

Potty and toilet training for children with additional needs and disabilities



What do we mean by additional needs and disabilities?

This information is designed to be used alongside the Bladder & Bowel UK information on toilet training and on trouble shooting toilet training. It has been written for families whose children who have any differences in their development. This may be due to a physical disability, learning disability, or developmental difference, such as autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Children affected by any of these may need specific help with toilet training.

It is important to remember that many children with typical development find learning the skills for toilet training difficult. Information in this leaflet may be helpful for them as well.

How will I know when to start toilet training my child with additional needs or disabilities?

Many children, including those with additional needs and disabilities do not show the signs that families have been encouraged to rely on to know when to start potty or toilet training. Not showing the signs does not mean your child cannot potty or toilet train.

Rather than waiting for your child to appear to be ready to potty or toilet train, it is recommended that you start to teach your child the skills that they will need to use the potty or toilet as early as possible. This will mean that your child is not expected to change their routine of using a nappy as they get older, which they may find difficult.

As with all children, those with additional needs benefit from a calm, consistent and persistent approach for as long as they need. It is helpful if everyone follows the same routines and starts the process at the same time. Good communication between you and anyone else involved in your child's care (e.g. nursery or school or grandparents) is important.

If your child is struggling to learn the skills for potty or toilet training, they should be offered an assessment and support from a healthcare professional. This should include making sure there are no underlying problems, such as constipation. Therefore, if you are not sure when or how to start working on the skills for potty or toilet training, ask your child's health visitor, school nurse or specialist nurse for advice and support.

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What equipment do I need for potty or toilet training my child?

Most small children find a potty easier to use than a toilet. If they can walk, they can get off the potty when they are ready. The position on the potty (bottom well supported, feet flat on the floor and knees higher than hips) is the best position for them to fully emptying their bowels, as well as for doing a wee.

However, if your child finds changing their routines difficult, you may want to go straight to the toilet, rather than using a potty. Most children will need an insert or reducer seat and a footstool to make sure they are comfortable and feel safe and stable while on the toilet. The insert seat should be small enough to support their bottom well. The footstool should be high enough to allow their feet to rest flat on it and their knees should be higher than their hips.

If your child has physical disabilities, their occupational therapist will be able to provide a specialist toilet seat or other adaptations to suit their individual needs. For wheelchair users this may include a urinal, (urinals are available for boys and for girls), or a bottom wiper or other specialist equipment.

If your child has problems with mobility, or balance, or you are struggling to know what will suit them best ask their healthcare professional or occupational therapist for support.

How should I use routines for potty or toilet training?

- Having a time to sit on the potty or toilet as part of your child's daily routine is one of the first steps for toilet training. This can be introduced at any time from a few days or weeks to a few months old. Children who are not able to sit on their own will need you to support them on the potty or toilet. If not being able to sit on their own is related to a physical disability or sensory issue, then your occupational therapist should be able to recommend some equipment or adaptations to help.
- Start by sitting your child on the potty or toilet for a very short time once a day, when you and your child are relaxed. Gradually build the time of sitting to about one minute for each year of their age, then increase the frequency of sitting. On waking from sleep, after meals or drinks can be good times.

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- Your child may need a toy, or attention from you, or distraction such as singing a song, or reading a story to help them to stay on the toilet.
- You could use an egg timer, or an alarm on your phone, or something similar to help your child understand how long they should sit for.
- To start with there should be no expectation that your child will wee or poo on the potty or toilet, they are just getting used to being on the potty or toilet and learning to sit.
- The next step is knowing when your child is most likely to need a wee or poo, as this can help you to get them to the potty or toilet at the time when they are most likely to go. Catching some wee or poo in the right place will help your child understand what is expected. If you check your child's nappy hourly for a few days, and make a record of when they drink, and when their nappy is wet or soiled then you will know when they are most likely to need to wee or poo and you can take them to the potty or toilet at those times. There is more information about how to record your child's wees and poos in the Bladder & Bowel UK information library.
- When you are catching about half of your child's wees or poos on the potty or toilet, you can remove their nappy and start to use cotton pants. For more information see the Bladder & Bowel UK child information library.

How do I help my child with understanding and communication for potty or toilet training?

- Your child may find it easier to understand what is expected if you use a social story about going to the toilet. Your health visitor, school nurse or community nurse may be able to help you to find one. For more information see the Bladder & Bowel UK child information library.
- Share the story with your child every day, at a time when they are relaxed. Once they are used to the story it can be used just before you take them to the toilet.
- You can also use a sequence of pictures to help your child understand what you want them to do and to remind them of what comes next. These can be the same pictures as you have in the social story. It is important to also have a picture for the activity that will come after the toilet visit.
- You can include toilet time in any visual timetables that you use with your child. There is an example of this below.

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Play time



Tea time



Toilet time



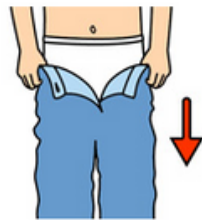
Computer time

Examples of pictures that would help your child understand that toilet time comes after tea, but before they are allowed to play on the computer.

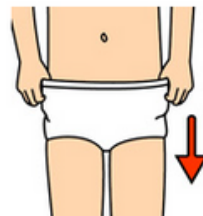
- PECS (picture exchange communication systems), photos, or other pictures, such as the ones available on the Do 2 Learn website, (<http://www.do2learn.com/> - used above and below), can be used for social stories and picture cues. If school use picture communication cards, they may be happy to give you some to use for toilet training.



Go to the toilet



Pull trousers down



Pull pants up



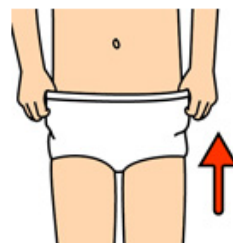
Sit on toilet



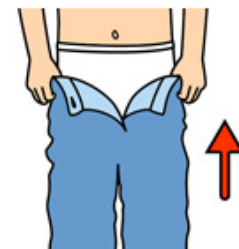
Stay on the toilet



Wipe bottom



Pull pants up

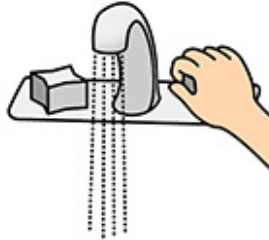


Pull trousers up

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Flush toilet



Wash hands



Dry hands



Go and play

- Ask other people who look after your child, including at nursery and school, to use the same picture cues as you do. This will help them do things in the same way that you do and will help prevent your child becoming confused or anxious.
- Having a picture of the toilet near your child can help them let you know when they need to go, if they find talking difficult.
- Give your child very clear instructions and give them just one instruction at a time. For example, if your child is just told to 'wipe your bottom', they may not realise that they need to use toilet paper. If told to 'get some toilet paper and wipe your bottom', they are being given two instructions at once, and not being told how much toilet paper they need. Your child may find it easier if they are told take three pieces of toilet paper and then told, shown or helped to wipe their bottom.
- Using picture cards for each step of the toileting process may make it easier for your child to understand what is expected and also to remember what they need to do next at each stage.

How do sensory issues affect potty or toilet training for my child?

We learn about our world and understand what is happening around us and in our bodies through our senses. However, many children with autism, developmental or learning disabilities experience their senses differently. Your child may be under sensitive in some or all of their senses, or they may be over sensitive, or they may struggle to understand some of the signals from their body.

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Differences in how your child experiences their senses may have an effect on how they are able to learn the skills that they will need to potty or toilet train. This is because most of the senses are involved in potty or toilet training in some way. Using a calm and relaxed manner can help your child to relax. However, your child may need you to think about their sensory needs and make adjustments for them to feel safe and comfortable on the potty or toilet.

There is information about how sensory issues, what to think about and suggestions for what you can do to help your child with potty and toilet training in the Bladder & Bowel UK child information library.

You could also ask if your child could have an occupational therapy assessment about their mobility and sensory needs in the bathroom.

How should I use rewards when potty or toilet training my child?

Rewards help to reinforce behaviours that are wanted. If your child responds well to rewards, then use one when they start to learn the skills for potty or toilet training. For example, you may reward them when they are first learning to sit, with no expectation of them weeing or pooing at that point. You might give them the reward to start with for sitting for just a few seconds and then gradually expect them to sit for longer before they get the reward. When they are doing this successfully, the rewards may be used when they have managed to wee or poo in the potty or toilet. Your child may need to be given the reward as soon as they have weed or pooed, even before they have got off the toilet for the first few times, to know what they are being rewarded for.

The right reward will depend on your child's preferences e.g. a chocolate button, or time playing on an electronic game. Using praise with the reward is helpful for most children, but your child needs to be told, or shown a picture of exactly what they are being rewarded for e.g. 'Well done Joe, you have done a wee on the potty'. The reward should only be used for the toileting skill you are working on and not for other behaviours. You should avoid letting your child have the thing that is going to be the reward for three or four days before you start to work on the skills needed for toileting.

Once your child is regularly using the potty or toilet to wee and poo, the frequency with which the rewards are given should gradually be reduced, but the use of praise should be continued.

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It is important to remember that not all children respond well to rewards. Some children, particularly some children with autism, do not work well with rewards and some children need the rewards to be changed to keep them interested.

How do I introduce my child to toilets away from home?

Introducing your child to different toilets early is helpful. They may need their picture cues, if these are used. Keeping as much of their routine as possible the same as it is at home or nursery or school will help reduce anxiety.

Some children find public toilets difficult. Unfamiliar smells, the sudden or unexpected sound of another toilet flushing, doors banging, extractor fans, or loud hand driers can be upsetting or frightening for your child. Disabled toilets tend to be quieter and more spacious but may need a RADAR key for access. These can be purchased from a variety of different websites.

Having picture cues with the different things that are found in public toilets can help to prepare your child. Wet wipes might make hand washing easier and having a towel from home can help you avoid hand driers.

A gradual introduction to different toilets can also be helpful. You could take your child to a toilet when out and about and just open the door to look in to start with and point out things that are the same as at home. When your child is happy with this, you could start to go in, for example to wash your hands and then when they are comfortable with this, you could try going into a cubicle, etc.

Using toilets away from home may also be easier if you take any equipment that you use at home with you. For example, if your child uses a potty or seat reducer or wet wipes instead of toilet paper, you could take that with you when you for them to use in a toilet when away from home.

If your child has specialist equipment or adaptations that have been provided by an occupational therapist, ask the occupational therapist for advice about how to manage at toilets away from home. Children with physical disabilities may be able to use a urinal rather than being hoisted onto a toilet. They may benefit from the additional space in a disabled toilet or a Changing Places toilet.

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My child is not letting me know when they want the potty or toilet: how do I manage this?

For many children the last skill learnt for potty or toilet training is being able to tell their parent or carer when they want the toilet. Your child needs a way of letting you know when they want the potty or toilet, particularly if they do not talk.

As your child becomes better at letting you know when they want the toilet, either by asking you, or by using sign language, showing a picture, or using their usual communication device, you can reduce how often you remind them to go to the toilet. If you always remind your child or take them to the potty or toilet, they may rely on this, rather than learning to notice their own bladder or bowel signals. They are then more likely to have accidents if you forget to remind them or are not with them.

How do I manage difficulties with potty or toilet training?

Many children with additional needs or disabilities, including physical or learning disabilities or developmental differences such as autism or ADHD can successfully learn to use the potty or toilet once they understand what is expected of them and have had plenty of practice with the skills needed. However, some children do have difficulties. These may be related to a change in their routine that they find difficult to understand. This can make them anxious and upset. Using stories, pictures, or photographs before introducing any new routines can help make things predictable and less frightening.

Many difficulties, including fear or anxiety about the bathroom or toilet, are due to sensory differences. There is information about how sensory issues and toilet training in the Bladder & Bowel UK child information library. For other tips on how to manage difficulties with potty or toilet training see the Bladder & Bowel UK child information library.

Conclusion

Many parents worry about toilet training and professionals sometimes give different advice, which can be confusing. Families are still sometimes told to wait until their children are showing signs of being ready to toilet train, before starting. However, many children with additional needs or disabilities will not show the usual signs, but are able to toilet train with a calm, consistent and sustained approach.

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Most children do well if they are supported to start to learn the skills for potty or toilet training in their first or second year. This may also help their bladder and bowel to develop and mature well and help families to notice if a problem, such as constipation is developing. Therefore, it is advisable to start working on the skills your child will need for potty or toilet training as early as you can. However, it is never too late to start.

If your child is struggling, or if you are finding it difficult or have questions, ask their health care professional for advice and support.

For more information see the Bladder & Bowel UK child information library.

Additional resources

There is more information about toilet training on:

The Bladder and Bowel UK website at: www.bladderandboweluk.co.uk

The Autistic Society website at: <http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understanding-behaviour/toilet-training.aspx>

Do 2 Learn picture cards available from:
http://do2learn.com/picturecards/printcards/selfhelp_toileting.htm

Victorian Continence Resource Centre, One Step at a Time Easy English Toilet Training Guide for Boys available from:
<http://www.continencevictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/EasyEnglishBookBoys.pdf>

Victorian Continence Resource Centre, One Step at a Time Easy English Toilet Training Guide for Girls available from:
<http://www.continencevictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/EasyEnglishBookGirls.pdf>

Some schools may have access to picture communication cards and may be happy to help with personalised social stories and picture sequences for their students.