

Toileting Independence in Preschool-age Children

“Toileting independence” or “toilet learning” is a skill that a child learns over time. It is a skill that takes practice, like climbing steps, using scissors, pouring milk, and other developmental skills. It’s different from “toilet training.” The main difference is that toileting independence is child directed, and toilet training is adult directed. Toilet training can raise stress for adults and children, lead to power struggles, and harm relationships.



Families and caregivers know how to help children recognize hunger, thirst, and other body signals. Helping children notice when they need to use the toilet also supports their health and well-being. It gives control to children, not adults. Toilet learning is about encouraging children to notice body signals by themselves, and then use the toilet. Children with disabilities may require different approaches. Work with the child’s family and health care provider to support the child’s needs.

Learning how to use the toilet involves three things:



Process:

The child learns the skill over time.



Focus:

The adult encourages the child’s independent awareness of needing to use the toilet, rather than telling them when to go.



Goal:

The child responds to their body’s signals for when they need to pee and poop.

This resource offers ways that adults can support children who are learning to use the toilet independently. Understanding why preschool-age children struggle with toilet learning can help you better support them.

Feelings During Toilet Learning

Emotions can affect behavior. Adults who can respond sensitively to children's feelings about using the toilet can better support their learning. Many children enjoy the comfort and familiarity of diapers and the freedom to pee or poop at any time. Moving from diapers to underwear can bring up feelings of loss of not being a baby anymore. Some children may be afraid of the toilet because of its sounds or the feeling of sitting over the toilet bowl.

Wearing underwear and using the toilet may be uncomfortable. And it can require the child to make more of an effort, which they may not like. Adults may have beliefs about how and when a child should learn to use the toilet based on their experiences and culture. If an adult expresses anger or disappointment when a child doesn't use the toilet, the child may feel less safe in their relationship with that adult.



Children's Temperaments

Temperament describes the way children approach and react to the world. It is an important part of social and emotional health. There are three general temperaments: flexible, fearful, and feisty. By understanding each child's temperament, you can help them succeed in learning new skills. There is not just one way to learn how to use the toilet. Children with different temperaments need different approaches.



Flexible



Flexible children react to changes well and are usually positive and easygoing about new experiences. Ways to support their toilet learning may include the following:

Consistent routine: Follow a regular toileting schedule to reinforce new behavior.

Gentle reminders: Gently encourage the child to pay attention to their body and notice signals.

Observations: Describe the child's actions, which will encourage ownership and pride. For example, tell them, "You listened to your body and went to the toilet when you needed to. You're taking great care of your body."

Fearful

Fearful children are slower to try new things. They are often reserved or cautious in new situations. Ways to support their toilet learning may include the following:

Gradual introduction:

Introduce new routines slowly and allow the child time to adjust.

Reassurance: Reassure them often to build their confidence.

Consistent support:

Stick to a routine to help the child feel secure.



Feisty



Feisty children may be less adaptable and react strongly to changes or new situations. Ways to support their toilet learning may include the following:

Calm environment: Create a calm and supportive environment to reduce stress and resistance.

Clear expectations: Set clear and consistent expectations for toileting.

Patience and persistence: Be patient and consistent and understand that progress may be slower than expected.



Think about a child you support with toilet learning. How can you use what you know about their temperament to adjust your approach to helping them with toileting independence?

Ways to Support Toileting Independence

Use these strategies to create feelings of safety and well-being for children who are learning to use the toilet independently.

Offer emotional safety.

- Create a nurturing environment where children feel safe and valued.
- Be patient and understanding. Know that each child develops at their own pace.

Create a supportive learning environment.

- Set up a comfortable bathroom. Remove anything that makes the experience unpleasant.
- Allow children enough time to use the toilet.
- Have consistent routines adapted for children's individual needs.

Use positive language.

- Help children feel confident by using encouraging words as they learn new skills.
- Be aware of your tone and body language.
- Avoid negative language or actions that could embarrass or shame children.

Work gradually toward success.

- Think about toileting as you would any learning process and focus on developing skills slowly.
- Break down the process into steps and guide the child at each stage.
- Understand that becoming skilled takes time and is different for each child.
- Celebrate small successes and milestones.
- Offer direct help when needed. Slowly reduce support as the child becomes more confident.

Communicate with families.

- Ask families for information about their child's toileting habits and routines.
- Talk with families about using the same routines at home and at the program.





Fitting Toilet Learning into Routines

Include toilet learning every day in your other activities. It makes learning this skill less stressful, and it improves success. For example, talk about the importance of eating and drinking water during meals and snacks. You can tell children that their body will get rid of the food it doesn't need to grow. Use visual aids, such as a picture of a toilet, on your daily schedule to show bathroom breaks. But remember, children who are learning to use the toilet may have their own schedule at the beginning.

Other learning activities about toileting include:

- Read age-appropriate books about toileting and talk with children afterward. Ask questions like:
 - How did the character feel about using the toilet?
 - What did they do when they needed to go?
- Use songs and rhymes, such as a hand-washing song.
- Create puppet shows where characters recognize body signals and use the toilet.
- Set up an area to play with toy toilets and dolls so that children can practice toileting steps.



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