



TOILET LEARNING AND THE TODDLER

Toileting and the Toddler

One of the hardest transitions for toddlers is moving from diapers to using the toilet. Parents are sometimes in a hurry to have their child toilet trained. As a caregiver, you may feel that you don't have the time to toilet train a child or that the child is not ready. It is very important to remember that both the caregiver and the parent must work together as a team in order to avoid negative emotions and power struggles.

In order for toilet learning to be successful, the child must have the bladder and bowel control to physically be able to use the toilet. The child needs to recognize the feeling of pressure just before urinating or moving her bowels and associate that pressure with the physical action. The child also has to be able to respond to the feeling by stopping her activity, walking to the bathroom, pulling down her pants, and sitting on the toilet.

Signs a Child is Ready to Use the Toilet

- Staying dry for two hours at a time.
- Recognizing when she is urinating or having a bowel movement.
- Being able to pull pants up and down.
- Being able to get on and off the toilet.
- Being able to follow simple directions.
- Wanting to wear underpants and use the toilet.
- Being able to communicate either with words or gestures.
- Pulling her diaper off.
- Telling an adult when wet or soiled.

If a child exhibits these signs, then parents and caregivers may wish to discuss starting toilet

learning. Remember – Toilet learning is very individualized!

How to Approach Toilet Learning

According to Zero to Three Institute, it is important to approach toilet learning matter-of-factly and without a lot of emotion. It is just another developmental skill the child is learning. Showing extreme excitement with successes and anger with accidents lets the child know that this is something you want badly. The child soon realizes that she has control over something you want and refusing to use the toilet is a way for her to show you that she has control in this situation.

Keys to Successful Toilet Learning

- Give the child words to use for urination and defecation that are easy to say and used consistently between home and child care. Avoid words that imply shame, such as stinky, dirty your diaper, poop on yourself.
- Ask parents to dress the child in loose fitting clothing that is easy to pull up and down.
- Help the child make the connection between what she feels and what she needs to do. When the child shows signs that she is about to go, such as standing quietly, squatting or hiding behind a chair, take her into the bathroom and try to get her on the toilet. Use words to describe what is happening. Again, the words must be consistent between home and child care to help the child make the connection between the words and actions.
- Acknowledge fears the child may have regarding the toilet learning process. The loud flushing from the toilet may be frightening. The child may be afraid she will fall into the toilet and be flushed herself. Be sure to take steps to ease those fears by letting the child

leave the room before you flush, letting her practice flushing the toilet over and over to watch the water go down, having a toilet ring so she doesn't feel like she is going to fall in, or having a step stool she can plant her feet on while she is sitting on the toilet.

- When accidents happen, and they will, let the child help with the work involved. She can take off her own wet pants, help clean herself up and put on new pants by herself. Give her ownership.

Things to Consider

- Avoid starting the toilet learning process when there are new changes in child's life, such as a family move, switching from crib to bed, weaning off bottles or pacifiers, expecting a new sibling, or during a major illness or crisis.
- Diapers and pull-ups can sometimes hinder the toilet learning process. The child cannot always feel the wet diaper after urination because of the absorbency of the diaper; therefore it can be hard to associate the pressure of having to urinate with the wet feeling of soiled pants. There are a variety of training pants available that may be used during this process.
- Try to avoid terms such as "big boy/big girl pants." The child may not be ready to be big, especially if there is a baby around and she wants that attention as well. If you suspect the child wants the attention she sees the baby getting on the changing table, try to prolong the time you spend with the child as she uses the toilet. Take extra time washing hands. Give her attention throughout the toileting process.

- Too much praise can also put undo stress on a child. She may feel guilty or bad when she isn't successful.
- Forcing a child to use the toilet can cause intense power struggles. These power struggles can lead to tantrums but can also lead to the child holding her urine or bowel movements, which can cause physical problems like constipation.

To Reward or Not to Reward?

Many people struggle with the question, do I use a reward system or not? On one hand, a reward may help a child grasp the process faster, getting instant gratification for using the toilet. On the other hand, what is it teaching the child in the long run? If a child gets a reward for doing something that is a normal part of development, it could lead to the child feeling she should get a reward for any accomplishment. Rewards can also put undo pressure on the child and cause extreme anxiety. The child may feel like a failure because she had an accident and did not get the reward. When toilet learning isn't made into a big deal, children are more likely to follow their internal milestones.

Difficulties with Toilet Learning

If you feel yourself getting angry over accidents or you see power struggles emerging, it may be a time to step back and put the process on hold. Wait for a few days or a week and try again. Try to remember that toilet learning can be a very complicated process for young children and what works for one child may not work for another. The child must be both physically and emotionally ready for the toilet learning process in order to be successful. You can support the child's effort through your communication, preparedness and patience.

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