



Emotional Growth Needed for Toilet Training

For many parents, a child's emotional readiness for toilet training is the most difficult to recognize—particularly since a child moves in and out of emotional “prime times” and troublesome periods for toilet training throughout early childhood. Emotional issues that can profoundly affect toilet training include a desire for independence and self-mastery, the child's need to control some aspects of his environment, testing of limits and rules, his desire to win his parents' approval, fears associated with toilet use, and the desire to mimic or conform to other children's behavior.



The best way to determine the emotional state your child is in, and how conducive this is to toilet training, is to observe both his general behavior and his responses to any suggestions about potty use. If he clearly enjoys sitting on his potty or talking about potty use, his urge toward self-mastery will probably support his training. If he resists the idea or cries when you mention the potty, he may be experiencing conflict and you will need to wait for a more opportune time.

Self-Mastery

The desire to master one's own body and environment is a powerful desire common to all toddlers and preschoolers. The onset of cries of “I can do it!” will let you know that your one- or two-year-old's urge toward independence is in full swing. On one hand, this type of ambition can inspire great toilet-training progress as your child tries to act like a big kid in every possible way. Periodically, however, his need to control his own body and environment may manifest itself in less-than-desirable ways. Your one-year-old may insist on running away and hiding each time he feels the urge to have a bowel movement—in an effort to prevent you from violating his fragile physical pride by picking him up and placing him on the potty. He may even get up off the potty and have an accident on the living room floor for the sheer satisfaction of making the decision where to urinate. At age two, he may yell “No!” whenever you ask him if he needs to go, or delay going until it's too late and an accident occurs. The more attention you give such experiments—all normal attempts to test your rules and limits—the more he will repeat them.

The best response is to clean up the mess, keep your comments minimal, downplay the incident, and wait for a later, more mature phase of independence to inspire him to show you what a “big boy” he can be.

Resistance

The desire to control his physical functions and his environment may increase during times of major change in the child's life. A child who feels disoriented by recent upsets (such as a move to a new home, a divorce, or the arrival of a new baby in the house) may seek to regain emotional balance by exerting tighter control over those aspects of life that are within reach. Inner stresses, such as fears resulting from a rapidly developing imagination, may also lead to resistant behavior that makes toilet training difficult. Older toddlers and preschoolers, who are physiologically able to delay bladder or bowel movements longer when desired, can deliberately withhold stool and become seriously constipated in response to emotional stress, parental pressure, or even reluctance to let go of what they experience as a part of their bodies. Again, when confronted with such resistance it's best to talk with your child about what is upsetting him, do your best to allay his fears, and then back off for a while. With your help, your child will soon pass out of this emotional stage, and you can readdress toilet-training issues when he's better prepared to do so.

Desire for Approval

Two of the greatest tools parents can take advantage of during toilet training are their child's desire for approval and his urge to imitate others' behavior. Your child's experiments with winning your approval probably began before his first birthday. Spurred by cognitive development to explore cause-and-effect relationships ("I bite Mommy's nose and what happens?"), he soon began to assemble a database of which types of actions win positive responses from you and which do not. The more smiles and words of parental praise he experienced, the more he desired, and except during the normal spurts of rebellion that occur throughout childhood, he will probably continue to make a great effort to please you. Throughout the toddler and preschool years, praising your child for any small step toward bathroom mastery will pave the way for faster, more positive training.

If your child has not been successfully toilet-trained by age three and a half, his renewed desire to please can make adapting to potty use quite simple, for this is a time when many of his issues around independence will have been resolved. In later chapters, we will discuss ways to tap into this desire to please through affirmation ("Look what a great job you did!"), sticker charts, and other forms of positive reinforcement.

Social Awareness

Social awareness—the observation of and desire to be like others—gradually expands throughout the toddler and preschool years, adding yet another motivator for your child to become fully toilet-trained. At around eighteen months, your child is likely to become fascinated by the behavior of other children his age or a little older, and his desire to imitate them may spur him to use the toilet much earlier than he otherwise would. (This is why children with older siblings are often toilet-trained earlier than single children.) By age two and a half or three, he will become interested in the concept of gender and focus on imitating the behavior of his same-sex parent. This is a good time for parents to start inviting their same-sex child to observe them using the bathroom. If there is no adult of the same sex in your household, try asking an adult relative or friend to act as role model. Not only will your child's curiosity be satisfied in this way, but he may decide to start trying to use the potty to "be more like" the grownup he admires.

By the preschool years, your child's fascination with social identity and his peers' behavior will provide quite strong motivation to wear big-kid underwear and use the toilet like other children his age. If he has not already been toilet-trained by this time, peer pressure alone can motivate him to train himself. In many cases, all it takes to toilettrain a child at this age is to point out casually (never critically) that most of the other kids in his class seem to be out of diapers. Once he is aware of this, your child may choose to toilet-train himself.

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