concentration are noticed, the parent may take the child to the toilet to finish.
- Children who can walk steadily from room to room; have coordination to stoop and pick up things and can pull their pants up and down may have the physical ability to complete toileting tasks.
- Children who show an interest in and are motivated by wearing “real” underwear may be ready to learn toileting.
- Children need to be old enough to learn to gauge their own body signals and attend to them. Children who stay dry for several hours and feel the need to urinate, (posture, gestures, verbal, or facial expressions are indicators) may be ready to begin the process.
- Girls usually learn toileting before boys. For girls, toilet learning may occur as early as 18 months and, for boys, around 22 months. However, there is no magical time to begin, and this process cannot be rushed. Each child will have his or her own schedule.
- Children begin toilet learning first in the daytime then progress to nighttime learning.

Problems in toilet learning often can be traced to parental stress or other struggles between parent and child. For example, if both parents work away from home, the process may need to be started on the weekend. Or, if there is a family crisis or other major family event requiring the child or adults’ attention, the process may need to be delayed. The process should be discussed with childcare providers, family members, and friends, and procedures should be agreed upon.

Parents should be prepared with extra supplies such as clean underwear, clean-up supplies, and a child-sized toilet or toilet chair. In general, the learning process is least stressful when parents think through the process and give the child strategies and reinforcement to begin work on this special growing step.

How Parents Can Help

- Teach the child words needed to talk about elimination.
- Provide a potty chair for training. Providing a step stool to use the toilet may be helpful too.
- Use praise (hand clapping, positive phrases) and incentives (stickers, books to read while sitting, “playing potty” with a doll) without allowing them to be too distracting.
- Begin toilet learning only when the child seems interested and willing.
- Ask the child gently several times throughout the day and evening if he or she needs to go to the bathroom.
- Establish a regular pattern of toileting: upon rising, before and after meals, before bed.
- Begin a routine of hand washing after each visit to the toilet.
- Monitor fluid intake, particularly at bedtime.
- Postpone toilet learning if the child does not seem to catch on or does not seem interested.
- Remain calm and patient.
- Expect accidents. Do not punish children for accidents; rather explain firmly what is expected. “Next time, just call for help” or “Go ahead and wash out your pants in the sink.”
- Do not blame, threaten, or demoralize the child.
- Do not insist that a child remain on the potty seat longer than 5-7 minutes. The child may build up an association of unpleasantness with the bathroom or potty seat.
- Follow the child’s cue. If he or she seems more interested in the large toilet than the small potty chair, let the child use the large toilet.
- Let the child observe the same-sex parent using the toilet when possible.
- Remain calm if the child has an accident. Say, “sometimes accidents happen.” Let the child take part in the cleanup by placing soiled clothing in the sink, wiping the floor with a towel, or wiping with a washcloth.
- Try turning on the water faucet in the bathroom as a stimulus to urinate during early toilet learning.
- Store clean underwear near the toilet.
- Dress children in easy-to-remove clothing. Try giving children colorful underwear, which may make them feel more grown up.