

TOILET TRAINING: TRIALS AND TRIUMPH

Toileting is a skill that most parents wish for their child to learn. As well, it is an area that most children desire independence in. Every child is different, and there is not one universal toilet training method that will work for all children. This handout will outline some tips and strategies for toilet training your child with special needs.

Before you begin toilet training, have your child examined by your family physician or pediatrician to ensure that your child is in good health and that there are no concerns that may impact toilet training such as constipation or urinary tract infections.

IS YOUR CHILD READY FOR TOILET TRAINING?

Just as each child is unique in the method of toilet training that will be successful for them, each child also has their own timetable about when they will be ready for toilet training, and how long toilet training will take. In determining if toilet training is appropriate, developmental age (determined by examining a child's skill level) is more important than chronological age (based on actual birthdate).

Children with developmental delays may therefore not be ready for toilet training until an older chronological age than their typically-developing peers. While you may experience pressures from well-meaning friends, colleagues and family to toilet train your child at a particular age, try to resist this pressure, as any anxieties you have about toilet training will only make your child anxious about the process and perhaps resistant to your efforts.

The following are some signs that your child may be ready to begin toilet training:

- Your child acts differently or seems to notice when their diaper or clothing is wet or soiled.
- Your child demonstrates an awareness of when they need to urinate or have a bowel movement—this may be communicated through language or gestures.
- Your child shows an interest or change in behaviour in response to seeing other people involved in activities or with objects related to toileting.
- Your child has bowel movements on a fairly predictable schedule.
- Your child's diaper remains dry for an hour or more, indicating that your child's bladder is able to hold urine.
- Your child is able to understand simple verbal instructions or picture cues.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Communication

Communication is very important during toilet training. Establish a common vocabulary by teaching your child words for relevant body parts, body functions and excretions, and toileting equipment that you will use during toilet training.

'The Potty'

Buy an appropriately sized potty or ring reducer for your child. Your child should be comfortable on their potty or the toilet, with their back supported and arms relaxed. Also, your child's feet should be supported with their knees slightly higher than their hips. It may be necessary to use a step stool to achieve this.

Being properly positioned on their potty or on the toilet will help decrease any fears of falling that your child may have, and frees their abdominal muscles to assist in having a bowel movement.

So that your child can become comfortable with their potty prior to the beginning of toilet training, allow them to first sit on it fully clothed. Gradually have them practice sitting on the potty with more clothing removed, until they are finally able to sit on the potty with their pants and underwear down.

Look for Patterns and Develop a Schedule

Keep a diary of when and how much your child eats and drinks, and when they need to eliminate. This will provide you with information about your child's toileting pattern and will allow you to develop a schedule of when you should put them on the potty. Schedule potty times for 10-15 minutes prior to your child's typical elimination time.

Bathroom Set-up

Ensure that when possible your child is able to reach and operate the bathroom doorknob, light switches, as well as the taps to the sink. You may need to put a step stool in front of the sink. Have toilet paper or wipes, soap, and towels for hand-drying within reach of the toilet and sink, respectively.

Dressing for Success

Dress your child in clothing without complicated fasteners that is easy for them to remove, for example, loosely fitted elastic waist pants or skirts and shirts that are hip-length or shorter.

Diet

A high fibre diet can help to maintain regular bowel movements. It is important to not only provide high fibre foods for you child, but to model eating them yourself, as children learn best by example. Also, although it may be tempting to decrease the amount of fluid your child drinks in order to minimize accidents, it is important to your child's health and the success of your toilet training to keep your child well hydrated.

Safety

Considering purchasing a lid lock for the toilet.

GETTING STARTED

Modelling Toileting

As in diet, it is beneficial for children to have a model on which to base their toileting behaviours. Allow your child to see other members of the family performing toileting tasks (Some families implement an 'open door policy' during toilet training). This way, your child can observe the various steps necessary for toileting. Also, for children who are fearful of toileting, observing others may help to normalize the experience. For children with mobility problems, you will need to assist them to get into the bathroom so that they can observe others toileting.

Teach a Routine

Some children thrive on routine; therefore, it may be a good idea to teach toileting as a string of tasks, rather than just as sitting on the toilet. A visual schedule might be used for this purpose.

The routine should involve such tasks as entering the bathroom, pulling down pants, sitting on the toilet, eliminating, wiping, flushing, pulling up pants, and washing and drying hands.

Struggling to Succeed

It is possible that you've tried every strategy that you've heard of, and your child is still not showing any gains in toileting abilities. This could be for any number of reasons. For example, perhaps your child is simply not developmentally ready for toilet training. In this case, it may be best to stop toileting training efforts for the time-being, and recommence when your child is more ready.

Sensory issues may also be impacting on your child's toilet training success. For example, perhaps your child is afraid of the sound of the toilet flushing, doesn't like the texture or temperature of the toilet seat, or can't tolerate the feel of the toilet paper. Does your bathroom have an echo that frightens your child? Is your child afraid of water? These are only a few examples of issues that may impact on different steps within the toileting process.

Once you are able to identify the factors affecting toileting, you can act to make changes or to take steps to address your child's fears. Finally, keep in mind that it is very common to encounter set-backs and resistance during the toilet training process. Remember that troubles encountered during toilet training are not a reflection of your skills as a parent or your child's intelligence. With patience, perseverance, and trouble-shooting skills, eventually you and your child will experience toilet training success.

Praise and Rewards

Praise and rewards are very important parts of the toilet training process. They make toilet training fun and motivating for your child. You can praise your child's toilet training efforts in a number of ways: clapping, cheering, hugs and smiles after toilet training attempts, and talking loudly and proudly about your child's toilet training efforts to important people in your child's life, such as family and friends. You can also reward you child with stickers, small candies, or other items that are motivating for your child.

When using rewards, the following are a few guidelines to keep in mind:

- At first, reward small steps such as sitting on the toilet.
- Always reward immediately after the desired behaviour.
- Over time, phase out treats, but continue to praise your child.

Conversely, punishment, anger, or shaming your child will only serve to make your child fear and/or resist toilet training. Even though there will be frustrations along the way, at no point is it beneficial to express these feelings to your child.

Consistency is Key

To avoid confusing your child and interfering with the success of your toilet training efforts, it is important to always remain consistent. As much as possible, you should try to use the same equipment, routine, prompts and rewards during all toileting attempts. In order to maintain this consistency, it will be necessary to share your plans and strategies with other individuals who will be involved in toileting your child, such as other caregivers, family members, and daycare/school staff.

Resources

- The website www.autismspeaks.ca has some resources regarding toileting for children with Autism.
- The book Toilet Training for Individuals with Autism or Other Developmental Issues: Second Edition Paperback – October 15, 2007 by [Maria Wheeler](#) (Author) is also a great resource.

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