Potty Training and Toilet Learning

There is not one “right” way or one “right” age to learn to use the toilet. It can be helpful to think of potty training as a process in which both you and your child have your own “jobs” to do.

It is the parent’s responsibility to create a supportive learning environment. This means that you:

- recognize that your child is in control of her body
- let your child decide whether to use the potty or a diaper/pull-up each day
- teach your child words for body parts, urine, and bowel movements
- offer your child the tools she needs to be successful at toileting (such as a potty/seat, stool)
- expect and handle potty accidents without anger
- avoid punishment as well as too much praise around toilet use. (This can make children feel bad when they aren’t successful.)

It is your child’s responsibility to:

- decide whether to use the toilet or a diaper/pull-up
- learn his body’s signals for when he needs to use the toilet
- try using the toilet. (Let your child decide how long to sit.)

Finding a toilet training method that works for your family is the key. No matter how you do it, remember this is a learning process that takes time, with many accidents along the way. Being patient is the best way you can support your child as she learns.

Keep in mind that children with special needs may take longer to learn to use the potty. They may also need special equipment, and a lot of help and support from you. If you need assistance with your child’s toilet training, talk with your child’s health care provider or community service coordinator.

1 Helping to make toilet training a success

Every child is ready for toilet training at a different time, so it’s important to start the learning process when your child is ready (talk to your HealthySteps Specialist for signs of readiness). If this is the case:

- Decide together what toileting words you want to use. Let the other people who care for your child know what these words are and what they mean. Share how you are approaching toilet training and how they can support your efforts. Consistency across all your child’s settings will help her learn.
• Use a potty chair. Place it in the bathroom where your child can use it, and explain what to do with it. Help your child get used to the chair. Let him sit on it—fully clothed—for a few moments a day. Never force him to sit on it. Try to time it for when he is likely to have a bowel movement.

• Consider letting your child watch you use the bathroom. Your child can learn parts of the toileting routine by helping flush the toilet (if it doesn’t scare your child) and say “bye-bye” to the waste.

• At first, try offering the toilet to your child every 2 hours or so and at routine times during the day: when she first wakes up, before lunch, and after nap time. Always make it a choice to use the potty. Over time, your child will be able to recognize her own needs and tell you when it is time to use the toilet.

• If your child uses the potty chair to urinate or have a bowel movement, let her watch you dump the waste from the chair into the toilet. Let her flush, if she wants—this may help your child feel successful as she sees the waste disappear. (Some children don’t want to flush their waste and it may help to explain where “the poop” goes when you flush.)

• Ask your child during the day if he “needs to go potty,” or whatever language you have chosen. Look for signs that he is about to go. Tell the child, “Would you like to take off your pants and go potty?” (Allow your child to say no.) If your child says yes, let him sit for as long as he wants.

• Consider using training underpants (rather than pull-ups) because they give your child a sensation of wetness that absorbent diaper products do not.

• Notice and appreciate your child’s attempts and successes, but don’t criticize failure.

• Switch to an over-the-toilet-seat chair once your child is consistently using the potty chair.

• Remember that nighttime dryness will happen after your child is toilet-trained during the day. Once your child is consistently staying dry at night, you can introduce training pants at night, too.

• Finally, when your child is successful, take a moment to celebrate! Use praise that focuses on her efforts (keeping in mind there are likely to still be a few accidents here and there): “You used the potty on your own. You felt when you needed to go pee-pee, and you told me. You sat on the potty and went all by yourself. You should feel proud!”

• Until your child is fully trained, consider using diapers when you are away from home. Know the location of bathrooms in public places that you frequent, such as the grocery store, mall, or library. Remember that public bathrooms (especially those with auto-flush toilets) might be scary for young children. Stay close and prepare them for the sounds. Your child may also need you to hold her to keep her stable on larger, adult-sized public toilets.

2 Power struggles over potty training

Toddlers are all about trying to gain some control over their world. This natural and healthy desire for control can lead to power struggles, as children quickly figure out that one way to feel in charge is by refusing to do something they know their parent wants them to do. Often, toilet training is very high on a parent’s list of what they want their child to do—and children pick up on that!

To avoid power struggles over potty training, approach this learning process matter-of-factly and without a lot of emotion. Remember that the more emotional you are (angry or disappointed with accidents, overwhelming joy and clapping with toilet use), the more it shows your child how much it matters to you that he uses the potty. These power struggles can lead to children trying to regain control by withholding urine or bowel movements, which can create physical problems such as constipation.

So if you see power struggles developing over the potty, step back and take the pressure off. Stop talking about the potty for a little while, until your child shows signs of interest again. Avoid lots of clapping and rejoicing when your child uses the potty. Keep things matter-of-fact: “I see that you pooped in the potty. You are taking care of your body. Okay, now we are going to wipe to get you clean again.”