



What Toilet Training Teaches You

If you are like most parents, you are delighted to see your child successfully concluding the toilet-training process. The days of loading the grocery cart with diapers are behind you (at least with this child), and accidents have dwindled to a manageable few. But the completion of toilet training signifies much more than liberation from diapers. By learning to control this bodily function, your child has moved significantly closer toward self-mastery—every young child's goal.



Responding to your wish for him to use the toilet “like a big boy” and practicing this new skill and succeeding again and again have given him a wonderful new sense of competence and even independence. This feeling that he can successfully meet a challenge will add to his confidence in other areas of his life, including social and academic pursuits. Even in the face of occasional accidents, then, it is important to recognize the level of accomplishment your toilet-trained child has reached.

What Will You Learn About Yourself?

One of the fascinations of parenthood is that many of our own long-unexamined assumptions and buried emotions surface as we interact with our children. When your child was first born, you may have been surprised at how you responded to each new experience. You may have been awed or frightened by the act of childbirth, enchanted or apprehensive about breastfeeding, confident or anxious the first time you held your child.

Toilet training also evokes a wide range of feelings, many of which may have been deeply buried in the unconscious until now—competitiveness, anxiety, anger, neediness, ambition, and a host of other emotions. Reasonable or not, such feelings can be difficult to control. As you look back on your experience toilet-training your child, think about your emotional responses—the positive feelings as well as the ones you now regret. Why do you think your emotions were stirred by these specific occasions? What did you do when you felt these ways? Did you find ways to express your emotions that did not damage your child's self-esteem and led to positive solutions? What did you learn about yourself through these interactions that you can generalize to other parenting situations?

Toilet training is a valuable task that every parent must undertake. But its greater value lies in its power to teach parents more about their children, themselves, and their lives together as a family. Ideally, in the years to come you will be able to draw on lessons learned during this task to communicate effectively, promote desirable behavior, approach new challenges in positive ways, and toilet-train future children with greater ease.

What Will You Learn About Your Child?

The toilet training process not only offers you new insights into your own emotions, attitudes, and parenting approach, but also allows you a fascinating look at your child's personality and learning style. Once toilet training is more or less completed, think back on your child's experiences. Which parts of the process were easy for him and which were more difficult? Did he have a hard time sitting still on the potty for more than thirty seconds or so? Did he become so involved with other activities that he frequently forgot to go? Did he tend to mimic whatever child he was with at any given time—using the potty if the other child did but having an accident if the other child was still in diapers? Which training techniques worked best—talking a great deal with him about potty use or simply placing him on the potty, sticking to a regular schedule, or just letting him sense when he needed to go? Did he appreciate your reminders to go to the bathroom or did he perceive them as controlling and resist? Did he respond better to hugs and kisses, words of praise, stars on a chart, or promises of fun activities if he stayed dry through the day or the week?

An observant parent will notice how much more effective positive reinforcement is with children than criticism or punishment. The desire to please a parent—and to be praised, loved, and rewarded—is extremely powerful in most young children. Toilet training is one of the best times to witness and appreciate this motivation in your child. As your child moves on to kindergarten and elementary school, your continued positive interest and rewards for progress will keep his desire to please alive, helping him achieve academic, social, and personal success.

What Will You Learn About Your Family?

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Some of the more frequent insights you will experience during the toilet training process have to do with the ways in which your family works together. Chances are you notice over the six months or longer that toilet training generally takes that you (or your partner) take on the role of family disciplinarian while your partner (or you) prefers a more permissive approach. (All references in this section to a partner can be applied to any other adult involved in raising your child.) Or you may notice that your child generally goes to one parent when she has an accident and the other when she announces her success. You and your partner may also learn to recognize the signs indicating when one of you reaches his or her limit, requiring quick intervention from the other. Finally, you may notice that one of you may be more inclined to “do” for your child, while the other is more likely to help her to be as independent as possible—a pattern that may continue for years.

Though you will find that many of these created patterns will continue throughout childhood, others will change many times over the years: Your child may turn to one parent more than the other for a few years, then switch parents; she may imitate one of you at one stage of her life, the other at another stage, and then switch back again; she may prefer one of you as her confidant, the other as her playmate. The main thing to remember is that she will have separate relationships with both of her parents, and this is all part of growing up and becoming herself.

However, you can use what you observe about your patterns as a family to make whatever changes you think are necessary. Perhaps you will find that the two of you tend to “gang up” on your child when she makes a mistake, overwhelming her rather than allowing her room to understand and correct her mistake. Or you may notice that when you and your partner disagree over your approach to a parenting problem, you each tend to follow your own course, undermining the other’s efforts instead of agreeing on a viable compromise. Reserve some time to discuss these issues alone with your partner or together with your child’s pediatrician. You may even talk with your child on a simple level about which parenting techniques lead her to feel better or worse.

Enjoying Your Self-Sufficient Child

When it comes time for your toilet-trained child to say goodbye to toddlerhood and move on, you can congratulate yourself on the completion of a major parenting challenge. Your child has become more confident and independent as a result of your efforts to help him achieve this developmental milestone, and his pride in his ability to master a new skill will support his further development. The simple fact that he has experienced the pleasure of achieving a goal will make later success more likely. In the years to come, accidents will happen now and then. What’s important is that your child and your family have accomplished something together and you are now better prepared to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

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