

Toilet Training: Don't Rush Kids

The term "toilet training" is a terrible phrase since parents never actually "train" their child. Instead, children learn to control their bladder and bowel when they are ready, just like they "learn" to sit up, walk, and talk. Most parents put themselves under pressure to achieve this developmental landmark for a variety of reasons. Some think that the sooner their child achieves bladder and bowel control the better parents they are or the smarter their children are. Others feel pushed into starting the process since they want their child to enter a nursery school or child-care program that requires the children be trained. Still others are told by their parents that they were trained at 12 months (trust me, it was the adults who were trained). And some view toilet training as a skill to be mastered by an age which is set by their social group. Whatever the reason, the first and most important rule is not to rush your child into toilet training. The second rule is that your child must be ready. So instead of calling the process "toilet training," let's refer to it as "toilet learning".

Most toddlers are not ready to control their bladder and bowel until the age of two. This is when most children have both the interest and the ability. If left alone, most children will tell their parents when they are ready for toilet learning. The child will complain when their pants are wet or messy or will watch with interest when other members of the family use the toilet. Since children like to learn new skills, they will sometimes try just by imitating to use the toilet on their own. But you must have a willing "pupil." If there are outside stresses in your child's life-- a recent move, a new sibling, a major illness in the family--it is sometimes best to wait even though the child seems ready.

When showing the child how to use the toilet, parents need to decide on whether to let the child use the adult potty with a trainer seat, or a child-size potty chair. Most experts agree that a potty chair is best for the new trainee. Children like to use their own potty since it belongs to them. Furthermore, by placing it next to your toilet, the child is more likely to imitate you. Certainly your child will feel safer with their feet firmly on the ground, rather than dangling midair from the adult toilet. If the adult toilet is selected, parents should provide a stool so that the child can get onto the toilet themselves, and feel secure when sitting on it. Some children like to use their own potty since it belongs to them, others like to be like their parents and use the adult toilet.

Once the child is ready and has learned where to go, the next step is for the child to be encouraged to tell someone when they are about to have a bowel movement or to urinate. Occasionally, the child will do so after the fact. Turn this into a success by praising the child for recognizing what has happened and thank them for telling you.

When the child tells you they need to go to the bathroom, go with the child to the potty. Keep the child on the potty for only a few minutes at a time. If the child doesn't go, praise them for sitting. Do not sit with them for hours reading books as the child will forget the real reason for the toilet.

Parents should praise any signs of interest, but should avoid asking the child if they have to use the toilet. Asking the question gives the child a chance to say "no" (which most do at this age) and also puts too much emphasis on the process. If you find your child using the potty as an excuse not to go to bed or do something else you have asked them to do, you are placing too much significance on the procedure. Rewarding the child with candy or other prizes should also be avoided. It is extremely important to ignore all failures and reward all successes.

There is no place for pressure, scolding, or punishment in the toilet training process. If there is resistance to toilet learning, it is wise to postpone it for a while. The most important thing for parents to remember is to relax, praise all successes, and ignore any failures. This will only delay the development of voluntary control and possibly lay the groundwork for a real "toilet problem" in the years to come. The best approach is encouragement, patience, and praise. Make the entire process fun. Don't even mention the failures as this will add an unnecessary element of stress, further hindering the progress. Occasionally, a child will ask to go to the potty but nothing will happen. A few minutes later, the child has an accident. This may be a sign that the child is not ready for toilet learning or that there is a power struggle going on between the parent and child. In these cases, handle the accident in a matter of fact manner and say "better luck next time." The most success comes with a relaxed, unpressured attitude.

In our experience, most children are successful with toilet learning by age two and a half, with girls easier taught than boys. The first child in a family usually achieves toilet learning slightly later than subsequent children. Even identical twins can have different behaviors on the potty, more evidence that the child's own developmental timetable runs the show. The biggest mistake parents make is starting too early.

There are a variety of toilet training techniques and conflicting ideas that have been described over the last few years. This only adds to the confusion most modern day parents feel about the process.