

Toilet Training Tips

Decide if you and your child are ready

Make sure your child is developmentally ready. Signs of readiness include staying dry for longer periods, hiding to poo, pulling at their nappies or undies, interest in the toilet, and communicating when they need to wee or poo.

Make sure you are not too stressed, that other family members are on board, and that your child is not under too much stress at the moment. (If you're trying to sort out sleep problems or start preschool, this might not be the right time to place more expectations onto your child.)

If the process becomes too stressful or upsetting for you or your child, it's ok to take a break and try again later. This can mean trying again in a few hours when everyone's calmer, or it can mean deciding that now is not the time, and coming back to it in a few weeks or months. Try not to stress about what toileting stage your child is at compared to their peers - it's really common for autistic children to toilet train a bit later, and to take longer to learn to use the toilet consistently. Take your time, and go at your child's pace.

Get prepared

It can be helpful to stay home for a few days to focus on using the toilet.

Dress your child in clothing that's easy to take off, like pants with an elastic waistband.

It's up to you whether you start with a potty, or go straight to using the toilet - a potty can be less scary for some children, but for others starting with the toilet and avoiding having to transition from potty to toilet later can be helpful.

A footstool and/or a smaller, inserted toilet seat can help your child sit on the toilet comfortably and safely.

Make the toilet area comfortable

Some things that can make the toilet area more comfortable for your child could include:

- Reducing noise and harsh lighting - if you have a bathroom fan or heater, turn it off. If you have enough natural light in your bathroom, leave the overhead light off.
- Letting your child wear socks or slippers to avoid the cold floor.
- Decorating the toilet area with your child's help - have them help you pick out a warm mat for the floor, put up pictures or stickers your child likes, etc.
- Use soft toilet paper or flushable wipes, and scent-free soap, to make the experience as sensory-friendly as possible.

Let your child get comfortable with sitting on the toilet

This can be done fully clothed to start with - it's just about getting used to the new environment and position. Ask your child to sit on the toilet for as long as they're comfortable (which might only be a few seconds to begin with). You can talk, sing, read, or play games while your child is sitting on the toilet, have them bring a favourite toy or comfort object with them, or do anything else that you know will make your child more comfortable. Once they're comfortable sitting on the toilet for at least three minutes, you can encourage them to sit there without clothes on - after a wet/dirty nappy has just been removed is a good time for this.

Help your child sit on the toilet when they're likely to need it

Once your child is comfortable sitting on the toilet with no pants on, encourage them to sit there at times they're likely to need to wee.

These include:

- 15-30 minutes after a meal
- 45-60 minutes after a big drink
- Before and after travel, sleep, or a change in activities
- Any time that you can see from their body language that they need the toilet (they might repeatedly squat down, repeatedly stop still, hold or clutch at their crotch area, hunch over, or have other physical cues that they need to wee).

Keeping a toilet diary can help identify any particular times when your child always needs to use the toilet, and how long they can hold it without having an accident.

Establishing a routine where your child spends a few minutes sitting on the toilet at the same times each day, like after meals or before and after sleep, can help for some children.

Accidents are normal

All children will have accidents while learning to use the toilet.

When your child does have an accident, it's important to stay as calm as possible, and avoid expressing any frustration towards your child. Let your child know, via whatever communication method works for them, that it's ok that they had an accident, and they can try again later.

For some autistic children, it's difficult or impossible to read their own internal cues and know when they need to use the toilet - these children may have occasional accidents for a long time even after they're done with toilet training. You can help by putting a toilet routine in place, by reminding your child to use the toilet every few hours as they transition between activities, and by reacting calmly without showing frustration or disgust when they do have an accident - even if it's been years since their last accident.

Toilets can be scary

Some autistic children are really uncomfortable, distressed, or fearful around toileting - if your child is scared of the bathroom, the toileting process, or the toilet itself, there are a few things that can make it easier for them:

- If the flushing sound is too loud or the flushing water is scary, help your child use the toilet and wash their hands, then flush once they've left the room.
- If the hole of the toilet bowl seems big and scary to your child, use a toilet insert to make the hole smaller, or start with a potty so they get used to the process before using the big toilet.
- If your child is afraid of pooing, they may be having stomach or gut problems that make bowel movements uncomfortable or painful - talk to your GP about what might be happening.
- If your child is afraid or nervous about having an accident, you can make it easier on them by praising and celebrating them when they tell you about it (not for having an accident, but for being brave and coming to tell you).

Take it one step at a time

For children who struggle with new motor tasks, or with complex sequences of tasks, going to the toilet can be really difficult. The process involves a long string of mini-tasks and processes, and getting any of them wrong, or doing them in the wrong order, causes a mess.

It's ok if your child takes a while to get their head around how to wash their hands, or needs you to do it for them for a while. It's ok if they need to be reminded to wipe after using the toilet, or to pull their pants down before getting on the toilet - it can help to have a visual reminder, like a comic of someone going through all the steps, displayed in the toilet area.

This resource was developed by an autistic author, based on material written by Dr Jolene Hunter and Professor Laurie McLay of Canterbury University.