

# Trouble shooting potty or toilet training



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Some children find learning all the skills needed for potty or toilet training difficult. It is important to remember that children learn at different rates and in different ways. For potty or toilet training your child needs to learn several different skills before they will be successful in staying clean and dry. The more opportunity they get to practice the skills needed, the more likely they are to be successful. Every 'accident' is a learning opportunity.

Disposable nappies are so good at keeping children warm and comfortable that some children find it difficult to make the transfer to the potty or toilet. If your child is finding learning to use the potty or toilet difficult, do not give up. Having difficulty does not mean that they are not ready to learn, it may just be that they need a slightly different approach.

Children with typical development, as well as those with additional needs, sensory issues, or disabilities, should be able to successfully start to learn the skills needed to use the potty or toilet from a few weeks or months old. It is never too early or late to start. Children who do have additional needs or disabilities may take longer than other children to learn the skills and they may continue to need more help from you or whoever is looking after them, but starting to learn the skills should not be delayed just because of the additional needs or disability.

This leaflet is part of a series provided by Bladder & Bowel UK to help you teach your child the skills they need to potty or toilet train. If you are having any difficulties speak to their healthcare professional or contact the Bladder & Bowel UK helpline at 0161 214 4591.

## **My child does not notice when they are wet or soiled**

Some children do not seem to notice when they are wet or soiled. This may be due to some sensory differences: your child may find it harder to recognise the signals from their body of when they need to do a wee or poo. They may find it more difficult to know when they are wet or soiled. Or it may be that they do not know that they should tell you when they need the potty or toilet.

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You may find your child needs the potty toilet or toilet more frequently than you had expected when they first stop wearing nappies. If this is the case, take them to the potty or toilet as often as you think they need to stay dry. However, you should then gradually increase the time between potty or toilet visits until your child is able to go about one and a half to two hours between visits.

You may find that your child is more likely to notice when they are wet or soiled if you allow them to have a bare bottom, or loose clothing (such as a long t-shirt, or baggy jogging bottoms with no pants) when they are first toilet trained. Many children learn better when they have experienced being wet a few times. You can start using pants as they become better at staying dry.

If the wetting continues, it may be that your child is constipated. If you think this may be the case talk to your healthcare professional. There is information about constipation on the Bladder & Bowel UK website at [www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk)

If you think that your child is finding it difficult to recognise when they need to do a wee, they may be helped by using a wetting alarm. There is more information about these in the Bladder & Bowel UK leaflet: Using a wetting alarm for toilet training.

## **My child is using the potty or toilet some of the time, but they are still having lots of accidents**

Accidents are part of the learning process. You could try to respond to them by quietly letting your child know that they are wet or soiled and then take them straight to the potty or toilet. Picture cue cards may help some children understand that they are wet or soiled and where the wee and poo should go.

You may find it helps to use picture books, songs, stories or apps to help them understand where they should do a poo or wee. Let them see you and other family members use the toilet. You could try having them sit on the potty while you or other immediate family members are on the toilet.

Make sure that your child is having plenty of water-based drinks. Take them to the potty or toilet about 10 - 20 minutes after their drinks and meals and when they wake up from a sleep.

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Children may be more likely to have accidents if they are distracted, unwell or if they have developed a problem such as a urinary tract infection (UTI), bladder issue or constipation. Try to avoid becoming frustrated or cross with your child. They will not be wetting or soiling deliberately. Children do not wet and soil due to laziness, naughtiness or to upset the people looking after them. It will help to try and work out what is causing the problem. If you are struggling speak to your healthcare professional.

If your child is very busy or engrossed in play they may need reminders from you to stop what they are doing to go to the potty or toilet. It will be harder for them to hear their bladder or bowel signals if their brains are very busy. Avoid reminding them more often than every 1 ½ - 2 hours. If your child is wetting more frequently than this, then take them to the potty or toilet more frequently, but gradually increase the time between toilet visits.

If your child has been unwell they may need some more support while they recover. Using the same approach that you used when first teaching them the skills for potty or toilet training should work well. If you are concerned that they may have a urinary tract infection, a bladder problem or constipation or if you are unsure why they are having accidents, speak to their healthcare professional. Urinary tract infections can result in children wetting when they have previously been dry. They can also cause your child to need to get to the potty or toilet suddenly and frequently. Some bladder problems and constipation can have the same effect. Constipation can also result in soiling. There is more information about bladder problems and constipation in children on the Bladder & Bowel UK website at [www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk)

## My child has clean and dry but has started to have wetting and/or pooing accidents

Children can start to have accidents if their routine has changed or something is different, such as starting nursery, moving house, birth of a new brother or sister or going on holiday. Children may also start to have accidents if they have been unwell or upset.

Usually if you go back to supporting them in the same way as you did when they were first potty or toilet training they will get better quickly.

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If the problems continue ask their healthcare professional for support. There may be an underlying reason, such as constipation, a urinary tract infection or other illness or bladder or bowel problem that needs treatment.

## My child seems to be frightened of the toilet or bathroom

Fear of the bathroom may be because of sensory issues. There is more information on these and how they affect toileting in the Bladder & Bowel UK leaflet at [www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk)

However, it may help if you try to make sure that the bathroom is as calm and pleasant as possible for your child. Small rewards may help you to encourage your child into the bathroom. This may allow them to gradually get used to the environment there. Picture cue cards may help your child let you know when they need to go, but may also help them to focus on going to the potty or toilet and therefore reduce any fears.

Children who have had a difficult experience in the bathroom may also be frightened. Making sure that your child uses a potty that is comfortable for them or that they have a seat reducer, if they are using the toilet, so that their bottom is well supported and a step, so that their feet are flat on a firm surface will help them to feel safe. This is also the best position to do a poo. Your child may like to have a handle to hold onto as well (some seat reducers have this).

Some children may be frightened of the toilet if they have been constipated. If your child has passed a large or hard stool, it may have hurt their bottom. Their natural response to that will be fear and they will not want to open their bowels again. This can make the constipation worse. There is more information about constipation and how to manage it on the Bladder & Bowel UK website.

Do not force your child to sit on the potty or toilet if they are frightened. Ask their healthcare professional for advice. They may be able to make suggestions that gradually reintroduce the potty or toilet in ways your child can manage.

## My child is/may be constipated

Do not delay potty or toilet training because of constipation: sitting in a good position on the potty or toilet may help your child to fully empty their bowel and therefore improve the constipation.

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Constipation in children should be treated with laxatives. Speak to your healthcare professional for advice and support. There is more information about constipation and how to manage it on the Bladder & Bowel UK website.

## My child will sit on the toilet, but will not wee or poo when there

If your child will sit on the toilet but will not wee or poo there, then try using clear pictures and stories to show them what is wanted. You could try showing them the pictures just before you take them to the potty or toilet and when they are on the potty or toilet.

Encourage your child to have a water-based drink every one and a half to two hours and take them to the potty or toilet ten to twenty minutes after each drink. Take them to the potty or toilet at times when they are most likely to need to go (e.g. after meals or drinks, and as soon as they wake up in the morning or after a nap). Make sure the bathroom is calm and relaxed and be as quiet as you can, using a quiet voice to talk, while you are there may help.

Your child will need to sit for long enough and in a good enough position to relax, or they will not be able to wee or poo. The best position for children is with their bottom well supported, feet flat on a firm surface and knees higher than their hips.

Some children find moving from weeing and pooing in a nappy to going on the potty or toilet too difficult to do in one go. If this is the issue for your child then follow the steps suggested in the Bladder & Bowel UK leaflet: Understanding Toilet Refusal. The child who will only pass urine or open their bowels in a nappy This breaks the process into smaller stages, that your child may find easier to accept.

## My child will not sit on the potty or toilet long enough to do a wee or poo

Make potty or toilet time fun by giving your child lots of attention, such as singing songs, blowing seaside windmills, playing games etc while they are sitting. Let them get off while they are still having fun.

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Try giving your child a clear signal to let them know when they can get off the potty. Gradually increase the time that you expect them to sit for until they are sitting for a minute or two or for about a minute for each year of their age.

If you are using a potty for your child, you could try putting it in front of the TV, or you could put a little table in front of the potty with some toys for your child to play with while they are sitting.

## My child smears poo

Some children will smear poo. This may happen because they like the feel of the poo, or it may happen because they do not realise they are meant to use toilet paper to wipe themselves.

Providing clear picture cues of what is expected, making sure that the toilet paper or wipes that your child likes and finds easy to use can help. Some children prefer wet wipes or warm wet cloths to toilet paper. Make sure you help your child with wiping, with a hand over theirs, until they are able to start doing this for themselves.

If your child has smeared, using the least possible interaction with them during clearing up is often helpful. If they are smearing because they like the feeling, giving them the opportunity to play with sensory toys such as playdough, finger painting or textured toys may be beneficial. You could try staying with them while they use the toilet, using picture cue cards and social stories to teach them not to smear. You could also try giving them a sign to use to let you know when they have finished and need help with wiping.

For more information on why children smear poo and for suggestions on how to manage this see the Bladder & Bowel UK leaflet.

## My child will use the potty or toilet at home, but not at school (or at school but not home)

Some children, and particularly those with autism, learning difficulties or other developmental issues struggle to transfer skills. This means that if they learn how to do something in one place, they may not realise that they are expected to do the same thing in a different place.

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It may help to make sure that when you start working on the skills needed for toilet training that everyone else who cares for your child also starts to work on the same skills in the same way. Make sure that everyone is using the same equipment if possible (the same toilet reducer seat and step or the same potty, the same toilet papers, and any picture cues or social stories and so on).

## My child will not use toilet paper

Some children are very sensitive with touch. If your child does not like the feeling of toilet paper they will not want to use it. You could try using wet wipes or a wet flannel for them. Don't forget to show them where to put the used wet wipes or flannel.

If they do not understand that they are meant to use toilet paper to wipe themselves, then they will not do so. You could try reminding your child that they need to wipe themselves by having a picture cue for this either on its own, or in a series of picture cues for each step of the toileting process. The picture cues should be somewhere that your child can see them when they are using the toilet. A social story that includes wiping may also help.

If your child is struggling to reach their bottom, or to know where to wipe, you could teach them by putting your hand over their hand and helping them while wiping.

## My child has additional needs. Will that affect them learning to use the potty or toilet?

Children with additional needs or disabilities usually have a bladder and bowel that are maturing in the usual way. However, they may be more likely to have problems such as constipation. Constipation should be actively treated in all children. There is more information about this on the Bladder & Bowel UK website at [www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk)

It is important to know that learning to sit on the potty or toilet for bowel opening can help constipation. This is because the position of sitting with bottom well supported, feet flat on a firm surface and knees higher than hips can help with complete bowel emptying.

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Many children with additional needs or disabilities can learn the skills for potty or toilet training in the same way and at the same age as their typically developing peers. It may take them longer to learn each of the skills and they may need extra support, such as social stories, picture cue cards, apps about toileting, more reminders and more help with getting to the potty or toilet. There is more information that you may find helpful in the Bladder & Bowel UK and PADS leaflet: top tips for toilet training.

Some children who have sensory needs may benefit from adjustments to the bathroom environment. There is more information about this in the Bladder & Bowel UK leaflet: The impact of sensory issues on toileting.

Your child will also be helped to learn the skills needed for toilet training if everyone who looks after them continues with the routines and approaches that you use at home.

## Other problems with potty or toilet training

It is important to remember that to become potty or toilet trained children need to learn a set of skills. Every child is different. Your child may need more support with some skills and less with others. The most important things for success is that you are calm, consistent and continue to work with your child on learning the skills.

If it does not seem to be working, or there are problems, it does not mean that your child cannot potty or toilet train, or that they are not ready to learn. It may simply mean that they need a different approach. If this is the case, then do speak to your healthcare professional for more advice.

You may also find the other leaflets in this series from Bladder & Bowel UK helpful. They are available at: You may also contact the Bladder & Bowel UK helpline at:

## Further information

Find more information about child bladder and bowel health in our information library at [www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk). You can also contact the Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline (0161 214 4591).

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.

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