

Toileting for Toddlers

By Mary Broeckling

Though helping your toddler transition from diapers to underwear can feel like a daunting task, it can in fact be an empowering experience that encourages confidence and independence. Use the terms “toileting” or “toilet learning” instead of “potty training,” so your child can be an active participant in the process. Toilet learning actually begins long before switching to underwear. By 18 months, children are typically able to control their bowel and bladder movements; however, signs of readiness for underwear—an interest in the bathroom, frequent dry diapers at changing time, successful urination in the toilet—may not come until much later. Rather than comparing your child to others, or going by your child’s age, look for these signs.

In the meantime, you can begin the process of toilet learning by changing diapers in the bathroom, to establish it as the place where toileting occurs. Have your child practice pulling down pants, sitting down, eliminating (or not), wiping front to back, pulling up pants, flushing if necessary, and, finally, washing hands. It can be difficult for the male child to know when to sit and when to stand, so have boys sit to start. Remind him to scoot back and push his penis down (at school, we use anatomically correct terms).

Once you introduce underwear, use it in all cases except naptime and nighttime (it takes longer to learn how to control the bladder while sleeping). Refer to these as “sleeping diapers” so that your child understands they are only worn when sleeping. Going back and forth between underwear and diapers or pull-ups is confusing. After 30 consecutive days of waking up from nap dry, you can start to ditch the naptime diaper, and later, sometimes much later, the nighttime diaper.

Accidents will happen. Diapers were created to wick moisture away from the body so the child won’t feel wet or uncomfortable. When a child wears cotton underwear, she begins to feel the sensation of being wet. Through accidents, she can start making connections between the sensation of needing to urinate and feeling wet. Be patient; this takes time and practice. React calmly, and never use guilt or shame. At school I say, “I see that you’re wet. Let’s get some dry clothes to change into.” I also give a gentle reminder that urine goes in the toilet. Set your child up for success: Toddlers don’t have the time or fine-motor coordination to manage things like belts, buckles, buttons, and snaps. Elastic-waist pants are easy to put on and take off independently; avoid overalls and onesies. When there is a urine accident, let your child help as much as possible—allow him to wipe up and go behind him, sanitizing where needed. Encourage him to place soiled clothing in the laundry and choose dry underwear and dry pants.

At the beginning of toilet learning, I suggest reminding your child every 30 minutes. As this proves successful—she is dry and can successfully urinate in the toilet—you can lengthen this time, but never go more than 2 hours without a reminder. Always tell your child it’s time to use the toilet rather than asking (you know as well as I do that you can ask a toddler just about anything and the answer will be “no”). Options work. Say to your child, “It’s time to use the toilet. Would you like to use the toilet downstairs or upstairs? Do you prefer the toilet or the potty seat?” If she chooses a normal-size toilet, consider adding a step stool so her feet aren’t dangling, to provide a sense of comfort and safety.



Establish a consistent toileting schedule so you’re not interrupting your child in the middle of a fun activity. Try toileting when you wake up in the morning, before getting into the car, before lunch, before nap, just after nap, etc. If you use the toilet too during these times, you show your child that there’s a consistent schedule for everyone. Create visual schedules that depict daily activities, including sitting on the toilet. Before outings, say, “We can go to the park (or whatever fun activity you have planned) after you sit on the toilet.” Or consider these phrases: “The clock tells me that it’s your turn to sit on the toilet.” “Would you like to use the toilet now or in 3 minutes?” “Can you do it by yourself or do I need to help your body?” There’s no reason why you can’t cash in on your child’s burgeoning independence.

Rewards and punishments aren’t necessary and often hinder toileting progress. Offering a reward sets a precedent and teaches your child that learning to use the toilet is merely for a reward instead of fostering an intrinsic desire to master toileting.

Don’t be afraid to ask your child’s teacher if any questions come up along the way. Good luck, and happy toileting!

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