

# early years are learning years

## Toilet learning for toddlers

**T**oileting (or using the potty) is one of the most basic physical needs of young children. It is also one of the most difficult topics of communication among parents, child care providers, and health care professionals when asked to determine the “right” age a child should be able to successfully and consistently use the toilet.

Most agree that the methods used to potty train can have major emotional effects on children. The entire process—from diapering infants to teaching toddlers and preschoolers about using the toilet—should be a positive one. Often, and for many reasons, toilet learning becomes an unnecessary struggle for control between adults and children. Many families feel pressured to potty train children by age two because of strict child care program policies, the overall inconvenience of diapering, or urging from their pediatricians, early childhood columnists, researchers, other family members, friends, etc.

The fact is that the ability to control bladder and bowel functions is as individual as each child. Some two-year-olds are fully potty trained, and some are not. But those that aren’t should not be made to feel bad about it. There are also many cultural differences in handling potty training, therefore it is important that families and program staff sensitively and effectively communicate regarding these issues.

The purpose of toilet learning is to help children gain control of their body functions. If a child is ready, the process can provide a sense of success and achievement. Here are some helpful hints on determining when young children are ready to begin the potty training process and suggestions on how to positively achieve that task.

### Ready, set, go!

Children are most likely ready to begin toilet learning when they:

- show a preference for clean diapers—a preference adults can encourage by frequent diaper changing and by praising children when they come to you for a change.

- understand when they have eliminated and know the meaning of terms for body functions. For example, “wet,” “pee,” “poop,” and “b.m.” are words commonly used by children to describe bladder and bowel functions.

- indicate that they need to use the potty by squatting, pacing, holding their private parts, or passing gas.

- show that they have some ability to hold it for a short period of time by going off by themselves for privacy when filling the diaper or staying dry during naps.

### Become a cheerleader

- There may be times during the learning process when children accidentally go in their diapers or training pants. This can be very distressing and may cause them to feel sad—especially if they have been successfully using the chair for some period of time. When this happens, change the diaper without admonition—a caring adult can then try to pick up the child’s spirits with encouragement that she is doing well and will get better with practice.

- The most common cause of resistance to potty training occurs when children have been scolded, punished, or lectured too often about using the potty, or have been forced to sit on it for too long. This learning process usually is not fast or consistent. Children need your patience and support.

### Have a plan

- Parents and child care providers should decide together when a child is ready and then negotiate a plan that will be consistent and manageable in both settings. Some questions may include the following:

- 1) Is special equipment needed—step stool, toilet seat deflector, potty chair?
- 2) Are extra clothing items needed?; and
- 3) Are good hygiene practices in place, for example, handwashing for children and staff, a system for handling soiled clothing, and a routine for disinfecting equipment?

- It’s a good idea for families and child care professionals to exchange information on the words for body functions most preferred by each child in order to avoid confusion and provide a consistent message for everyone engaged in the process.

Successfully learning to use the potty is a major accomplishment for young children, and patience and praise from the adults who care for them is an extremely important component to their healthy emotional and physical development. Each child will individually provide signals as to when he or she ready to make that leap. Good communication, appropriate expectations, and a consistent plan on the part of parents and caregivers make it easier to support this process and is the surest route to success.

### Additional Resources

Kendrick, A.B., Kaufman, R., and Messenger, K.P., Eds. 1995. *Healthy Young Children: A Manual for Programs*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. #704/\$15

Greenberg, P. 1991. *Character Development: Encouraging Self-Esteem & Self Discipline in Infants, Toddlers, & Two-Year-Olds*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. #175/\$8



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