



A University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service

Getting Ready for Toilet Training

A Parent and Caregiver Resource

Parent Home Training Program

Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Division

How Can I Tell When My Child Will be Ready for Toilet Training?

While there is no foolproof way of knowing when a child is ready to begin toilet training, available research has given us some general guidelines to follow to determine if a child is ready for toilet training. Completing the following checklist is a great starting point to decide whether your child is ready for toilet training or needs some help learning a few skills first.

1. Does your child have the ability to pull most pants up and down? Yes / No
2. Does your child have the ability to walk from room to room and sit upright for 5-10 minutes? Yes / No
3. Does your child have the ability to follow simple instructions? Yes / No
4. Does your child sometimes stay dry for at least two hours at a time? Yes / No
5. Does your child have a regular bowel movement schedule? Yes / No
6. Does your child demonstrate/communicate discomfort with dirty diapers? Yes / No
7. Does your child ever communicate need to use the toilet or that they are voiding? Yes / No

While there are no hard and fast rules how to use the information from the checklist, if your answer is YES to most of these questions (no more than 2-3 NO answers), then your child is likely ready for toilet training.



What Can I Do to Help My Child Get Ready for Toilet Training?

Before you actually start toilet training or if you are not sure if your child is ready for toilet training, there are a few things that you can do.

- Begin changing your child's diapers in the bathroom. This can help your child associate the process with the bathroom. This also allows you to start working on a few new steps that children will need to learn. You can have children pull their own pants down/up, empty contents of the diaper into the toilet, flush the toilet (if they are not bothered by the noise), and/or have them wash their hands after the diaper routine.
- When you begin to talk about toileting, read books about toileting, watch videos about toileting, and have any older siblings model toileting behaviors. Many children with ASD learn best when there is visual information that goes with any verbal information.

Preparing For Toilet Training

- **Create a Visual Task List.** We recommend that you prepare a visual task list for the bathroom. A visual task list pictorially depicts all the steps necessary for the toilet training process and presents them in sequence. You can use real pictures, line drawn pictures, or cartoon drawings. They can be shown horizontally or vertically, just as long as the visual support communicates steps and expectations for using the bathroom. Often included in the task list are pulling down pants, sitting on the toilet, voiding in the toilet, wiping, flushing, pulling up pants, and washing hands.
- **Gather Data.** Many people find it helpful to record information about how often your child is voiding before you beginning toilet training. It does not have to be complicated, but it can be very helpful for planning to know how often voiding is happening during the day, how much time there is between dirty diapers/pull-ups, and what time of day bowel movements generally occur.
- **Set Up the Bathroom.** Some families select one bathroom in the house where toilet training will take place. Look around for ways to make the bathroom a place that is not over-stimulating. If it is possible, remove extra items that might be near the toilet area such as cleaning materials, bath toys, trash cans, scales, or clothing hampers so that there will be fewer distractions when the child is in this space. Also, consider whether the potty chair or toilet has good physical support for the child's body. If you are not using a potty chair, you may need to add foot support (like a small bench) and/or a potty seat with side rails so that your child feels supported on all sides. Children whose bodies are well-supported often find it easier to relax and prepare to void.
- **Think about Reinforcement.** Learning a new complex skill is hard work for a child and we recommend developing a plan to reward for their attempts and successes. Think about something that is meaningful to the child such as earning stickers of their favorite superhero, playing a favorite song or movie, getting a preferred snack, or a fun activity like bubbles.

Some Useful Resources on Toilet Training

Toilet Training for Individuals with Autism or Other Developmental Issues by Maria Wheeler

The Potty Journey: Guide to Toilet Training Children with Special Needs, Including Autism and Related Disorders

by Judith A. Coucouvanis

Ready, Set, Potty!: Toilet Training for Children with Autism and Other Developmental Disorders by Brenda Batts

potty



pull pants down



go to bathroom



wipe



pull pants up



flush



go to sink



What is the Best Method for Teaching Toileting Skills?

There are a number of great toilet training programs available for children with ASD but there is no one right method for all children. Most successful methods suggest some combination of the same components. Most families find that they do not need to implement all the following strategies, but select a few that best fit their child.

- **Schedule Bathroom Trips.** Just about every teaching method available encourages developing a plan for when you are going to practice. At the start of training, many children have trouble initiating trips on their own and often will not recognize that they need to go to the bathroom even when asked. Use any data you collected to develop a schedule. For example, if your child was dry for around 75 minutes after a wet diaper, you may wish to plan a trip roughly every 60 minutes. If possible, try to schedule these trips around natural transitions in your child's day or put them on a daily schedule.
- **Set a Consistent Toileting Routine.** Many children with ASD learn best when routines are presented in the same way each time. Most programs recommend that you use a visual schedule to cue your child to complete each step of the toileting routine.
- **Use Physical or Gestural Prompting.** To teach the routine, use physical prompting or gestural prompting to teach each step. Examples of these kinds of prompts are putting your hands over your child's hand while they pull down their pants, moving your child's hand to the toilet paper, or pointing to the visual schedule to show them the next step. Physical and gestural prompts are much easier to fade out later on than verbal prompts.
- **Have Lots of Shorter Practices for Urine with One Longer Practice for Bowel Movements.** Often, the amount of time that a child first sits on the toilet is not long enough to allow for bowel movement success. Thus, in addition to the many practices that take place during the day for urine, setting aside one for longer practice for 'poop' can be helpful. It may be necessary to slowly increase the amount of time that this practice takes to help your child get used to sitting for a longer period. If your child has a regular bowel movement schedule, it is recommended that this longer 'poop' practice take place just before this usually occurs.
- **Use Reinforcement.** When a child has a success on the toilet, you may want to give them some form of reinforcement to encourage the behavior. For some children, having two levels of reinforcement available works well. For example, a child may earn a sticker each time that they complete the toileting routine successfully and an extra treat when they have a voiding success on the toilet.
- **Ensure Hydration.** Children should have plenty to drink during toilet training, so that they are set up for success when sitting on the toilet. If a child is well hydrated, there is a greater chance that you will get to reinforce success.
- **Make a Switch to Underwear.** Today's diapers and pull-ups are so good at their job that children may not get the sensation that they are having an accident. At some point during the toilet training process, making a switch to underwear during the day may be necessary so that a child gets the sensation that they need to take a trip to the bathroom. If that becomes too messy, try the option of wearing underwear underneath the pull-up.
- **Schedule Dry Checks.** Toilet training has two goals: learning a new toileting routine and staying dry at other times. Many toileting plans recommend introducing 'dry checks' into a plan. These dry checks involve helping a child check their underwear or pull-up to see if they are dry. If they are, then they earn a reward!
- **Keep a Record.** Most programs recommend keeping some sort of a record of urine successes, bowel movement successes, and accidents. This is most helpful for making any changes to your schedule of trips (e.g., change when you make a 'poop' trip). Keeping a record can also help you evaluate their progress. For some children, progress can seem very slow and you may not be sure that you are making gains until you look at the data collected and find that you have been making some progress each week.

Other Frequently Asked Questions

Is There a Good Way to Handle Accidents?

Accidents should be handled swiftly so that there is an opportunity for learning to take place during the accident. We recommend that when your child has an accident, you quickly re-direct the child neutrally to the bathroom and finish any part of the void that is not completed. Give your child praise for any part of the routine they complete in the bathroom. Although it is important to react quickly, it is even more important to be emotionally neutral when you discover an accident. Accidents are a normal part of the learning process and we do not want your child to associate any emotion, happy or upset, with an accident.

Should Boys Learn to Use the Toilet Sitting or Standing?

Some families initially find it much easier to teach a boy to void into the toilet while standing as it is much easier for a boy to learn to aim successfully when they are standing. However, when a child does learn to void urine while standing, occasionally it is much harder to learn to have a bowel movement since they then have to learn to void sitting for a bowel movement. Often, it is recommended that boys learn sitting first.

Why is it Hard for My Child to Learn to Wipe?

Wiping is quite a complex motor skill as it requires your child to move their hand in a very particular way while not being able to watch their hand make the movement. As such, it often takes a long time for a child to learn to successfully wipe and parents have to help with wiping for some time after other parts of toilet training have been completed. We encourage a child to always try to wipe before or after you help them so they get as many practice opportunities as possible.

How Long Will This Process Take?

As with learning any new skill, it is hard to predict how long it will take a child to learn to use the toilet. Toilet training requires a child to use their sensory system to initiate a new behavior and asks a child to make a big change to a home routine that they have been familiar with for a few years. For some children, this takes time and a lot of practice. You may have heard that toilet training can be done “in less than a day” but we encourage families to be prepared that it usually takes longer than that for a child with ASD to learn. Though it can take some time to complete the training process, most families do experience some beginning progress in the first few weeks of practice. If you are not observing progress, accidents seem to be increasing, or your child has developed behavior problems during toileting practices, you may need to try another toilet training method or speak with your PHT consultant or another provider such as an occupational therapist, speech/language pathologist, classroom teacher or developmental specialist.

When Should I Be Thinking About Nighttime Training?

Nighttime training usually comes well after daytime training. Some children are not ready to sleep without a pull-up or diaper for a few years after daytime training. Your child may be ready for nighttime training when you begin to notice that their pull-up or diaper is dry most of the time after a night's sleep.

For more information about this resource or to inquire about the Parent Home Training Program call (505) 272-1852 or 1-800-270-1861.



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