



by Karen Stephens

Why Change? A Kid's Eye View of Toilet Training

Diapers are very kid-friendly. Toddlers (kids ages 2 to 3) love the luxury and convenience of a diaper. Diapers enable toddlers to play with no side trips to the restroom. With all there is to explore, diapers are a real time saver for kids!

Toddlers like other perks that come with diapers, too. It's handy having someone else deal with the messy details. And if they're lucky, toddlers are diapered with loving patience. That makes for cozy parent-child interactions. For kids in child care, diapering is an opportunity for individualized care. I love to watch kids smile and giggle during diapering. They get their belly tickled, their bottom powdered — all while being sweetly serenaded with Mother Goose rhymes. Who would want to give up the diaper?

But, of course, they must. Living in civilization requires it. It's one of life's challenges that must be met if kids are to achieve independence and fit in socially. And so, this Parenting Exchange column series explores the nuts and bolts of toilet training. Using the toilet is old hat to you and me; but for kids, it's a major lifestyle change!

Timing has a lot to do with beginning toilet training. If you start before kids are physically ready, they fail through no fault of their own. If you start too late — and I've heard as late as kindergarten age — kids are so used to dirty diapers that they're apathetic and highly resistant to any changes. That's called missing the "window of opportunity" when learning comes most easily.

For most kids, potty training should begin between ages 2 and 3, when developmental abilities and self-motivation to cooperate indicate readiness. Parenting Exchange library column, "Toilet Training: Signs that indicate prime time for potty training" lists behaviors, attitudes, and abilities that need to be present before toilet training should begin.

Begin training when life is stable and relatively stress-free. Even positive events, such as relatives visiting or a vacation, can interfere with toilet training. During potty training, maintain regular and predictable family routines. Stability in child care arrangements is important, too. Avoid potty training during major life changes, such as moving to a new home, during a family illness, hospitalization, or immediately after a death. If a new sibling is on the way, try to accomplish potty training before the birth, or wait a few months after so adjustment to a new sibling and to a new potty routine don't occur at the same time. Stability at home and child care allows children to focus their energy and concentration on learning to use the toilet. Believe me; moving from diaper to toilet is enough change to handle at any one time.

It's also essential that you and everyone else who interacts with your child, such as grandparents and child-care providers, adhere to a consistent toilet-training plan. Home and child care must cooperatively plan and coordinate toilet training efforts and consistently follow them. If all who care for children don't support each other's efforts, potty training is undermined. Haphazard potty-training confuses kids and stretches the training period out much too long. It can even

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result in larger problems like defiance, power struggles, constipation, and excessive fear of failure, apathy or regressive baby-like behavior. Mutual cooperation and consistent practices give children the guidance and self-confidence to achieve potty competence.

In the early stages, toilet-training needs to be the focus of the household schedule, no exceptions. Daily schedules and activities will have to revolve around training details. Under typical conditions of concentrated effort, toilet training can take two weeks to three months, with some kids taking a little less time and others a little more. It's not unusual for some children to take up to four months to attain complete daytime toilet mastery.

Once your child is mostly toilet-trained, don't be surprised if you encounter potty accidents or set-backs along the way; it's typical. And by the way, although there are many, many exceptions, the average age for girls to be fully toilet-trained is said to be 29 months; the average for boys is 30 months.

If after two weeks of initial potty training your child is emphatically resistant and shows NO interest in cooperating, or doesn't seem to have a clue as to what you want, it's best to put off training efforts until more readiness signs emerge.

A child's apathy and resistance can be signs that you misjudged your child's developmental window of opportunity for learning. Or it could mean you need to chat with caregivers to see if training is consistent at child care. Perhaps mixed signals are confusing your child about expectations.

Toddlers' toilet mastery requires more complex skills than you may think. We can't remember how we got out of diapers ourselves, so it's easy to forget how involved the task actually is! Here's what children have to successfully master to use a toilet.

1. Feel the physical urge to eliminate, and pay attention to it. (Hard to do when playing.)
2. Understand the urge or sensation is a signal to eliminate: "Hey, I gotta go, NOW!"
3. Suppress the immediate urge — hold on until you reach the bathroom!
4. Let an adult know you need to get to the potty.
5. Get to the nearest toilet — quickly! (Challenging in a store or restaurant.)
6. Manage the bathroom or public restroom stall door.
7. Pull clothing down and out of the way.
8. Sit and balance on the potty, without falling backward, forward — or, heaven forbid, IN!
9. While on the toilet, not before or after, relax muscles to eliminate.
10. Maintain balance while reaching for toilet paper.
11. Reach up high for handle to flush.
12. Step up and lean over sink to wash and dry hands.

From a toddler's viewpoint, all that is a lot to remember — especially, when for their ENTIRE time on earth, they've casually let nature take its course in a diaper without ever giving it a second thought. And not only was doing their duty in the diaper handy, but it came with mom and dad's acceptance and permission! That is, until one day, parents turn the diapering-table topsy-turvy and introduce toddlers to the whole new concept of using a toilet. Parenting Exchange library column, "Ditchin' Diapers: Tips on Toilet Training" will help you begin that process.

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*.