

Ready or not? When to start toilet training your child



Becoming toilet trained is a milestone that all families hope to reach with their child. For some parents, however, this seems more difficult, particularly if their child has additional needs or disabilities. However, experience shows that most children are able to potty or toilet training if they are taught the skills needed in the right way.

There is no need to wait for your child to appear ready for toilet training. In fact, delaying until your child is showing signs of readiness is not necessary and may be unhelpful. This is the case for children all children, including those with additional needs or disabilities.

Becoming toilet trained is like climbing a ladder. At the bottom of the ladder is a child who wears a nappy all the time and cannot meet any of their own needs. At the top of the ladder is a child who can use the toilet independently, including wiping their own bottom and flushing the toilet. The aim of potty or toilet training is to enable the child to get as high up the ladder as they are able. Most children will achieve this well before they are due to start school. Some children with additional needs and disabilities do not get to the top and may always need some help with some aspects of toileting.

With the right approach and the opportunity to try, most children can learn to use the potty or toilet in the second year of life. Those with additional needs and disabilities may get far higher up the ladder than their families and healthcare professionals ever thought possible. This means that they had unrecognised potential in this area of development. All families should be offered information in the first weeks and months and further support to work on the skills for potty and toilet training, if this is needed, when their child is one to two years old. This will enable every child to reach their full potential.

Many families wait until they think that their child is ready before starting potty or toilet training. However, lots of children do not show clear signs that they are ready.

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Becoming toilet trained is a developmental skill, like learning to talk or walk; yet potty or toilet training is often treated differently to other developmental skills. Children are encouraged to talk, by their families talking to them and responding when their little one makes sounds. Children who are struggling with speech and language are referred to a speech and language therapist. No one suggests waiting until the child appears interested in learning to talk. Similarly, children are encouraged to learn to walk by their families supporting them and holding their hands as they try to find their feet. Children who are struggling to learn to walk are referred for an assessment to identify the cause, and then to a physiotherapist for support. Referral is not delayed until the child appears to want to walk.

Potty or toilet training is usually achieved through the interaction of two processes. The first is the bladder and bowel becoming more mature, which usually develops in the second year of life. There is now evidence that this is helped by the process of learning to use the potty or toilet. The second is your child becoming socially aware and motivated to be like others: such as wanting to wear pants and use the potty or toilet.

Many children, including those with additional needs or disabilities, are slower to develop the social awareness that they should have started to use the potty or toilet and some may not be motivated to do the same as others. For children with additional needs or disabilities this may be made worse by their families and professionals having lower expectations of their abilities in this area.

It is also important to remember that bladder and bowel issues are very common in childhood. If your child is with delayed toilet training is not assessed and supported, an underlying bladder and/or bowel problems, such as constipation, may be missed.

Suddenly presenting your child with pants and a potty or toilet and expecting them to get the idea, sit happily and wee or poo is unrealistic. They will have no idea of what is expected. That is why starting to work early on the skills needed to successfully potty or toilet train is so important.

Using consistent language for toileting, involving the child in nappy changes and doing these in the bathroom, will help raise the child's awareness of wee and poo.

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The potty or toilet (with an appropriate reducer seat and step) should be introduced once a child has developed good sitting balance. For many children this will be when they are just six to eight months old. If they have a problem with sitting balance when they are one to two years old, their health visitor or occupational therapist should be asked to recommend equipment that will help them. Once they can sit safely and comfortably, if the potty is gradually introduced at set times during the day, such as after meals, drinks and sleeps, it will quickly become part of the child's daily routine.

As children are more likely to wee or poo after a meal, drink, or sleep, you may be able to 'catch' a wee or a poo in the potty or toilet. If this happens, you should give them lots of praise, so they learn that this is a good thing to do. Once a routine has been established, and your child has some awareness and understanding about wees and poos and what is expected, and you are catching about half of their wees or poos in the right place, then you can stop using nappies during the day and take your child to the potty or toilet regularly.

Becoming clean and dry should only take a couple of weeks if all the background work, such as potty/toilet sitting, awareness of wee and poos etc has been done previously. If things are not going according to plan, you should ask your child's health visitor or other healthcare professional for help rather than putting your child back into nappies. It is likely that a change of approach is what is needed. Putting your child back into nappies is likely to confuse them and you may lose any progress that you have already made.

Further information

Find more information about child bladder and bowel health in our information library at www.bbuk.org.uk. You can also contact the [Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline](tel:01612144591) (0161 214 4591).

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.
