



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Learning to Use the Toilet:

A Guide for Parents

Learning to use the toilet is a big step for children. Every child is different. **There is no one “right” way or one perfect age for learning.** Most children learn to control their bladder (pee) and bowels (poop) between the ages of 2 and 4 years.

Learning to use the toilet is a process. Both you and your child have your own jobs to do.

It's the caregiver's responsibility to:

- ▶ Be supportive so your child can learn.
- ▶ Recognize that your child is in charge of their body.
- ▶ Let your child decide whether to use the potty or a diaper/pull-on diaper.
- ▶ Teach words for body parts, urine, and bowel movements (BM).
- ▶ Get what is needed for toileting (child-sized potty, seat, stool).
- ▶ Expect accidents and respond without anger or punishment.
- ▶ Remain calm about whether your child uses the toilet.

It's the child's responsibility to:

- ▶ Learn their body's signals for when they need to use the toilet.
- ▶ Decide whether to use the toilet or a diaper/pull-on diaper.
- ▶ Try using the toilet and decide how long to sit.

Knowing when to start toilet learning is important. **Children need to be both physically and emotionally ready to learn.**

Is my child ready?

Here are signs your child may be ready:

- ▶ Stays dry for two hours or more.
- ▶ Follows simple instructions like “let’s go sit on the potty.”
- ▶ Copies adults’ behavior.
- ▶ Can dress with help.
- ▶ Notices when their diaper is full or wants their diaper changed right away.
- ▶ Hides when pooping in their diaper or goes into another room.
- ▶ Says they want to use the potty or wear “big kid underwear.”

When to wait:

Major changes or stressful times can make learning harder. You may want to wait if your family is going through:

- ▶ Moving to a new home
- ▶ Starting a new childcare
- ▶ Switching from a crib to a bed
- ▶ A new baby or pregnancy
- ▶ Separation or divorce
- ▶ Illness, death, or other family crisis



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Tips for successful toilet learning

- ✓ Consider letting your child watch you go to the bathroom. They learn through your modeling.
- ✓ Use a child-sized potty or a seat that fits onto the toilet, along with a small stool. The stool helps them feel stable and gets them into the best position for a BM. Let them sit whenever they want, dressed or naked. Don't force them to sit.
- ✓ Watch for signs. If your child says they need to go, help them get to the potty right away. They may also have a certain behavior that shows they need to go. They may dance in place or hold their privates.
- ✓ Ask your child frequently throughout the day if they "need to go potty." Use whatever language you like. Be willing to accept "no" for an answer.
- ✓ Keep a routine. Offer the potty at the same time every day. Try after meals or before bed.
- ✓ Make it fun. Let them choose underwear with their favorite characters or put stickers on their potty.
- ✓ Let them be naked. This works best if you have an outdoor space or not many rugs. With no clothes on, children can feel exactly what happens when they go.
- ✓ If you're using a potty, let them watch you dump the waste into the toilet. They can flush if they want. Some children like to see the waste go down and say "bye-bye," but some don't.
- ✓ Use positive language — Say "Let's try the potty" instead of "Don't pee in your pants."
- ✓ Celebrate success!
- ✓ Expect accidents. Be patient. Every child learns at their own pace. Some children may take a few days to learn. Others may take months. Children should never be punished for accidents.
- ✓ Stay calm and clean up accidents together.
- ✓ Once they get the hang of it, try training underpants. They are thickly padded underwear. They let your child feel the wetness if they start to go. You might want to avoid pull-on diapers at that point. They are very absorbent, so your child will not notice when they are wet.
- ✓ Use diapers when you are out of the house until your child can stay dry for 2-3 hours. Find the toilet when you arrive in a new place. When your child is learning, sometimes they don't give you a lot of notice when they have to use the toilet!
- ✓ It takes much longer to learn to stay dry at night. It's ok to use pull-on diapers at night for years.

Remember that toilet learning is a big step, and it takes time. Accidents are a normal part of learning. Most children will learn when they are ready. Being patient, supportive, and calm will help your child feel confident and proud. Every small success is a step closer. Children with special needs may take longer to learn to use the potty.

Have more questions?

Talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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