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When and how to help your child learn to use the potty depends on how ready your child is, as well as your own beliefs and values about toilet training. There is no “right” way or “right” age to learn.

### How do I know my child is ready to potty train?

- Stays dry for at least 2 hours at a time, or after naps
- Recognizes that she is urinating or having a bowel movement
- Developing physical skills critical to potty training—ability to walk, pull pants up and down, and get onto/off the potty (with some help)
- Follows simple instructions
- Copies a parent’s toileting behavior
- **Most important:** Wants to use the potty!

### Where do we start?

It can be helpful to think of potty training as a process in which both you and your child have your own “jobs” to do.



#### Your job

- Recognizing that your child is in control of his body
- Teaching your child words for body parts, urine, and bowel movements
- Offering the tools he needs to be successful (small potty, potty seat, stool, etc.)
- Expecting and handling potty accidents without anger
- Avoiding punishment or too much praise



#### Your child’s job

- Deciding whether to use the toilet or a diaper/pull-up that day
- Learning his body’s signals for when he needs to use the toilet
- Using the toilet at his own speed

#### When NOT to Start Potty Training



- Before, during, or after a family move
- When changing child care arrangements
- During switch from crib to bed
- While you are expecting or have recently had a baby
- During a major illness
- After a death or other family crisis

## What should I avoid when potty training?



### Power Struggles

Toddlers are all about trying to gain some control over their world. They quickly figure out that they can feel in charge by refusing to do something they know their parent wants them to do. For better or worse, learning to use the potty is way up there on most parents' list of what they really, really, really want their children to do—and children quickly pick up on that.



### Excess Emotion

Approach toilet training matter-of-factly and without a lot of emotion. Think of it as just another skill you are helping your child learn. If you show anger or disappointment, or overwhelming joy, it lets your child know this is something you want him to do badly. Refusing to do it becomes a very powerful way for your child to feel in control.



### Forcing

Children may try to regain control over their bodies by withholding urine or bowel movements if you force things. This can create physical problems, like constipation. In this case, it might help to take the pressure off. Stop talking about potty training or doing anything about it for a little while, until your child shows signs of readiness and interest again.

## Should I use rewards while I'm potty training?

Many parents wonder about offering rewards for using the potty—a sticker, an extra sweet, or a little toy every time their child is successful on the toilet. Although these kinds of rewards may encourage progress in the short run, the concern is that for some children, the pressure of “success” in the form of the reward creates anxiety or feelings of failure when they have a (very normal and even expected) potty accident. The other risk is that the use of rewards for toileting can lead children to expect rewards for doing almost anything—finishing a meal, brushing teeth, etc. When parents are matter-of-fact about potty training and don't make a big deal about it, children are more likely to follow their own internal desire to reach this important milestone.

My preschooler just isn't interested. Now what?



Reach out to your child's health care provider. Your child may have physical issues that make potty training more difficult. Or, sit down with one of our child development specialists who can help you approach challenges for your individual child.

Adapted from ZERO TO THREE

