

Toilet Training By the Numbers

By Dr. Jenn Berman



Most parents look forward to not having to change dirty diapers, anticipating the day their child will use a toilet on their own. But toilet learning is not as easy as simply placing a child on the toilet and asking him to “go.” The process can be anxiety provoking for both parents and children. While all healthy children eventually learn how to use the toilet, parents need to look for the signs that their child is ready before beginning the training process.

8 Early Signs

According to The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) there are eight signs that parents should look for that indicate a readiness for toilet learning:

The child is able to stay dry for at least two hours at a time during the day.

Bowel movements are regular and predictable.

Your child shows signs that they are eliminating such as: squatting, making faces, crossing their legs, or even telling you.

She can follow simple instructions.

He can walk to and from the bathroom and is able to undress himself.

She is uncomfortable being in dirty diapers and requests to be changed.

He asks to use the toilet.

She asks to wear underwear.

9 Pre-Training Activities

Pre-training plants the seeds of toilet learning and helps children get excited about and aware of the whole toileting process. During this phase try the following activities:

Model toilet behavior. Say “goodbye” to your privacy! Children need to see adults use the toilet. This is how they learn how it is done.

Encourage your child to dress and undress himself. These skills are crucial for successful potty training.

Read potty books. Good potty train-

ing books mention that accidents happen and discuss the difficulties kids have adjusting to the idea. Steer clear of books that show children or animals putting the potty on their heads, using a potty as a shoe, or other undesirable behavior.

Give her the vocabulary for the experience. Teach your child the proper names for his or her genitals and bodily waste, and teach her the words like wet, dry, wipe and wash. A great way to start doing this is by narrating her diaper changes.

Put a potty chair in the bathroom and let her know what it is for. At this stage don’t expect that the child will use it. Some kids get used to the idea of the potty by sitting on it fully dressed or reading a book while sitting there.

Get a “potty doll.” These dolls allow children to bottle feed them liquid that can be expelled on a toy potty, allowing the child will use her imagination and to walk through the process step by step, not only as a student but also as a teacher.

Schedule regular potty visits. Incorporate regular “sitting on the toilet” time into your child’s routine. Start with one regular time, like before the bath and gradually add other times, like first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

Make note of potty patterns. Keep track of times that your child urinates and defecates in order to notice patterns in behavior.

Teach your child how to follow simple instructions. Give your child the chance to practice following directions by asking her to do easy tasks like “please hand the diaper to Mommy” or “please put the toy on the table.”

5 Steps to Training

After readiness and pre-training, it’s time for focused training. The two greatest determinants of outcome are a parent’s attitude and patience. Make sure you are ready to commit to this endeavor, and have dedicated time. Don’t start during difficult times (during

a divorce, when a new baby is on the way, etc.). During this focused time, which generally lasts 2-4 days, parents should be completely focused on potty training.

Decide on a start date with your child. When you feel your child is ready, say, “*It looks like you are getting ready to not wear diapers. Let’s pick a day when you will begin to learn how to use the toilet every time you have to go.*”

Put the diapers aside. During this time, the child should be in training pants, underwear or naked in order for him to get in touch with his body signals. Be prepared for accidents and make sure to continue to put diapers on during naps and at night. It is not uncommon for children to stay in nighttime diapers for a year or longer after daytime success.

Create opportunities for potty use. Continue regularly scheduled potty times and add new ones. When it is time to go to the bathroom, don’t ask if he wants to go; the answer will be “no.” Instead, tell him “*It’s time to go potty.*” If he tells you he doesn’t have to go, just firmly, but kindly, say “we can try.”

Use rewards. Most experts recommend rewarding successful toileting with praise or even small “prizes” like candy or inexpensive toys. Some recommend rewarding the child for staying “clean and dry,” not for actually using the potty.

Entertain your child on the toilet. Since using the toilet usually requires sitting there for four to ten minutes, an eternity to a toddler, try reading books together, talking, singing songs, looking at pictures or playing with special toys. This will also help her to become relaxed enough to let go of her waste.

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