Helping your child learn to use the toilet

A guide for parents and carers



DERBYSHIRE County Council

Improving life for local people

Introduction

Learning how to use the toilet is part of growing up and, like many other skills, children learn to do this at different times, in different ways and at different rates.

Learning to use the toilet is an important step towards independence. Children are usually ready to start between 22 and 30 months but some children may be younger and others older. The important things to look out for are the signs that your child is beginning to understand what is going on and what is expected of them.

So, when should we start?

It is a good idea to wait until you can answer 'yes' to most of the following questions:

- **Is your child interested in watching you use the toilet?**

Handy tip: Children have to learn what the toilet is for so do talk about this and let your child find out by watching you on the toilet. As your child becomes ready to use the toilet, make sure that nappies are changed in the bathroom. Let your child watch while you empty the contents of the nappy down the toilet and let them help to flush it.

- **Is your child showing an awareness of being wet or dirty, perhaps by pulling at a wet nappy or showing discomfort when walking in a soiled nappy?**

Handy tip: Look out for little signs. Some children may tell you that they have a dirty nappy while others may fidget, become quiet or assume a particular look!

- **Does your child show a consistent response to the words used at home for urinating and bowel movements e.g. wee and poo?**

Handy tip: Decide as a family what words you will use with your child. Pick words that you are comfortable with and then use these consistently. Tell your wider family (and the child's early years setting if they attend one) which words you will use so that everyone uses the same language.

- **Does your child sometimes stay dry for around two hours?**

Handy tip: If you're not sure, put your child a pair of pants on, or put a piece of kitchen roll inside their nappy and check every half hour for wetness.

- **Does your child have plenty to drink?**

Handy tip: Your child should drink a minimum of six to eight drinks every day. Water or milk is the best although well diluted fruit juice or squash is okay. Don't limit drinks as this can affect how your child's bladder works. Avoid drinks that contain caffeine, for example tea, coffee or cola.

- **Does your child have regular bowel movements?**

Handy tip: your child should pass a soft poo between three times each day and three times each week.

- **Can your child understand and follow simple instructions and try to carry out some self-care tasks independently?**

Handy tip: Talk to your child about the fact that they are getting a little older and that it is really good that they are trying to do things for themselves, such as feeding and dressing.

- **Does your child show some anticipation before they have a poo?**

Handy tip: Signs can be hard to see and may only last a few seconds. Your child may briefly look up from playing, become quiet for a second, their eyes may widen or they could make a particular sound. Other signs may be more obvious such as your child disappearing behind the sofa to fill their nappy.

- **Is your child happy to spend short periods of time without a nappy on?**

Handy tip: Encourage your child to spend some time without a nappy on. It might make more sense to your child if you do this in the morning before getting dressed, after a bath or after a nappy change.

If you cannot answer 'yes' to most of the questions above, wait a few weeks and then go through the list of questions again. While waiting, refer to all the handy hints above to give your child the best possible chance of being ready.

Getting ready

Before you start teaching your child make sure that you have the time and energy to devote to this. It is not usually a good idea to begin the process if you know that you have a busy or stressful time ahead, so take time to check that you haven't got too many other things to do or worry about. Similarly the time has to be right for your child. Just after starting at a new nursery or playgroup, when your child may be quite anxious, may not be a good time.

First of all you need to decide if you are going to use a potty or not. This is a personal decision. Potties can be useful in that they are portable so if your child needs a wee while you are on a car journey you can pull over and get out the potty. However, some children find it difficult to transfer from the potty to the toilet and this can create problems.

When you begin teaching your child make sure that he or she feels comfortable and secure when sitting on the toilet or potty. There are lots of toilet seats and styles of potty around so make sure you choose one that suits your child. If you are using the toilet, you may want to think about getting a toilet step so that your child is able to keep his or her feet on a solid surface while sitting.

Role play can also be useful. Pretend that one of your child's dolls or toys is using the potty and give them lots of praise when they do. If your child likes story books there are some excellent ones about learning to use the potty. Visit your local library to see what they have to offer.

It is a good idea to make sure that your child is wearing clothes that are easy to take off or pull down as you may not get much notice. Try to avoid complicated fasteners, dungarees and many layers of clothes.

Children who don't experience feeling 'wet' usually take longer to learn how to use the toilet, than those who do. Modern nappies and pull ups are particularly comfortable and don't allow children to feel that they are wet so it is important to move onto pants as soon as you can.

Once you have made the decision to take off nappies, make sure that you have a large stock of pants ready – you will probably need more supplies than you think. Stick to your decision and get rid of the nappies so you are not tempted to start using them if the going gets tough.

Getting started

If your child attends pre-school, nursery or a childminder, explain to them that your child is going to start learning to use the toilet. Send lots of spare clothes including shoes and socks as these may also get wet if your child has an accident.

Encourage your child to try and use the toilet every couple of hours. Don't ask them if they want to go as they may say 'no' – tell them that it's time to try. If you think you might forget use a kitchen timer to remind you and your child.

Never force your child to sit on the potty or toilet and do not expect him or her to sit for longer than two minutes each time.

Make the potty or toilet area exciting by putting up pictures or keeping some favourite toys nearby.

Give plenty of drinks during the day to keep the bladder healthy and give lots of opportunity for passing urine.



You may find it helps to link sitting on the potty or toilet to a regular event (for example, a few minutes after a meal or snack) and to start the habit of sitting on the potty or toilet just before you go out and after you get back home.

Make sure your child always knows where the potty or toilet is in case they want to use it as you probably won't get much notice.

All children need to be encouraged and praised for their efforts. Many children will find a reward motivating. Some children will like a small treat, others may like a special event such as phoning grandma to tell her. Other children will find a sticker or star chart a big incentive or may like to sing a special song.

Give the agreed reward as soon as you can after the event and remember to reward every time and for every effort, however small. Be clear about what you are rewarding, for example: 'Here's your sticker for trying to do a wee on the potty'. Reward all progress, for example your child telling you that they need a wee, sitting on the toilet or actually using it. Never remove a reward that has been earned if an accident happens later.

Be patient

Do not expect immediate success. Learning to use the toilet could take some time, usually several months. Be prepared for accidents and try to be relaxed about it. It will not help you or your child if you are tense and anxious. You can expect many false alarms. If you are ready for these, it may help reduce your frustrations.

Becoming clean and dry can be a difficult task for children. As with any new skill, they have to practice to get it right and there will be mistakes. When your child has accidents it's really important to remember that he or she won't be doing this on purpose and is not trying to be naughty.

Remember that accidents are more likely to happen if your child is unwell, on medication, anxious, sleepy or engrossed in play. All children go through this stage and it will pass.

Children usually learn how to stay dry through the night about six months to a year after becoming dry in the day. This is a rough guide – some children may do this sooner, others may take a little longer.

Once learning has begun don't put a nappy on 'just in case' if you are going out as this gives the confusing messages to the child. Plan outings and check that a toilet or potty will be available.

If you are concerned about this area of your child's development, speak to your health visitor who may be able to help.



Children in care or those who have recently been adopted

It is important to make sure the child has time to settle into your home and to build up trust before starting potty training. Nappy changing time can be an important opportunity for you to show gentle, sensitive, nurturing care towards your child and can help with the bonding process. Don't worry if this means they may be potty training later than their peers.

If they show particular fear or anxiety about going in the bathroom or sitting on the toilet, you may have to build up to this gradually. Sometimes children who have had difficult early life experiences can use toileting as a way of trying to exert some control on their lives and those around them so continue to wet or soil. Over time, and as your child learns to trust you, these incidents will lessen. If your child sees that this behaviour causes you to become angry or frustrated it is more likely to lead to further incidents.

Children with special educational needs or a disability

If your child has a disability, learning needs or a medical condition, this might mean that learning to use the toilet can be more difficult. Some children will take longer, may need different equipment or different methods to learn to use the toilet. Talk to the health or education services who are already involved if you would like some further help with this.

There is also information on continence support on the Derbyshire Local Offer website **localoffer.derbyshire.gov.uk**



Further ways to help

Using the toilet independently relies on your child learning a lot of new skills. In addition to the having a wee or a poo in the right place, teach your child how to:

- Pull his or her pants and trousers up and down
- Wash and dry his or her hands
- Wipe his or her bottom after using the toilet.

Learning to use the toilet can be a challenging and stressful time for both you and your child. However we hope the information in this leaflet makes it as pain-free as possible and that your child will very soon be using the toilet independently. Good luck.

Useful links:

Visit the website of the children's continence charity ERIC **www.eric.org.uk**

Look online for NHS Choices and search for toilet training **www.nhs.uk**

Visit the website of the Institute of Health Visiting **www.ihv.org.uk**



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