

A Guide to Toilet Learning

Toilet learning can be a daunting task for many parents. Knowing what practices to follow can be challenging with so much information available. To make it easier for you, I have created a simple guide that provides all the essential information you need to know about toileting independence in young children and how to support toilet learning at home. I hope you will find this guide helpful. Do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or need additional support.

Toilet Learning vs. Potty Training

The process of transitioning from diapers to using the toilet is more commonly referred to as “potty training” in the US, but we refer to it as toilet learning in Montessori. There are a few notable differences. Potty training is typically adult-led with an imposed timetable (e.g., planning to potty train your child over a long weekend at home) and often utilizes rewards and punishments. Toilet learning, on the other hand, is a gradual process that is child-led. We start by creating body awareness and inviting collaboration in caregiving routines, then gradually provide opportunities for your child to practice using the bathroom. With toilet learning, children possess an internal drive to develop new skills and become independent. Using rewards or punishment would only diminish their intrinsic motivation.

Four Factors for Success

You might wonder, *“How do I know my child is ready to use the potty?”* Instead of looking for signs of readiness, let's look at four factors that will set your child up for success in learning to use the toilet.

1. *Control of sphincter muscles*—Children must control their sphincter muscles to use the toilet independently and successfully. They typically gain this control by the time they are walking.
2. *Body awareness* - Your child needs to be aware of their bodily cues. You can support

this awareness by switching them out of diapers into training pants so they can start making a connection between elimination and the sensation of being wet/soiled.

3. *Independent dressing and undressing* - Your child must be able to dress and undress themselves to be successful with toileting. This involves a lot of collaboration at first, but you should only offer as much help as needed.

4. *A desire to do it*—We can't force them to use the toilet; they have to want to. Your attitude and reactions play an important role here, but we'll discuss that later. Rely on intrinsic motivation instead of using rewards or punishment.

Preparing a Toileting Space in Your Home

The first step to supporting your child's toilet learning journey is to prepare a toileting space in your home. Ideally, you would prepare an area in your bathroom for their toileting needs. Having the toilet in one area supports your child's development of order and orientation. But if there isn't enough room in your bathroom, then any designated space will do. You will need the following:

- A potty chair or toilet seat insert
- A source of water for independent handwashing
- A small chair or stool to sit down and remove soiled clothing
- Easy access to extra clothes, wipes, training underwear, and cleaning supplies (e.g., towels and a spray bottle of distilled white vinegar)
- A laundry basket where your child can put soiled clothing or hang a wet bag
- A vertical mirror to help your toddler see what they are doing as they dress, and undress

The key to creating your toddler's toileting space is





accessibility. Think about how you can prepare the environment to allow your toddler to be as independent as possible. For example, you don't need to install a child-size sink in your bathroom, but a stool and faucet extender can make the sink more accessible to your child for independent handwashing.

The Stand-Up Diaper Change

Once you have prepared a space for your child's toileting needs, you can start doing stand-up diaper changes in that area to encourage collaboration with your toddler. They will be happy to actively participate in the process, even if all they do is push down their pants. Invite your child to sit on the toilet/potty chair before putting on a new diaper. However long they choose to sit is okay. Remember - no pressure! Your goal is simply to create opportunities for your toddler to sit on the potty. And when you're ready, you can make the switch to underwear. When your child enters the Toddler Community, it is expected that your toddler switches to cloth underwear at home and at school. Consistency is key.

The Cloth Underwear Change

At this stage, it is normal for your child to just wear underwear at home. This helps them feel their body has the function to urinate or have a BM. If you prefer your toddler to wear underwear and pants at home be aware it might be too many layers for them to remove before they sit on the toilet. Start with underwear, then slowly introduce pants.

Invite your child to push down their underwear by modeling on their body then inviting them to do it themselves. Encourage your toddler to sit down on the toilet. Next, you will model on their body how to remove one leg from the hole of the underwear and invite your toddler to remove the other. Invite your child to place their soiled underwear in the laundry basket or wet bag. Encourage your child to go to the drawer to retrieve dry underwear. You will model how to put one leg in the underwear and invite your child to do the other leg in the hole. When your toddler is done. They will stand up and you will model how to pull up their underwear. Your toddler will be excited to try.

Note:

- We do not give rewards such as stickers or treats. The reward is being dry.
- We believe in “natural consequences” for example, if the child is wet, then they will feel uncomfortable and naturally they will want to freshen up/change. They will eventually learn to control relieving themselves in the potty to not feel that discomfort.
- When you are ready to introduce pants you will repeat the same method as



underwear.

- Eventually your child will be able to remove and put on clothes independently. Allow them to take their time.

Creating a Routine

You will also want to establish a toileting routine. An easy way to do this is to invite your child to sit on the toilet/potty chair during natural transitions throughout the day, such as when they wake up, before leaving the house, before and after meals, before getting into the bath, and before bed. When you offer the toilet at routine times, your child will start to see it as a regular part of their day. It also ensures they have many opportunities to practice.

Supportive Language

Be mindful of how you invite your toddler to use the potty. If you make it a yes or no question (e.g., *"Do you want to use the toilet?"*), then they will most likely say no. Instead, you can say, *"It's time to use the toilet,"* or *"Let's go use the toilet."* This way, you leave less room for them to say no. Of course, there will be times when you forget and ask your child if they want to use the toilet. If the answer is no, wait 5-10 minutes before inviting them to use the toilet again. See below for a list of other toileting language and phrases to use with your toddler:

- Use proper names for body parts to help your child develop a complete awareness of their body.
- Use *wet* and *dry* to describe your child's sensations instead of calling it an accident, which can sometimes have a negative connotation.
- At school, we use the phrase *freshen up* when we notice a child has soiled their clothes (e.g., *"I noticed your pants are wet. Let's go to the bathroom and freshen up."*).
- Be descriptive when talking through the steps. We *push down* and *pull up* our pants. We also hold our underwear and pants by the *waistband*.
- Offer a choice if they're resistant (e.g., *"Let's go use the bathroom before we go outside. Do you want to walk or jump to the bathroom?"*).
- When celebrating their accomplishments, match their level of excitement (e.g., *"I see you peed in the potty. Let's empty the potty into the toilet, and then you can help me flush,"* or *"You peed in the toilet! I can see you feel really proud of yourself!"*)

Clothing that Supports Toileting Independence

To support toileting independence, clothing should be easy to put on and remove. Bottoms should be loose-fitting to make it easier to independently pull up and push down (i.e., no leggings or skinny jeans). Look for elastic waistbands, and avoid elastic cuffs around the ankles.



Your toddler must be able to remove clothes quickly to make it to the toilet in time. It can be difficult to push clothes down quickly if they are too small/tight or if there are buttons, snaps, or buckles to undo first. While stylish and cute, clothing like dresses, skirts, rompers, and overalls hinder your child's ability to use the toilet independently. It's best to keep your toddler's clothing simple during toilet learning.

Don't Sweat the Mess

Your toddler's toileting journey is going to get messy. There will be pee on the floor and poop in their pants - it's just another part of the process. In those moments, they will need you to remain calm and matter-of-fact. *"I see there's pee on the floor. Let's get a towel and wipe it up. Next time you feel you need to pee, you can sit on the potty."* Avoid negative reactions, which can cause your child to feel anxiety, stress, or shame about their bodily functions and toileting. Prepare for the messy side of toileting in advance by figuring out how you want to handle clean-up and ensuring you have everything readily available. In the future you will be grateful!

Regressions and Other Struggles

Your child may be making a lot of progress, and then suddenly, they regress. Regressions are a normal part of the process and can occur for many reasons:

- Disruption to their regular routine, including illness, a family vacation, or welcoming a new baby.
- Loss of control—Children only have control over three things: sleeping, eating, and toileting. If they don't feel they can make choices in other areas of their lives, they might start exerting control in one or more of these three areas. You can avoid these power struggles by providing plenty of opportunities for your child to make choices.
- Shame or pressure—Consider how you or other caregivers respond to this process to ensure everyone has a positive and supportive attitude.

If your child starts to regress, don't fret! Trust in the process and continue to offer your love and support. You can also contact me anytime if you're dealing with regression or other toileting struggles at home. I am here to help!

Additional Resources

I know toilet learning can feel overwhelming, so I created this guide to help you feel better prepared to introduce toileting at home. I tried to narrow it down to what I think is most



important for you to know, but I could go on about toileting. Instead, I included a list of additional resources for anyone interested in learning more on the following page. And, of course, I am always available to answer your toileting questions.

Best,

Naj Bachinski

Amity Creek Guide

Toileting Resources

- Books:

[Toilet Awareness](#) by Sarah Moudry

[Babies Build Toddlers](#) by Mariana Bissonnette (in the chapter on hygiene)

[The Montessori Toddler](#) by Simone Davies - (Part Two - Dealing with Changes)

- Articles:

[A Montessori Approach to Toilet Training](#) (The Montessori Notebook)

- Podcasts:

Shelf Help, Episode 35 - [An Introduction to Montessori Potty Learning](#)

Lovevery: My New Life, Season 3 Episode 7 - [Perspectives on Toileting with Author of 'Oh, Crap! Potty Training'](#)

Lovevery, My New Life, Season 3 Episode 8 - [A Montessori Perspective on Toilet Learning](#)

- Books for Children:

Everyone Poops by Taro Gomi

Even Firefighters Go to the Potty by Naomi and Wendy Wax

Diapers Are Not Forever by Elizabeth Verdick

A Potty for Me by Karen Katz

Potty! By Carol Zeavin

Potty by Leslie Patricelli

Ready to Go: Pee by Lovevery

Ready to Go: Poop by Lovevery

