

Potty Training Guide

- When and how should you start potty training?
- Who should take the lead?

There is baby-led breastfeeding, and there is baby-led weaning, so why not make potty training a no-stress process by letting your child take the lead there as well?

A modern guideline for modern parents

Switching to potty training and ditching the diapers is a very important stage in the development of young children, but it can also be a headache for parents.

You might feel that it is up to you as the parent to potty train your child, and that all their success depends upon you. After all, this is what will make you either a good or a bad parent. But that is not true!

Potty training is a journey that you take together with your child, but only when he/she is ready for it and has reached a certain stage of their development.

You don't need to potty train your child, but there are many things you can do to support your 'little human' as they master this natural and basic skill by him/herself when the time has come.

Not all children are ready for this step at the same age, and not all children learn it with the same speed. The biggest questions parents face is when and how to start the potty-training process.

We've dug into the details for you; we've searched the **best practices**, read the **latest articles** and **evidence-based guides**, added in **our experiences with our own children** and asked many other parents for their opinions and what lessons they've learned. We've also **consulted with a paediatrician, Dr Zsuzsanna Aschenbrenner**, who is a great expert of the topic and has a lot of personal practice, being a mum of five children herself.

All of our research was conducted with the aim of collecting the most recent knowledge and making sure that we have everything written down correctly for you. This guideline will show you how you can prepare and help your children by consciously assisting them in the process of potty training, with no stress and no mess ... or less mess! :)

Coming up next are all the details that can help you take this journey together with your child without any stress. Don't forget, your child is the captain, and you are their assistant.

Some basic rules to always keep in mind:

- **Understand** that elimination is a learning process which actually starts right after birth and is affected by your attitude as a parent. Whether you start with diapers or choose to practice elimination communication (EC) with your baby, the switch to using a potty and real conscious elimination are the parts of the learning process where your child needs your co-operation, but not your taking the lead.
- **Remember** that your child has to be mature enough and must be at the stage of their development where they are able to control their muscles, recognise cause-and-effect relationships and show an interest in starting potty training.
- **Don't push** potty training, but prepare for it. Create the right environment to ease the process, and assist your child when you see them displaying signs of readiness for potty training.
- **Relax and be patient!** Yes, patience, patience (aaaaand did we already say patience?) is crucial to properly support your child and to avoid doing any harm during this sensitive learning process.

1. WAIT UNTIL YOUR CHILD IS BOTH MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY READY.

Development and maturity levels can differ from child to child, but between the ages of 18 to 36 months (an average age of 27 months) the time might come to take the step to get rid of diapers. **Maturity in regard to potty training means that the child's nervous system has developed, and that mentally, they have all the needed connections built up in the brain.** It takes time to be able to entirely control their muscles and to be physically ready to do so in the first place. Small children are not fully aware of the need for elimination, and they relieve themselves whenever they feel that sensation. They have learned very early on how to let go by easing their muscles, which are also called the sphincter muscles. Potty-training children have to learn to recognise this feeling, acknowledge the stimulus and be able to identify the urge. But more importantly, they need to be able to control their sphincter muscles and to hold the pee or poop till arriving to the potty. In addition, **your child has to understand the relation between the urge of peeing or pooping and the fact that he or she needs to go to a potty to eliminate there.** Besides all of this, children should be emotionally ready to switch from diapers and to be able to let go of their waste, which they often see as belonging to them as part of their body. Therefore, give the process some time.

2. LOOK FOR THE SIGNS AND EVALUATE READINESS.

It is important to do this based on your child only; **never compare your child to other children.** Observe, listen and be there to help when needed, but relax and leave this part of the process to your child. You will know they are ready when the time has come. One sign could be that your child starts to feel uncomfortable in dirty diapers and communicates it in some way, or maybe even tries to tear the wet or soiled diaper off. Other signs could be when your child

develops the habit to go to a given place or to hide somewhere to eliminate consciously. **You'll know that potty readiness is there when your child can recognise and identify the urge to pee or poop,** and when he/she is able to hold it and eliminate consciously in a potty or toilet, and in the meantime understands the cause-and-effect relationship of this complex process (from the moment of recognition till elimination). However, **staying dry during the night does not mean readiness for potty training,** as night-time readiness depends on other factors of development, and often the ability to control elimination during the daytime or the night does not go hand-in-hand or happen at the same time. For potty training, the focus is on the learning process of the conscious daytime period.

3. HELP TO IDENTIFY BEHAVIOURS AND INTRODUCE THE TOPIC BY TEACHING SOME EXPRESSIONS.

Using a potty will be new to your child, so get them used to the idea gradually and show them that 'there is life after diapers'. **Without over-pushing the potty topic, you can ease the process by helping your child get familiar with it and understand some fundamentals there.** Start with some basic words, and when you change their diaper, say these words out loud to help your child distinguish between pee, poop, dry, wet and soiled. Introduce these terms to express the act of you going to the toilet and your child is around. Identify behaviours and help your child learn to recognise the feeling of the urge to pee and poop. To strengthen body consciousness, you can start asking questions like: **'Are you peeing now?' or 'Are you up to pooping?'** You can even try to ask your child to let you know when their diaper is wet or soiled, and you can start the co-operation there by teaching him/her to sense and check for dryness. But don't make a big deal out of this; let it be a natural thing, something like asking if he/she is thirsty or hungry.

4. READ ABOUT IT OR PLAY TOGETHER TO LEARN ABOUT THE PROCESS.

You can give your child hints toward potty training by reading about it, or by playing. There are more and more great books for toddlers about using a potty, explaining what happens to the pee or poop when it gets flushed. Some children like to know everything, and these books can help them to get familiar with the topic and to learn about the process. If you want, you can also come up with your own little story to tell your children to help them know what's going on. Your child might also find it fun to play a game together when you change diapers on their toys or plushies, or to take them to the potty. So why not do that sometimes? It helps toddlers to 'digest' this new concept and to see what it is about in a fun way. But the whole day should not revolve around potty training.

5. BE PREPARED WITH A POTTY FOR THE MOMENT WHEN THE TIME HAS COME.

Even if your child won't use it straight away, have one at home and leave it in a place where your child can see it. **Have the potty in the bathroom, or near the toilet, so your child can get used to it being there. Explain what it is and what it is for, and try to keep it in the same place.** This way your child can get used to the idea and the sight of it, and he/she will also know the way there and the distance they need to cover while they hold the pee or poop. This will make the process more predictable for your child and give him/her a sense of security and more of a chance to succeed. If he/she wants, you can let your child sit on it, even with their clothes on, at the beginning. If possible, **you can start changing their diaper in the same room where the potty is as a first step to bridging the gap between diapers and the potty.**

6. LET THEM COPY YOU AND FOLLOW YOU TO THE TOILET.

Your child might start to be interested in the process, so let him/her follow you to the toilet. Show it to them, explain what is happening there and answer all of their questions. If you already have the potty, let your child sit on it and imitate what you just did. **Children love to copy, and it is a great way to teach them that it is a natural thing and that parents do it too.** Children also have an inner motivation to take the next step, learn and grow, so you can even say something like this to motivate them: 'This is the toilet that big children and adults use, and once you are bigger you will also come here to pee or poop'.

7. START WITH A POTTY AND LET YOUR CHILD SWITCH TO THE TOILET GRADUALLY.

The potty is the size of your child, and it is easy for them to sit on it and hop off. It is more comfortable and stable, as your child can relax while his/her feet are rested on the floor and not dangling in the air. It is safer and your child cannot fall off from high up and hurt him/herself (like they can on a bigger toilet when they are small). **It gives them more self-confidence and the satisfaction of being able to do it alone, which is a huge motivation for toddlers at this age.** It also enables a squatting position, which is anatomically and urologically considered to be better and eases the job to be done on the toilet. Squatting enables the puborectalis muscle to open, which makes it easier to poop and results in less chances for constipation (a common problem amongst little children). Also, some children might find a potty less scary than the big toilet, the 'monster' that you need to feed but which can actually eat you! Haha! Oh, the imagination of children knows no bounds! Another advantage of a potty is that you can also bring it with you if you go somewhere and need it on the way. As your child grows, he/she can jump to the toilet and do what 'big humans' do.

8. SWITCH TO CONVENIENT CLOTHES WHICH YOUR CHILD CAN EASILY TAKE OFF.

Avoid clothes that are hard for your child to take off, such as overalls, bodysuits, snap crotch shirts, problematic buttons etc. Ease the task so your child can undress alone and quickly. There is sometimes time pressure, so it's better to avoid unnecessary accidents caused by trying to remove complicated clothing. It is time to change from bodysuits to t-shirts, opt for easily removable diapers or purchase some underpants or training pants. You can even choose together some nice ones so he/she will be happy to wear them. Such training pants can come in handy and pave the way from diapers to underpants. In some cases, they can give your child more confidence to potty train as it might help to avoid little accidents. Note that training pants do not replace diapers and cannot hold larger amounts of pee or poop, but they are washable and reusable.

9. DON'T RUSH; IT IS NOT A RACE.

Give your child time, and don't stress if the neighbour mum's child can already do it and it only took so-and-so just a day. Some children are quick, while for some it takes time. Learning to use the potty isn't an overnight task; rather, it is a journey you take together where your child captains and you are their assistant, helping them with the process and motivating them to go forward. One thing is certain: **don't push it, and never force your child to do it. Work in co-operation with them and let it be your child's decision when to start. Otherwise, the process can be full of stress and tend to take longer... much longer, feeling like an eternity.** Also, there could be times when there is a pause in your child's willingness to potty train, which is not a problem; just put the diaper back on and give more time to your child.

10. MAKE A TRIAL TO FIND OUT.

If readiness is on the way and you feel it makes sense, you can try potty training for one or two days. You don't need to wait for summer to do it, since it all depends on the maturity of your child and not the season or the weather. But try to find two calm days when nothing special is happening. It is just a test to provide a bit of motivation within the learning process, and you don't do any harm with it. You can start by taking off their diaper half an hour before bath time if your child is open and agrees to do it. **Don't forget that it is a co-operation, and your child should be interested in trying to go without diapers and wearing underpants or sitting on the potty.** Explain to your child that you will take their diaper off, and that he/she should let you know if they need to pee or poop and go to the potty for the occasion. **You can start with training pants if that gives more confidence to your child, or you can start straight away with simple underpants.** With this test, you will see if he/she understands the cause-and-effect relationship of the urge to pee/poop and the task to eliminate in the potty. Just observe and evaluate the results for yourself. If it works, cool! You can increase the time the next day and see how it goes. If it wasn't successful, then lay back, relax and put the diapers back on your child and wait a few more weeks.

11. ALWAYS KEEP IT NATURAL; DON'T OVER-REACT OR EXAGGERATE, AND NEVER FORCE IT, HUMILIATE OR PUNISH.

Your child shouldn't feel that using the potty is extraordinary or that it means so much to you. Otherwise, it can easily become a power struggle. If your child succeeded on the potty, then wipe, flush, wash their hands and move on with the day. No applause, cheers, stickers or treats are needed; just use some simple and nice words to compliment and encourage your child. Also, don't make a show out of it. It is not a performance for their grandparents or for others. **Keep it intimate between just you and**

your child. Never humiliate or laugh at your child (e.g. if something too big ended up in the potty or if something extra messy happened), and don't let others do that either. Children can hold their poop for days – leading to potential complications – just because someone makes fun of them or calls his/her poop names. **Never be angry if your child does not succeed or accidentally pees next to the potty. Stay cool; it's all new to your child. Don't get mad (even if sometimes you feel you could explode), never force the usage of the potty and never ask your child to do it for you or to do it to make you happy.**

12. TRY TO AVOID NEGATIVE WORDS.

Don't use sentences like, 'Urgh, it smells bad', and always stay positive, kind and patient, and try to be relaxed and to have a pleasant attitude. Think of words you might use – better to use formal words and not babyish terms or slang – and be consistent there. Consistency is important so you do not confuse your child. Let your child know that it is a natural and good thing to do, and highlight the benefits of using the potty, but don't call the diapers and old habits babyish, because that could lead to resistance. Don't get angry if accidents happen while your child is still practicing.

13. UNDERSTAND THAT TIMES OF BIG CHANGES ARE NOT RIGHT FOR POTTY TRAINING.

This does not mean that your child cannot surprise you by starting to use the potty when he/she feels the time has come. But there are events/periods which are not considered as the right time. So understand that potty training can wait when your child might be overwhelmed with those events, as there might already be too much input for them; e.g. moving to a new home, the birth of a sibling, when your child starts daycare or when your child is sick. Again, let your child

decide here, and never stop him/her from taking that step in their development if they feel they are ready.

14. DEVELOP A ROUTINE AND MAKE SURE OTHER CAREGIVERS ARE AWARE OF IT.

Think of an easy process at the beginning that you both can follow that goes from the moment your child signals to go to pee or poop till washing their hands. **Teach your child how to wipe when ready, always from front to back (this is really important for helping little girls to avoid infections). You can flush together if he/she is not afraid of the sound, and don't forget to teach them to wash their hands after finishing.**

Once your child has started the journey of becoming diaper-free, let all their caregivers know about the situation. Also, let them know what the new routine is and how they can assist. It is advantageous if you are all on the same page and follow the routine you have developed so as to not confuse your child.

15. ACCIDENTS ARE NO PROBLEM; CLEAN UP THE MESS TOGETHER.

Accidents can happen. Your child might forget to go on time when they are playing, or they might pee just after sitting on the potty. If pee/poop accidents happen on the way to the potty, do compliment your child for trying and explain calmly that next time, it would be better to go a bit earlier. This way you can help in the learning process and keep your child motivated after an accident. Such accidents can happen even after some weeks of successful potty-training periods. This is not a problem. **Don't make a big deal of it in any case, and quickly clean up the mess together. Involve your child so he/she can learn the consequences, but never make it a punishment to clean up; let it be a natural act.** They can even help you to clean their little clothes, which will also

help them in understanding the process and realising why they should make it to the potty on time.

16. IT SHOULD BE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF YOUR CHILD.

Your child should feel that it is his/her task and responsibility, and that they are controlling the full process, including the muscles 'down there'. Let him/her decide when to go to the potty. It should never be you bringing him/her to eliminate on the potty throughout the day. Ask your child at most once or twice a day if they need to go, but only on certain occasions, like when you go somewhere together and leave from home, or before going to sleep in the afternoon or in the evening. It does not necessarily mean that your child will be able to pee in that moment you ask, as – unlike adults – small children only feel the urge and are able to eliminate urine when their bladder is full (that is, really full) and not a moment before. **Keep in mind that if you are constantly asking, or if you even force and bring him/her to sit on the potty within regular time periods, it is actually you who is controlling the process and their muscles to eliminate. You can screw up and slow down the learning process by taking over the control in that way,** as your child can get used to the fact that he/she needs to wait for you to come and intervene, and they will stop listening to their body signs, the urges of bowel movement or the need for emptying their bladder. What's more, your child could be deep into the so-called 'terrible twos' period of toddlers, and if they are not the ones who have the power and control over the process, you can easily end up with massive opposition and resistance from your child.

17. PATIENCE IS FIRST.

Stay patient if your child does not show interest or signs of readiness for potty training, even if you might feel that your child will still use diapers at the age of 18 (they won't) ... even if your friends' children can already

do it ... even if there is pressure from your grandparents that, at this age, you were already diaper-free and that your child should be, too ...or even if the time for going to daycare (where diapers are not allowed) is rapidly approaching. **Don't push the starting date, and once started, give time to your child, and always stay cool, relaxed, kind and patient.** Each child is different, and they learn and develop at their own speed. Don't take the diapers off too early, since that does not help or make potty training faster, but only results in pee or poop accidents, making your child disappointed, frustrated or even humiliated. Be patient and leave those diapers on till your child is mature enough and ready for it.

18. BE AWARE AND SEEK HELP IF NEEDED.

Don't get upset if your child is not up to starting potty training at all; however, don't hesitate to seek advice from an expert or to consult with a doctor if you have a gut feeling that something is wrong with your child. Note that **if your child is above three years of age, is constantly peeing with no control during the day, is still sticking to diapers and refusing to sit on the potty or the toilet, that might ring a bell for a medical check-up, as it could be a sign of a condition that needs to be treated. It might turn out that there is a sensory processing disorder behind this.** The lack of night-time bladder control is considered to be normal up till the ages of five to six years, and above that age the possible reasons for this need to be investigated by a doctor. **Understand that bladder control in the daytime (which is conscious) and the night-time (which is unconscious) is not the same, and the level of readiness might differ for the two.** It might take more time for your child to stay dry during the night than during the day, but it really depends on your child, and it can even be the reverse.

19. THE FIRST OCCASION CAN BE A FRIGHTENING EXPERIENCE FOR SOME CHILDREN.

Be aware that the first occasion of eliminating stool outside of diapers can be a very sensitive and sometimes even shocking experience for your child. Children can develop fears of painful or frightening defecation based sometimes on one single event as a trigger. They can get terrified just by the sight of their own poop when they see it for the first time in a potty, outside of the diaper. They can get scared of the sound poop makes when it lands in the potty or in the toilet. So if your child prefers to poop in diapers after trying to potty, this is totally fine, and don't hesitate to give them diapers for that occasion. You can dump the poop in the toilet together and flush it with your child if he/she is not afraid of the sound. That might solve the problem, but sometimes it is much more complicated, and it might take more time to find a solution. You can also play 'stool games' together in the sand, mud or with clay to ease the situation and to help your child get over their first bad experience. Make it fun!

20. THERE COULD BE PAUSES IN THEIR WILLINGNESS TO POTTY TRAIN.

Your child might decide to stop for a while, or accidents might happen again during daytime potty training, but that does not mean that you should immediately run to the doctor. **This is normal and needs to be accepted; just give your child time, put those diapers back on your child and restart in a few weeks.** However, if your child was successful and stayed dry continuously for at least six months during the day or night, yet returns to wetting their underwear or the bed while sleeping, then you should bring him/her to the doctor to rule out any internal problems.

21. KEEP AN EYE ON BOWEL MOVEMENT AND LOOK FOR SIGNS OF CONSTIPATION.

When your child has dry, hard and infrequent bowel movements which are difficult and painful to pass, this is a condition called functional constipation, and you need to be aware of that as a parent. **As a basic rule, constipation is present if you observe at least two of the following:**

1. There are less than three bowel movements a week
2. Their stool is small and resembles rabbit poop, or you observe traces of liquid to pasty stool daily in your child's diaper/underwear
3. You see signs that your child is holding back their bowel movements, e.g. performing a 'poop walk' or refusing to eat.

One in three children suffers from constipation, and the root cause for it can be based on various reasons like dietary changes, an unpleasant experience connected to potty training or the power struggle or too much parental pressure in potty training. Not surprisingly, this is most commonly observed in toddlers around the time of potty training. Consult with a doctor if you notice long-lasting constipation that is constantly present for more than one month before it turns severe and becomes a true struggle for the whole family for months, or even years.

22. EASE THE JOB WITH THE RIGHT DIET FOR YOUR CHILD.

To enable healthy bowel movements, make sure your child has the chance to consume the right diet, which includes eating high-fibre foods and drinking enough water. Hydrating the body with (preferably) water is important for their overall health in general, not just for a healthy bowel movement. Never limit the daily fluid intake of your child simply to cut down on the number of occasions that they need to pee, or in an attempt to avoid pee accidents. But think of the contrary, as it actually gives them more opportunities to try and

succeed on a potty. High-fibre foods, including veggies and fruits, and sufficient fluid intake help to avoid constipation. A basic and normal fluid intake for a child weighing ten kg should be around an average of one litre a day including water that he/she drinks (any soup, fruits and veggies they consume have a considerable fluid content that also counts). At 15 kg the average normal fluid intake is between 1200–1300 ml, and at 20 kg it is around 1500 ml a day. If you observe constipation for at least two weeks in a row, there are some steps you can take to help your child before running to the doctor. Try to cut back on chocolate and/or bananas, since these can cause constipation and make it worse for some children. Give them more to drink and go for some home remedies featuring plums or linseed oil. Make sure to give them foods rich in fibre, or even fibre supplements for children; and of course, give them enough to drink. Keep in mind that if you increase their fibre intake, you also have to increase their fluid intake. Otherwise, the risk of constipation will be higher.



This **Potty Training Guide** was created for you by **Liimmi** in close cooperation with **Zsuzsanna Aschenbrenner, paediatrician**.

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