

# toilet training



Learning to use the toilet is a big step for toddlers and it can be difficult for some. Some children just seem to train themselves when they are ready, but many need some help from their parents. Parents see toilet training as an important milestone for their children and often become very concerned if it doesn't all go smoothly. For toddlers it is something new to learn. It is one of the steps from being a baby to fitting in with what other people want.

## **When will my child be ready?**

- Most children are not ready to control their poo and wee (bowels and bladder) until they are two years old and some not until they are three. Often boys are later than girls. Control over poo may happen before or after control over wee.
- To be ready to use the toilet or potty, a child needs to be able to:
  - know when he has to do wee or poo before he does it
  - hold on for a short time so that he can get to the potty or the toilet
  - understand that he is meant to use the toilet or potty.
- The first sign that this will be happening soon may be that he tells you when he is doing wee or poo or when he has done it. When he gets praise for telling you, he will soon be ready to move on to the next step of telling you before he does it.

## **Other signs of readiness are:**

- taking an interest in others using the toilet
- pulling at wet and dirty nappies
- telling you that his nappy is wet
- telling you that he doesn't want to wear nappies anymore.

Be prepared to wait until your child is ready. Most toilet training problems can be avoided if you don't start too early. Don't try and set a date by which you want your child to be toilet trained, e.g. before the new baby arrives. This is almost a sure recipe for failure. It works best if there is no pressure and you toilet train your child at the pace he can manage.

## **Getting ready to toilet train**

- Teach your child the words needed for toilet training, such as wet, dry, wee, poo, it's coming. Choose words that you are comfortable with.
- Choose either a potty, or a special toilet seat.
  - A potty can be moved around the house but you may need to take it out with you if your child is not used to using a toilet.

- If you choose to use a special toilet seat, a step or footstool is necessary (a couple of bricks are cheap and easy to step up on), so that your child can get up to the toilet by herself, and can feel safe and relaxed there. She needs to be able to relax to be able to let the wee or poo out.
- If your child will be using the toilet, make sure that she can get to it by herself all the time (door open, light on at night), and that it is set up for her all the time that it is not actually being used by someone else. There will not be time to set it up when she really has to go **NOW**.
- Some toddlers are afraid of being flushed down the toilet because they don't understand yet that they cannot fit down such a small hole. For these children a potty is better or let them learn to flush the toilet with you or by themselves. You may need to flush it when they are safely out of the way.
- Make sure that the toilet area is safe. Keep household cleaners, deodorants and toiletries out of reach.
- If you feel comfortable about it, let your child go with you to the toilet and talk about what you are doing.
- Make sure your child is wearing clothing that is easy to get on and off, and easy to wash, such as trainer pants.

- In the warm weather toilet training is often easier because there is less clothing to remove quickly when 'wee is coming'. You might like to let your child go without pants or nappies for some of the time.
- If you know your child's signals, you can be ready to guide her to the potty or toilet in time.

## Starting toilet training

- It is best not to start toilet training at a time when your child is adjusting to other changes, e.g. when there is a new baby in the family or he is starting childcare.
- If you think your child might be ready to start training, choose a time when you are likely to have the time and patience to give him your full attention. It is better to wait for a few days or even a couple of weeks until you have time, rather than try to rush it.
- Some toddlers can be introduced to toilet training by getting comfortable with the potty first, e.g. leaving the potty where he can see and touch it, or letting teddy sit on the potty 'to do a wee'.
- You might start by noticing when your child is doing a poo in his nappy and tell him, 'I think you're doing a poo'.

- Later watch for signs that he is about to do a wee or poo (such as expressions on his face or stopping very still for a moment) and guide him to the potty or toilet. You might say something like 'Let's see if there's a wee coming'. Eventually he will be able to know and get there himself.
- If your child tells you before he does a wee or poo, thank him for telling you and take him to the toilet or potty straight away. Toddlers cannot 'hold on' for more than a few seconds.
- If he doesn't get there in time at first, give him praise for whatever he has managed, e.g. pulling down his pants, trying to get to the toilet, or sitting on the toilet. Make sure he sees that the praise is for learning a new skill, not something he has to do to please you. For example you might say, 'You did that really well' rather than 'You are a good boy for Daddy'.
- Children should not be made to sit on a potty or toilet for a long period of time. This feels like punishment to the child and does not help toilet training.

Reward successes with cuddles. Say things like 'I am proud of you for trying'.

Be positive and praise small successes. Learning to use the toilet is a new skill and a difficult one.

## Hygiene

- Teach girls to wipe themselves from the front towards the back to avoid the chance of getting any poo (soiling) into the vagina.
- Teach boys to shake their penis after a wee to get rid of any drops. Boys who are not circumcised need to be careful as the foreskin can trap some wee. Some parents have found it helpful in the early stages of toilet training to float a ping pong ball in the toilet for little boys to aim at.
- Most toddlers don't have the skills to wipe their bottom properly, so you will need to do this with them until they can get it right.
- Teach boys and girls to always wash their hands after using the toilet or potty.

## Toilet training troubles

Remember that a toddler is not able to 'hold on' to a wee that is ready to come out. Children are often busy with what they are doing, so they don't always notice that their wee or poo is coming until it starts to come out, or it is too late to run to the toilet. They will have lots of 'accidents' while they are still learning.

Learning to control bowel and bladder can be a big task for your toddler and sometimes there are problems:

- Starting too soon can cause problems. It can be difficult for some parents to wait until their child is really ready because of pressure from others, or hopes that she will be ready by a certain time (e.g. when she turns two or before you go on holiday).
- If the child feels pressured by her parents, learning is harder. She may become afraid of making a mess, and it will be hard for her to get it right. Toilet training works best when there is no pressure for either the parent or the child.
- Children and parents getting into a battle over toilet training doesn't help. Parents cannot 'make' a child let go of wee or poo, and little children don't know how to do it if they are upset and tense.
- Any stress in your child's life, such as a new baby or starting childcare can set her back. Temporary loss of control is common when children are unwell or stressed.
- It is common for toddlers to relax and 'let go' as soon as they stand to walk away from the potty. She may not be fully ready for toilet training if this is happening a lot.

If you find that you are getting angry, even feeling like she is not trying, leave it for a while and try again in a few weeks when things are less tense. Punishment does not help with toilet training.



## Hiding when doing poo

Quite a lot of children start hiding in strange places when doing poo, while they are being toilet trained. Some research has suggested that more than 50% of children do this at least a few times. They may do poo behind the sofa, inside a cupboard, outside in the garden or anywhere that they feel safe. It is not known why they do this (they certainly cannot explain it). They also stop doing it, probably without parents having to do anything much to stop it other than encouraging them to do poo in the toilet.

Check that he still has easy access to the potty or toilet, and that he still has the footstool and special toilet seat in place if using the toilet. It is possible that he needs the potty to be in a more private place.

Punishing toddlers for doing poo in the wrong place will not help.

## Spreading poo around

- Doing poo feels good, and parents show a lot of interest in poo while toddlers are being toilet trained, so it is very normal for toddlers to be interested in their own poo.
- Most normal toddlers get some poo on their hands and spread it around at least a couple of times. This is unpleasant to deal with, but toddlers are not trying to upset their parents or caregivers. Punishment does not help, but you do not have to pretend to be happy about it either.

- There are germs (viruses and bacteria) in poo, but hot water and normal household cleaners are usually enough to clean cots, walls and other furniture.

## **Constipation (over six months)**

Sometimes, usually due to constipation, a small tear (or fissure) can occur at the anus (where the poo comes out). This can cause pain when a child does poo. He might try to hold on and not be willing or able to let the poo come out. Some children become very distressed when the poo is coming out. A warm bath can help relax the muscles (be ready to pick him out of the bath quickly, and ready with praise for letting the poo out even if some goes into the bath water). You may need to see your doctor if the problem is ongoing.

## **Physical problems**

Sometimes a child who has been dry during the day starts to have many wet pants again. This might be a sign of a health problem (such as a urine infection) or some big change in her life. If it lasts more than a couple of days, or if she seems unwell, have her checked by your doctor.

Signs that might mean there is a urinary infection include:

- doing wee very often
- pain when doing wee
- blood in the wee
- wetting frequently during the day after the age of two

- if your child's wee changes in smell
- a child of four years or older still wetting during the day.

## **When a child has never been fully dry**

Any child who still has some wet pants by the age of four years (or even six months earlier) needs to be checked by a doctor. He may be having urine infections or have some abnormality of the bladder or other part of the urinary system - such as urinary reflux (called vesicoureteral reflux).

## **What parents can do**

- It is important for your child to feel she has your support in learning to use the toilet or potty. If it is not working she needs at least a few weeks with all the pressure off. In the meantime spend lots of time making her feel good.
- If you have a new baby, your toddler will see you happily changing the baby's nappies, while inside she is wanting some babying herself. If she asks to wear a nappy or have a bottle again for a while, let her. Once she feels that she is still special to you she will be able to go forward again.
- The first step towards a new beginning is to tell your toddler whenever and wherever she does her poo, that poo is good and doing poo is good for her. This will help her to feel free to tell you when she is doing it, or when she is ready to.

- Sometimes it helps to put the potty in a place chosen by the child.
- If she is relaxed about it you could take her to the toilet or potty at a time when she usually does poo (such as soon after a meal), or soon after a sleep if she wakes up dry. The first praise needs to be just for sitting there for a short time, or for pulling up her pants or whatever she can manage.
- Children learn new tasks in small steps and each step can be praised. Don't wait until they can do the whole task properly before praising them.
- It is not helpful to make toddlers wash their own pants or sheets. This usually makes them feel bad and may make things worse. (Sometimes a counsellor will suggest this as part of a program to help older children with bedwetting problems, but it is not appropriate for younger children).
- The more that you can take the pressure off and help your child to feel that success will be her own doing, the quicker success is likely to come. When children feel tension or anger in their parents, it makes them tense and then it is harder for them to learn new skills.

- Once your child is using the toilet, don't be disappointed if there are a few accidents. A few accidents are to be expected even when children are trained. Try to avoid getting cross because, if your child sees that you are upset or angry, it is likely to set back all your good work! Sometimes toilet training can go backwards when there is a new stress or something is troubling your child. This is normal.

## **Bedwetting**

Many children go on wetting the bed long after they are dry during the day. Don't worry about bedwetting if your child is under five or so, but if bedwetting continues after this, or your child has been dry and starts wetting again, check with the doctor to make sure there is no medical problem. Also check if one child is bedwetting much later than others in the family. Over 10% of children in the younger primary school years still wet their beds and most will grow out of it naturally. Sometimes children continue to wet the bed for other reasons.

## Reminders

- Toilet training is a difficult new skill to learn.
- Start toilet training when your child shows he is ready.
- Don't try to set a date by which you want your child trained - it puts pressure on both of you.
- Give praise for small steps - don't wait for the success of being toilet trained.
- Go at your child's pace, and don't expect too much.
- If there are any setbacks, stop for a few weeks and then start again.
- Don't get into battles over toilet training. It needs to be your child's achievement that he can be proud of.
- Punishment has no place in toilet training.

## For more information contact:

- Local community child health nurse  
See inside your baby's purple 'All About Me' book  
Look in the phone directory under 'Child Health Centres'  
Visit [www.healthywa.wa.gov.au](http://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au)
- Local family doctor
- Ngala Helpline  
8:00am– 8:00pm 7 days a week  
Telephone (08) 9368 9368  
Outside metro area  
Freecall 1800 111 546\*  
[www.ngala.com.au](http://www.ngala.com.au)
- Parenting WA Line  
Freecall 1800 654 432\* (24hr service)  
[www.dlgc.wa.gov.au/parents](http://www.dlgc.wa.gov.au/parents)
- Raising Children Network  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)
- WA Continence Advisory Service  
Telephone (08) 9386 9777  
Outside metro area  
Freecall 1800 814 925\*
- National Continence Helpline  
Freecall 1800 330 066\*

\* Calls made from a mobile may be charged at a timed rate.

This topic may use 'he' and 'she' in turn - please change to suit your child's sex.

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