



The Benefits of Peer Pressure During Toilet Training

"I went to the bathroom with Eric today," four-year-old Frank reports to his parents over dinner. "That's nice, Frank," his dad says with a glance at his wife. "Did you use the potty all by yourself?" "I peed in the toilet!" Frank says proudly, helping himself to more bread. "Eric peed, too. We made an X with our pee!" Frank's parents exchange a smile as Frank laughs with delight over his exploit. They know that the joy Frank takes in sharing his toilet-training skills with a friend is a powerful motivator.

Preschoolers' expanding social awareness—their love of observing and categorizing all aspects of their peers' behavior, from what they eat for lunch to whether they wear diapers or underpants—feeds a growing desire to be like their friends. While this aspect of a child's development can work against his toilet training progress at age two and a half or three, when he may decide he wants to revert to diapers because so many children at the childcare center wear them, it becomes a more positive force as toilet use becomes more common among his classmates.

You can take advantage of this natural tendency to conform by pointing out, in nonshaming, nonjudgmental ways, which of the children your child knows have learned to use the potty. Keep in mind the fact that preschoolers are more likely to imitate people they most like or admire. This is a time to keep an open mind about the many aspects of toilet use that captivate young children. While we may not quite understand the thrill of sharing a bathroom stall with a friend, communal voiding has helped many a preschooler succeed at and enjoy toilet training.

Your preschooler is certainly thrilled to learn the ways he is like and unlike the children he knows, but this is a time when a strong urge to conform with same-gender adult behavior manifests itself as well. Fascinated as they often are by the concept of gender, three- and four-year-olds still have a limited understanding of what constitutes "maleness" and "femaleness." They are easily confused—assuming that a teenage boy with a ponytail is a girl or that a girl with short hair and a baseball cap is a boy.

Bathroom use is one obvious way to discern differences between genders and to solidify one's own sense of gender. As a result, your male preschooler may take great pride in urinating standing up "just like Daddy," while a girl this age may enjoy using the potty while Mommy puts on her makeup nearby. Again, it's best to use this natural tendency to categorize in your child's favor.

Wanting to use the bathroom "like a boy" or "like a girl" is a signal that your child is exploring all aspects of what it means to be him- or herself.

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