

Toilet training

Saying goodbye to nappies can be a drawn-out affair, but there are simple ways early years settings and parents can work together to cope with the challenges, says

Sarah Ockwell-Smith...



about the author

Sarah Ockwell-Smith is a parenting expert and mother of four. She is the author of *BabyCalm: A Guide for Calmer Babies and Happier Parents* and *ToddlerCalm: A Guide for Calmer Toddlers and Happier Parents*. Her third book, *The Calm Baby and Toddler Sleep Book*, will be released in 2015. Sarah is also the founder of GentleParenting - visit gentleparenting.co.uk

HOLD THE REWARDS!

HANDING OUT INCENTIVES CAN PROVE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE...

I am not a fan of rewarding children for their behaviour and do not endorse star charts or stickers, as research has shown that they are not effective in the long term and may even cause problems. As such, I feel strongly that toilet training should be free from external rewards such as sweets or stickers. The act of toileting should be treated as normally as possible. The biggest aim with toilet training is to teach children to listen to their own bodies and the cues. If toddlers are toilet-trained using rewards it may teach them to override their bodily signals in order to receive a treat, which ultimately is counterproductive. In addition, toddlers can regress in their toileting if rewards are withdrawn.

Working with a child's innate beliefs and helping them to feel proud of themselves when they use the toilet can never be taken away or over-ridden. Be mindful of your language too. Rather than using generic comments such as "Good boy", it is more effective to say, "You must feel like such a big boy with your new pants" or "I bet you feel proud of yourself for doing using the potty". Toddlers are hard-wired to want to explore, experience new things and grow - the reward of their own achievement is more than enough for them.

The average child will get through five thousand nappies by the time they are toilet trained! It's no surprise, then, that parents are often keen to get their offspring toilet trained as soon as possible. The average age a child attains daytime dryness is two years and eight months, but night-time dryness takes far longer and it is normal for a child to be in nappies at night until the age of seven. It is important, however, to understand that these are just averages. Some toddlers will be ready to start toilet training earlier, while others will not be ready until after their third birthday. One of the most important things early years practitioners can do to aid the toilet learning process is to reassure parents of this wide range of normality - another is helping parents to understand that if toilet training is undertaken at a time dictated by the child, it is likely to be easier. Far too many over-eager parents struggle with soggy pants and constant changing of bed sheets needlessly.

Ready to train?

Helping parents to recognise when their toddler is ready to begin toilet training can be incredibly helpful. There are a number of signs to be aware of - watch out for toddlers:

- passing the age of 18 months - before this it is unlikely that toddlers are physically developed enough to control their bladder and bowels;
- beginning to poo only in the daytime;
- becoming aware of toileting;
- asking to have their nappy changed;
- telling parents when they need to go to the toilet;
- asking to wear pants instead of a nappy;
- asking to use the potty or toilet;
- being interested in other family members using the toilet.

As early years practitioners, you may be one of the first to notice these signs, sometimes before parents have. If you do notice a child exhibiting one or more of these signs and the parent has yet to start toilet training, it can be very helpful to chat with the parent and suggest their child is showing some signs of toilet training readiness that they may not have spotted.

How to begin

Allowing toddlers as much control as possible over toilet training is perhaps the key to success. This can be achieved by parents:

- letting the toddler choose his own potty;
- letting the toddler choose where in the house the potty should go;
- letting the toddler choose his new big boy pants;
- selecting story books that talk about potty training.

A lovely way to incorporate all of these is for parents to go on a special toilet training shopping trip to buy all of the above. Throughout the trip, the parent should chat excitedly about the new stage in the child's life.

It is also important that both parents and early years settings normalise the toileting process as much as possible. A great tip for early years practitioners is to share books about potty training and simplified explanations of the digestive and excretory system during story time. In addition, talk about visiting the toilet or using the potty, and make sure that the child understands any rules or processes you have in place in your setting. Using pictorial instructions here can be very helpful.

Practical issues

When potty training, it is vital parents never go out without lots of spare underwear and a new set of clean clothing. Reminding parents of this and encouraging them to bring spares in to your setting can be very helpful as it saves the toddler the potential embarrassment of wearing nursery spares. If the toddler is toilet training at home, it can be easier to leave them naked from the waist down, for easier and most importantly quicker access. Toddlers are not known for giving much warning of their impending toilet needs. At your setting, encourage children to think about going to the toilet before beginning a new activity, engaging with a new toy or playing outside. Otherwise they quickly become too engrossed and often miss their bodies' cues until it is too late! Watch out for any signs children may show when they need the toilet and if you, or parents, spot these signs, you should always ask "Do you think it may be time to use the potty?" instead of telling them that they need to go. The former invites a learning opportunity, whereas the latter doesn't.

When things go wrong

It is important to never tell children off for any accidents they may have. This is especially true for parents, who can take accidents and set-backs rather personally. It is really important to remind parents that the child is still learning and is only very small. When an accident happens, let the toddler know that it's okay. Empathy is a far more constructive way of dealing with accidents than chastising. Any cleaning up after an accident should be done in a very matter of fact fashion and ideally nobody will show irritation over having to clean up.

It is common for toddlers to have issues with poo, and these can have either a physical or psychological cause. In terms of physical comfort, it is very important that a child is able to poo (on a potty or a toilet)

with their feet resting flat on the ground or a step. Humans are meant to poo while in a squatting position, with feet firmly on the floor. This position allows the muscles around the anus to loosen allowing for the easy passage of poo. For children, sitting on toilets with legs dangling from a toilet seat can cause the anal muscles to tighten making it harder to poo.

Constipation, and related memories and fears, can make many toddlers reluctant to use the toilet. They will often hold in their poo for as long as possible; however, this then leads to even more constipation. Looking at the child's diet and fluid intake is a good place to start. Many, though, will need a far more psychological approach. The wonderful story *Poo Goes to Pooland* really helps young children who are fearful of pooing (find it online at bit.ly/1trfEnd).

Above all else though, remember to remind parents that their child is normal. It is very unlikely that there are any greater issues at play, and for most the key to successful toilet training is simply patience and time!