



by Karen Stephens

Ditchin' Diapers: Tips on Beginning Toilet Training

Setting the stage for children's comfort and success in toilet training is important. Three basics are required: a warm, well-lit bathroom, an accessible toilet your child can easily sit upon, and an encouraging adult — that's you!

Some parents provide a child-sized potty-chair. A potty chair takes away the fear of falling off (or in!) a tall toilet and helps kids focus on the chore at hand. Other parents prefer a toddler seat adapter that can be used with a standard household toilet. If you use the bathroom toilet, provide a step stool. Kids can then rest their feet on the step-stool. They feel more secure and have less fear of falling. I've never heard of any market survey on which type toddlers prefer, potty seat or seat adapter, so the choice is really yours.

Whichever way you go, it takes time for kids to be comfortable using the toilet alone. In the beginning stages, they need you nearby to bolster their confidence — and help the time pass should nature be slow in cooperating. Gently encourage your child by coaching them on the specifics of toileting. Be matter-of-fact, clear, and direct. Remember, it's a very natural process common the world over, so don't act embarrassed or ashamed. And don't assume your child understands what's happening; if she did, she wouldn't need training! To be an approachable parent, be as at ease and casual as you can be.

Kids can't go on command, so set a basket of kids' books beside the toilet to help them wait patiently. If you want to provide a little more company, prop a doll nearby on a potty-chair of its own. The children's book, *Once Upon a Potty* by Alona Frankel, has a girl or boy doll with a potty that's sold in a boxed set. Many parents tell me the dolls can be motivating, so embrace the idea if it appeals to your child.

Toilet training begins before your child actually switches from diapers to underwear. Don't just spring the idea of getting rid of the diaper. Prepare them over a few weeks. Change their diaper frequently so they experience a dry feeling as much as possible. When diapering children, tell them why you are doing it. Talk about being wet or having a full diaper and how uncomfortable that can be. By talking about this during diapering you are helping children learn to notice sensations that will motivate them to stay dry. Talk about how pleasant it is to have a clean, dry diaper. Help your child look forward to being a big helper by using the toilet independently. Casually tell him how much it will help out when he uses the potty instead of the diaper.

Before switching from diapers to underwear, help your child practice sitting on the potty so they become used to it. It takes more balance than adults realize! Some children balance best by sitting sideways. Others find it more stable to sit backwards on the toilet so they don't feel like they can fall back into the stool. And by the way, in the beginning, it's easier if boys sit on the toilet to urinate just as girls do. Eventually boys learn to use the toilet standing up, just like papa.

Once developmental readiness signs are in full-bloom and the toileting steps are familiar, make the switch to underwear during the daytime, at home as well as

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child care. No exceptions. Even if you're going shopping, stick with underwear. Going back and forth from diaper to underwear during the day gives kids too many mixed signals. Diapers at night may be required longer until children are able to wake to sensations from a very deep sleep.

Steps for Toilet-Training

1. Dress children in clothing that can be removed QUICKLY. For girls as well as boys, pants and shorts with elastic waistbands are best. Bib overalls and clothing with lots of zippers, buckles, buttons, and snaps slow things up and needlessly contribute to potty accidents. (Dresses should be avoided, too. They make it too hard for girls to see and manage underwear.)
2. Tell your little one you've noticed how grown up he or she is getting. Explain that part of being a "big boy or girl" is learning to use the toilet (or potty) instead of wearing diapers. Be honest and straightforward so kids trust you. Tell them how much their learning to use the toilet will help mom and dad. Everyone has a role in making family life easier; toddlers should not be excluded from that important team feeling of mutual commitment. Learning to toilet is just another self-help skill, (like getting dressed or setting the dinner table), that helps daily life go smoother for everyone. Help your toddler feel pride in contributions she can make; self-toileting makes a big difference.
3. Toilet-training is not a time for modesty. Children learn through imitation, from you as well as older siblings. Take advantage of it and casually leave the bathroom door open so children can see how siblings (with their permission!) and parents handle toileting routines. It takes the mystery out of toilet time and allows kids to observe skills they need to master. Eventually kids will learn that a closed bathroom door is proper toileting etiquette.
4. Watch for signals kids give when they have to potty. Signals may include dancing on tiptoes, holding legs together tightly, pulling at pants or body parts, becoming red in the face, or passing gas (you get the picture). Point these signals out to the child so he or she can recognize them, too. Say, "That feeling means you need to use the potty. Let's go to the bathroom now." Noticing cues means you become trained before your child. It works, so observe closely and follow your intuition when you think a child needs to use the bathroom. Eventually kids tune into the signals themselves, but first they need your help. Kids in the throes of toilet training cannot be ignored. Kids are easily distracted. They need you to help them get into the habit of noticing and focusing.
5. Use natural routines to establish regular potty times. This helps make toileting a habit. Most parents have kids try to go upon waking, before going outside to play, after a snack or meal, before nap, upon getting up from nap, and so on.
6. At the beginning, have your child try to potty about once each hour (some do so every half-hour.) DON'T phrase your request as a question, "Would you like to potty now?" A question leaves the door WIDE open for your toddler to reply, "No!" Simply and casually say, "It's time to use the toilet now." Tell them they only have to try. If they don't have "to go" reassure them they can play again after trying to go.
7. When children sit on the toilet, genuinely congratulate them for their efforts. Don't go overboard with sappy, baby-talk praise. Kids can spot a phony in ten seconds flat. Use encouragement to relax kids. Over-exuberant, cheerleader-type praise rings as pressure and stresses kids. Be supportive without acting desperate. When your child cooperates, say you're proud of her and she can be proud, too. Do this even if your child doesn't eliminate every time he sits on the toilet. Be calm, upbeat, and positive and respectfully thank children for trying their best. Reassure your child that you have faith he'll learn to use the potty soon.

Those are the simple basic steps. There's no earth-shattering secret to it. The Parenting Exchange library column, "Toilet Training: Tips for Motivating Children" will give you ideas for getting children's attention and cooperation.

Children's Book Citation

Once Upon a Potty by Alona Frankel (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.