



Toilet Learning

You & Your Foster Child

A guide for
foster parents

Learning to use the toilet is an important developmental step. But toilet learning also can be one of the most stressful times during the toddler stage—for the child and for parents.

Sooner or later, all children learn to use the toilet. Although most parents prefer sooner, there is no sense in rushing it. Forcing the issue will only lead to resistance, frustration, and failure. To be successful, children must be physically and mentally ready to learn. If they can't control the muscles associated with the process, they won't be able to make it to the potty. They also must want to use the potty. Readiness depends on the child. Most are ready to learn between ages 2 and 3 years, but some may not be ready until later.

Learning to use the toilet is not easy. It is normal for accidents to happen, even after children begin using the toilet on their own. Never punish or criticize your child for having an accident. That is like punishing a child for falling down while learning to walk.

Patience, understanding, and encouragement will go a lot farther. This is important when helping foster children. Children who have experienced trauma or abuse may have issues with feeling powerless and may exert themselves in areas they feel they can control, such as toilet learning. Be patient and allow toilet learning to unfold at your child's pace.



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Tips for helping your child learn to use the toilet

Don't expect toilet training to be a snap. Here are a few tips that may help.

A few general facts about toilet learning

All children have their own developmental timetable. But, in general:

- Daytime dryness happens first, then nighttime dryness.
- Most toddlers learn to use the toilet between the ages of 2 and 3.
- Most toddlers are dry through the night by age 3.
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Signs that a child is ready to learn to use the toilet

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

- Use words related to using the toilet, such as pee, urine, poo, or bowel movement.
- Understand the difference between wet and dry, clean and dirty.
- Have regular bowel movements.
- Indicate that he or she wants to wear underpants instead of diapers.
- Is able to undress enough to use the toilet.
- Let you know that he or she is about to, is in the process of, or has filled his or her diaper.
- Have a dry diaper for a few hours.

Special considerations before learning begins

Make sure there are no disruptions in your child's life that will make learning to use the toilet more challenging. These include starting a new daycare, a new brother or sister, a recent illness, or a pending move. If there are such issues, you might wait until they pass.

Signs that a child is ready to learn to use the toilet

- Enthusiastically talk up using the potty, but don't put down diapers.
- Tell your child that learning to use the toilet is another step in growing up.
- Read children's books about learning to use the potty with your child.
- Let your child choose between using a potty or the big toilet, and buy a sturdy potty or seat.
- Have the potty around before learning begins so that the child can get used to it.
- Start changing your children's diapers in the bathroom, if possible, to get them used to the idea that the bathroom is where you go.
- Decide on the words you'll use for using the toilet, and use them consistently.
- Try to catch your toddlers in the act of filling their diaper to teach them to be aware of the body's signals.



Use the readiness method of toilet learning

One way to help a child learn to use the toilet is the readiness method, promoted by noted pediatrician and author Dr. T. Berry Brazelton.

- Week One: Buy a potty chair so your children can get used to it. Let your children put it where they want.
- Week Two: Have the child sit on the potty fully clothed while you sit on the toilet. Think of a way to keep the child on the potty a few moments, such as reading a book or giving a treat.
- Week Three: Once a day, ask your children if you can remove the diaper and have them sit on the potty. Say this is what Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, etc. does each day.
- Week Four: Take a soiled diaper to the potty and dump the contents into the toilet. Tell your child that someday this is where he or she can go to the toilet. But don't let the child see you flush. At this point, that may worry some children.

These steps should be taken at the child's pace:

- After getting permission, remove the children's lower clothing and allow them to run around bare bottomed. Then, offer to take them to the potty to try to go. If they resist, do not force them. After trying, re-dress the children.
- Leave your children's pants off for longer and longer periods of time. If your children go on the floor, put a diaper on and say that they can try again tomorrow. Putting pressure on your children at this stage can make learning harder.
- Boys should first be taught to urinate sitting on the toilet. At this stage, they don't have the concentration or the skills to aim well, and they may make a mess. Once they have mastered this, they can be shown how to stand and urinate.
- Night training begins once the above steps have been mastered and your child is staying dry consistently in the day. This may not happen until age 3 or older.

