



## Potty Training Regression

"Our daughter made great progress with toilet training the first two weeks. But when she started at the new child-care center, it was like she forgot everything she'd learned. She never told the adults in charge when she needed to go. She had one or two accidents a day at the center, and even had them at home on the weekends. When we tried to talk to her about it, she would just look at us like she had no idea what we were talking about, or would run away and play."

As adults, we are accustomed to acquiring new skills at a steady pace and retaining what we learn. For young children, though, learning often depends on their development in other areas. They often progress in a series of sudden spurts interspersed with periods of little apparent improvement. At times, a child may even regress in their learning—that is, lose skills they recently acquired or even take a few steps back in their learning process.



### Regression: ruling out physical causes

Regression during toilet training—a child's sudden neglect of potty practices, constant "puddling" or other accidents, or desire to return to diapers—can be baffling and upsetting to parents who believe they have nearly completed the process.

Your first response when this happens should be to have them examined by their pediatrician to be sure the cause is not physical. Regression sometimes signals an infection or other disorder that requires medical treatment. If medical causes have been ruled out, however, your child is probably just responding in the only way they know how to a recent change in their environment or some other source of stress in their life.

## What causes a child to regress in potty training?

Common causes of potty training regression in young children include:

- Change in the child-care routine—for example, a new sitter, or starting a child-care or preschool program
- The mother's pregnancy or the birth of a new sibling
- A major illness on the part of the child or a family member
- A recent death
- Parents' marital conflict or divorce
- An upcoming or recent move to a new home
- Constipation/painful bowel movements
- Urinary tract infection
- Other medical problems

Big events—even when they are happy ones—can represent a real challenge to young children still struggling to master their own personal routines. Just as you may choose to drop your diet or exercise routine during a difficult time at work, your child may need to take some time off from toilet training to adjust to their new home situation. In signaling an emotional problem, regression can actually be a healthy way for a child to meet her emotional needs at a time when life feels overwhelming.

# Tips to deal with potty training regression

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When responding to regressive behavior during the training process, focus on taking the following steps to help get your child back on track.

- **Identify the problem.** Is there a good reason for your child's regression, such as a new sibling or other change in their environment? As verbal as your toddler or preschooler may be, it is often not possible for children this age to express what they are feeling. If the reason is not clear, contact your pediatrician to determine if there is a more physical reason for the regression, such as constipation.

If there is no physical reason, let your child know that you've noticed their change in behavior—that they have stopped using their potty, have been having a lot of accidents at the child-care center, or have been talking about wearing diapers again. Ask them why this might be—because their potty is in a new bathroom in your new home now, because the toilet at the child-care center is scary, or because their new baby brother wears a diaper and has been getting so much attention lately? Listen to their response, and help them try to communicate any events that are upsetting them, as well as their feelings about them.

- **Do what you can to fix the problem.** If there are practical steps you can take to ease your child's distress, do so as soon as possible. Arrange for a special time to spend alone with your child (without her new sibling), accompany them to the child-care center to talk with caregivers about how they can help your child keep up their bathroom habits, or surround their potty in the new home with familiar objects from the old home. Ask your child to think of ideas, too, on how to improve their situation. By helping them "own" their problem and its resolution in this way, you will commit them to a more active role in correcting it.
- **Be clear about your expectations.** Particularly for younger children, these expectations are largely nonverbal. Have the potty readily available, for example, and sit them on it at times you think they are more likely to go. For the older child, let them know you are fully confident that they will succeed and pee on the potty. Support them with positive reinforcements, including hugs and praise, stickers on a chart, and an occasional pep talk as they struggle to regain their footing.

## Taking a break from potty training

If your child's regression stretches on for a month or more, you may need to ask yourself whether they were ready to be fully day-trained in the first place. There's no harm in suggesting that you set the potty aside for a while if it's clear that this would be a big relief to your child. But this is an exception to the general rule that moving forward, however gradually, is usually best.

## How long do potty training regressions last?

Upsetting as regression can be to parents, it usually doesn't last very long. In many cases, the child picks up where she left off in toilet training after a few days or weeks.

## More information

- [Bedwetting: 3 Common Reasons & What Families Can Do \(/English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/Bedwetting.aspx\)](#)
- [Emotional Issues and Potty Training \(/English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/Emotional-Issues-and-Bathroom-Problems.aspx\)](#)
- [The Right Age to Potty Train \(/English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/The-Right-Age-to-Toilet-Train.aspx\)](#)

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