

# Potty Training

By The Numbers

by Dr. Jenn Berman



The average child goes through 6,000 disposable diapers during the first two years of life. According to The Real Diaper Association, this costs the average family \$1,600 a year, not including wipes or diaper cream. Aside from the cost in dollars, the environmental cost is also great. The association estimates that 92% of all single-use diapers end up in landfills and that it takes 250-500 years for a disposable diaper to decompose. As if helping the environment and saving money were not motivation enough, 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 or potty training is not

as easy as simply placing a child on the toilet and asking him to "go." The process can be overwhelming, anxiety provoking and even frustrating for both parents and children. While all healthy children eventually learn how to use the toilet, parents still need to look for the signs that their child is ready before beginning the training process.

## 8 Early Signs

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

- 1** The child is able to stay dry for at least two hours at a time during the day.
- 2** Bowel movements are regular and predictable.
- 3** Your child shows signs that they are eliminating such as: squatting, making faces, crossing their legs, or even telling you.
- 4** She can follow simple instructions.
- 5** He can walk to and from the bathroom and is able to undress himself.
- 6** She is uncomfortable being in dirty diapers and requests to be changed.
- 7** He asks to use the toilet.
- 8** She asks to wear underwear.

## 5 Readiness Factors

The following are five key areas in which to look for the maturity necessary to confirm toileting readiness:

- 1** Physiologically, your child's system must have matured enough so that he or she can hold in her waste until he or she can get to a toilet. This is more complex than it sounds. According to Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, authors of *Potty Training 1-2-3*, infants have "a neurological autopilot in the brain that handles the 'full bladder' message." When a baby's bladder fills, the muscles automatically contract releasing the urine through the sphincter muscle. This is a reflex, not a cognitive experience. The Ezzos estimate that it is not until some time between 18 and 22 months of age that the neurological autopilot switches off and the brain is able to communicate with the bladder, allowing for the possibility of toilet training.
- 2** Physically, your child must have the motor skills necessary to get to the bathroom, take off his clothes, sit down on the toilet and stay there long enough to relax the muscles sufficiently to urinate or have a bowel movement.
- 3** Cognitively, a child must be able to understand the connection between the urge to eliminate and the use of a toilet or potty chair. In addition, she needs to be capable of remembering the new plan, delaying gratification and resisting distractions long enough to get herself to the bathroom.
- 4** Developmentally, he must be at the stage where he values and strives for autonomy. The urge for independence, self-efficacy and mastery are crucial motivators for young children.
- 5** Socially, a child must have an awareness of other people's use of the toilet and

a desire to imitate that behavior. This is a time when older siblings can be especially helpful. The two great toddler qualities that work to a parent's advantage in this area are a toddler's dual desires for approval and to imitate the behavior of others.

## 10 Pre-Training Activities

Parents can start a no pressure pre-training period in order to prepare their child for the actual focused training that will take place after readiness signs have been achieved. This phase of training plants the intellectual seeds of toilet learning and helps children get aware of and excited about the whole toileting process. During this phase you can implement the following activities:

- 1** Model toilet behavior. Say "good-bye" to your privacy! Children need to see adults use the toilet. This is how they learn how it is done.
- 2** Encourage your child to dress and undress himself. These skills are crucial for successful potty training.
- 3** Read potty books. Children's books are a great way to introduce the concept of kids their age using the toilet. Most good

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potty training books mention that accidents happen and discuss the difficulties kids have adjusting to the idea. This normalizes the experience, fears and resistance most children experience. Steer clear of books that show children or animals putting the potty on their heads, using a potty as a shoe, or any other undesirable behavior.

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

**5** Put a potty chair in the bathroom and let your child know what it is for. At this stage, a parent should not have any expectations that the child will use it. He should be given the opportunity if he expresses interest but do not put any pressure on him to use it. At this stage, some kids get used to the idea of the potty by sitting on it fully dressed or reading a book while sitting there. The potty should be close enough to the ground that your child's feet are able to touch the floor because, down the road, successful use will require this and this will allow him to start using the necessary muscles.

**6** Get a "potty doll." Most of these dolls allow children to bottle feed them liquid that can be expelled on a toy potty. These dolls allow the child to use her imagination and to walk through the toilet learning process step by step, not only as a student but also as a teacher.

**7** 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.

**8** Make note of potty patterns. Keep track of times that your child uri-

nates and defecates in order to notice patterns in behavior.

**9** Teach your child how to follow simple instructions. Give your child the opportunity to practice following directions by asking her to perform small, easy tasks like "please hand the diaper to Mommy" or "please put the toy on the table."

**10** Many parents use videos to teach their children how to use the toilet, however, direct one-on-one focus from a parent is always preferable.

## Getting Ready to Train

When your child has achieved the readiness signs and you have implemented all of the pre-training activities, it will be time for focused training time. First, it is important to note that the onus of potty training falls on the parent and, therefore, parents must make sure they are ready to commit to this endeavor. In order to create ideal conditions for both parent and child, training should not be taken on during difficult times of transition (during a divorce, after the loss of a pet or loved one, when a new baby is on the way, etc.). The two greatest determinants of outcome are a parent's attitude and patience.

Parents must be prepared for accidents and must understand that toileting is a learned skill that takes practice. Studies show that more child abuse occurs during toilet training than any other developmental step. This is because many parents' expectations exceed the child's abilities or understanding, and the child's frustrations and imperfect attempts at self-control are easily mistaken for willful disobedience. To avoid power struggles, make sure to make statements instead of asking questions, which invite a toddler to say, "no."

During this focused time, which generally lasts 2 to 4 days, it is recommended that parents be completely focused on potty training. For many parents this means devoting a weekend or possibly even taking a couple of days off from work in order to devote to this important task.

### 1 Decide on a start date with your child.

When you feel your child is ready, let him know by saying, "It looks like you are getting ready to not wear diapers. Let's look at the calendar and pick a day when you will begin to learn how to use the toilet every time you have to go." Let the child know that you will both be staying home all day to use the potty.

### 2 Put the diapers aside.

During the intensive training period, the child should be in training pants, underwear or naked in order for him to have an easier time getting in touch with his body signals. The reward for training is the opportunity to wear underpants. Allow the child to pick his underwear himself. Be prepared for accidents and make sure to continue to put diapers on during naps and at night time.

### 3 Create opportunities for potty use.

Continue the regularly scheduled potty times begun during the pre-training phase. Additional potty visits should be added based on your child's previously noted patterns. When it is time to go to the bathroom, do not ask your child if he wants to go; the answer will be "no." It is natural for children to exert their will when given a choice. Instead, tell her, "it's time to go potty." If she tells you she doesn't have to go, don't argue; just firmly, but kindly, say to her "we are going to go anyway" or "we can try."

### 4 Use rewards.

Most experts recommend rewarding successful toileting with praise or even small "prizes" like candy or inexpensive toys. The Ez-zos, however, recommend rewarding the child for staying "clean and dry," not for actually using the potty. This takes the focus off the pee and poop and makes the training less performance oriented.

## 5 Entertain your child on the toilet.

Since using the toilet successfully usually requires sitting there for four to ten minutes, which is an eternity to a toddler, parents should try to entertain their toddler by 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.

## Night Time

It is important to continue to use diapers even after successful daytime training has been completed. It is not uncommon for children to stay in nighttime diapers for a year or longer after daytime success. According to Elizabeth Pantley, author of *The No-Cry Potty Training Solution*, "Nighttime dryness is achieved only when a child's biology supports this. You can't rush it, so don't even try."

Dr. Jenn's Favorites:

*A Potty for Me! A Lift-the-Flap Instruction Manual* By Karen Katz  
*Big Girls Use the Potty! Or Big Boys Use the Potty!* By DK Publishing

ing

*My Big Girl Potty or My Big Boy Potty* By Joanna Cole

Some other potty classics:

*Too Big for Diapers* By Random House

*Once Upon a Potty- Girl or Once Upon a Potty- Boy* By Alona Frankel

*Everyone Poops* By Taro Gomi

Dr. Jenn is a licensed Marriage, Family and Child Therapist in private practice. She is the author of the Los Angeles Times bestselling book *The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy Confident Kids*. Her "Dr. Jenn" column won the prestigious Parenting Publications of America award in Parenting and Child Development. She has appeared as a psychological expert on hundreds of television shows including *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Today Show*, and *The Tyra Banks Show*. Dr. Jenn lives in Los Angeles with her husband and twin daughters. For more information on Dr. Jenn go to: [www.DoctorJenn.com](http://www.DoctorJenn.com).

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