

The ABC's of toilet training

Most parents eagerly anticipate toilet training as a milestone in their child's development, if for no other reason than that it means an end to changing diapers. But few moms and dads are prepared for how long toilet training can take. Some children master it within a few days, but others can take several months. You and your child have a better chance of success if you understand the elements of training and approach the process in a clear fashion. Here are the basic steps:

1. Assess your child's readiness — and your own

When your child is about a year old, she'll be able to begin to recognize that she has a full rectum or bladder.

Some children are ready to start potty training as early as 18 months, while others aren't interested in the process until after the age of 3. Most western parents begin potty training when their children are about 2 and a half. This is however also culturally different.

Since there's such a wide age range, watch for signs that your toddler is ready to start: Can she follow simple instructions? Can she walk and sit down? Can she take her pants off and put them back on? Try not to put on the pressure — rushing will be counterproductive.

Don't expect this child to have the same timeline as your earlier child. Boys tend to train a bit more slowly than girls, while second (and subsequent) children may learn more quickly than firstborns.

Also consider the other challenges your toddler is dealing with. If she's experiencing any turmoil or major change in her life, like a new school, caregiver, or sibling, the potty-training process is likely to hit some snags and should probably be put off until things have settled down.

Be prepared to take several months to potty-train and offer daily encouragement.

2. Buy the right equipment

First and foremost, invest in a child-size potty chair or a special adapter seat that attaches to your regular toilet.

This eases the anxiety some children feel about the grown-up toilet — some fear falling into it, others dislike the loud noise of the flush.

Figure out what is best for your toddler before you go shopping, then ask your child to help you pick a potty chair. Once you get the special chair home, write his name on it

and encourage him to play with it.

If you're using an adapter seat, make sure it's comfy and secure, and buy a stool to go with it. Your toddler will need the stool in order to get up and down from the toilet quickly and easily, as well as to brace his feet while sitting, which helps him push when he's having a bowel movement.

3. Create a routine

Set your toddler on the potty seat, fully clothed, once a day — after breakfast, before her bath, or whenever else she's likely to have a bowel movement. This will help her get used to the potty and accept it as part of her routine.

Once she's fine with this routine, have her sit on the potty bare-bottomed. Again, let her get used to how this feels. At this point, let her know that this is what Mommy and Daddy (older siblings) do every day — that taking off your pants before you use the bathroom is a grown-up thing to do.

If sitting on the potty with or without clothes is upsetting to your toddler, don't push it. Never restrain her or physically force her to sit there, especially if she seems scared. It's better to put the potty aside for a few weeks before trying again.

4. Demonstrate for your child

Children learn by imitation, and watching you use the bathroom is a natural way to understand what using the toilet is all about. If you have a son, it's simpler to teach him to pee sitting down at this young age. Later, when he's mastered that, he can watch his dad, older brother, or friend pee standing up — he's bound to pick it up quickly.

When you demonstrate for your toddler, it's helpful to talk about how you know it's time to go to the bathroom, then explain what's going on as you're using the toilet and let him see afterward what you "made." Then show him how you wipe with toilet paper, pull up your underwear, flush the toilet, and wash your hands.

Even though you'll be helping your toddler with these activities for some time, especially wiping after a bowel movement, seeing you do it and hearing you talk through it will help him get used to the whole process. (If your toddler is a girl, when you wipe her be sure to go from front to back, especially after a bowel movement, to minimize the risk of urinary tract infections.)

If your toddler has older siblings or friends who are potty-trained, consider having them demonstrate, too. It can be helpful for your child to see others close to his age exhibiting the skills he's trying to learn.

5. Explain the process

Show your toddler the connection between pooping and the toilet. The next time she poops in her diaper, take her to the



potty, sit her down, and empty the diaper beneath her into the bowl. Afterward, let her flush if she wants to (but don't force her if she's scared) so she can watch her feces disappear.

You also may want to pick up a few potty-training picture books or videos for your toddler, which can assist her in taking in all this new information. *Everyone Poops*, by Taro Gomi, is a favorite, as well as *Where's the Poop?* and *Once Upon a Potty*, which even comes in a version with a doll and miniature potty.

6. Foster the habit

Encourage your toddler to sit on the potty whenever he feels the urge to go. If he needs help getting there and taking off his diaper, make sure he knows it's okay to ask you for help any time.

If you can, let him run around bare-bottomed sometimes with the potty nearby. The more time he spends out of diapers, the faster he's likely to learn, although you'll have to steel yourself to clean up a few more puddles. Tell him he can use the potty whenever he wants to, and remind him occasionally that it's there if he needs it.

Sometimes toddlers won't sit on the potty long enough to relax and let anything come out. Calmly encourage him to sit there for at least a minute or so. You'll have the best luck getting him to stay put if you keep him company and talk to him or read him a book.

When your toddler uses the potty successfully, shower him with praise. This will help to give him positive reinforcement as he masters potty training. Chances are that he'll continue to have accidents, but he'll start to grasp that getting something in the potty is an accomplishment.

Still, try not to make a big deal out of *every* trip to the potty or your toddler may start to feel nervous and self-conscious under the glare of all that attention.

7. Grab some training pants

Once training is under way, consider adding training pants to your routine. Training pants are disposable or cloth diapers that pull on and off like underwear instead of being fastened. They allow your toddler to undress for the potty on her own, which is a critical step toward becoming completely potty-trained.

While cloth training pants are less convenient than disposable pull-ups, many parents say they work better because your toddler can really feel when she pees or poops in them. Whichever option you choose, introduce them gradually – probably for a few hours at a time – and stick with diapers at night for the time being.

When your child consistently seeks out the potty whenever she has to go, it's time to move on to "big-kid" underwear. Many moms and dads have found that undies with a favorite character on them give children a dandy incentive to stay dry.

8. Handle setbacks gracefully

Toilet training can be difficult for parents and children. Keep in mind that temporary setbacks are completely normal and virtually every child will have

several accidents before being able to stay dry all day long. An accident doesn't mean that you've failed. When it happens, don't get angry or punish your child. After all, it's only recently that his muscle development has allowed him to hold his bladder and rectum closed at all, and he's still learning why it's important to use the potty. Mastering the process will take time.

What can you do? Reduce the chance of accidents by dressing your toddler in clothes that are easy to remove quickly. When he has an accident anyway, be positive and loving and calmly clean it up. Suggest sweetly that next time he try using his potty instead.

9. Introduce night training

Don't give away that stash of diapers just yet. Even when your child is consistently clean and dry all day, it may take several more months, or even years, for her to stay dry all night. At this age, her body is still too immature to wake her up in the middle of the night reliably just to go to the bathroom. In fact, it's perfectly normal for a child to continue wetting the bed occasionally until she's in her early school years.

When you're ready to embark on night training, your toddler should continue to wear a diaper or pull-up to bed, but encourage her to use the potty if she has to pee or poop during the night. Tell her that if she wakes up in the middle of the night needing to go, she can call you for help. You can also try putting her potty near her bed so she can use it right there.

If she manages to stay dry consistently at night, it might be a good time to start nighttime training. Put a plastic sheet under the cloth one to protect the mattress. Put your toddler in underwear (or nothing) and have her use the toilet before you tuck her in. Then see how it goes. When she wakes up, get her in the habit of using the bathroom before she begins her day.

But remember that many children aren't ready to stay dry at night until they're school-age. There's also not much you can do to help things along, short of limiting liquids before bedtime, so if your toddler doesn't seem to get the hang of it, put her back in nighttime diapers and try again in a few months when she's a little older.

10. Jump for joy — you're done!

Believe it or not, when your child is mentally and physically ready to learn this new skill, he will. And if you wait until he's really ready to start, the process shouldn't be too painful for either of you.

When it's over, reinforce his pride in his achievement by letting him give away leftover diapers to a family with younger children or help you pack up the cloth diapers and send them away with the diaper delivery service one last time.

And don't forget to pat yourself on the back. Now you won't have to think about diapers ever again – at least, not until the next baby.