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Ages & Stages

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It's Potty Time!

"Mommy, I have to pee!" Aside from "I love you, Mommy and Daddy," these may be the sweetest words your toddler can utter. Potty training is a monumental milestone that is on the wish list of every parent who has purchased, changed, or disposed of diapers.

"As parents, we are constantly setting limits and controlling our child's universe to maintain safety and to provide structure in their lives," says Andrew Garner, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. "But even the best of parents cannot make them sleep, eat, or eliminate when we want them to! Successful parenting is all about setting developmentally appropriate expectations and then providing enough positive reinforcement and modeling to motivate and reward them."



So how do you know when your child is ready to be introduced to the potty? How can you make it fun? What happens if there are accidents, and how can you prevent them in the future? Let's take a look at a few pointers to help flush away your frustrations.

Is Little Joe Ready?

Perhaps the better question is, "Are you ready to potty train your child?" Parents are ready when they can devote up to three months of daily encouragement to their toddler. Although there is no set age to begin potty training, most children start to show an interest between the ages of 18 months and 24 months, according to the AAP. Some children are not ready until they are 2 1/2 years old, however, so let your child's reactions be your guide.

"Just like learning to walk, talk, or ride a bike, it will happen when a toddler is ready, and you can't rush it," says Tanya Remer Altmann, M.D., FAAP, editor-in-chief of the book, *The Wonder Years: Helping Your Baby and Young Child Successfully Negotiate The Major Developmental Milestones*. "If your child is scared of the potty or if he can't tell you that he has to go before he goes in his diaper, then you'd be better off waiting to introduce the potty."

Other signs that your child is ready include a desire to use the potty, the ability to help dress and undress himself, the ability to follow simple instructions, and a desire to wear "big kid" underwear. The AAP warns that potty training may be more challenging if there are stressors in the home, including a recent or upcoming move, a new baby, or a death, illness, or other crisis that has a major impact on the family.

It's a Process

"As potty training approaches, it is often useful for diaper changes to no longer be kissy-kissy, tickles to the feet, smiling times," Dr. Garner explains. "Instead, they should be 'robot like' — not angry, not fun — just routine and emotionless. Children will then quickly appreciate that being on the potty gets them a lot more parental attention."

To get the ball rolling, parents will want to employ the following tactics, recommended by the AAP:

- **Decide what words to use** to describe body parts, urine, and bowel movements. It is best to use proper terms that will not offend, confuse, or embarrass anyone.
- **Pick a potty chair.** They are logistically easier for a small child to use because there is no problem getting onto it and a child's feet can reach the floor. If you use a child-size seat attached to an adult toilet make sure you provide a stepstool to support the feet so he can push down during bowel movements.

- **Help your child recognize signs** of needing to use the potty. If he lets you know after the fact, suggest that next time he let you know before wetting or soiling his diaper.
- **Make trips to the potty routine.** If you notice the telltale signs, take your child to the potty. Explain what you want to happen.
- **Encourage the use of training pants** to help your child feel proud, as this is a sign of trust and growing up. Be prepared for accidents. It may take weeks, even months, before toilet training is completed. "If an accident occurs, simply say, 'Oops. We had an accident. That's okay. Let's clean up, and we'll try again later,'" Dr. Altmann explains.

"Finally, the most important way to keep a child interested in being diaper-free is to provide loads of encouragement and positive reinforcement for even small steps in the right direction," Dr. Garner says.

Dr. Altmann agrees wholeheartedly. "Criticizing or scolding your child in the event of an accident or if she seems uninterested usually just backfires. I recommend parents give their children lots of hugs and kisses; stickers; encouraging words; and that they dance around the room when the toddler uses the potty properly. Who wouldn't want to continue to use the potty after that kind of excitement, praise, and open display of pride?!"

Should I Be Worried?

You've done everything to get Little Joe interested in the potty, but nothing is working. "If you have any concerns about your child's development or milestones, including potty training, you should always talk with your pediatrician," Dr. Altmann says. "As a general rule of thumb, children are developmentally ready to use the potty around the age of 3. However, remember that children develop at different rates and that not all children are ready at the age of 3."

You may get frustrated while trying to train your toddler. This is normal, according to Dr. Garner, "but, hopefully, you are able to hide it. If the child gets frustrated, too, you're in big trouble!" As with many new experiences, patience and consistency are keys to success.

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