



Toilet Training and the Older Child

"My husband likes to tease me by calling my parenting style the 'lazy parent's method' for raising a child," writes one mother. "I like to just wait for my son to move on to the next stage of development and then follow his lead. He toilet-trained himself when he was four because he wanted to—not because I decided it was time."

Such a relaxed attitude toward toilet training has grown somewhat more common in this country in recent years, though many parents continue to report surprised reactions from others who learn that their preschool-age children are still in diapers. Your older child—age three and a half and up—may not be potty-trained for a variety of reasons. You may have decided to delay training until your child expressed an interest. You may have attempted toilet training at an earlier time, only to give up when you met with resistance. Your child may have been fully trained but then regressed when a new sibling arrived or another major change occurred, causing him never to return to his toilet-using routine. Or your toddler or preschooler may have experienced physical or developmental challenges that interfered with bladder or bowel control.

If your child has recently tried and failed to master the toilet-training process, or has never responded to your attempts to begin, it's a good idea to schedule a checkup with his pediatrician before beginning training at this time. An examination can identify such common, treatable obstacles to toilet training as a bladder infection or bowel problems. Your pediatrician can also explain how to compensate for physical or mental disabilities or developmental challenges. Whether a physical or other problem is confirmed or ruled out, a visit to the pediatrician will give you a better understanding of how to work with your child and will help you and your child proceed with greater confidence.

Toilet training a healthy older child can offer some advantages over training a toddler. Preschoolers' improved ability to visualize a goal and achieve it, increased skill at communicating any confusion, anxiety, or resentment they may feel, and greater awareness of other children's behavior all work together to promote a smoother and faster transition. Yet these same developments can also present new challenges. A child's ability to act on his own spurs resistance to a parent's directions. A preschooler's improved verbal skills allow him to argue and negotiate. His awareness of other children's behavior may backfire if he feels ashamed of his continued diaper use. The simple force of long habit can also make it more difficult to achieve the transition out of diapers.

In most cases, parents find that toilet training an older child is neither easier nor more difficult than training a toddler—just different. There are unique challenges and opportunities you are likely to experience with your preschooler or older child.

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