

The Bladder & Bowel UK guide to potty and toilet training



What is potty or toilet training?

Potty or toilet training is the process of teaching your child the set of skills that they will need to be able to wee and poo in a socially acceptable place.

How will I know that my child is ready to start to potty or toilet train?

Many children will never give any signs that they are ready to potty or toilet train. Therefore, it is not helpful to wait for your child to seem to be ready to learn to use the potty or toilet.

Children need to be taught the skills they will need to potty or toilet train, in the same way as they need to be taught other skills, such as washing, brushing their teeth, or feeding themselves. This teaching can start at any time and, as with other developmental skills, your child should gradually become more independent with time and practice.

When should I start teaching my child the skills they need to use a potty or toilet?

It is never too early or too late to introduce your child to the skills needed for potty and toilet training.

In previous generations children were introduced to the potty or toilet gradually from the early weeks and months of life, and in some cases from the first days. Parents would hold their infants over a potty when they were most likely to want to wee or poo. This included after their feeds, food or drinks and when they woke up from sleep.

Babies are born with some awareness of when they need to do a poo or wee. Some babies will appear to concentrate, move or hold themselves in a certain way, or pull a certain face when they are about to do a wee or poo. If their families notice this, they can use these cues to hold their child over a potty, toilet, or other container at the right time to catch the poo or wee. This is sometimes called infant-led potty training.

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This helps their child learn to recognise the signals from their body that they need to wee and poo. It also helps them learn that there is a right place to go. With this method many children are reliably clean and dry well before their second birthday.

Are there any advantages to start working on the skills for potty or toilet training early?

There is some research to suggest that babies who are exposed to infant-led pottying have less unexplained crying than infants who use nappies all the time.

There is also some research that suggests that potty or toilet training before the age of two years old helps children's bladders become mature more quickly. It may also make it less likely that children will develop bladder problems later in childhood. If your child is older than this, do not worry: it is never too late to start working on the skills for potty or toilet training.

Children whose families are able to catch wees and poos on the potty or toilet from the time they are a few weeks or months old, will need fewer nappies than those who do not learn the skills until later. This can save money on washing nappies or on buying disposables. Using fewer nappies is also better for the environment.

Using the potty or toilet may also help with constipation. This is because it is easier for the bowel to empty completely when the bottom is well supported, feet are on a flat surface and knees are higher than hips (a semi-squat position).

Will my child potty or toilet train more quickly and easily if I wait until they are older?

Some children will learn the skills needed to use the potty or toilet more quickly if teaching does not start until they are older. However, if you wait until your child is older the advantages of starting early, that are described above, may be lost.

For many children, including those with developmental differences and/or disabilities, learning the skills for potty or toilet training early may make the whole process more straightforward and successful. This is because the routines associated with potty or toilet training have been introduced earlier. You are not trying to change behaviours around weeing and pooing that have been established for longer.

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There is more information to help you with potty or toilet training if your child has developmental differences or learning disabilities in the Bladder & Bowel UK library.

What skills does my child need to be able to potty or toilet train?

To be able to learn to use the potty or toilet, your child will need to develop a set of skills. The skills needed for potty training include:

- Knowing the right place to wee and poo
- Understanding the feeling when it is time to wee or poo
- Being able to tell you that they need the potty or toilet
- Being able to wait until they get to the potty or toilet
- Getting to the potty or toilet
- Being able to get undressed before using the potty or toilet and then dressed again afterwards
- Being able to sit in the right place for long enough to wee and poo
- Being able to wipe themselves clean
- Washing and drying their hands
- Getting back to what they were doing before the potty or toilet visit

You do not need to wait for your child to be able to do all or any of these things before you start to teach them the skills that they need for potty and toilet training.

How can I start to introduce the skills my child will need to use a potty or toilet?

You can start to prepare your child for potty or toilet training by:

- Change your child in the toilet or bathroom and tip any poo down the toilet and flush it away. This will help your child see where poo should go
- When your child can stand up without support, change their nappy with them standing up.
- Show your child their nappy and use positive language: 'well done, you have done a wee' or 'that is a good, big poo'
- Get them to start to help you pull their clothing up or down.
- Have some time each day when your child has a bare bottom, or wears just loose jogging bottoms or a long t-shirt and no nappy

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- Let your child see you and other members of your immediate family use the toilet. Explain to them what you are doing
- Use story and picture books and apps to help them learn about going to the potty or toilet
- Help your child to learn to wash and dry their hands.
- Introduce sitting on the potty or toilet. (If you are using the toilet then your child will need a seat reducer and step).
- You may want to start this once a day at a time when you are both relaxed and gradually increase how often each day you sit your child on the potty or toilet.
- You could have them on the potty while you are using the toilet
- If your child is unsure, then use role play with dolls or teddies first.
- You may start by sitting your child on the potty or toilet with them fully dressed and gradually reduce the amount of clothing they have on their bottom when you sit them on. You may start with sitting them for just a few seconds and gradually increase the time they are sitting for
- Start to introduce sitting on the potty or toilet after your child has had a feed, drink, meal or has just woken up from sleep
- Use toys that your child just has when they are on the potty or toilet. Seaside windmills, or kazoos to blow, squeezey or other toys may help your child to stay sitting on the potty or toilet
- If your child is old enough and not upset by the flush, you can start to teach them to use it after a visit to the potty or toilet.

What other skills will my child need and how can I work on these?

- Make sure that your child has a way of telling you when they need the potty or toilet.
- If your child can speak you can teach them words for wee and poo, potty or toilet.
- It is helpful if everyone looking after your child uses the same words
- If your child is not able to speak then have a sign that they can do with their hands, or picture cue card they can use. Many children can learn to use signs from about 6 to 9 months old.

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When should we stop using nappies in the day?

If you are taking your child to the potty or toilet when they wake, after drinks and meals (or feeds) and if you notice any signs from them that you think they need to go, then you should start to catch wees and poos in the potty or toilet. When you are catching about half of all their wees and/or poos, stop using nappies in the day.

Take your child to the potty or toilet whenever you think they need to go, but after waking from sleep, after drinks or feeds and meals. If your child is wetting more often than this you should take them more frequently, but gradually increase the time gap between potty or toilet visits, until your child can go about 1 ½ - 2 hours between potty or toilet visits.

Consider removing the daytime nappies when you can spend time getting your child to the potty or toilet. If possible, try to do this when there are no big changes happening at home, such as a new baby being born, or moving house.

Once your child starts to wear pants in the day, they should wear them all the time that they are awake, including when you are going out. Putting a nappy or pull up on, even for a short time, may confuse your child and they may then take longer to learn to stay dry.

Should we use disposable nappy pants (pull ups) or trainer pants when we stop using nappies?

Disposable nappy pants feel like a nappy to your child. They may not understand that they are not meant to use these in the same way as they did the nappy. Therefore, they are not recommended for toilet training.

Washable trainer pants are available and can help with toilet training. They will absorb some wee and therefore offer some protection to your child's other clothes, your furniture and floor coverings. However, they are similar to ordinary pants, as they allow your child to feel wet, which is part of the learning process.

If you are worried about car seats or furniture getting wet, you could use washable or disposable waterproof sheets, to protect them.

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Is potty or toilet training something that should just be done at home?

It is important that your child learns that they can use the potty or toilet wherever they are and whenever they need to. Try to make sure that you have your child's potty or toilet seat and step with you when you go out, so that they can use the equipment they are familiar with.

It is also important to make sure that everyone looking after your child knows how you are approaching teaching them the skills for potty and toilet training. Ask them to do this in the same way as you do.

What should we do if our child continues to be wet lots of times every day?

Wetting or soiling (accidents) are common to start with and are a good learning opportunity for your child. When you notice they are wet or soiled, take them to the potty or toilet and clean them up with the minimum fuss and then have a time for them to sit on the potty or toilet. Remind them that is where wee and poo go. If your child has been used to using a nappy it is a big step for them to learn that they are no longer expected to wee or poo wherever they are.

Do not be tempted to take your child to the potty or toilet too often. If they are encouraged to empty their bladder more than they need to, then their bladder may get used to only holding smaller amounts of wee and then need to empty more often than it should. If your child is wetting often, take them before you expect them to need to go, but then gradually increase the time between potty or toilet visits, until they can go 1 ½ - 2 hours and stay dry.

If you are struggling to catch wees and/or poos in the potty or toilet, you can try to work out your child's normal habits. If you put a piece of folded kitchen towel into their nappy, when your child wakes up and then check it every hour, that will give you an idea of how often your child wees and how long they can stay dry for. Note down on a chart (such as the Bladder & Bowel UK baseline toilet training, which can be found in the Bladder & Bowel UK children's information library) whether your child's nappy is wet or dry. Also write down when your child has their bowels open and when they have a drink.

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Do this for at least three days. This will help you to see patterns of when your child is most likely to want to wee or poo and you can use this information to get them to the potty or toilet at the time they are most likely to want to go. As your child learns to go in the potty or toilet, then slowly increase the time between potty or toilet visits.

If your child continues to be wet frequently, then ask your healthcare professional for advice and support. They may have an underlying problem that needs assessment and treatment, such as constipation.

What about night time control?

Children cannot learn to be dry at night in the same way as they learn to be dry in the day. Most children become dry naturally within a few months of potty or toilet training in the day. You can support your child to become dry at night by:

- Making sure they are drinking plenty of water-based drinks in the day
- Stopping food and drinks an hour before they go to bed
- Make sure they use the potty or toilet just before they settle to sleep
- Take them to the potty or toilet if they wake in the night, but do not wake or lift them to use the potty or toilet if they are not awake
- Have a good bedtime routine
- Try to make sure they are not constipated

Wetting during sleep, after the age of five years old, if your child has been potty or toilet trained in the day for at least six months, is considered to be a medical problem called enuresis. Assessment and treatment can be offered for this, so speak to your child's healthcare professional for more advice and support.

There is more information about bedwetting (enuresis), what causes it and how it is usually treated in the Bladder & Bowel UK information library.

My child is struggling with toilet training. Does this mean that they are not ready yet?

Up to a third of all children may have a problem with their bladder or bowel. Most of these are treatable. Therefore, if you and your child are struggling with potty or toilet training you should be offered assessment to make sure that there is no underlying problem such as constipation. Waiting until your child is a bit older is not helpful for most children.

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My child has additional needs or disabilities. Will it be easier for them to learn if I wait until they are older?

If your child has additional needs or disabilities their bladder and bowel should be the same as that of other children their age. As potty or toilet training can help the bladder mature, there is no reason why it should be delayed simply because of the additional need or disability. However, your child may need an occupational therapy assessment to see if they would benefit from any adaptations or from specialist equipment to help them feel safe and secure while using the potty or toilet.

Different children take different amounts of time to be successful learning new skills. Most children can learn at least some of the skills needed for potty or toilet training. However, some children will always need extra help or support to use the potty or toilet. They may need reminding to go, especially if they are busy, distracted or somewhere new. They may need help to get to the toilet, or managing their clothes, or with wiping. However, it is important that your child is supported to become as independent as they can with toileting.

Children with disabilities or additional needs are more likely than their peers to have an underlying problem with their bladder or bowel. Therefore, if they are struggling to toilet train, they should be offered an assessment of their bladder and bowel health and appropriate support. It should not be assumed that any ongoing wetting and soiling is due to their disability, additional need, or a behaviour problem.

Children with additional needs or disabilities who are struggling with potty training may have sensory differences that are impacting Or it may be that they need a different approach. Ask your healthcare professional for support or for a referral to a local children's bladder and bowel service if there is one in your area. Delaying toilet training is not helpful and children who are finding it difficult should be referred for further support in the same way as would happen for other developmental difficulties.

Further information

Find more information about child bladder and bowel health in our information library at www.bbuk.org.uk. You can also contact the Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline (0161 214 4591).

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There is more information about toilet training and managing any issues with it in the other Bladder & Bowel UK leaflets in this series:

- Trouble shooting toilet training
- The impact of sensory issues on toilet training

There is also more information on constipation, soiling, daytime wetting and bedwetting in at www.bbuk.org.uk

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.
