

# Potty Training Overview

By Janelle Durham, MSW, Bellevue College Parent Education, [www.GoodDaysWithKids.com](http://www.GoodDaysWithKids.com)

Stage	Your child is at this stage if they:	What you can do to help them move to the next stage
<b>Body Awareness</b> ~ 16 months	Recognize words for body parts Recognize words for urine and bowel movement Are aware <b>after</b> : notice that they HAVE peed or pooped	Teach vocabulary, in a matter-of-fact way. Do not use negative language or imply body parts/products are disgusting or bad Help them notice they have eliminated “your diaper is wet/poopy”
<b>Potty Awareness</b> 18 – 26 months	Like to imitate others in a variety of daily activities Understand all things have a proper place they belong in Show interest in the potty and in trying the potty (usually by 26 mo)	Role model what you want them to learn: toileting, handwashing Help them put things like toys and clothes away in the proper place Show them that poop goes in the potty – dump their diaper into potty Get a potty – make it available to explore Pretend that a doll/toy is using the potty, read books about toileting
<b>Practicing</b> 22 – 30 months	Can follow simple instructions Has the motor skills to get onto the potty with help Can help some with getting their clothes off Can hold urine (keep diaper dry) for two hours Poop (has bowel movements) at predictable times Are aware <b>during</b> : they know they ARE peeing or pooping (show signs like grimacing, grunting, squatting, holding groin, tugging diaper – when you see this, comment on it, “it looks like you need to go potty”)	Encourage them to sit on the potty with their clothes on. Sit on potty with their clothes off, no expectation they’ll pee or poop Put them on potty first thing in the morning when they’re likely to pee Look for poop opportunities... when you think they are about to poop, or they are pooping, take them to the potty Go pants-free. If they start to pee, place on potty. Respond to any success with smiles and gentle praise. No scolding if they don’t produce anything in the potty or if they wet/soil diaper!
<b>Potty Training</b> 30 – 48 months	Can take their own clothes off Can sit on the potty independently. Can keep diaper / underwear dry and clean for most of a day, with regular reminders to use the potty (average age 33 mo for girls, 36 mo for boys) Are aware <b>before</b> : they know they need to go and can communicate that to you	Help them learn how to undress, how to use potty, wipe, wash hands  Help them notice their cues and remind them to take action Give reminders - Suggest potty several times a day Respond to accidents calmly –comment non-judgmentally and ask them to help you clean up. No punishment or shaming. Transitioning to underwear can be gradual, or a “big day” approach
<b>Toileting Independently</b> 60% by 36 months 98% by 48 months	Are aware <b>before and know what to do</b> : Know they need to use the potty, can hold pee or poop till they’re there Can take clothes off and put them on independently Can toilet independently in the daytime (may need help wiping after a BM till age 5+) Can stay dry overnight (90% by age 6)	Help them plan ahead – use bathroom before leaving home, know where bathroom is at school, how to ask teacher to use it Teach boys to pee standing up (it’s easiest to sit and aim down till now...) Teach them how to clean their genitals at bath time Explain what symptoms to report (pain on urination, constipation, diarrhea) Teach about consent, private parts

## Potty Training vs. Toilet Learning

The phrase potty training implies that the parent is responsible for the process and that if they “do it right”, it will go well. In reality, the phrase “toilet learning” is better. The parent creates a supportive environment and teaches the child the skills they will need. The child learns to recognize cues that they need to go, learns how to get undressed and use the toilet and decides to do so.

## When Should You Start? How Long Will It Take?

In the table, there are age estimates for when the *average* child reaches each stage, but many things affect when any given child is ready: gender, temperament, the opportunity to observe other children, disabilities, neurodiversity, and more. If you’re wondering when to start, instead of looking at the ages, look at their capabilities, then try ideas to help them move to the next stage. The more ready they are, the faster and easier it will be.

Other factors that affect timing: you may need to start earlier and push through more quickly if you need to get them potty trained to start preschool, or you want / need to reduce how many diapers you are using. On the flip side, you may decide to wait a while to work on potty training if you are managing other family challenges right now – such as when you’re busy at work, about to move, or just had a new baby.

Whenever you start, if you hit a point where it feels like a battle and you and the child are both struggling, take a break for a month and then try again.

## Rewards?

Many people use a reward system. Rewards can be a very effective tool for kids. However, don’t over-use rewards! And make sure the focus is on accomplishing the goal for its own sake, not on just doing something so they get a reward. Follow these guidelines:

- Choose rewards that are cheap and easy to obtain - interesting enough to motivate but not so amazing they’ll be really sad if they don’t earn.
- Make sure they’re clear about exactly what they’re working on and exactly what the reward will be.
- Have a plan for making it harder to earn rewards over time. For example: “if you just sit on the potty, you get a sticker” as the first level. Later, they need to actually pee or poop to get the sticker. Once they’ve mastered that, set a cumulative goal like “if you can keep your diaper dry for a whole week, you can wear the big kid underwear.” Over time you will phase out rewards for using the potty.

## Talking about Private Parts, Consent and Sexuality

To learn about toileting, children need to have the language to talk about it: common words like potty, pee, poop plus medical terms, like penis, vulva and anus. You’ll need to teach them how to clean their “private parts” and explain that these are the parts covered by a swimsuit, and that we keep them covered in public, and others shouldn’t touch them there and they shouldn’t touch others there. The ways you talk about these topics now lays a foundation for your child knowing you’re a resource for information on health, self care, sexuality, and relationships as they get older. When they view you as an “askable parent” you can answer their questions in ways that align with your family’s values. Learn more on [GoodDaysWithKids.com](http://GoodDaysWithKids.com).