

Toilet Learning

Is Your Family Ready?



OUR APPROACH

Please know we are here for you during this important milestone in your family life. Throughout the toilet learning phase of your child's life, it is important to be kind to yourself as a parent and recognize that you are doing important work in caring for your child during this important milestone. Caring for children can be a humbling experience, but if we approach it as an opportunity to grow with our children, it can provoke an open heart and a new kind of self-awareness.

Toilet learning can cause a wide range of feelings in adults, including competitiveness, neediness, ambition, tenderness, love, pride, and anxiety about letting go (Guide to Toilet Training, American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999).



Self-awareness and reflection about the emotions that rise, can help adults become intentional, rather than unconscious, about the messages and the tone we take with children while they are taking big steps towards independence. Here are a few areas to think about as you become a care partner to support your child in toilet learning:

DON'T PUSH

It is helpful if adults take a matter-of-fact approach with the understanding that toilet leaning really is the child's accomplishment. It is possible to have expectations without pressure or stress. Children are sensitive and intuitive, and they know for sure that we want them to be out of diapers. They also know that their body is their own and that toilet learning is their own business. We risk turning toilet learning into a power struggle if we express too much eagerness, which can be felt as pushiness. Research shows that when parents postpone training until the child shows readiness indicators, less time is required to complete the process. If we are constantly asking a child to use the toilet, we may spark resistance.

BE A TRUE PARTNER

Being a partner is about finding the middle ground and recognizing that toilet learning is a two-way street. Adults must be ready to pay attention and participate in the process. Sometimes adults are so afraid of putting pressure on children that they take the opposite approach of pushing instead of becoming so relaxed that they expect the child to learn entirely by themselves. Other times, adults plan potty training around their expectations, needs, and schedules. Toilet learning is both a matter of readiness skills and learning skills. When children show us that they are physically and emotionally ready, we help them learn by providing consistency, support, and encouragement.



RIGHT TIMING IS IMPORTANT

Although children can begin the first stages of the toilet learning process at a very young age, such as learning the words for elimination or showing interest in the potty, we believe that the child must demonstrate ALL of the indicators in the readiness checklist at both home and school before the child is ready to move into underwear while in group care. Each child is unique, and we recognize there is a broad range of ages at which children successfully learn to use the toilet. Children need to be able to participate fully. Children show readiness when they know how to tell us when they need to go, can pull down their pants, sit on the toilet, flush, and wash their hands.

EXPECT ACCIDENTS

Like all learning journeys, toilet learning is a process that usually doesn't happen overnight. Children often have accidents along the way and sometimes experience regressions too. When children learn to walk, we accept that they fall down; when they learn to talk, we accept their babbles; when they learn to use the toilet, we accept their accidents. Mistakes are a valuable part of the learning process around bodily functions like elimination and eating. Accidents allow us to help the child experience persistence, resilience, self-love, and unconditional acceptance.

NO SHAME OR PUNISHMENT

A child's body is his or her own; nothing is more personal than bladder and bowel relief. Shame can cause a child to feel panic, fear, and unworthiness. Emotional stress around toilet learning leads to withholding, accidents, refusal, and power struggles.

BRIBES AND PRIZES

We don't use rewards at school. We use encouraging words and positive support, and we celebrate the child each step of the way. We believe that the intrinsic reward of self-regulation and self-respect is most meaningful and sustainable around bodily functions like elimination and eating.



BUILD TRUST AND GROW LOVE

The simple fact that you have worked together to achieve a goal will set the stage for later parent and child partnerships. Toilet learning can help us learn a great deal about our children and ourselves and can be the foundation for establishing a tone of unconditional love that will carry us through many milestones and parent-child adventures in the years to come.

READINESS FOR ADULTS

When young children are learning to use the toilet in two settings, with several trusted adults, it is even more important that the child must reach a readiness stage where he or she can participate, and own the process. Just as we learn from the children in our care, families are also our teachers. As we look for readiness indicators from the children in our care, we can also begin to prepare the adults supporting children. Gretchen Kinnell includes these adult readiness indicators in her book, *Good Going*:

- Have adults educated themselves about toilet learning, and do they feel confident the child is ready?
- Have adults communicated with one another in the variety of settings where the child is cared for?
- Are adults willing to devote time and view the toilet learning process as a process - realizing that mistakes are an important part of the journey?



Storybook Village Preschool expects parents/guardians to work with us when children learn to use the toilet. We have created structures so that important conversations can happen. When the child shows readiness indicators in both home and school settings, we will hold casual conversations and create a toileting plan based on the child's age and needs.

AN OUTLINE OF STEPS FOR MOVING OUT OF PULL-UPS

There are many variations on toilet learning and countless suggestions about steps, but here is Storybook Village Preschool's outline of the toilet learning process within a partnership developmental approach for children in our group care setting.

- **Share:** We implement toilet learning policies and share helpful literature with families as soon as possible to develop a shared approach and recognize together that toilet learning will be mastered in two settings, with several trusting adults. We acknowledge that communication and agreed-upon practices will support the child's mastery.
- **Decide together:** When the child is ready (when all readiness indicators have been achieved in both settings) and agree upon a mostly-consistent approach. See the Readiness Checklist.
- **Begin:** When home and school have decided the child is ready, the child can begin wearing underpants to school.
- **Continue:** Supporting the child in both home and school environments with a consistent schedule and encouragement, and keep communicating with one another about successes and any pitfalls that may arise.

"Learning to use the toilet is a process that takes time. Rather than push or manipulate your child by giving him treats such as candy or a special reward for something that he will learn to do on his own, trust that he will learn when he is ready. Respect is based on trust."

-Magda Gerber, Dear Parent: Caring for Infants with Respect



PREDICTABLE SCHEDULE

- **At Storybook:** In our classrooms, an important part of the scheduled routine is diapering and toilet learning, which we call Caregiving Routines. Although we let children use the toilet freely if they tell us they need to go, and we attend to children promptly when they are in need (we do not want children to sit in soiled clothes), we also have specific times of the day when we consistently offer children a chance to try the toilet. For children beginning to wear underwear, we have predictable toileting times (every 1.5 to 2 hours) as a helpful reminder for children who are in the toilet learning process.
 - When we have scheduled toileting times, sometimes children say they don't have to go. We just matter-of-factly remind them, it's time to try, and if nothing comes out, that's okay!
- **At home:** As children become interested in toilet learning, it is also important to put predictable routines in place at home. This does not mean that home life needs to be over-scheduled or regimented. Simple sequences like, "It is time to try the potty before we get in the car" and "first we try the potty, then we go play outside." Routines can be established logically, such as going to the toilet after meals or before naps.
 - We don't want to force children to sit on the toilet, and we can't control when children will need to go, but reminders are often necessary at the beginning stages of toilet learning. It is important to realize that at this age, they sometimes are so wrapped up in play that they forget to respond to their bodily urges, or they just don't want to stop playing for fear they will miss out on something fun.
 - Making trips to the potty on a regular part of the family routine is helpful!

IMITATION AND MODELING

- **At Storybook:** We never force children to sit on the toilet, but as they see their peers trying the toilet, they often become curious and want to try. Collaborative learning is one of the advantages of group care - children learn from one another. Toilet learning becomes a social process.
- **At home:** It is sometimes helpful to let children see older siblings or parents in the bathroom. If parents are in the habit of locking the bathroom door to claim a moment of peace, they might consider including children in bathroom rituals. Children need modeling to learn how to sit on the toilet, stand at the toilet, flush, wipe, and wash hands with people they trust and love.

CHOICES

- **At Storybook:** Having a choice respects a child's budding autonomy and self-identity. Some of the options we give children when they are learning the toilet are: "Would you like to try sitting on this toilet or that toilet?" If a child is resistant to using the toilet and we know it is nearing the time they should go, we might say, "Would you like to try the toilet now or in 2 minutes?"
- **At home:** Remember the golden parenting rule, don't give choices unless it is truly a choice, and you are okay with a "no" answer! Choices at home might include:
 - Would you like to use the upstairs bathroom or the downstairs bathroom?
 - Would you like to go now or in 2 minutes? (Set a timer on your phone or microwave)
 - Would you like me to stand next to you or wait outside the door?



INDEPENDENCE THROUGH MOVEMENT

- **At Storybook:** Throughout the toilet learning and diapering process, we encourage children to do as much as they can independently. Through care rituals like toilet learning, hand washing, and dressing, children gain motor development, coordination, sequencing, planning, and problem-solving skills. Self-help skills nourish brain development through whole-body work that integrates movement and thinking, along with a child's sense of accomplishment.
 - Rather than lifting children on the toilet, we give them the time to do it independently. Young children love to do it "all by myself," and we see them as capable and respect their desire for independence. We respect care rituals like toilet learning as a valuable educational milestone in the child's life. We don't rush children during care routines. We give care and the toilet learning journey the same respect we give all learning journeys.
- **At home:** We realize that we have the luxury of creating a child-centered environment at school, and that isn't always possible at home. Sometimes family life is busy, and it often involves some compromise and hurrying times of the day.
 - During toilet learning, it is very helpful if parents can make an effort to slow down and allow children to move at their own pace through caring rituals. For example, rather than lifting a child onto the potty chair, a parent can encourage, "Oh, look how you found your potty chair seat all by yourself." Or, "Now it's time to wash hands - can you show me how you turn the water on and get the soap?" The child can master each step in the process, and when they have this autonomy over their own body, it helps them claim ownership and pride over their accomplishment.



ACCIDENTS

- **At Storybook:** Teachers understand that accidents will happen! Mistakes are learning opportunities - and teachers use a matter-of-fact, supportive, encouraging tone to give children the message that we understand and we are on their side. “Oops, sometimes accidents happen - let’s go choose some clean clothes for you to change into. It’s hard remembering to say ‘I need to pee’ before the pee comes out.” We ask parents to send in extra sets of clothes, so there is no stress about changing several times during the day if need be. Teachers are partners with children while changing clothes - offering to help and encouraging them to remove their own clothing and participate in the process. We do not make children do it all by themselves as a form of consequence or punishment. During mistakes, children need to know that we are still participating in the caring rituals with them.
- **At home:** Parents understand that accidents are part of the process and they are prepared.
 - Make sure you have extra changes of clothes on hand in the car or in the child’s backpack if you are out shopping or doing errands.
 - Remember, toilet learning is one milestone out of many to come, where parents can practice unconditional love.
 - Children should not be punished or shamed for accidents. They should not be forced to clean up a mess as a consequence/punishment, nor should they ever be left in soiled clothing.
 - Parents and teachers recognize that children do not learn by fear or shame.

Family Material and Resources:

- [Potting Training: Learning to Use the Toilet](#)
- [Teaching Your Child to: Become Independent with Daily Routines \(Pyramid Model\)](#)
- [First 5 California Resource for Toilet Training](#)

American Academy of Pediatrics. “Toilet Training Guidelines: Parents: The Role of the Parents in Toilet Training,” *Pediatrics* 103: June (1999).

Garboden-Murray, Carol. *Illuminating Care, The Pedagogy and Practice of Care in Early Childhood Communities*. Nebraska: Exchange Press, 2021.





TOILET LEARNING READINESS CHECKLIST

Once we have filled out the readiness checklists at home and school and agree that the child is ready to move into underwear, we can discuss questions, expectations, and rituals, and decide when the child can start wearing underwear. Although there is no universal magic moment to begin, determining a window or readiness and deciding together on the right time is important for children to be supported and successful in group child care settings.

CHILD'S NAME:

Readiness Indicators	Home Notes	School Notes
18 months old Although there is no magic age when toilet readiness begins, most experts agree that the child should be at least 18 months of age. 24-32 months is the average age when children show readiness.		
Child stays dry for two hours Holding urine for at least 2 hours at a time indicates that the bladder is big enough and the child is mature enough to begin toilet learning.		
Child is having regular BMs Children should be having regular soft comfortable bowel movements. If there is any possibility of bowel withholding or constipation, it should be addressed with a pediatrician.		
Child is aware when wet or soiled Does the child indicate discomfort or show you or tell you when he or she needs to be changed?		
Child can undress Children should be able to pull up and down their pants to practice toilet learning as a self-help skill. It helps to dress children in elastic-waist comfortable clothes.		
Large motor skills Children should be coordinated enough to walk, even run, and climb. Physical readiness will allow the child to be a full participant.		

Readiness Indicators	Home Notes	School Notes
Child can follow simple directions The child will need to cooperate with simple directions to participate.		
Child imitates others & shows pride Role play and imitation are a sign that the child is making sense of his world and motivated to begin toilet learning. Showing pride indicates the child is intrinsically motivated as well as eager to please.		
Child trusts adults We learn from those we trust and love.		
Language The child needs to be able to answer yes and no questions such as “do you need to go?” or “are you wet?” The child should also be using language to describe body parts and waste products.		
Child washes hands The child participates in handwashing routines, and will wash hands with prompting. Handwashing is part of toilet learning, promoting healthy habits.		
Adults are ready to be supportive Adults are communicating in a variety of environments to provide consistency, and they understand there may be some inconvenience in the routine, and are ready to give encouragement and support.		

Special Notes:

HANDWASHING AT HOME

Developed by Rochelle Lentini and Lise Fox

What can I do to prevent the problem behavior of avoiding handwashing?

BELOW ARE TOOLS TO TEACH HOW TO WASH HANDS:

- Get a book about washing hands -- Go to your local library or book store, get a book about washing hands, read it with your child, and then suggest to your child that he/she can make his/her own “washing hands book” using real photos. Take photographs, develop pictures, and staple several pieces of paper together to make a book for your child by gluing in the photographs and writing the steps of hand washing in the book. Read your homemade book to your child prior to going into the bathroom, and allow him/her to read it to you.
- Show the steps -- Use wash hands visual routine sequence to cue steps. Use photographs of each step of the hand washing routine. If the pictures are laminated and Velcroed, your child can remove the picture, or turn the picture over to indicate completion.
- Back up hand washing with something fun -- Tell your child he/she can do something fun after hand washing.
- Make it fun -- decorate sink area with your child’s favorite characters.
- Sing a song -- Sing a fun song about washing hands to encourage child to wash.
- Encourage your child -- Praise for all attempts at washing hands.
- Make sure your child can comfortably reach the sink using a step stool.
- Use pump soap in a decanter if that will be more interesting or fun for your child, or use some scented soap.
- Let your child play in the sink after washing hands.

Why might my child be doing this?

Your child does not want to wash hands.

What can I do if the problem behavior occurs?

- Say to your child, “ I will help you. You turn on the water; I will get soap.”
- Use a first-then cue: first wash hands; then ____.
- Count with your child how many more steps, or count how many times they need to rub his/her hands together, e.g., “O.K. put soap on, now rub 1-2-3” make it fun or silly.
- Remind your child of something fun he/she can do after hand washing.
- Praise for completing each step.
- Praise for washing hands.