A PARENT'S GUIDE FOR TOILET TRAINING

For parents, toilet training requires time, understanding and patience. For children, maturation, motivation and experience are all needed. Maturation means a child is physically ready, motivation means a child is emotionally ready and wants to cooperate, and experience means the child is given time to practice and make mistakes.

The first and most important rule is not to rush your child into using the toilet. There is no set age at which to begin; the right time depends on your child's individual development — both physical and emotional. The average age for toilet training in the United States is between 2 and 2 1/2 years of age, but many children do not achieve this milestone until 3 or 4 years old. Remember that children younger than 12 months have no bladder or bowel control, and that control will develop gradually after that age.

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IS YOUR CHILD READY?

Toilet teaching will be most successful if you wait until your child shows signs of readiness. Exploring the potty chair may be the first step. Watch for a combination of several of the following traits:

- Indicates dislike of having a wet or soiled diaper.
- Lets you know before or after urinating or having a bowel movement.
- Understands the purpose of a potty and a toilet.
- Begins to demonstrate curiosity about his parents or siblings using the bathroom.
- Can pull his or her pants up and down without help.
- Stays dry for a couple of hours between diaper changes, or wakes up dry after nap.
- Asks to use the toilet or potty chair.
- Is not experiencing any major changes such as moving from crib to bed, giving up bottle or pacifier, welcoming a new baby in the family, etc.
- Orders the environment. When a child starts putting things away it tells us that he or she is beginning to understand that everything has a place including pee and poop.

Encourage your child to tell you when he or she is about to urinate or have a bowel movement. Practice going to the potty first thing in the morning, before bath or before naptime. All of these steps indicate progress and should be recognized as such, even though the child has not completed the whole process. When you feel your child is showing readiness signs and is interested, set a time frame of four to six weeks for serious practice. Keep track and take the child to the potty every two hours or so. If the attempt is successful, wait two hours; if not, try again in a half hour. Keep a child on the potty only a few minutes at a time.

If you see no progress after four or six weeks, stop and wait a few more months. If, during this process, you become very frustrated or angry, or your child strongly resists, stop and wait a few months. Remember, punishment never has a place in toilet teaching! You must remain calm and patient. Accidents are a part of the learning experience and should be handled positively: "That's OK. You can try again next time."

Choose a simple potty chair that sits on the floor. Don't be swayed by gimmicky potty chairs (those that "talk" or play music) — they really don't help the process. Avoid giving your child an electronic device while sitting on the potty. This distracts the child from paying attention to the way muscles feel when you use the toilet. Choose clothing that is simple for your child to get on and off. Use simple words for urination and bowel movements such as pee, potty and poop. If you use unusual words for body parts and functions, they can cause confusion when the child is away from you and other adults don't understand these words.

Let your child go at his or her own pace. Toilet teaching is a gradual process and may take several months to become a habit for the child. Be aware that nighttime dryness may occur much later than daytime dryness, and some children will train for one function at a time — bowel or bladder.

Few phases of raising children are as tricky to negotiate as toilet training and most parents feel some confusion, frustration or lack of confidence when facing this process. You will probably get lots of advice from parents, relatives and friends. By approaching toilet teaching in a positive way, you will help your child achieve this milestone, and achieve it with high self-esteem.

For more information, contact the Family Life Educators at 605-322-3660 or email us at familylifeeducators@avera.org.

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