

## Toilet Training

This overview will discuss common toilet training techniques for you to use with your child. Toilet training is an important step in helping your child become independent. Before you begin toilet training, you may ask yourself - what is the right age to start? Although many children are ready to be toilet trained somewhere between the ages of 2 and 3, their developmental age and readiness are much more important than their physical age.

Before starting to toilet train your child, there are three things you should ask yourself:

- 1) Does my child have some muscle control?
- 2) Can my child follow simple instructions?
- 3) Can my child sit on the toilet for 3 minutes at a time?

If your answer is 'yes' to all three of these questions, your child is probably developmentally ready for toilet training. Other indications that your child is ready, include showing an interest in using the bathroom, showing discomfort when they have a dirty diaper and being able to get onto the toilet independently or with a little assistance. Toilet training requires a caregiver to have dedicated time and a lot of patience – it is not something that will happen overnight. Children with autism can take months or even years of training to attain bowel control. By focusing on the positives throughout this journey, you will help your child gain independence and a very important life skill.

### Setting You and Your Child up for Success:

- 1) Before introducing your child to the toilet, read children's potty training books to your child. Let them pick a few independent activities they can use in the bathroom, such as favorite toys or books. Provide these while your child is on the toilet and make sitting on the toilet enjoyable. The toilet should be comfortable for your child: choose a potty seat for smaller tooshies; use a small stool to make getting on the toilet easier; use a small table to put a book or activity on, helping them to stay occupied during their time on the toilet.
- 2) Once the bathroom is set up, have your child pick out a reward that they will earn for going potty, such as stickers, or favorite foods. These reinforcers should only be given to a child who successfully urinates or has a bowel movement in the toilet.
- 3) Create visuals to make communication easier when it's time to prompt your child to use the toilet. Children with limited language skills can learn to communicate with pictures. Explain to your child what to do, and what they will earn for following directions.
- 4) Collect data on your child's current toileting habits, noting how often they urinate, and the time of day they are most likely to have a bowel movement. This will help determine how often to take your child to the bathroom, and how to anticipate when they need to go, giving them as many opportunities to be successful as possible.

- 5) Think about whether your child is getting enough fiber in their diet, and significantly increase the amount of liquids they drink in the day – water is best. This will increase the opportunities for them to be successful. The more success they have, the more likely they are to repeat the behavior in the future!
- 6) Get rid of diapers during the day, except for naptime and bedtime. Have several pairs of underwear available as accidents are expected. It's helpful if the child has a selection of fun underwear to choose from, so they can pick when they get dressed in the morning.

Here's how to begin toilet training, step by step.

### Toilet Training Basics:

- 1) Once you have set up the environment and are ready to begin, change your child into underwear.
- 2) Decide on a time interval that you will use consistently to take your child to the bathroom. Start by taking your child every 30 minutes. If your child is having accidents between bathroom trips, decrease the time between visits. If your child is not voiding during every bathroom trip, either increase the amount of liquids they are drinking, or increase the amount of time between bathroom trips.
- 3) Now that your child is in underwear, and the toileting schedule is set - it's time for your first bathroom trip! Tell your child "It's time to go potty," show them the picture of the potty and walk them to the toilet. By using the words "go potty," you are teaching them the right words to associate with using the toilet. If your child does not use words, use a picture or sign language.
- 4) Prompt them to pull down their pants by telling them and providing any physical assistance they may require to be successful. Next, tell them to sit on the potty. It may be easier for boys to start with sitting down until they can differentiate between needing to urinate and having a bowel movement.
- 5) Use a timer to time 3 minutes and say something like "Anna, now try and go potty" every 30 to 40 seconds. You can also have the "first, then" visual present as a way to motivate them, letting them know what they can earn for going potty.
- 6) Do not allow the child to get up until the 3 minutes expires. Give your child their preferred item while sitting on the toilet to reinforce their sitting behavior. Don't give them too much social interaction while they are sitting to avoid dependency on attention while on the toilet.
- 7) Don't provide attention to crying, tantrums, or hitting while on the toilet, or let your child get up. Remind your child what they can earn for going potty.
- 8) If the child urinates or has a bowel movement, give a lot of praise and offer the pre-selected reward.
- 9) If the child does not do anything, you can say "Anna, you can pull your pants up now, we will try again later."

- 10) Make sure you give verbal directions and physical assistance as needed for wiping, flushing and washing hands.
- 11) Ask your child frequently, "Anna, where are we going?" Let them answer "potty." Praise them when they use the right word, picture or gesture.
- 12) It is likely that your child will have accidents during toilet training. Instead of reprimanding your child for having an accident, use it as an opportunity to practice what to do when they have to go potty. If your child has an accident, walk them to the bathroom 3-4 times and tell them, "This is where you go potty." On the last trip, have them sit on the toilet and attempt to void.

### **Bowel Movements:**

It can be harder for a child to understand that they need to use the toilet for bowel movements. Typically, a child will learn how to urinate in the toilet before they will learn how to have a bowel movement in the toilet. So, you should think of a very powerful reward for a child who is able to use the toilet for a bowel movement. Favorite foods, a short outing, access to a favorite toy are all examples of what you can use to reward and reinforce this behavior.

### **Night-time Toilet Training:**

For many families, night time toilet training happens much later than day time toilet training. Often, this is because children who tend to sleep soundly, may not recognize the sensation of having to urinate while asleep and may continue to need diapers for months or even years after they have been successfully toilet trained for the day time. If your child wakes up at night, they may need to use the bathroom, and you can assist them with this to avoid accidents. Night time toilet training often occurs naturally with time, and at some point you may find that your child has consistently dry diapers in the morning when they wake up. When this happens, reward and praise them, and try eliminating night diapers. Occasional accidents at night are to be expected and often these can occur through middle school. However, if your child is unable to control their night time toileting after the age of 9 or 10, you may need to consult with an expert.

### **Challenges with Training:**

Toilet training is one of the most challenging topics that parents discuss with therapists. Here are some of the most common challenges faced by parents and caregivers.

- 1) "My child has a tantrum when I take him to the bathroom." If this is an issue, you may want to consider things that might be causing sensory discomfort, such as lighting, smells or even a very loud flush and reduce or remove the discomfort if possible. Next, be sure that the "rewards" and reinforcers are things that your child really does like and want.
- 2) "My child has frequent accidents." Accidents are bound to happen and are a very normal and expected part of toilet training. If your child is having frequent accidents, there are a few different things you can do to reduce

the number of accidents they are having. First, you can shorten the interval between each toilet trip so that they have more frequent opportunities to succeed. You can also remove their pants and leave them in just their underwear to get them to be more aware of the sensation of needing to go to the bathroom. If these changes do not help, and your child continues to urinate outside of the bathroom, you can use a firm voice to say, "No, you go pee-pee on the potty." Then, walk them to the bathroom and put them on the potty. Next, walk back to where they were and again back to the bathroom 3-5 times to help them understand that they need to use the bathroom to urinate. If accidents continue for weeks in spite of you making adjustments to the schedule and process, you may want to check in with your child's physician or therapist to rule out any medical or physical conditions that may be preventing them from successfully using the toilet.

- 3) "We've been working on toilet training for a while, but we are still not successful." If you have tried to consistently toilet train your child, and have tried to change the schedule and rewards and have also ruled out any underlying medical issues, you might want to get help from your child's BCBA who can create a rigorous toilet training plan and dedicate time to follow through with the plan.
- 4) "My child engages in frequent fecal smearing." To address the issue of fecal smearing, you first need to understand why a child engages in the behavior. Often, it is the attention they receive, or a sensory input need that is fulfilled by smearing. To reduce fecal smearing, you may want to provide clothing with rear zipper access so that they are unable to remove their pants without help. And to help with sensory needs, you can provide them with moist clay, or play dough for touch, sharp smelling foods such as certain types of cheese for smell related needs and paint for visual needs.

### **Consistency and a Plan:**

Successful toilet training is highly dependent on being consistent throughout the day, in every environment and with each caregiver. If someone else in your family, or a nanny, therapist or preschool teacher will be spending a lot of time with your child in the initial stages of toilet training, you should talk with them in advance to explain your approach, to gain support and to ensure consistency in how you work through toilet training with your child. It can be very confusing to a child to have two different people using two different techniques or even words, pictures or gestures. You could also create a written schedule for a caregiver to follow to eliminate any inconsistencies in approach.

We hope you have found these techniques useful. You can find additional information on the [Porchlight website](#). Good luck, and remember, toilet training is a process which takes time and patience and each child will go through their own unique journey as they master this skill.