

Parent Education Guide

Convenient Hand-Outs on Important Health Issues

7 Tips for Troubleshooting Toilet Training

Despite everyone's best efforts, there can be issues along the toilet training road. Here are 7 tips to help you navigate some of the potential obstacles and prevent complications.

Focus on what the child can do

1 Instead of focusing on what the child can't or won't do, start with what the child is able to do. Even for a child who has been a competent toileter, it may help to start at the beginning and break down toileting into small steps and reward each step. For instance, if a child is in pull-ups or back in diapers, do diaper changes in the bathroom or have the child help with clean-up. The child may simply practice sitting on the toilet either with or without a diaper.

Eliminate stress around toilet training

2 Don't push a child who is resistant or who is not developmentally able. For a child who is very resistant to toilet training or who is trained to stool and/or urine and then is no longer able or willing to do so (regression), consider backing off or discontinuing toilet training temporarily. This may feel like a step backwards. Having an alternative plan will help so that backing off does not feel stagnating. An example plan may be to stop training but involve the child in another reward incentive program, such as cleaning up toys. In 4 weeks, reintroduce toilet training.

Have scheduled sitting times

3 These should occur even if the child does not feel the urge to go (which he or she may not). To take advantage of the gastrocolic reflex, it is best to have the child sit about 30 minutes after meals. The sitting time should last about 10 minutes (shorter times can be considered in younger children).

Use a reward incentive plan

4 This should be used for sitting and usually consists of stickers or treats that can be turned in for a prize. The rewards should match the task. For instance, a child should not receive a new toy for sitting on the toilet. However, the child may earn the same toy through involvement in a regular program: the child may earn 1 sticker or treat for each scheduled sitting time; after the child earns X number of stickers, he or she receives a new toy, special activity, or event. Token rewards (stickers) for involvement should be provided directly after the child participates. High-cost rewards (big presents or trips) should be avoided.

Change rewards or prizes frequently

5 Given that toilet training can be a long process, it is essential to change rewards or prizes frequently to maintain motivation. Rewards should be adjusted depending on the child's age. Visual systems, such as sticker or check charts, are helpful in keeping track of successes and prizes. Rewards should be given for effort in the process (ie, sitting on the toilet) not just for reaching a specific toilet training goal.

Consider other motivators

6 Keeping a special toy in the bathroom may be useful. While sitting on the toilet, the child can practice exercises that involve the Valsalva maneuver (blowing on a balloon or pinwheel). This can encourage stool evacuation.

Stay positive

7 Staying positive can be challenging even under the best of circumstances. You can take comfort in the fact that most children achieve daytime continence by 30 to 36 months of age. Be aware that certain medical conditions (eg, constipation) can complicate the toilet training process. It is important to seek help as soon as a concern arises, even if it is earlier than a regular scheduled visit. In children with constipation, relapses during the treatment process are common and can occur during times of stress.