

A parent's guide to... **potty training**

Moving your child out of nappies can involve challenges – but there are ways to make the process easier. *Penny Tassoni* explains



Potty training is one of those developmental stages that can sometimes be quite tricky for both children and parents to navigate. While there are plenty of success stories, there are many factors involved in potty training that can cause things to go badly awry. Here, we offer some background information and advice.

FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT POTTY TRAINING

1. Stage not age

There is a wide variance in the age at which children might be ready for potty training. Children as young as 15 months can surprise their parents by being ready, while it is perfectly normal for children to be closer to or

over three years old before they are clean and dry. Most children at four years are clean, dry and reliable.

Successful potty training requires two things to be in place: bladder maturation and awareness and understanding of the process.

2. Bladder maturation

For potty training to be successful, children's bladders have to be sufficiently mature. This means that they can hold urine for a period of time, at least an hour, preferably an hour and half, before releasing it completely. You can check this by seeing how long your child's nappy remains dry after changing. It is the speed at which your child's bladder reaches this level of maturity that will influence how early potty training can begin.

3. Ready, steady, go!

Once children have gained bladder maturation and also awareness that they are passing urine or poo, it is not a good idea to delay potty training. Children who stay in nappies for several months after showing awareness and bladder maturation may become used to wetting and soiling in them and so lose the motivation to become clean and dry.

4. Reflex action

Years ago, babies were potty trained as newborns to save on the laundering of nappies. This system relied on babies learning to urinate as a reflex action when they felt the cold brim of a bowl or toilet seat. Some children can learn to pass urine before they are potty trained as part of a routine – for example, sitting on the toilet before a shower. Whilst this is useful in helping children to learn to urinate without a nappy, it is not a guarantee that a child is ready for potty training.

5. Signalling delay

Unlike adults, children's bladders send out 'empty me' signals very late. While adults' bladders do this from half full, giving us plenty of notice, children's bladders are nearly full when the signals are sent out. This is one of the reasons why children may have accidents.

PREPARATION

In the period before potty training begins, it can be worth doing some background preparation. This can help your child to become more aware of their bodily functions and also can help them with some of the practical skills.

Dressing It is helpful if your child has practised pulling up and down trousers and even trying out pants.

Language Before potty training starts it is helpful if you have talked to your child about the process – for example, 'wee wee coming out' or 'poo coming', using whatever words feel right for you. This helps children to recognise what is happening and also have words to use when they need to go.

Learning by watching It is helpful if children have seen others go to the toilet. This helps them to learn that going to the toilet is a natural process. As a parent, this is something that you can help with, by letting your child come with you to the loo. For obvious reasons this is something that cannot be done in early years settings, so it is important to do this at home.

Getting used to the potty Buy a potty ahead of time. Look for one that is robust and stable. Encourage your child to sit on it, but only if they are interested. Try also sharing books about potty training, such as *I Want My Potty!* by Tony Ross.

Keeping a diary Keep a note of when your child seems to poo. See if there are any patterns that emerge

so that you can anticipate when it is most likely to happen.

STARTING OUT

When you think that your child is ready, choose a time that is fairly quiet and relaxed. It may take a few days before your child gets the hang of it, so bear this in mind.

On day one, slip on a pair of pants instead of the nappy and talk to your child about using the potty. You could share a book about potty training. Agree with your child the location of the potty. As the time between feeling the need to go and the urine appearing is very short, it is important that it is close at hand. Consider having more than one.

On day one, it is important for your child to have some success. It is, therefore, worth waiting an hour or so and encouraging your child to try using the potty as their bladder is likely to be getting fairly full.

If they are not interested or do not produce anything, don't make a fuss and don't make them stay. Instead, simply say something such as 'It looks like your wee wee is not ready to come out now.' Later, if you see that your child is showing signs of a full bladder, say something such as 'Your wee wee is ready to come out.'

Don't worry if there are accidents on day one, as children have to learn the signals associated with a full bladder. The speed at which children get the hang of potty training does vary, but if after day two or three there have been no successes or near misses, you might need to go back

to nappies and try again in a few weeks' time.

FIVE TIPS FOR POTTY TRAINING

Here are some tips to help make the start of potty training easier.

1. Make sure that your child is drinking regularly

It is helpful if children are producing urine at a fairly constant rate as this will help them get into a routine. It will also prevent them from becoming dehydrated. On average, children will need six to eight cups of water a day.

2. Keep calm

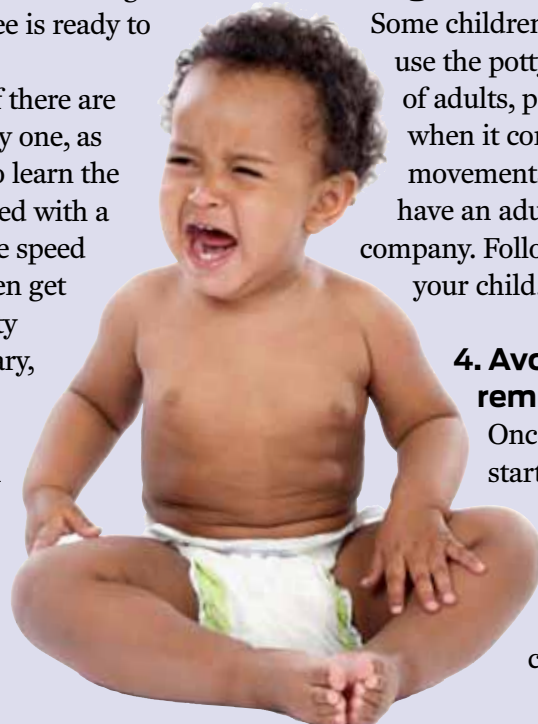
It is very important to keep calm during the potty training process. Any pressure from adults can backfire very badly. To pass urine, children need to relax and so having an adult getting cross with them or standing over them is unlikely to help. In the same way, it is not recommended for children to be forced to sit on the potty as children will start to associate the potty with being miserable.

3. Be guided by your child

Some children prefer to use the potty out of sight of adults, particularly when it comes to bowel movements. Others like to have an adult to keep them company. Follow the cues of your child.

4. Avoid constant reminders

Once your child has started to get the hang of using the potty, it is important not to give constant



reminders or to suggest that they go too often. To become reliable, your child needs to learn what it feels like to have a full bladder and the signals that the bladder sends. At first, withdrawing reminders might cause a few accidents, but this is part of your child's learning.

5. Use ping pong balls!

Once boys have mastered potty training, it is likely that they may wish to pee standing up. Many parents find putting a ping pong ball into the toilet helpful so that there is something to aim at.

COMMON PROBLEMS

Q. My daughter is two-and-a-half years old and I think she is ready for potty training. I am not sure whether to use pull-ups to start with.

A. Pull-ups divide opinion. On the one hand, some people swear by them and say that they are helpful in making transition from nappies to pants. Others say that they delay the process as children still feel as if they are in a nappy. There is no particular evidence that they are needed and so it is very much a question of personal preference.

Q. My son is just four years old. I was wondering how long it will take for him to last through the night.

A. This is very variable with most children doing this somewhere between three to five years. There is not much that you can do at present, apart from noticing whether he is sometimes waking up with a dry nappy. If this is happening and he is interested in having a go, you could then put out a potty for him.

It is also worth making sure that he is drinking regularly through the day and perhaps not giving him a drink just before bedtime. Some



parents also take their children at night to the toilet. If you choose to do this, make sure that he is awake when he is urinating. Otherwise, you will be effectively teaching him to pee when he is asleep.

COMMON DIFFICULTIES

There are two common difficulties associated with potty training, which are worth knowing about.

Constipation

Some children during potty training can become constipated. They may avoid producing stools and so retain them instead. This can quickly lead to a situation when mild constipation becomes more serious and may need medical intervention.

If your child does not want to use the potty for their poo, it is therefore worth putting them back in a nappy. Over time, you can loosen the nappy before going on to line the potty with the nappy.

To avoid constipation, it is also worth making sure that your child drinks enough water and has plenty of fruit and vegetables. It is also

useful keeping a note of your child's bowel movements and if there are signs of constipation to seek medical advice quickly.

Urinary infections

Some children, especially girls, can develop urinary infections during and after potty training. Signs of a urinary infection include a frequent need to go to the toilet, wetting accidents, pain when urinating and so children resisting the potty, and blood in urine. If you spot these signs, seek medical advice promptly as antibiotics may be needed.

To avoid urinary infections, it is worth understanding why they may develop. Some infections are caused by children delaying going to the toilet. It is important, therefore, for adults not to tell children to wait if they need to go.

In girls, another common cause of infection is their not wiping their bottoms from front to back. This can introduce bacteria into the vagina. Take control of wiping at first until you are sure that your child can manage this properly. ■