

Potty training: How to get the job done

Potty training is a major milestone. Get the facts on timing, technique and handling the inevitable accidents.

By Mayo Clinic staff (reprinted)

Potty training is a big step for parents and kids alike. The secret to success? Patience — perhaps more patience than you ever imagined.

Is it time?

Potty training success hinges on physical and emotional readiness, not a specific age. Many kids show interest in potty training by age 2, but others may not be ready until age 2 1/2 or even older. And there's no rush. If you start potty training too early, it may only take longer.

Is your child ready? Ask yourself these questions:

- Does your child seem interested in the potty chair or toilet, or in wearing underwear?
- Can your child understand and follow basic directions?
- Can your child ask simple questions?
- Does your child stay dry for periods of two hours or longer during the day? Does he or she wake from naps dry?
- Does your child have fairly predictable bowel movements?
- Does your child tell you through words, facial expressions or posture when he or she needs to go?
- Is your child uncomfortable in wet or dirty diapers?
- Can your child pull down his or her pants and pull them up again?

If you answered mostly yes, your child may be ready for potty training. If you answered mostly no, you may want to wait awhile — especially if your child has recently or is about to face a major change, such as a move or the arrival of a new sibling. A toddler who opposes potty training today may be open to the idea in a few months.

There's no need to postpone potty training if your child has a chronic medical condition but is able to use the toilet normally. Be aware that the process may take longer, however.

Ready, set, go!

When you decide it's time to begin potty training, set your child up for success. Start by maintaining a sense of humor and a positive attitude. Then:

- **Pull out the equipment.** Place a potty chair in the bathroom. You may want to try a model with a removable top that can be placed directly on the toilet when your child is ready. Encourage your child to sit on the potty chair — with or without a diaper. Make sure your child's feet rest firmly on the floor or a stool. Help your child understand how to talk about the bathroom using simple, correct terms. You might dump the contents of a dirty diaper into the potty chair to show its purpose, or let your child see family members of his or her sex using the toilet.
- **Schedule potty breaks.** If your child is interested, have him or her sit on the potty chair or toilet without a diaper for a few minutes several times a day. For boys, it's often best to master urination sitting down, and then move to standing up after bowel training is complete. Read a potty-training book or give your child a special toy to use while sitting on the potty chair or toilet. Stay with your child when he or she is in the bathroom. Even if your child simply sits there, offer praise for trying — and remind your child that he or she can try again later.
- **Get there — fast!** When you notice signs that your child may need to use the toilet — such as squirming, squatting or holding the genital area — respond quickly. Help your child become familiar with these signals, stop what he or she is doing and head to the toilet. Praise your child for telling you when he or she has to go. Teach girls to wipe carefully from front to back to prevent bringing germs from the rectum to the vagina or bladder. When it's time to flush, let your child do the honors. Make sure your child washes his or her hands after using the toilet.
- **Consider incentives.** Some kids respond to stickers or stars on a chart. For others, trips to the park or extra bedtime stories are effective. Experiment to find what works best for your child. Reinforce your child's effort with verbal praise, such as, "How exciting! You're learning to use the toilet just like big kids do!" Be positive even if a trip to the toilet isn't successful.
- **Be consistent.** Make sure all of your child's caregivers — including baby sitters, child care providers and grandparents — follow your potty-training routine.
- **Ditch the diapers.** After several weeks of successful potty breaks, your child may be ready to trade diapers for training pants or regular underwear. Celebrate this transition. Go on a special "big kid" outing. Call close friends or loved ones and let your child spread the news. Once your child is wearing training pants or regular underwear, avoid overalls, belts, leotards or other items that could hinder quick undressing.
- **Treat mistakes lightly.** Accidents are inevitable — especially when your child is tired or upset. When it happens, stay calm. Simply say, "Uh-oh. There was an accident. Let's change you. Pretty soon you'll remember to use the potty chair every time you have to go."

- **Sleep soundly.** Most children master daytime bladder control within six months of starting potty training. Nighttime control may take months — or years — longer. In the meantime, use disposable training pants or plastic mattress covers when your child sleeps.
- **Know when to call it quits.** If your child resists using the potty chair or toilet or isn't getting the hang of it, take a break. Chances are he or she isn't ready yet. Try it again in a few months.

Accidents will happen

You may breathe easier once your child figures out how to use the toilet, but expect occasional accidents and near misses. Here's help preventing — and handling — wet pants.

- **Slow down.** Remind your child to relax and take it slow. Completely emptying the bladder can help prevent accidents.
- **Offer reminders.** Accidents often happen when kids are absorbed in activities that — for the moment — are more interesting than using the toilet. To fight this phenomenon, suggest regular bathroom trips, such as first thing in the morning, after each meal and snack, and before getting in the car or going to bed. Point out telltale signs of holding it, such as holding the genital area.
- **Stay calm.** Kids don't have accidents to irritate their parents. If your child has an accident, don't add to the embarrassment by scolding or disciplining your child. You may say, "You forgot this time. Next time you'll get to the bathroom sooner."
- **Be prepared.** If your child has frequent accidents, absorbent underwear may be best. Keep a change of underwear and clothing handy, especially at school or in child care.

When to seek help

Occasional accidents are harmless, but they can lead to teasing, embarrassment and alienation from peers. If your potty-trained child reverts or loses ground — especially at age 4 or older — or you're concerned about your child's accidents, contact his or her doctor. Sometimes wetting problems indicate an underlying physical condition, such as a urinary tract infection or an overactive bladder. Prompt treatment can help your child become accident-free.