



by Karen Stephens

Toilet Training: Signs That Indicate Prime Time for Potty Training

Are words like “pee,” “tinkle,” “poop,” and “BM” staples of your vocabulary? Have you found yourself — stone serious — holding your child’s hand as you both look down and wave “bye-bye” to a swirling toilet bowl and its newly fallen stool? If so, you’re parenting a toddler, probably between 2 and 3 years old. Outsiders may find it embarrassing when you talk openly about potty training, but parents of toddlers know potty talk is serious business.

Mastering the toilet is a significant step for kids. For a brief time in life, it becomes the central focus of mom and dad. In terms of child development, mastering toilet training is one of childhood’s earliest rites of passage, ranking right up there with learning to walk and talk. By learning to control body functions, toddlers step toward independence, self-reliance, and personal responsibility. Pride in newfound autonomy is children’s rightful reward.

Diaper-freedom has perks for parents and other caregivers, too. It frees up a portion of the family budget. Not having to diaper and clean children several times a day eases the time crunch of daily routines for parents and child care providers.

This column is the first in a Parenting Exchange series in which I’ll give tips on toileting training. Share information with others who also care for your child — whether they are teenage babysitters, grandparents, or child care teachers. You’ll have to be cooperative and like-minded partners during the toilet training process. When the road to diaper-freedom gets bumpy, you’ll be each other’s best support system for coping with the occasional stress and frustration that can accompany potty training, even in the best of situations.

Parents’ first challenge is to decide when a child is able and ready to begin learning their way around the toilet. Developmental abilities, NOT precise chronological age, provide the best clues as to an individual child’s readiness. Determining physical readiness, such as strength of urinary tract and sphincter muscles to control elimination, can be hard to judge. However, in most children, the PHYSICAL ability to control those muscles has been achieved by age 2.

There’s much more for a parent to consider. Maturity and thinking ability also play a role in identifying prime times for potty training. After all, it must be a child’s CHOICE to use the toilet. It’s one of the few things kids have complete control over. If they don’t have the mental capacity — or willingness — to cooperate, there’s no way a parent can force potty training. And if parents do apply too much pressure, they end up creating more potty-related problems than solutions.

Luckily, there are developmental milestones that parallel the ability to be toilet-trained. By keeping a watchful eye on child’s behavior, parents and caregivers can judge the most promising time to begin toilet training.

Road marks include richer language development. Children are able to understand more of what you say (called receptive language.) Their own communication skills flower. They willingly follow simple directions.

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Prime candidates for toilet training can notice sensations (such as the need to eliminate) and verbally describe them to caregivers. They can tell caregivers when their diaper is wet, full, or even when they need a new one.

“Ready children” willingly cooperate with simple requests. They are able to put their own possessions where they belong. (Knowing where body waste belongs will come more naturally if they already realize toys and clothing have their own special places.)

Children who love imitating mom and dad are more likely to comply and be interested in using the toilet just like “big kids and grown-ups.” A desire to be like older siblings or child care classmates can also play a role in motivating toilet learning.

Basic self-help skills, like being able to sit down on one’s own and pulling pants on and off mean children are prepared to handle vital steps in the toilet using process. Likely candidates for toilet training also include children who have regular bowel movements, stop playing during a BM, stay dry for two or more hours at a time, are dry after naps, and express a preference for being clean and neat.

External indicators of physical development can also clue you into your child’s readiness to cooperate with potty-training. For instance, you’ll observe better control, coordination, and balance in their motor abilities. Such abilities even prompt some kids to begin taking their own diaper off when they notice it is dirty! The large motor development also leads to more running and jumping up with two feet.

The social and emotional urge to “be a big kid now” may lead kids to ask for a bed like an older sibling’s. Transitions from high chair to booster take on new importance. Self-help skills also emerge, showing children are interested in greater control over what happens to them. Toddlers’ desire for increased self-reliance rings out as, “ME do it!” They will be interested in eating with utensils, brushing teeth, dressing themselves, and helping with simple household chores.

During this transition to greater independence, children also work hard to create a unique identity for themselves, separate from parents and caregivers. They begin demanding the right to make definite choices. They take any chance to express adamant preferences.

An intrinsic drive for achievement stirs during toddlerhood. Working toward a goal and being cooperative with others provides motivation for toilet training. Praise and encouragement take on greater significance.

All these developmental road marks are visible, behavioral ways two and three year olds reveal their internal drive for autonomy. Alert caregivers will capitalize on that window of opportunity for toilet training. Muscular and intellectual development for the ONSET of training is typically sufficient in most children between age two and three. Unless there are special needs or physical problems, almost all kids are physically and mentally ready to begin toilet training by age three.

Spotting the teachable moment when children are eager to please mom and dad is important. However, even more important, is capitalizing on children’s OWN internal motivation, their personal desire to experience the intrinsic satisfaction of their own achievement and mastery. Once the desire to become toilet-capable and diaper-free is mutual. Toilet training is mostly a matter of focus, patience, and consistency.

Throughout this series, we’ll get into the nitty-gritty particulars of toilet training. If you’re pondering potty training, record aspects of your child’s development in a notebook. Observe your child as objectively as you can. Write down behaviors, attitudes, and abilities that provide clues as to your child’s readiness — or lack of readiness — to successfully learn toilet usage. Ask your child’s caregivers to do the same and compare notes to decide whether it’s prime time to introduce the potty or not. Other columns in this series will start you on the road from there.

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*.

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