



Toilet Learning

Learning to use the toilet is an important developmental skill that involves your child learning to:

- Recognize when they need to go (have a bowel movement or urinate)
- Communicate their need to go
- Control their urge to go

The best time to start is when your child is mentally, emotionally and physically ready. Many children begin to show signs of readiness (cues) sometime after their second birthday, but remember it is your child's readiness, not age that dictates when to start. It is also important to know that children only begin to gain muscle control over their sphincter and bladder between 2 and 2 ½ years of age.

Just like learning to walk, it is okay for a child to start later and take longer to learn this new skill. Quite often children learn to master this skill by first controlling their bowels, then learning daytime bladder control and finally nighttime bladder control (which is often many months later).



Signs of Readiness

Your child may be ready to start learning this new skill when they:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> follow simple one or two step instructions | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> wake up dry from a nap |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> can let you know they need to go, by using words such as pee, poop, potty | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> have bowel movements that occur on a regular schedule |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> show interest in using the potty or wearing underpants | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pull their own pants up and down |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> show interest in imitating you in the bathroom | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> walk to the potty and can sit on and get off of it |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> keep a diaper dry for 2 hours or more | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> dislike being wet or dirty |

When NOT TO Start

If your child is experiencing a stressful time, it may be a good idea to wait 4–6 weeks before beginning toilet learning. Some examples of these times are:

- weaning from the breast or bottle

- birth of a new baby
- changes in routine (changing from crib to bed, starting childcare, moving, returning to work)
- travelling
- when your child is sick (especially with diarrhea)

How to Start

Parents and caregivers play an important role in helping a child learn this new skill. If your child shows the signs of readiness and you've decided it is a good time to start toilet learning, here are some tips that may help:

1. Plan and Prepare

- Make sure you have time to dedicate to toilet learning
- Include others in the process (talk to family or daycare providers so they are aware of your child's progress and can follow the same routine)
- Avoid clothes that are hard to take off, such as overalls and shirts that snap in the crotch (the child should be able to undress themselves)
- Get a potty, such as a separate toddler-sized potty chair or a toddler-sized seat placed on top of a toilet (if using the second option, provide a step stool so your child can get on and off the toilet and can also support their feet while sitting on the toilet)
- Encourage your child to sit on the potty or toilet seat (they may wish to do this first with clothes on or a diaper on, then have them practice pulling down their pants and sitting bare-bottomed)
- Role model going to the bathroom (have them sit on the potty while you use the bathroom)
- Use words to describe the act of using the toilet (pee, poop, potty) and encourage your child to use them to communicate their need to go
- Change diaper soon after it is wet or dirty and if possible change diaper in the bathroom or

help your child drop the discards from the diaper into the toilet and flush them away

- Be prepared with extra diapers and a change of clothes
- You may want to bring the potty with you when travelling in the car
- Boys often learn first by sitting on the toilet to pee, rather than standing



[Toilet Learning | Caring for Kids](#)



[Toilet Learning \(Toilet Training\)](#)

2. Establish a Routine and Practice

- Keep a list of times when your child urinates or has a bowel movement so you can identify a pattern
- Encourage your child to sit on the potty or toilet seat for a few minutes, a few times a day and allow them to get up if they want to
- Times when you may want to encourage your child to sit on the potty:
 - 15 to 30 minutes after meals
 - after waking from a nap with a dry diaper
 - 45 minutes to an hour after drinking lots of liquids
 - at bath time (because their clothes are already off)
 - if there is a specific time of day they typically have a bowel movement
- Encourage your child to sit on the potty or toilet seat if you see clear signs of needing to go to the bathroom, such as crossing legs, grunting, squatting or if they stop playing to go to a different area of the room (if you notice these signs, ask “are you pooping” to help your child learn the words to describe their urge to go)

- At first, you will need to wipe your child after using the potty or toilet (girls should wipe from front to back), but it is important to begin teaching this early along with handwashing, as part of the bathroom routine

3. Praise and Be Patient

- Encourage your child to tell you when they need to go, by using words or walking to the bathroom and praise them every time they tell you, even if nothing happens or they have an accident
- Provide reassurance if there are accidents and do not punish or get angry at them
- Sometimes offering your child small rewards, such as stickers or extra reading time, can be helpful or you can keep a chart to track their successes so they can see their progress
- Once your little one appears to be mastering the use of the potty or toilet seat (for at least 1-2 weeks), let them pick out a few new pairs of big-kid underwear to wear



Training Pants

When your child has used the potty successfully for 1 or 2 weeks, you may want to start using cotton underwear or training pants. Some parents and caregivers find it useful for their child to use disposable training pants before they transition to underwear, when they are away from home or at nighttime (making clean-up easier). Training pants are not used by everyone and are often used for only short periods.

Nighttime Toilet Learning

Nighttime bladder control often comes many months (or longer) after daytime control has been established. Your child can continue to wear a diaper at night, but encourage them to use the potty if they can and to call for help when they feel the urge to go. When they have stayed dry for several nights in a row, you may want to try cotton underpants or training pants at night. You may want to use a plastic mattress protector to protect the bed. If your child is not ready (doesn't wake up with an urge to go, or it is affecting their sleep and daytime toilet routine) put them back in a diaper or training pants and try again in a few weeks.

Common Challenges

During times of stress, even a child that has learned to use the toilet well, may begin to regress (fall back), start having accidents or even refuse to use the toilet. Remember to be patient, give praise and celebrate successes and do not punish or force your child to use the toilet.

If your child resists or seems uninterested in using the toilet, do not force them. This added pressure can slow down toilet learning. Wait a few months and try again when your child shows interest and the other signs of readiness.

If your child is experiencing constipation and painful bowel movements, this may delay the toilet learning process. Wait until you have spoken with a healthcare provider before beginning or resuming toilet learning.

If your child expresses fear about pooping in the potty or toilet, let them poop in the diaper at first so they don't hold it in and develop constipation or a negative association with using the bathroom. Continue to encourage them to communicate when they need to go and to discard the bowel movement in the potty or toilet. Be patient.

If your child has special needs, you may need more guidance from their healthcare provider to decide if your child is ready to begin toilet learning.

Speak To a Healthcare Provider If Your Child:

- is not using the toilet by 4 years of age (independent toilet use is typically encouraged in school settings)
- was using the potty or toilet well for 6 months or more, but now seems to be falling back
- withholds stool, experiences pain when using the potty or has blood in the stool
- develops redness or rash around the vagina, foul smelling or cloudy urine, or suddenly seems to need to go more frequently or urgently

References:

Canadian Pediatric Society
Nemours Kids Health
Sick Kids

November 2024



www.hnhss.ca

519-426-6170 • 905-318-6623

**Health and
Social Services**
Haldimand and Norfolk