

## Potty Training: Learning to Use the Toilet



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### Key Takeaways

- There is not one “right” way or one “right” age to start potty training.
- Look for signs that a child is ready to begin potty training
- Know when it is not a good time to start potty training
- Ensure all caregivers create a supportive environment for success

### Signs a Child is Ready for Potty Training

**When and how to help a child learn to use the potty depends on how ready the child is, as well as each family's own beliefs and values about toilet training.**

Most children develop control over their bowel and bladder by 18 months. This skill is necessary for children to physically be able to use the toilet. How ready a child is emotionally to begin learning to use the potty depends on the individual child. Some children are ready at 18 months, and others are ready at 3. While every child is different, about 22% of children are out of diapers by 2½, and 88% of children are out of diapers by 3½.

**A child is ready to learn to use the toilet when they:**

- Stay dry for at least 2 hours at a time, or after naps

- Recognize they are urinating or having a bowel movement. For example, a child might go into another room or under the table when they have a bowel movement. This is important—if the child does not realize they are having a bowel movement, she won't be successful at potty training.
- Develop physical skills that are critical to potty training—the ability to walk, to pull pants up and down, and to get onto/off the potty (with some help).
- Copy a caregiver's toileting behavior.
- Can follow simple instructions.
- Wants to use the potty. They may tell you they to wear “big boy” underpants or learn to go potty “like Daddy does.” They may feel uncomfortable in a soiled diaper and ask to be changed or ask to use the toilet themselves.

### **When to Not Start Potty Training**

**Knowing when not to start potty training is just as important as knowing when to start. There are some issues that can sometimes get in the way of success.**

When children are going through a significant change or several changes at once it might be smart to hold off on adventures in potty training. At these times, children often feel overwhelmed and sometimes lose skills they have already learned or were making progress on, like potty training.

If a child is in the middle of potty training during a stressful time and seems to be having more accidents than usual, know that this is normal. The child needs all of your patience and support right now and will return to their previous level of potty training once things have gotten back to normal.

**Common situations that can cause stress and are generally not good times to start training include:**

- An upcoming or recent family move
- Beginning new or changing existing childcare arrangements
- Switching from crib to bed
- When you are expecting or have recently had a new baby.
- A major illness, a recent death, or some other family crisis



### **When to Start Potty Training**

**It can be helpful to think of potty training as a process in which both you and your child have your own “jobs” to do.**

**It is a parent and caregiver’s responsibility to create a supportive learning environment. This means they:**

- Recognize the child is in control of his or her body
- Let the child decide whether to use the potty or a diaper/pull-up each day
- Teach the child words for body parts, urine, and bowel movements
- Offer the child the tools she needs to be successful at toileting (such as a small potty, potty seat, stool, etc.)
- Expect and handle potty accidents without anger
- Avoid punishment as well as too much praise around toilet use. (This can make children feel bad when they aren’t successful.)

**It is the child’s responsibility to:**

- Decide whether to use the toilet or a diaper/pull-up

- Learn their body's signals for when they need to use the toilet
- Use the toilet at their own speed



### **What to Avoid When Potty Training a Toddler**

**Toilet training is particularly ripe for power struggles because it is so tied up with toddlers wanting to have control over their own bodies.**

Toddlers are all about trying to gain some control over their world. They are using their growing physical, thinking, and language skills to gain some power over themselves, their bodies, and their surroundings. This natural and healthy desire for control can lead to power struggles, as children quickly figure out that one way to feel in charge is by refusing to do something they know their parents want them to do. And, for better or worse, learning to use the potty is way up there on most parents' list of what they really, really, really want their children to do—and children quickly pick up on that. (Just picture mom and dad clapping and jumping up and down when they see their child's first bowel movement in the potty.)

It's important to approach toilet training matter-of-factly and without a lot of emotion. Think of it as just another skill you are helping a child learn. If you show anger or disappointment when it's not going well, or overwhelming joy when it is, it lets the child know this is something you want them to do badly. Refusing to do it becomes a very powerful way for a child to feel in control. The more emotional you are, the more it shows the child how much it matters to you that they use the potty.

It is also very important not to force a child to use the potty because it can cause intense power struggles. These power struggles sometimes lead to children trying to regain control over their bodies by withholding urine or bowel movements. This can create physical problems, like constipation. If you are starting to see power struggles developing over potty training, it might help to take the pressure off. Stop talking about potty training or doing anything about it for a little while, until the child shows signs of readiness and interest again.

### **Rewards for Potty Training: To Use Them or Not**

**Many caregivers wonder about offering rewards for using the potty. A sticker, an extra sweet, or a little toy every time the child is successful on the toilet.**

Although these kinds of rewards may encourage progress in the short run, the concern is that for some children, the pressure of “success” in the form of the reward creates anxiety or feelings of failure when they have a (very normal and even expected) potty accident. The other risk is that the use of rewards for toileting can lead children to expect rewards for doing almost anything, finishing a meal, brushing teeth, etc. When parents are a matter of fact about potty training and don’t make a big deal about it, children are more likely to follow their own internal desire to reach this important milestone.

### **When Preschoolers Are Still Not Interested in Potty Training**

**Occasionally, children have physical issues that make potty training more difficult, so a check-up is always a good idea.**

Reach out to the child’s health care provider with your questions or concerns about potty training. You may also want to sit down with a child development specialist who can help figure out what the challenges around potty training might be for an individual child and can help you identify toilet learning strategies that might be more successful.