



by Karen Stephens

Potty Shy: Flush Out Your Toddler's Fears

In keeping with their developmental profile, toddlers (ages 2 to 3 years) are famous for liking specific, predictable routines. They like doing the same thing, in the same way, over and over and over. They listen to the same story book each night for months in a row. And if you lose concentration and alter the story just a bit, toddlers let you hear about it right away: “No, no, no, that’s not how it goes, Daddy! Do it right!”

Knowing what to expect, and when, comforts toddlers. Sameness creates an atmosphere of security and stability that puts them at ease, relaxes them. Because of that characteristic, it’s not surprising that some kids become riled and rattled at the thought of giving up something they’ve depended upon since day one — the good old diaper. Learning to use the toilet, rather than the diaper, is a big upset in the regular routine that toddlers know and love and count on.

On top of that, exerting self-control isn’t one of a toddler’s strengths. It’s an emerging skill that takes many years to master. Regardless, during toilet training we ask kids to control their body’s response to powerful urges that, until now, had always been granted immediate release in the handy dandy diaper. I’m sure our request for toileting self-control seems arbitrary to little ones. They must wonder why one day they could do their duty in the diaper, and we even applauded it, but the next day it had to land in the toilet in order to please mom, dad, and caregivers!

And there’s more to complicate the picture. Toddlers are just learning to identify and cope with feelings. Their vocabulary is limited, and they are just beginning to use language to express themselves clearly and effectively. Put all those factors together and you have a child with a mighty big mountain to scale. No wonder some kids resist toilet training. No wonder they develop fears about it.

And parents have a big challenge, too. Since toddlers have trouble verbalizing, parents and caregivers have to try to guess what’s going on in a child’s mind. That’s no easy feat since most adults can’t remember what it was like to be a two year old. And I don’t know anyone who remembers how they were potty trained. (And yes, I’ve asked. This explains why I’m not invited to parties often!)

Using the toilet doesn’t seem mysterious to you and me, but some kids are riddled with questions and often fears. During toilet training, parents must figure out their child’s thoughts. Observing behavior can give you clues. If your child does have fears, addressing them all — even the small ones that seem insignificant to you and me — can alleviate stress kids experience during toilet training.

When confronted, address questions, concerns, and fears openly and honestly. If your child isn’t comfortable asking questions, you can open the door to conversation by saying something like, “I’m wondering if you are curious about the loud noise the toilet makes.” Broaching that topic can pave the way to understanding. Once kids understand what happens and what is normal to expect, they are more likely to cooperate with toilet training.

Following are fears and concerns that typical children have about toileting. Of course, your child will come up with one I don’t mention, so you’re on your own

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with that one. And a word to the wise: be careful about putting thoughts into your child's head. For instance, don't immediately volunteer that snakes or spiders don't live in plumbing. The thought might never have OCCURRED to your child. If you have good cause to suspect a fear, openly address it to offer reassurance; otherwise keep quiet.

Some kids fear sitting on the toilet because the seat is cold. If so, let them know their skin will warm up the plastic very fast. Some kids are afraid of having the door closed when they potty; if so, by all means, leave the door open. Many kids are afraid to be alone in the bathroom. Reassure them you'll be there as long as they need you. Some parents provide a doll so kids don't get lonely waiting for nature to take its course.

Kids may fear falling into the toilet. They think they might be "swallowed up." Reassure kids that the swirling, tornado-like water doesn't pull people into potties. If their expression is skeptical, tell them if they do begin to slip, you'll always help them up. You can reduce falling fears by showing kids how to brace so they balance on the seat better. A friend's child actually did slip into a toilet at a mall. She was chastised by her indignant toddler, "Good mommies don't let their babies fall into the toilet!" The lesson: be extra alert with a helping hand when kids use a strange toilet.

Children may worry that an animal will come up the toilet to "grab" their bottoms. Using a child-size potty-chair, rather than the regular toilet, can allay those fears. And don't let kids watch movies where reptiles or gremlins come up plumbing fixtures. For kids, seeing is believing; they have a hard time telling fact from fiction.

The sound of the toilet flushing may scare a child. If so, don't make flushing part of toilet-training; it can be taught after fears subside. Some kids are frightened when urine or bowel movements just disappear. They think the house floor is filling up with nasty stuff! Explain that waste goes to sewer pipes in the ground and is carried far away from the house.

Some children experience pain during elimination. If this happens often, it could be due to a bladder infection. Have a doctor check it out. Constipation is another common cause of pain. It's countered best by giving kids lots of liquids, fiber, and exercise. Chronic constipation warrants a doctor visit.

There's one more fear I've heard of. I know it sounds peculiar, but some kids view their urine or bowels as part of their bodies. These are not the kids who like to wave bye-bye after doing their duty. No, they see "A part of me!" flushed down the toilet and get distraught. If a child fears this, simply flush when they are out of earshot. Believe me, after a little more mental development, kids will figure out that poop is poop and it's best to get it into the sewer as fast as possible.

A handy, non-threatening way to help kids discuss questions and fears about toileting is to read them story books about potty training. There are many available at libraries and book stores. I've listed some favorites. (And yes, all the titles are real, but it's okay to chuckle.)

Children's Books about Using the Potty

- *Everyone Poops* by Taro Gomi (La Jolla, CA: Kane/Miller Books, 1993).
- *KoKo Bear's New Potty* by Vicki Lansky (Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers, 1999).
- *Going to the Potty* by Fred Rogers (Minneapolis, MN: Econo-Clad Books, 1997).
- *Annie's Potty* by Judith Caseley (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
- *Once Upon a Potty* by Alona Frankel (One book for boys, one for girls.) (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).
- *Your New Potty* by Joanna Cole (New York: William Morrow, 1990).
- *The Toddler's Potty Book* by Alida Allison (New York: Putnam Publishing, 1992).
- *What Do You Do With A Potty?* by Marianne Borgardt (New York: Golden Books, 1994).
- *I Want My Potty* by Tony Ross (La Jolla, CA: Kane/Miller Books, 1991).
- *On Your Potty!* by Virginia Miller (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1998).
- *Princess and the Potty* by Wendy Lewison (Minneapolis, MN: Econo-Clad Books, 1998).

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*.

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