

# Potty Training

(and: how to motivate a child to do something *you* want them to do, that they may or may not care about...)

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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.
  - If a family has practiced elimination communication (aka diaper-free) since birth, potty training may come quite early, because parents are used to watching for their child's cues, and the child is used to going to the toilet as soon as they have an urge to eliminate.
  - For families that diaper, you may have talked to them about these ideas on occasion since infancy. Discussing it more as they near potty training age will help with this stage.
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:** Goal is that during the day the child used the potty, with support from parents, and with only occasional accidents. (At night time, diapers are still used.) The average age to be potty trained is 29 months for girls, and 31 months for boys. 90% or more are independently toileting in the daytime by 36 months. They typically need help with tasks like wiping after a bowel movement 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 the time estimates above are *only averages!* When a child is ready, and how long potty training take depend a great deal on the temperament and developmental skills of the child, and also depend on the temperament and energy of the parent.

## Is your child ready?

It's important not to push a child to do it before they're ready. You may remember taking a basic psychology class at some point, and learning about Erickson's stages of development. His second stage, experienced at 18 months to three years is Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt. If children are given encouragement and not pressured, they gain a sense of independence and competence. If pressured to achieve, and scolded for 'accidents', they suffer doubt and shame.

**Signs of readiness.** Here are some signs that tell you your child may be ready to potty train. 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 skills they have 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 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:

Up front, it's important to talk about roles: *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... as the saying goes, "you can lead a child to the potty but you can't make him pee."

And learning to use the toilet is a hard job! A child has to learn to notice sensations they've been ignoring, and *then* remember to head to the bathroom, and *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 dirty diaper, let your child see you dump the stool into the toilet. Then have your child sit on the potty for a moment and talk about the idea that their pee and 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 (being diaper-less helps children become aware of the fact that urine and stool come from them, and it's also faster to get on the potty which is better for the greater urgency of the need to pee.) 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 (when 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, probably 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 when 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 as your child masters the post-diaper reality.

Whether you do the extended-time option or the condensed 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! Expect to actively monitor potty needs for several months, suggesting that they use it at regular intervals, providing 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 take a doll to the potty. There are specially designed potty training dolls who can pee which help to reinforce learning.
  - 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. (Though some can skip days – know your own child's pattern)
- 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.)
  - Fill a bowl with warm water and a few water toys (like rubber duckies). Set it next to the potty, and encourage your child to play in it while they sit on the potty. The warm water may inspire them to pee. They can play with the toys for as long as they sit on the potty, then when they're ready to get off the potty, you put the toys away.
  - 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.
  - When children are using an adult toilet, they may find it easier to balance sitting backward.
  - 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 or examine 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 exploration is normal and natural behavior, and again, no need to 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 you want them to work hard at something to learn a skill that you think will be valuable to them in the long run, but they aren't particularly interested in learning at this time. How do we help them find their own internal motivation? 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? Is it pressure from a pre-school or daycare that requires it by a certain age? Or is it that you're tired of changing diapers? Or tired of paying for diapers? Or because other families are doing it, and you're feeling peer pressure to keep up? Or because you like to encourage your child toward independence in all areas? 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.

Some parents actually find that they're *not* motivated to potty train. The diaper routine is working for their family's schedule and commitments. This is fine for a while, but at some point (maybe three years old?) it's time to help your child move forward.

Then ask yourself: **What are your child's motivations?** Or maybe they are *not* motivated to potty train!

Why might a child prefer to continue to use diapers rather than using the potty? Some ideas: they're used to eliminating in their diaper – it's comfortable and familiar. They may be in a state of regressing a bit, and not feeling bold enough to be 'a big kid'. They may not like interrupting valuable play time with trips to the potty. They might be frightened of the potty. They might be rebellious toddlers, defying their parents' wishes 'just because.' They might have a desire to be completely in control of when and where they move their bowels. They might also have been constipated at one point, and found that it hurt to have a bowel movement, and not be afraid of repeating that.

Then ask: **What things might motivate your child to use the potty?** Some possible options are punishment or rewards...

### **Punishment?**

It's best not to use punishment. It can work, in that a child who is punished for eliminating in a diaper may well use a potty to avoid that punishment. But it could also shame them and damage their self-esteem. And it also means that they're only using the toilet to avoid punishment – not for any positive reason.

On the other hand, 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.

### **Rewards & Praise?**

Many people use a **sticker chart**, or some other reward system for potty training, and for other times where they want to shape their child's behavior. The general idea is: talk with your child about what you want them to do, tell them that when they do it they will get a reward (like a sticker – choose something cheap and easy to obtain! Don't use candy... The rewards need to be immediate for your child to understand them – as soon as they do the action, they get the reward. Toddlers can't remember things for very long, so waiting a long time for the reinforcement means they no longer remember what it's for!). Then have them be involved in setting up the system: pick out the reward, or make the chart, or whatever.

Make sure they are clear about what the behavior is you are working on, and be consistent about the response. For example: "if you sit on the potty, you get a sticker whether or not you pee there" may be a good first level.

Later on, when they've mastered that step, you ask more of them: they need to pee or poop to get the sticker. You may choose to also have a cumulative goal to work toward, like "once you have filled the chart, then you get a new toy (or big kid underwear!)." It's important to think of these rewards as short-term reinforcement, not an on-going system! Over time you will phase out the stickers completely. Rewards can be a very effective tool for toddlers. However, you don't want to over-use rewards! And you want to make sure the focus is on accomplishing the goal for its own sake, not on just doing something so they get a reward.

### **The downsides to Rewards & Praise**

Critics of rewards say they are a short-term solution to gain compliance with parental requests, not a long-term path to instilling the behaviors, qualities, and values you want your child to attain. And, research has found that kids who are raised on a series of rewards can become more self-centered, materialistic, reward junkies looking for their next fix from parents who can become exhausted by coming up with new rewards.

Research has also shown praise can backfire. If we continually praise our child for being "smart", "beautiful" or "strong", then they may be afraid to take risks – not wanting to do anything that they might not succeed at... fearing that then we will realize they're not so smart or strong or beautiful after all – and thus not lovable. Also, when a child is vigorously praised for every little thing she does, she may not know whether praise is genuine.

Experts recommend that when you want your child to learn a new skill, think about what it is you are really trying to teach and stay focused on that. Work with your child to find *their* motivation for learning this new skill. As they make attempts along the way, give specific praise for their efforts and their commitment, and specific recommendations for how they might improve. The emphasis is more on the process than the product, more on the work they do than on the "talent" they have. When they accomplish a goal that they set, then it is totally appropriate to celebrate that with something (Stickers? M&M's? Big kid underwear? A special toy?) as long as the emphasis is on the value of the accomplishment itself, not on having done whatever they needed to do just to earn the reward.

### **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!

### **Sources on Internal Motivation, Rewards and Praise**

- The Dangers of Sticker Charts For Kids! [www.growparenting.com/pages/blog\\_files/Sticker-Shock.php](http://www.growparenting.com/pages/blog_files/Sticker-Shock.php)
- Beyond Praise: Building Self Esteem Through Encouragement. [www.growparenting.com/pages/blog\\_files/Encouragement.php](http://www.growparenting.com/pages/blog_files/Encouragement.php)
- "Inverse Power of Praise", an excerpt from Nurture Shock by Bronson and Merryman. <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Books/story?id=8433586&singlePage=true>