

A.

Like learning to sit up, crawl and walk, potty training is a skill that your child must learn. Before mastering this skill, there are certain other skills and abilities that must be in place before learning can begin.

Signs your child may be ready:

- Your child is staying dry for longer periods of time (often two hours or more). This indicates that her bladder capacity is increasing.
- Your child recognizes when she is in the process of urinating or voiding. If you try to potty train before this time, you'll likely run into trouble, since your child isn't really aware of what she's doing and so is unable to control something she can't understand.
- Your child is able to easily pull her pants up and down. She may not have had any reason to do so in the past, but luckily, of all the readiness factors, this skill is easily learned.
- Your child can follow simple instructions. There are many steps to using the toilet that we take for granted as adults. For example-- go to the bathroom, turn on the light, pull down your pants and underwear, sit on the potty, wipe your bottom, flush the toilet, wash your hands-- the list goes on, so this is a very important skill.
- Your child is able to sit and engage in an activity for several minutes without becoming distracted or irritable.
- Your child is walking and running well. Because the urge to potty is often sudden in toddlers, and because a potty isn't always steps away, it's important for your child to be able to make it to the toilet before an accident occurs.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, your child shows interest and desire. Interest in keeping dry or clean. Interest in wearing "big kid" underwear. Interest in what you're doing when you go potty and a desire to do what you're doing.

Remember, age is not the most important factor. Potty training will be best accomplished when your child's physical and emotional development are taken into account as well.

Potty training can be a trying experience at times. It's important to make sure your toddler feels supported and that you uphold a positive attitude to ensure success. Here are some things to avoid.

Don't try to force the issue

Make sure that your child is ready to use the potty, is able to communicate his needs and can handle the physical requirements involved before starting. Always offer encouragement and support. If your child refuses to go, forcing him to go and sit on the potty will only create a charged atmosphere and can lead to more resistance. It can create negative associations with using the bathroom that can be hard to undo, and can also cause your child to withhold urinating or voiding, which can be harmful. Try to approach this time of learning much the same as you did with other skills like sitting up, walking and talking.

Don't start potty training during a time of stress

Even good stress is bad stress when it comes to potty training. Marriages, new babies, vacations can be just as difficult for your child as a divorce, death or move to a new home. If anything big and new is on the horizon in your lives, reconsider potty training. Wait until life settles down and the normal flow of activity resumes. This creates security for your child and helps him place toileting easily alongside other structure and routines.

Don't set deadlines or try to accomplish training in a set number of days

Young children don't work too well under deadlines and they certainly don't have the same concept of time that adults do. Be realistic with your time expectations, or throw them out the window altogether. Programs that promise that your child will be potty trained in three days, one day or even 100 days aren't taking your child's individuality into account. Each child has his own temperament and brings different skills to the table, so there is no true one-size-fits-all method out there. Programs that operate under a time schedule often suggest punitive measures, are inflexible or are actually training the parents instead of the child. This sets many parents and children who don't meet the deadline up for a feeling of failure. In addition they may not take into consideration the many different lifestyles of families, which include parents who work, families with many children, children with special needs, multiples and parents who share custody. Make sure any method you use fits the needs of everyone involved and is flexible.

Don't treat accidents like a big deal

One of the cornerstones of potty training methods that work is: It's just a part of life. It's natural and every living animal from apes to zebras do it every day. Accidents happen, and when they do, this is just part of the process. Overemphasizing accidents can actually reinforce, leading to more accidents. So keep the tone even and matter-of-fact, enlist your child in clean-up activity and move on to the next opportunity to use the potty.

Don't use clothes that are difficult for you or your child to manage

Ask any child care teacher who is in charge of a group of potty trainees and they will tell you just how difficult it can be for little arms and hands to manipulate complicated pants, overalls and other clothing when the urge to pee or poop is looming. Ask too what a task it is to re-outfit a child who has had an accident wearing those garments. First and foremost, use your child's motor skills as a gauge when choosing clothes during potty training. Shy away from overalls unless your child is adept at removing them and putting them back on. The same is true for suspenders, belts, tights, one-piece shirts that snap at the crotch and anything with lots of zippers, snaps, buttons or other fasteners that might be unfamiliar to your child. Clothing that works: Dresses, skirts, pants with elastic waistbands like sweatpants, pajama bottoms and shorts. Of course, if you're comfortable with it, letting your child run around in just underwear or in the nude is the ultimate potty training outfit.

Since winter in cold areas is a time of layers and bundling and heavy coats, most experts and parents agree that it's not the optimal time to start potty training. However, when potty training in the summer, the boys have it made with their drop-and-go trunks, but the girls will have issues with one-piece suits. Moms who have ever gone to the bathroom and tried to pull up and resituate a wet suit on themselves can identify, I'm sure. Consider two-piece swimsuits for the little ladies.

Don't give in to external pressures

External pressures can come from many sources: Grandparents, other moms at the playgroup, preschool administrators, spouses. Keep in mind that while many grandparents are full of wisdom about childrearing, some advice just doesn't ring true today. I often turned to my own mother for help with parenting, but I always kept in the back of my mind that this was the same woman who didn't use a car seat with me and thought whiskey was a fine remedy for teething when applied to my gums. Go with your own instincts and rely on the knowledge you have about your child's readiness.

Where other parents are concerned, just as it is with teething, crawling and walking, so it is with potty training. These are skills that children learn, and they all learn at different times, at their own pace.

Schools that require your child to be potty trained by a certain age may do so simply to meet licensing standards or avoid inconvenience. Licensing standards require that any room with a child in diapers be equipped with a diaper changing table and a sink as well as other supplies. If the sink must have hot water at a

temperature that differs from that of the sink available to children, this can mean that the school must run new plumbing from a separate hot water heater. Schools may not want to deal with the hassle of equipping a room, or they may not want to spend the money. And think about it this way, if the school is already setting an arbitrary deadline for toileting skills and not taking into account the individual needs of each child, what other areas will they apply this thinking to as well? Consider that this may not be the school for you or your child.

Don't expect night time training any time soon

Generally speaking, urinary control comes before control of bowel movements and dry nights come well behind both. It is completely normal for bed-wetting (or enuresis) to occur in children until they are 4 years old. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, about 40 percent of 3 year olds are affected. For many children, bladder control at night comes much later and does not necessarily signify any medical problem. The academy lists two main factors: Your child's bladder has not yet developed the ability to hold urine the whole night and/or he hasn't learned to recognize when he has to go, to wake up and make it to the toilet and use it. For a child who is asleep, that's a four-step process. When my son was working toward dry nights, I tried to keep that in mind, as well as the fact that as a grown woman, it's sometimes difficult for me to accomplish the one-step process of pressing the snooze button.

Don't discount your child's fears or attachments

Children can develop some fears during potty training, and they are as large to them as any fear adults could imagine having. Children may not understand the mechanics of the toilet and that large flushing sound in that small space can be frightening. If a child experiences even one slip off the toilet seat and bottom touches water, it can set them back to square one or even require a potty training hiatus. Some children have a hard time dealing with watching their poop disappear down the drain, as if it were as much a part of them as an arm or a leg. Treat these fears with sensitivity. Discuss the fear without invalidating it or making your child feel shamed or as if his feelings are unimportant. Some children may need help expressing their fears, so offer them the vocabulary that seems appropriate.

The same is true of attachments children may exhibit during this time. Diapers may represent a feeling of security in many ways. It is a time when parents are intimate with their children and are taking care of their needs, and letting go of that takes some children more time. This doesn't mean letting your child go back and forth between wearing diapers and training, but it does mean making sure he is ready to take that step of independence. If he seems to want to cling to diapers, suggest that it's potty time and tell him that afterward (whether he's used the potty or not) he can have a story on your lap or have some tickle-time. It may not be the diaper he's missing, but rather the closeness with you. It can be cold and lonely in the bathroom, after all.

Don't worry too much

Really. You've probably heard it or read it a million times by now, but it's true: It's highly unlikely that your child will go to college in a diaper. (Although I have heard some horror stories about people rushing fraternities.)

Try to take potty training in stride and work together with your child. Look at it like just one more learning opportunity, one more step of growth and independence in the life of a very special person in your life. If it helps put it in perspective, think of all the new and scary times you've had where you were equipped with the coping skills of an adolescent or adult -- a new job, a new relationship, learning a new language, giving a speech, taking a driver's test. Then imagine doing those same things without the matured coping ability you have today, with the motor skills of a small child, and a head so big you still can't get your arm up around it to touch the opposite ear. Treat your little guy or gal with the same patience and encouragement you'd want in the same situation, and **don't** forget to still have fun along the way.

My son is 2 1/2 years old and has no interest in using the potty. Is that normal?

A. Most children begin potty training sometime around 18 months to three years of age, so yes, if he is otherwise growing and developing well, it is probably normal that a 2 1/2 year old does not want to use the potty.

Although many parents feel like 3 years is a magic age by which their child must be potty trained, that is not always the case. A [recent poll on keepkidshealthy.com](http://www.keepkidshealthy.com) showed that almost 25% of kids weren't potty trained until they were 3 1/2 or 4 years old.

Even in an older child, it is important to look for signs of readiness before you begin potty training, including:

- staying dry for at least 2 hours at a time
- having regular bowel movements
- being able to follow simple instructions
- being uncomfortable with dirty diapers and wanting them to be changed
- asking to use the potty chair
- asking to wear regular underwear.

You should also be able to tell when your child is about to urinate or have a bowel movement by his facial expressions, posture or by what he says. If your child has begun to tell you about having a dirty diaper you should praise him for telling you and encourage him to tell you in advance next time.

Even if your child isn't totally ready to begin potty training, you can still get him a potty chair and have him decorate it with stickers and sit on it with his clothes on to watch TV, etc. to help him get used to it. Whenever your child shows signs of needing to urinate or have a bowel movement you should ask him if he wants to use the potty or take him to the chair and explain to him what you want him to do.

Only keep him seated for a few minutes at a time, don't insist and prepared to delay training if he shows resistance. Until he is going in the potty, you can try to empty his dirty diapers into his potty chair to help demonstrate what you want him to do.

Another good technique is modeling, where you allow your child to see family members or other children using the toilet, and using observational remarks. This involves narrating what is happening and asking questions while potty training, such as 'did you just sit on the potty?' or 'did you just poop in the potty?'

Things to avoid when toilet training your child are beginning during a stressful time or period of change in the family (moving, new baby, etc.), pushing your child too fast, and punishing mistakes (treat accidents and mistakes lightly). Be sure to go at your child's pace and show strong encouragement and praise when he is successful.