

Learning to use the toilet

Learning to use the toilet is an important milestone for toddlers. It is a big step as they learn to understand their body's signals and start to be responsible for their own bodies.

Each child is different. Some seem to almost train themselves while others need some help. The most important thing is that they are ready and you are relaxed and patient. Children respond best to praise and encouragement when learning this new skill.

What is the best way?

It used to be common for parents to decide the right time for their child to learn to use the toilet. However what seems to work best is for parents to follow the child's lead and watch for signs they are ready.

Many children follow the same steps when learning to use the toilet, but each will learn at their own pace.

Are they ready?

Many children start to show their readiness and the physical maturity needed for this skill between 18 months and 3 years.

Some signs they are ready are your child's ability to:

- copy your behaviour and follow simple instructions



- use words or signs for wee and poo, and show an interest in others using the toilet. They may ask to use it too
- pull their pants up and down
- stay dry for 2 hours or more in the day. This shows they have developed to the point where they can 'hold on' a little rather than their bladder just emptying itself when full like babies and younger toddlers
- tell you they have just done a wee or poo in their nappy, or when their bladder or bowel is full
- walk and they can sit for short periods of time.

Your child doesn't need to show all these signs but it does help to wait until they show some.

Signs your child is ready to learn to use the toilet are more important than their age. It is a big step in their development and can't be rushed.



Learning to use the toilet works best in a relaxed and supportive environment. Try to make it as easy and fun as possible. Avoid starting when your child is coping with other big changes.

How long will it take?

Some children learn within 3 to 4 weeks while for others it may be a few days. Quite often girls learn earlier than boys, but this is not always the case. If your child is not making progress after about 4 weeks, they may not be ready. Wait a few weeks and try again.

Getting started

If you think your child may be ready to start, choose a time when you will have the time and patience to give it your attention.

- Encourage your child to tell you when they have done a wee or poo in their nappy.
- Watch for signs they are about to do a wee or poo, eg fidgeting or crossing their legs. If your child tells you before they do a wee or poo, thank them and take them to the toilet or potty straight away. If they don't get there in time at first, give praise for whatever they have managed.
- If your child is relaxed about it you could take their nappy off and put them on the toilet or potty at a time when they usually wee or poo, eg about 20 minutes after a meal or soon after a sleep if they wake up dry.

Don't feel pressured to start too early. It takes longer if your child is not ready.



Keep in mind all children are different. What worked for one child won't necessarily work for another. Often firstborn children take longer than younger siblings who pick up cues from them.

Children like pleasing their parents. Reward each small step with cuddles and encouraging words rather than offering treats.

If you have any concerns talk to your doctor or visit the Child and Family Health Service - book an appointment on 1300 733 606.

Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, guardians, foster or kinship carers.

Want more information?

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Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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