Toilet Learning

Toilet learning is a major step in your child’s life – and in yours!

Like other skills, when and how your child learns to use the toilet depends on her physical and emotional development, as well as your family’s routines and expectations. In general, children first gain control over defecating and then urinating. Likewise, they will develop daytime control before staying dry at night. Most children are able to control daytime wetting and soiling before age 4. However, boys typically develop overall control later than girls. Just remember – every child develops at her own pace.

This process can be complicated by stress, illness and opposing advice from friends, relatives or your child care provider. Your cultural perspective and attitudes about independence also have a strong influence on your views about toilet learning.

Not your parent’s potty chair

Views about toilet learning have changed dramatically from one generation to the next. For example, the age when toilet learning takes place has risen over several decades. In 1957, around 92 percent of children had completed toilet learning by the age of 18 months. In 1999, only 25 percent of children were out of diapers by that age. Today, only about 10 percent of children are using the toilet by 18 months.

Readiness signs

Before conquering this skill, your child first needs to develop several other skills. She must be able to control her bladder and bowels and sit unassisted on the toilet. She needs to understand what she’s supposed to do and how to let you know she has to go. She needs the ability to undress and dress herself. And she needs to remember to do all these things at the right time!

Signs that your child is ready to begin toilet learning include:

> Stays dry for at least two hours at a time during the day or is dry after naps.
> Has regular and predictable bowel movements.
> Shows through facial expressions that she is about to urinate or have a bowel movement.
> Asks to use the potty chair or toilet.
> Dislikes wet or soiled diapers.

So many mixed signals can worry parents: Am I putting too much pressure on my child? Am I starting too early? Am I irresponsible if my child hasn’t started yet? Experts agree that toilet learning is a biological process that parents have little influence over. If your child picks up on your stress, it can lead to a power struggle, making it an emotionally-charged issue. Sadly, anger about toileting accidents is a principal cause of child abuse.
If your child is developing normally, she should have most of the signs by age 3. If not, bring it to the attention of her primary health care provider.

Aside from her natural motivation to be “grown up” and avoid being wet or soiled, your child must be willing to follow social expectations, want to master the task and be interested in pleasing you. Some children seem to sail right through this process. Most children, however, require firm, consistent support from their parents.

Tips for getting started

> Let your child know you’re confident in her ability. She will master using the toilet and stay dry at night.

> Make “potty breaks” part of your daily routine. Have everyone in the family try going to the bathroom before leaving the house and before bed.

> Resist pressure from other people to “train” your child. She will gain control when her body is ready.

> Ask your child for ideas about how to prevent accidents. This helps her “own” her accomplishment and participate in mastering this new skill.

> Avoid punishing your child for toileting mistakes. Make sure other adults who care for your child are on the same page. If you’re feeling overly frustrated, let another adult step in.

> Dress your child in easy-to-remove clothing. Difficult clasps and buckles or tight-fitting clothing can cause more accidents than necessary.

> Why do you want to start the toilet learning process with your child?

> What readiness signs have you noticed in your child?

> What toilet learning goals do you have for your child and your family?
Accidents Happen

*Using the toilet is just one of many self-care skills your child will learn as he grows. But, as with every other skill, children make many mistakes before mastery and accidents will happen.*

**Toilet learning and development**

Children typically learn to use the toilet around 3½ or 4 years. Mastery eventually occurs when your child gains control over his muscles. In general, he will first develop control over deflecting before he is able to control urinating. Likewise, your child will have control during the daytime followed by nighttime, which is considerably more difficult. Among other things, your child must have a mature enough sleep pattern to wake up when his bladder is full.

**Bedwetting**

Bedwetting is common, affecting approximately 5 million children in the United States. Twenty percent of 5-year-olds and 50 percent of boys aged 5 wet the bed. If one or both parents were bed wetters, it’s more likely their child will also wet the bed. Other common causes include food allergies, bladder infections or unusually small bladders.

**Tips for Bedtime Control**

- Make sure the way to the bathroom is well lit.
- Place a potty chair next to your child’s bed for easy overnight access.
- Wake up your child before you go to bed — or set a timer or alarm clock before the time he usually wets — to have him go to the bathroom.
- Avoid sweet juices and soft drinks in the evening — they can irritate the bladder. Offer a small drink of water instead.
- Keep the room temperature comfortable for your child. If it’s too cold at night, he may avoid getting out of bed to use the bathroom.

**Behavior**

If your child has the maturity and control to use the toilet, but refuses, then toilet learning often becomes a behavioral issue. If you believe this is the case with your child, have clear, firm expectations. Don’t feel guilty about encouraging him to make routine trips to the potty or use the bathroom before heading out the door. And reassure him that you know he is capable of mastering this important skill.

Some children resist going to the bathroom because they are constipated or have painful bowel movements. Small changes like making sure your child’s diet is high in fruits, vegetables and other fiber, so that his digestive system remains active, can have a positive impact on his toilet learning experience.

If your child’s refusal to use the toilet causes him to be embarrassed or is

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Experts agree that bowel and bladder control are primary biological processes and parents have limited influence over when their children will become accomplished toilet users.
interfering with his development in other areas (for instance, if he is unable to attend preschool or kindergarten or play at a friend’s house), discuss your concerns with his primary health care provider.

**Toileting regressions**
Regression happens when a child begins to wet or soil their pants after a period of successful control and it is very common in children this age. It is often due to stress, such as illness, moving homes, a new sibling, parental separation or a change in child care arrangements. If your child has regressed after staying dry for a period of time, try to determine if he is experiencing some type of stress.

**Handling accidents**
Hand-in-hand with your child’s desire to use the toilet like a grown up is learning how to take care of an accident. Give your child clear instructions and teach him what to do. This could include properly cleaning himself, changing his clothing and putting soiled clothes in the laundry basket. If it happens overnight, make sure he knows where to sleep for the rest of the night and what to do with the wet sheets.

There are many books and videos on toilet learning that offer a variety of teaching methods. Most methods require persistence, patience and consistency from parents. Your parent educator can assist you in finding helpful resources and brainstorming ideas to guide your child’s success!

> What have you noticed about your child during toilet learning?

> What have you noticed about yourself?
Using the Bathroom at School

Preschoolers and kindergarteners learn lots of new things at school and using the bathroom is one of them!

When your child begins school, he is faced with many new challenges all at the same time. He will learn new rules, meet new friends and experience new activities. Your child may be happy about being there, but he may also become overwhelmed by everything he’s learning. Stress sometimes causes more bathroom accidents than usual.

Teachers typically have scheduled bathroom breaks for students — before lunch or after recess, for example. These bathroom breaks are often coordinated with other classes or even the entire school.

Every school and classroom is different. Boy restrooms often have urinals, which can be unfamiliar to young students. Some early childhood classrooms have their own bathrooms so that children don’t have to leave the room to go. Other times, students have to walk down the hallway to get to the bathroom, which is usually shared with older and bigger students!

Aside from planned bathroom breaks, most schools require children to ask permission to go to the bathroom. This rule often takes some getting used to and may contribute to bathroom accidents or “holding” the urge to go. Children may also control the need to relieve themselves because they’re not used to sharing restrooms with other people. Holding the urge to go can weaken the bladder or cause constipation.

Bathroom barriers at school
When young students were asked why they don’t use the bathroom they reported that:
> They are afraid of the bathroom.
> The toilet seat is too cold.
> It smells bad.
> They are embarrassed.

Most preschoolers and kindergarteners have accidents at school because they are so busy learning new skills that they don’t realize that they have go. It is a common signal in many schools for students to raise their hands if they need to use the bathroom. Some young children express the need to go by squirming in their seats, but teachers may be so busy that they are unaware a student has to go.

You can help your child avoid accidents at school by:
> Helping him practice ways to tell his teacher that he has to go.
> Dressing him in easy-to-remove clothing or school uniforms (without difficult clasps or buckles).
> Visiting the school with your child before it begins and pointing out where the restrooms are located.
> Letting him practice using the school restroom before the first day of school.

Talk with your child’s teacher to find out about bathroom rules and routines. For example, what is the school’s policy about keeping a fresh change of clothes on hand? Teachers are usually patient and can help parents come up with solutions to make the transition as painless as possible. They are trained to understand the special needs of their young students.

Your parent educator can also help you brainstorm ways to support your child through this journey. It may take some time for your young learner to
get used to the new routines. Most bathroom issues at school clear up within a few weeks. However, if you ever have concerns about your child’s bathroom habits at school, talk to his primary health care provider.

> What are some ways you can help?

> How do you think your child might react to using the bathroom at school?

Take time to think about your child.