



Ready, Set, Go Potty!

BY KAY KOSAK ABRAMS, PH.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

I am hoping to potty train my 2-year-old this spring. He will be about 33 months old when our new baby arrives, and we would love to have him in underwear and out of diapers. I hear so many friends complaining about how long it takes to teach their toddlers to use the potty. It seems most are still using pull-on type diapers for 3- and 4-year-olds, at night or naptime. This really frightens us! We know only one mom who says, "Just put him in underwear." She is the only one who acts like potty training is a breeze. We want to know what you would advise when it comes to transitioning from diapers to the potty.



Photo by Harry Cutting Photography

Dear Parent,

Potty training can definitely be "a breeze." When we need to move a child through mastery, such as a first jump into the pool or a first sleepover, it is truly an experience of "Get ready, get set, and then go!" Helping our toddlers master challenges is easier when we direct them with confidence.

Our sense of confidence comes from having resolve. Feelings of ambivalence undermine our confidence when we need to move our children forward to master a major developmental milestone. Make sure you have considered all factors that may cause you to have feelings of ambivalence, which could lead to failure. Having resolve means you have done your thinking and preparation, and you are ready to move forward. Sending a confusing double message to our toddlers may confound teaching children to go potty. We tell them they are ready to use

the toilet, yet we put them in a pull-it-up-by-yourself diaper, just in case. To a toddler, whatever feels like a diaper must be a diaper. The marketing of pull-on style diapers promotes a substitute your toddler "pulls up" to wear. Such a product may actually invite dependency upon diapers and a reluctance to use the toilet. The use of pull-on style diapers can prolong potty training. While some children might pay attention to their body's internal signal for the need to go to the potty, most will respond to the external stimuli of the "diaper." Worse yet, some children become more afraid to let go of a bowel movement in the potty. To add to the potty training limbo, many toddlers will inadvertently be "trained" or conditioned to urinate in their diapers at night, simply because they can let go, rather than hold on until they can get to the potty. When we pretend that a diaper is underwear, we give our toddlers a choice, rather than a confident directive to use the toilet. We do not demonstrate

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to "go pee-pee or poo-poo."

•A child who is physically ready for the potty holds his urine or bowels for longer periods of time and may wake up dry after a nap or in the morning.

•Take your toddler to the potty at logical and regular intervals, such as upon waking, before naps or bedtime, before leaving for an activity and soon after mealtime.

•During the course of training, you may plan times to practice wearing underwear, while your child is home with you, under close supervision. Remember that consistency works best. For example, "time for panties" might be morning time up until naptime. In this manner, you are shaping success by having short intervals of mastery. Practicing underwear at naptime might help you build confidence about nighttime without pull-on styles after you have said "Goodbye to diapers."

•Soon, it will be time to let your child know it is "Goodbye to diapers" time. Communicate the expectation that it is almost time to be done with diapers and ready for "big boy underwear." Let him go shopping for underwear with his favorite super heroes. He can help to pack his underwear drawer. Be positive. Avoid too much emotion or undue pressure to please you.

•Choose your weekend carefully, preferably a "normal" time at home. It is too difficult for toddlers to deal with more than one major developmental task at a time. Avoid transitioning to underwear at a time when you are adjusting to a move, a new job, family visiting or during a major holiday. If you must move forward at a time that is not ideal, expect



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probable regression, but do not put a diaper back on.

- Say "Goodbye to diapers," put the underwear on and do not look back. Go to the potty regularly and frequently for at least one week. Once your toddler urinates and has a bowel movement in the potty more than a few times, you are done!

- Do not put a diaper back on in response to constipation. Do not put a diaper back on in a moment of weakness with the rationalization, "He won't go to college in a diaper." Give your diapers away.

- If regression occurs, go back to frequent trips to the bathroom rather than expect your child to tell you when he has to go. Plan outings carefully to ensure proximity to bathrooms before, during and after.

- Remain calm and patient. Do not become emotionally reactive or punitive about the "accidents." Simply clean up in a matter-of-fact fashion and remind him to go in the potty and to let you know. A little sympathy may be in order if you sense that a child who previously mastered independence is feeling shame, and you know there is some undue stress in the family. Again, be mindful, and take him to the potty more often for the time being.

- Do not rely on diapers at night. While there are a few children with inheritable or situational bedwetting problems, this is not the norm. Stop being afraid of urine. You can put padding under the sheets, but not when your child is watching. Our children pick up on our anxiety and may act on it by wetting the bed. Be relaxed. No fluids after early evening and always "empty your bladder" before going to bed.

- While most children can easily make it through the night, keep a nightlight on and teach your child to get up and go to the potty. Do not plan on this, however.

- Expect your toddler to make it through the night. Children are suggestible, and you have the power to write the script. Predict the positive, which tells your child you have faith in his capability. Let your toddler know that he will be fine all night long and go to the potty first thing in the morning. Just watch your child beam with pride when he wakes up dry and goes straight to the potty to relieve himself. That is it! You're done.

Potty training your toddler is a proactive process. A passive, take-your-time attitude does not facilitate mastery. Many parents learn this the hard way. Children will adapt to the expectations we set, as long as we can see what they are ready for, and as long as we are also ready to enable them toward mastery. Sending mixed messages to our toddlers often means we are not ready. Doubt and fear undermines our confidence and, in turn, undermines their confidence.

Mindful parenting means that you have taken the time to think. Think about your particular situation and the readiness of your toddler. Work toward your goal in a progressive fashion so you can face your toddler's transition to underwear with confidence. No doubt. No drama. Take your matter-of-fact energy and move your toddler toward mastery. He will go to the potty with ease and pride.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a psychologist in private practice in Garrett Park, Md. "Parenting with Confidence" coffeehouse sessions take place on-site at area schools, as well as on the second Wednesday of each month at the Garrett Park Town Hall, October through June. Visit www.kayabrams.com for more information.

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