



Toilet learning

There is no set age for starting to learn to use the toilet, or to become independent in toileting. Start when your child shows you they are ready. Make toilet learning a positive experience. Your child will learn a new skill and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Why is it now called “toilet learning” instead of “toilet training”?

The term “toilet learning” is used because it is important to follow your child’s cues. It is also important to accept that every child is different and will use the toilet when they are ready.

Some forms of toilet learning are directed by an adult, have a set timeline and don’t always ensure the child is ready for learning before beginning.

Toilet learning is the child learning to:

- Recognize when they are about to urinate or have a bowel movement
- Communicate what is about to happen and ask you for help if necessary
- Control the urge until they get seated on the potty

Do not pressure your child to use the toilet. Rushing the process may make it more difficult and frustrating for both of you. Be patient – your child is learning a new skill.

How do I know my child is ready for toilet learning?

Most children show interest in learning to use the toilet between the ages of 24 and 48 months. However, not everyone will show interest during this age range. For some children, the family may want to consider a more goal-oriented approach.

At a minimum, your child should be comfortable sitting on the toilet for a few minutes and have proper positioning when seated.

Your child may be ready for toilet learning if you answer ‘yes’ to most of the questions below:

- Can your child walk to the toilet or potty?
- Can your child sit by themselves on the toilet or potty?
- Is your child staying dry for several hours?
- Can your child follow simple 1 or 2 step directions like “Let’s go to the toilet!”?
- Can your child communicate to you that they need to use the toilet or potty?
- Can your child pull down their pants without help?

Another sign that your child might be ready to start toilet learning is that they want to be more independent.

However, it is important to keep in mind that children develop and learn new skills at different rates and in unique ways. Because each child is different, a variety of approaches and strategies for toilet learning should be considered.

How can I introduce the idea of toilet learning?

To get started, buy a potty chair and put it in the bathroom next to the toilet, or get a toilet seat that fits on top of the regular seat. A potty chair may be more helpful because your child can have good support for their feet. If you do use the toilet, provide a solid step stool for your child to use to get up onto the toilet. You can explain – “When you are ready, you can use the potty just like Mom or Dad uses the toilet.”

Let your child watch you use the toilet. Invite them to join you in the bathroom. Sit reading a magazine – offer them a favourite book to read. You are teaching them to relax and let nature take its course. Do not rush your child.

At some point, your child will want to sit on the potty or use the toilet just like you. Praise your child for wanting to sit on the toilet.

How can I start toilet learning with my child?

Start by taking a child-centred approach and honouring your child's needs, interests, and abilities. There is no one strategy for toilet learning.

One strategy is to talk about going on the potty and keep the potty handy. You may want to start toilet learning by putting your child on the toilet while fully dressed. Later, try putting your child on the toilet after a diaper change. Next, put your child on the toilet or potty several times a day (for example, after they wake up, after meals, before naps and bedtime) to encourage a toileting routine.

Encourage your child to tell you when they need to use the toilet, and praise them when they do (even if they don't tell you in time to make it to the toilet!). When your child feels the urge to urinate, it will be a very short time before they must go to the bathroom. Over time, your child will be able to control the urge to urinate for a longer period of time.

Praise your child's actions and successes. Focus your praise on the action rather than 'being good'. Use comments such as "Wow - you had a pee on the potty!" rather than "Good boy." Always be gentle and use a kind voice.

Here are some suggestions to help your child start using the toilet:

- Wait for a time when there aren't other big changes in your child's life to get started
- Make sure that everyone who cares for your child is using the same approach to toilet learning. This consistency will help your child learn

- Children may be frightened by a flushing toilet so be sensitive to this. Strange toilets often frighten young children. Pack the potty along until they are comfortable using the bathroom away from home
- Boys usually learn to pee sitting down first. This is okay. They can learn to go standing up later
- Assist with wiping, especially after bowel movements. This may be needed until preschool age. Teach girls to wipe from front to back
- Teach your child to wash their hands after using the toilet or potty with soap and water
- Be prepared to stop the learning process if needed and start up again

Should I keep my child in diapers while they are toilet learning?

Some children learn to control bowel movements and urination at the same time, but controlling urination is harder. Also, some children will be hesitant to have a bowel movement on the toilet when they are first learning.

You may choose to let your toddler go without pants around the easily cleaned parts of the house or yard. This allows your toddler to sit on the potty quickly when they feel the urge to go. If your child won't have bowel movements on the toilet, allow them to go in their diaper to prevent constipation.

Children differ in their willingness to give up diapers. Some children will feel more secure wearing them at night for a long time after they routinely stay dry. Others are so sure of themselves that they refuse to wear them after a week of success.

Try cotton underpants or training pants after a week of successfully using the potty. Make this a special moment.

How can I help my child succeed?

During the first year, toilet learning can be disrupted. If your child refuses to use the potty,

take a break from the training for 1 to 3 months, until your child shows signs of being ready again. Be aware that changes, such as moving to a new house, starting playschool, or experiencing the arrival of a new baby, can result in your toddler wanting to wear diapers again or having accidents. Praise your child's efforts and try not to be upset over accidents. With this kind of acceptance, your child will try to use the toilet again after they adjust to any changes in their life.

Remember that accidents will happen. Carry a spare set of clothes in case your child has an accident.

Talk to your health care provider if your child does not use the toilet during the day by 4 years of age or was using the toilet well for 6 months or more and now seems to be slipping back.

For more information

To learn more about child development, see the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC File #92a Your child and play from birth to 3 years](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92b Your child's development from birth to 3 years](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92c Your child's feelings](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92e Time for bed](#)

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