

Potty Training

By Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator. gooddayswithkids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

Stages of potty training

The transition from eliminating only in a diaper to being fully potty trained can be divided into several stages. Here is an overview, and *approximate* ages at which a child might reach the stage.

1. **Body awareness:** Learning names for body parts, learning what pee and poop are. Noticing after they have eliminated.
2. **Potty awareness:** Learning what a potty is and what it's for. Many children get interested in the potty around 16 to 24 months. That is a fine time to buy a potty and start talking about it.
3. **Practicing:** Trying out the potty on a regular basis, with occasional success. A child's physical maturity to control elimination, and other readiness skills may appear between 20-30 months.
4. **Potty training:** Once your child has a reasonable chance of success (they can hold urine for a few hours, poop at predictable times each day, and are starting to notice the urge to eliminate *before* they do it) it's a good time to start. Many experts recommend starting by 2½ years (30 months). The age at which children are *mostly* using the potty (with occasional accidents) varies. The majority of girls are by 36 months, most boys by 39 months. (But about 20% may *choose* to poop in their diapers instead of in the potty for longer than this.)
5. **Independent in the Day / Dry Overnight.** A child is independent in the day time when they notice the urge, know to go to the bathroom, can take off clothes and toilet by themselves. (May still need help wiping after a bowel movement.) Overnight bladder control is typically the last step. When a child's diaper is dry most mornings, it's a good time to move away from diapers completely. This may be age 3 for some children, but may be longer for others. By age 6, 90% are dry all night every night. But 10% will have issues with night-time bladder control till age 7 or 8, and 3% till age 12.

All time estimates are *only averages!* When a child is ready, and how long potty training take depend on the temperament and developmental skills of the child *and* the temperament of the parent.

Is your child ready?

Don't push before they're ready. Children who are given gentle encouragement gain independence and competence. Children who are pressured and are scolded for 'accidents' suffer doubt and shame.

Signs of readiness. These signs are a more important indicator than their age!

- Cognitive:
 - Imitating adults and older children
 - Desire for independence – wanting to 'do it myself'
 - Wants to put toys and possessions 'where they belong'
- Communication skills:
 - Able to understand and follow simple directions
 - Can communicate in simple sentences
- Physical / motor skills
 - Able to dress and undress himself with help
 - Can hold their urine (keep diaper dry) for two hours
 - Has bowel movements at regular, predictable times of day

- Potty and Body Awareness Stages – the more they have attained, the easier training will be
 - Has words for urine / bowel movements, knows what they are, where they come from
 - Shows interest in the toilet and what it's used for
 - Is aware *afterwards* that they *have* urinated or has just had a bowel movement
 - Is aware *when* they are "going" – may tell you or may hide in a corner or behind a couch
 - Is aware *before* they go – may tell you they need to go soon, or may be able to answer a question about whether they feel like they need to go.

Parental readiness

- Before starting training, consider: Do you have the time and energy at this time?
 - The American Academy of Pediatrics says parents should ask themselves: will you be able to devote up to 3 months of daily encouragement to your toddler? If not, wait.
 - If you choose a "1 day" method: are you willing to pay very close attention to them for a few weeks, really monitoring them? And are you willing to clean up accidents?
 - Is life fairly stable right now? It may not be a good idea to start at a time the child is experiencing major life transitions like a move, major vacation, or the birth of a sibling.

Steps to Potty Training:

Your role is to create an environment which enables your child to move from eliminating in a diaper to use a potty. *Your child's job* is do the actual work of learning *how* to do this. And learning to use the toilet is a hard job! A child has to learn to notice sensations they've been ignoring, *then* remember to head to the bathroom, *then* manage to get their clothes off, and *then* figure out just how to make all the right muscles work just right, on demand. It takes a while to figure it all out! The potty training books say children usually figure out bowel control earlier, as the urges are not as urgent, and it's easier *not* to push out poop than it is to *hold in* pee. The parents I work with often tell me that their child has bladder control earlier.

Here are some steps to potty use. Once they have some mastery of one step, move on to the next.

1. **Teaching the language** of potty awareness and body awareness.
 - a. Talk about elimination: yours and theirs. Treat it as normal, not disgusting or bad.
 - b. Teach them the names of their body parts.
 - c. Let them join you in the bathroom when you use the toilet. Let them join friends on trips to the potty. Read books or watch vides about toilet use
 - d. Help your child notice when they're peeing or pooping.
2. **Get a potty.** When they show interest: Get a child-size potty or a potty seat to put on an adult toilet. Many children feel safer on a small potty. If they are using an adult toilet put a step stool nearby so they have somewhere to rest their feet when having a bowel movement.
3. Have your child **sit on the potty, with clothes on**, to play or to look at a book.
4. Have your child **sit on the potty with clothes off, with no expectations** that anything will happen. (Praise them if something does!)
5. **Show them where poop should go.** When you change a diaper, let your child see you dump the stool into the toilet. Then sit your child on the potty and talk about the idea that poop could go there.

6. **Watch for opportunities to poop in potty.** Watch your child for signs of concentration or pushing. Take him to a bathroom right away, take off the diaper and let him finish in the toilet. As you're doing this, talk about how it feels when they need to poop, and what they should do when they feel that way.
7. **Go pants free for learning to pee in potty.** Spend time at home when your child is diaper-free, place potty near where they are playing so they don't have to stop what they are doing to use it when they have the urge. Expect to be cleaning up some accidents.
8. Once your child is managing to use the potty, **transition to training pants or underwear for daytime**, making sure to dress your child in clothes they can easily remove when needed, but continue to use diapers or pull-ups at naptime and bedtime.
9. When ready, **phase out bedtime diaper.**

Steps 1 – 5 can happen any time, whenever convenient, with no pressure for anyone.

Steps 6 – 8 can be taken slowly, worked around the convenience of the family's schedule and energy level. Parents offer the potty when it's convenient (they're home with time to spare) and let the child just use diaper to eliminate when the potty is not convenient (they're out and about or in a hurry to get out the door.) This method can take a few months to complete. The older they are when you start, the faster the process will go.

OR you can try the "Big Day" option, often promoted as "One Day to Potty Training," but it may be multiple days. (Unless your child is *really* ready.) There are variations to this, but here are ideas:

- Talk about it in advance. Get big kid underwear or other item which your child can 'earn.'
- Make the day a celebration. Give PLENTY to drink to increase the chance that they'll succeed
- On that day (or days), let your child run around naked, and have them sit on the potty at short but frequent intervals. Or you may encourage them to sit on the potty for extended periods of time (e.g. 15 minutes on, 5 minutes off). If you choose the latter option, make it pleasant by reading together, or watching a movie, or playing with toys on a nearby table.
- Celebrate every successful potty trip. Calmly clean up after accidents.
- Plan to stick close to home with extra changes of clothes for the next few weeks.

Whether you do the extended-time or Big Day option, your goal is to get your child to primarily use the potty not the diaper. But we're not yet getting the child to be totally independent! You'll still help for several months with potty reminders, and with hands-on support with undressing, wiping, dressing, hand-washing and so on.

Expect that there will be **accidents**. Clean them up in a matter-of-fact way, talking about how your child could do things differently in the future. You may want to have your child help with clean up so they see the consequences. But never punish or shame your child when accidents happen!

Expect **set-backs and regression**. There may be times where your child uses the potty for weeks, and you'll think you're done, and then they go on a potty strike for weeks and you'll think potty training will never end. 80% of children have setbacks – which means we should expect them as part of the normal process!

If potty training is *really* not working, stop, and try again in a few months.

Some More Tips:

- Increase interest and appeal:
 - Show potty training videos, or read books. Have your child put a doll on the potty.
 - Make diaper changing boring and routine. Make potty time fun and interactive.
- Timing and opportunity:
 - Suggest potty trips several times a day. (You may set a timer to remind you). Instead of asking “do you want to go potty”, try just saying “we’re going to the potty now.” Most children pee 4 – 8 times a day, and have one to three BM’s a day.
 - Try at times when your child is likely to succeed: first thing in the morning, when they have been dry for a while, just after a bath, or just after a meal.
- Make potty time a pleasant experience. We can’t relax our sphincter muscles when we’re stressed!
 - Read books, sing a special song, or give a toy to look at. But nothing TOO distracting.
 - Don’t force your child to sit if they resist – don’t turn it into a battle of wills
 - Don’t require sitting on potty for long periods (>5 minutes). Let them leave if desired.
 - Praise your child for cooperation with the process, and for trying, even if they don’t go.
- Logistics:
 - When training a little boy, teach him to urinate sitting down. Standing up while urinating is a more challenging skill to teach later on (when they’re taller!).
 - It is easier to train in summer when your child can run outdoors, bare foot and bare bottomed.
 - Consider training pants rather than pull-ups so they can feel when they are wet.
 - Underwear or other ‘big kid’ options (e.g. special toy) may be a good reward.
- Attitudes and Family Values
 - Your child may want to touch urine or feces. Discourage this without over-reacting or shaming.
 - Your child may want to touch their own genitals. This is normal. Don’t over-react. This is a good time to discuss family standards for when and where touching is appropriate.
 - Use simple and straightforward words for bowel movements (BM, poop), urine (pee), and body parts (e.g. penis, vulva.) Don’t use negative words like stinky, dirty, etc.
- Toileting refusal. Some children refuse to use the potty, or get very upset there. Try not to turn potty training into a power struggle which motivates them to rebel. Don’t punish for anything potty related. Let them choose when to go. Consider a short-term reward they get for just sitting on the potty. Or just stop trying for a while and let them choose when to start trying again.
- Toileting refusal for stool only: About 20% of children go through a period where they have bowel control and are making a clear choice about when and where to poop, but it’s not in the potty. (e.g. they ask for a diaper at nap time, go in their room and poop in the diaper, then asked to be changed. (Note, this is different than stool holding, where they’re trying not to poop anywhere anytime – which can lead to health concerns.) For tips:
<http://gooddayswithkids.com/2015/01/22/wont-poop-in-potty/>

Motivations for Potty Training:

There will be many times in your child's life where you want them to do something they don't want to do or aren't ready to do. Potty training is one of our first chances to explore this challenge.

First, **consider your motivations**. Why do you want your child to use the potty? The clearer your motivation, and the stronger your motivation, the more time and energy you're likely to be willing to commit to the process.

Then ask yourself: **What are your child's motivations?** Is there anything that makes them reluctant?

Then ask: **What things might motivate your child to use the potty?** Some people use rewards such as a sticker chart. Whatever you choose, keep it simple. Be clear about what behavior you're working on and be consistent about your response. Have an end plan for your reward so it doesn't go on forever.

Don't punish your child for accidents. Punishment can work in the short term, but can shame them, and doesn't motivate them to achieve on their own. Logical consequences are appropriate, as long as they are done without shaming. For example, having them help with clean-up after an accident allows them to see the consequences. Or taking back the big kid underwear, saying 'it looks like you're not ready for this yet... let's go back to diapers for a while', helps them to see what the goal is and what the reward is of accomplishing it.

Sources on Potty Training:

- Toilet Training, Univ of Missouri Extension: <https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/gh6128>
- Toilet Training from U of Michigan Health System: <https://www.mottchildren.org/posts/your-child/potty-training>
- The research behind the recommendations: <https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2019/1015/p468.html>