

Potty Training

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Stages of potty training

The process of moving from eliminating only in a diaper to being fully potty trained can be divided into several stages. These stages, and the approximate age when children may be ready for them are:

1. **Body awareness:** Learning what pee and poop are, noticing internal cues that they need to eliminate. Talk about these things during diaper changes, comment when you notice your child pooping, etc.
2. **Potty awareness:** Learning what a potty is and what it's for. Children learn by talking about it and by watching others. You might also read them books or show videos that discuss toilet use.
 - Many children have a surge of interest in the potty around 16 to 24 months. That is a fine time to buy a potty and start practicing, with no real expectation or pressure to begin using it.
3. **Practicing:** Trying out the potty on a regular basis, with occasional success. A child's physical maturity and readiness skills (see below) generally appear between 18 and 30 months. Once your child is having a reasonable chance of success when using the potty, and is showing many of the readiness signs, you're ready to move on to potty training in earnest. Many experts recommend that, if they have not already done so, parents begin a focus on potty training around 2½ years (30 months)
4. **Potty training till child is primarily using potty:** The goal is that during the day the child uses the potty, with support from parents, and only occasional accidents. (At night time, diapers are still used.) The average age is 29 months for girls, 31 months for boys. 90% or more are independently toileting in the daytime by 36 months. They need help with tasks like wiping after a BM for longer than this.
5. **Independent in the Day / Dry Overnight.** Overnight bladder control is typically the last step. When a child's diaper is dry most mornings, it's a good time to move away from diapers completely. This may be age 3 for some children, but may be longer for others. By age 6, 90% are dry all night every night.

All time estimates are *only averages!* When a child is ready, and how long potty training take depend on the temperament and developmental skills of the child *and* on the temperament and energy of the parent.

Is your child ready?

Don't push before they're ready. Children who are given encouragement and not pressured gain independence and competence. If pressured to achieve and scolded for 'accidents', they suffer doubt and shame.

Signs of readiness. These signs are a more important indicator than their age!

- Cognitive:
 - Imitating adults and older children
 - Desire for independence – wanting to 'do it myself'
 - Wants to put toys and possessions 'where they belong'
- Communication skills:
 - Able to understand and follow simple directions
 - Can communicate in simple sentences
- Physical / motor skills
 - Able to dress and undress himself with help
 - Can hold her urine (keep diaper dry) for two hours
 - Has bowel movements at regular, predictable times of day
- Potty and Body Awareness Stages – the more of these they have attained, the easier training will be
 - Has words for urine and bowel movements, knows what they are, and where they come from
 - Shows interest in the toilet and what it's used for
 - Is aware *afterwards* that he *has* urinated or has just had a bowel movement

- Is aware *when she is "going"* – may tell you or may hide in a corner or behind a couch
- Is aware *before* he goes – may tell you he needs to go soon, or may be able to answer a question about whether he feels like he needs to go.

Parental readiness

- Before starting training, you may want to consider: Do you have the time and energy for it at this time?
 - The American Academy of Pediatrics says a parent should ask him or herself: will you be able to devote up to three months of daily encouragement to your toddler?
 - If you choose a “One-day” method: are you willing to pay very close attention to your child for the next week or two, really monitoring them, and are you willing to clean up accidents?
 - Is life fairly stable right now? It may not be a good idea to start at a time the child is experiencing major life transitions like a move, major vacation, or the birth of a sibling.

Steps to Potty Training:

Your role is to create an environment which enables your child to move from eliminating in a diaper to use a potty. *Your child's job* is do the actual work of learning *how* to do this. And learning to use the toilet is a hard job! A child has to learn to notice sensations they've been ignoring, *then* remember to head to the bathroom, *then* manage to get their clothes off, and *then* figure out just how to make all the right muscles work just right, on demand. It takes a while to figure it all out! The potty training books say children usually figure out bowel control earlier, as the urges are not as urgent, and it's easier *not* to push out poop than it is to *hold in* pee. Anecdotally, parents may find that their child has bladder control earlier.

Here are some steps to potty use. Once they have some mastery of one step, move on to the next.

1. **Teaching the language** of potty awareness and body awareness.
 - a. Talk about elimination: yours and theirs. If you're comfortable, let them join you in the bathroom when you use the toilet. If they have friends who are potty trained, ask the parent if it would be OK if your child accompanied theirs on a potty trip to observe a peer using a potty.
 - b. Help your child notice when they're peeing or pooping.
 - c. Teach them the names of their body parts.
2. **Get a potty.** When they show interest:
 - a. Get a child-size potty or a potty seat to put on an adult toilet. Most children feel safer on a small potty where they can rest their feet on the floor. If they are using an adult toilet put a step stool nearby so they have somewhere to rest their feet when having a bowel movement.
3. Have your child **sit on the potty, with clothes on**, to play or to look at a book.
4. Have your child **sit on the potty with clothes off, with no expectations** that anything will happen. A natural time to do this might be during the diaper changing process.
5. **Show them where poop should go.** When you change a diaper, let your child see you dump the stool into the toilet. Then sit your child on the potty and talk about the idea that poop could go there.
6. **Watch for opportunities to poop in potty.** Watch your child for signs of concentration or pushing. Take him to a bathroom right away, take off the diaper and let him finish in the toilet. As you're doing this, talk about how it feels when they need to poop, and what they should do when they feel that way.
7. **Go pants free for learning to pee in potty.** Spend time at home when your child is diaper-free, place potty near where she is playing so she doesn't have to stop what she is doing to use it when she has the urge. Expect to be cleaning up some accidents.
8. Once your child is managing to use the potty, **transition to training pants or underwear for daytime**, making sure to dress your child in clothes he can easily remove when needed, but continue to use diapers or pull-ups at naptime and bedtime.
9. When ready, **phase out bedtime diaper.**

Steps 1 – 5 can happen any time, whenever convenient, with no pressure for anyone.

Steps 6 – 8 can be taken slowly, worked around the convenience of the family's schedule and energy level. Parents offer the potty when it's convenient (they're home with time to spare) and let the child just use diaper to eliminate when the potty is not convenient (they're out and about or in a hurry to get out the door.) This method can take a few months to complete. The older they are when you start, the faster the process will go.

OR you can try the "Big Day" option, which is often promoted as "One Day to Potty Training" but may more likely be two weeks or so. (Unless your child is really really ready.)

There are variations to this Big Day plan, but here are some ideas:

- Talk to your child about it in advance.
- Prepare by getting big kid underwear or other item which your child can 'earn' by using the potty.
- Make the day a celebration. Also, give your child PLENTY to drink that day to increase the chance that they will need to pee every time you sit them on the potty.
- On that day (or days), you may just let your child run around naked, and have them sit on the potty at short but frequent intervals. Or you may encourage them to sit on the potty for extended periods of time (e.g. 15 minutes on, 5 minutes off). If you choose the latter option, make it a pleasant experience by reading books together, or watching a movie, or playing with puzzles on a nearby table.
- Celebrate every successful potty trip. Calmly clean up after accidents.
- Plan on sticking close to home with extra changes of clothes easily available for the next few weeks.

Whether you do the extended-time or Big Day option, your goal is to get your child to primarily use the potty not the diaper. But we're not yet getting the child to be totally independent! You'll still help for several months with potty reminders, and with hands-on support with undressing, wiping, dressing, hand-washing and so on.

Expect that there will be accidents. Clean them up in a matter-of-fact way, talking about how your child could do things differently in the future. You may want to have your child help with clean up so they see the consequences. But don't punish or shame child when accidents happen!

Expect set-backs and regression. There may be times where your child uses the potty for weeks, and you'll think you're done, and then they go on a potty strike for weeks and you'll think potty training will never end! 80% of children have setbacks – which means they're part of the normal process!

If potty training is *really* not working, stop, and try again in a few months.

Some More Tips:

- Increase interest and appeal:
 - Try showing your child potty training videos, or reading books about the potty.
 - Have your child put a regular doll (or a specially designed potty training doll) on the potty.
 - Make diaper changing boring and routine. Make potty time fun and interactive.
- Timing and opportunity:
 - Suggest potty trips several times a day. Instead of asking "do you want to go potty", try just saying "let's go to the potty now." That may meet with less resistance.
 - Try at times when your child is likely to succeed: first thing in the morning, when she has been dry for a while, just after a bath, or just after a meal.
 - Try setting a timer and taking your child to the bathroom at least 6 times a day. Once they are having less than one accident a day, start giving them freedom to decide if they need to go.
 - Most children pee 4 – 8 times a day, and have two or three BM's a day.
- Make potty time a pleasant experience. We can't relax our sphincter muscles when we're stressed!

- Read books, or sing a special song, or give a toy to look at. But nothing TOO distracting.
- Don't force your child to sit if he resists – don't turn it into a battle of wills
- Don't require sitting on the potty for long periods of time (e.g. 5 minutes). Let her leave when she chooses. (Note: some behavioral modification methods have the child sit longer than this.)
- Praise your child for cooperation with the process, and for trying, even if they don't go.
- Logistics:
 - When training a little boy, teach him to urinate sitting down. Standing up while urinating is a more challenging skill to teach later on.
 - It is easier to train in summer when your child can run outdoors, bare foot and bare bottomed.
 - Consider training pants rather than pull-ups so they can feel when they are wet.
 - Underwear or other 'big kid' options (e.g. special toy) may be a good reward for potty training.
- Attitudes and Family Values
 - Your child may want to touch urine or feces. Discourage this without over-reacting or shaming.
 - Your child may want to touch his or her own genitals on the potty. This is a good time to teach proper names for body parts, and to discuss family standards for when and where touching is appropriate. This is normal and natural behavior – don't over-react or shame the child.
 - Use simple and straightforward words for bowel movements (BM, poop), urine (pee), and body parts (e.g. penis, vulva.) Don't use negative words like stinky, dirty, etc.

Motivations for Potty Training:

There will be many times in your child's life where you want them to do something they don't want to do or aren't ready to do. Potty training is one of our first chances to explore this challenge.

First, **consider your motivations.** Why do you want your child to use the potty? The clearer your motivation, and the stronger your motivation, the more time and energy you're likely to be willing to commit to the process.

Then ask yourself: **What are your child's motivations?** Is there anything that makes them reluctant?

Then ask: **What things might motivate your child to use the potty?** Some people use rewards such as a sticker chart. Whatever you choose, keep it simple. Be clear about what behavior you're working on and be consistent about your response. Have an end plan for your reward so it doesn't go on forever.

Don't punish your child for accidents. Punishment can work in the short term, but can shame them, and doesn't motivate them to achieve on their own. Logical consequences are appropriate, as long as they are done without shaming. For example, having them help with clean-up after an accident allows them to see the consequences. Or taking back the big kid underwear, saying 'it looks like you're not ready for this yet... let's go back to diapers for a while', helps them to see what the goal is and what the reward is of accomplishing it.

Sources on Potty Training:

- "13 Toilet Training Tips to Know Before You Start". <http://www.askdrsears.com/topics/parenting/child-rearing-and-development/toilet-training/13-toilet-training-tips-know-you-start>
- Toilet Training, University of Missouri Extension: <http://extension.missouri.edu/publications/DisplayPub.aspx?P=Gh6128>
- Toilet Training from University of Michigan Health System: <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/toilet.htm>
- It's Potty Time by the American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/Its-Potty-Time.aspx>
- Elizabeth Pantley's Quick facts about potty training, Potty Training readiness quiz, and Potty Training. <http://www.pantley.com/files/Pantley%20Booklet%202012%20HR.PDF>
- Potty Training Methods. <http://www.pottytrainingconcepts.com/CTGY/Potty-Training-Methods.html> Note, this is a commercial site with products they want to sell you... no need to buy!

For a longer version of this article, including thoughts on praise, rewards and punishment, go to <http://bellevuetoddlers.wordpress.com/2013/11/04/potty-training/>.