



University of Michigan  
Health System

# University of Michigan Health System

## Your Child Development & Behavior Resources

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### Toilet Training

#### How do I know when my child is ready to start toilet training?

Most children are ready to begin the process between 24 to 27 months, but some children will be ready earlier or later than that. If you start earlier, toilet learning will probably just take longer[1]. How to know when to initiate the process? Make sure your child has most of the readiness skills listed below, and that the timing is right for your family.

#### ***Look for these readiness skills:***

- Desire to please (likes to give gifts, enjoys praise)
- Desire for independence (takes pride in new abilities, wants to “do it myself”)
- Imitates adults and older children
- Language skills: able to communicate needs, and understands words about the toileting process
- Motor skills: able to walk to the potty, get on and pull down pants
- Bowel movements occur on a fairly predictable schedule
- Has longer periods with a dry diaper, which means your child's bladder is able to store urine. (Your child wakes up from a nap dry, or stays dry for 2 or more hours)
- Is able to follow simple, one-step verbal instructions
- Shows an interest in imitating other family members or friends in the bathroom
- Through words, facial expressions or a change in activity, your child shows you they know when their bladder is full or when they are about to have a bowel movement
- More on readiness from the American Academy of Pediatrics

#### ***When to start the process:***

- Begin only after your child has shown most of the "readiness skills" listed above.
- Don't feel pressured to begin earlier. If you start too early, it will just take your child longer to train.
- It can be easier to start in the summer, since your child will have on less clothing, and it will be easier for them to undress themselves.
- Don't start at a high stress time, like around the time of a move, or the birth of a new baby.

## **What is the average age for toilet-training?**

The physical maturity and readiness skills needed for successful toilet learning appear at the same time in girls and boys-between 18 and 30 months of age. The average age for girls to be toilet trained is 29 months, and for boys it's 31 months. Keep in mind that these are averages. Ninety-eight percent of kids are trained by 36 months of age.

## **What are some basic principles behind good toilet training?**

- Proceed slowly, and take signals from your child.
- Give your child a feeling of active participation, control and independence.
- Deal with potty training matter-of-factly, using simple and straightforward words for bowel movements (like BM, poop, or stool), urine (like pee) and body parts (like penis, vulva and anus).
- Do not use negative words like “stinky” or “dirty” to talk about poop. After all, the poop came out of your child's body, and they made it. Your child may feel it is still a part of them.
- Never pressure or force your child.
- Praise your child for every step in the right direction and keep your attitude positive.
- *Keeping a positive tone and using lots of praise will work much better than punishing, criticizing or shaming your child.*

## **How long does it usually take for a child to become reliably trained?**

An average time frame for success in toilet training is three to six months. It is common, however, for children to continue to wet at night until they are five years old. By six years of age, most children (90%) do stay dry all night. During the toilet training process, many children refuse to train and even regress. This is usually only a temporary setback that is best handled by continuing encouragement and a "keep trying" attitude. If they become very resistant it is a sign to back off for a while (a few weeks to a couple of months), to avoid a power struggle. It is important not to shame your child or make them feel like a failure.

## **What kind of potty or potty seat should I use and where should I put it?**

Kids need to feel comfortable and in control when starting to use the potty. A training potty allows the child to sit with both feet firmly on the floor. If your child prefers, a child seat can be attached to the adult toilet. Make sure it is stable, and your child has a stool to climb up on, and rest their feet on while sitting. It's a good idea to put the potty in the family room or play room at the beginning, so that it is accessible and not intimidating to your child.

## **What are the steps in the toilet training process?**

- Let your child get used to the potty seat without any other expectations. Allow your child to sit on the seat fully clothed, perhaps looking at a book or playing with a small toy. Let your child see parents and older siblings using the toilet.
- Learn your child's behavioral cues that signal they are about to go (for example, grimacing or stopping activity, often after mealtimes). Talk about the feeling of having to go, and encourage your child to notice it and tell you when they have that feeling. Praise your child for recognizing and sharing this information with you.
- Once your child is comfortable with the potty and maybe even showing interest in using it, have your child sit on the potty right after you take off a wet or poopy diaper. Put the used diaper in the potty to show them what the potty is for. This step may last a few days to a

week.

- Next, lead the child to the potty 1-3 times per day, take off their diaper and encourage them to sit. After meals tends to be a "high-yield" time for sitting. A few minutes should be enough. Your child can look at books or play with a small toy while they sit.
- **Praise, praise, praise** for cooperation with sitting, even if they don't go.
- **Do not force your child to sit** if they resist. This can lead to opposition, which may set back the whole training process.
- Gradually increase the number of sitting times. Guide sitting times towards a routine, such as in the morning, after meals and before bedtime.
- After repeated success, graduating to training pants or underwear is a big incentive for children to keep on using the potty.
- Try giving an underwear party, and sing "Happy Underwear-day to you".
- After the graduation, remember that accidents are common and that they are not a failure but a part of learning.
- Be matter-of-fact about accidents, and do not shame your child.

### What are some tips for trouble-shooting?

- Disposable diapers these days keep kids feeling so dry they are often not aware that they have wet. Consider forgoing the "pull-ups" or other such disposable products and use cloth training pants so your child can tell when they have wet. Make the transition to cloth training pants a proud moment for your child. Celebrate!
- If your child shows no interest in using the potty, set aside the training process and try again in a few weeks.
- Coordinate closely with other caregivers. For example, if you child attends daycare, explain to the provider that you are using a toilet training method based on positive reinforcement. Keep in touch with the caregiver regarding which step of the process you are currently working on.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has advice on preschoolers and public bathrooms.
- Many children refuse to train and may regress at any point in the training process. View this as a temporary setback and avoid shaming or scolding the child. Continue to base your training on encouragement and praise for a job well done. In Spanish: Resistencia a aprender a usar el baño.
- Your child may continue to wet their bed at night. This is normal and resolves on its own in most children by age six.
- If children feel pressured, they may attempt to "control" the situation by withholding stool. This may be more likely in children who are temperamentally "difficult" to begin with. The risk of withholding is constipation, which makes stools harder and more uncomfortable to pass, setting up a vicious cycle. Your pediatrician can help with a behavior, diet and laxative program to break the cycle. Do not give your child laxatives unless your child's doctor has prescribed them.
- If your child is over three years old and shows no interest in toilet training, seek the advice of your pediatrician. If there is no medical cause for the delay, behavioral specialists can help you and your child with successful toilet training.
- There may be different reasons your child won't use the toilet for bowel movements:
  - Constipation
  - Fear of the toilet or being alone in the bathroom



- A way to get extra attention
- A way to be in control
- Not wanting to stop playing to go to the toilet
- If your child asks for a diaper when they have to have a bowel movement, praise them for recognizing their body's signal, and telling you. Suggest that they go into the bathroom to poop in their diaper. Gradually work toward pooping on the toilet.
- Do not remind your child too much or express disappointment with set-backs. This is a kind of pressure, and pressure sets up resistance.

## **What about children with special needs learning to use the potty?**

Here are some tips:

- Toilet training basics for the child with special needs
- Handling resistance to toilet training
- From the AAP: Toilet training children with special needs covers general principles and specific conditions, including visual disabilities, hearing disabilities, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and behavioral and developmental disorders.
- Check out the book [The Potty Journey: Guide to Toilet Training Children with Special Needs, Including Autism and Related Disorders](#), by Judith A. Coucouvanis.

*A no-nonsense, often humorous approach, with strategies that have produced results for parents of children with autism and related disorders nationwide. Promising no "quick fixes," [The Potty Journey](#) systematically guides you through the entire toileting journey, step-by-step, to the ultimate destination—dry pants.*

## **Where can I find more information?**

***Here are some more resources with good basic advice on toilet training:***

- Entrenando a su niño a usar la taza de baño
- The University of Missouri has an excellent guide that includes some information on training children with special needs

## ***Related topics on YourChild:***

- Encopresis (Constipation and Soiling)
- Enuresis (Bedwetting)

## **What are some recommended books and videos?**

### ***Books for parents:***

- [Parents' Book of Toilet Teaching](#), by Joanna Cole.
- [Toilet Learning: The Picture Book Technique for Children and Parents](#), by Alison Mack.
- [Toilet Training in Less than a Day](#), by Nathan Azrin and Richard Foxx
- [Vicki Lansky's Practical Parenting: Toilet Training](#), by Vicki Lansky.
- Toilet training resource list with many more books for parents and children

### ***Books for kids ages 1-3:***

- [Going to the Potty](#), by Fred Rogers.
- [I Want my Potty](#), by Tony Ross.
- [Koko Bears' New Potty](#), by Vicki Lansky.
- [My Potty Chair](#), by Ruth Young.
- [Once Upon a Potty](#), by Alona Frankel.
- [Today I Took My Diapers Off](#), by Martha and Hap Palmer.
- [Everyone Poops](#), by Taro Gomi.

### **Videos for kids:**

- [Once Upon a Potty for Her \(and for Him\)](#).
- [It's Potty Time](#), Duke Family Series.

### **References**

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