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AGES & STAGES

Cognitive and Verbal Skills Needed for Toilet Training

If you know how to drive a car with a manual transmission, you probably remember how hard it was to master this skill. First, you had to locate the stick shift, the clutch pedal, and the gears. Next, you had to get a feel for when it was time to shift gears, and learn how to do so smoothly while easing the clutch pedal down and up again.

During the toilet-training process, your child must learn to coordinate an equally complex combination of physical and cognitive tasks. She must familiarize herself with the necessary “equipment” (her body and its functions), associate physical sensations with the proper responses, picture what she wants to do (use the potty), create a plan to get there, begin using it, and remain in place long enough to finish, which requires both memory and concentration. Throughout the process, she must be able to understand your explanations, commands, and responses to some extent, as well as her own feelings about toilet use.



Body Awareness

Clearly, all of this learning takes time. The first steps in this process involve bodily sensation—the ability an inner feeling of fullness with the bowel movement or urination that results—and usually take place at twelve to eighteen months. Your efforts to reinforce this awareness by remarking on the poop or pee to come among the first productive actions you can take to start your child thinking about potty use.

As time passes, your child may demonstrate discomfort over a dirty diaper, try to remove her diaper or refuse to be diapered, and otherwise show that her awareness of her physical state is expanding. She may start to enjoy (or insist on) spending a substantial amount of time without clothes on, and by age two will have become curious in all of her body parts, especially the “private” ones used to eliminate. This is the age when boys commonly talk about their penis, or comment on Dad’s, while girls start to explore and ask questions about the vagin uses. Such interest in the body indicates a new openness to your explanations of how the body works and “name the equipment.” Acquiring simple words to describe her body and its workings helps your child to learn fully about the process of elimination. It also sets the stage for learning through experience. Just letting her use the potty until she happens to have a bowel movement—and then hearing you say how pleased you are by what she did is likely to help your child connect the need to poop with potty use more effectively than any long-winded explanation.

Making Plans and Carrying Them Out

Understanding the link between needing to eliminate and doing so is an important first step in toilet training readiness. Still, more development is necessary before your child can begin picturing the potty when she goes, plan how she will get to the bathroom and urinate into the potty, and remember her plan long enough to carry it out. These next steps in the developmental process require the capacity for picturing actions (*symbolic thought*), planning (*problem solving*), and memory—abilities that begin to surface at age one but become much better established by age two or even later.

One of the first signs that your child is able to think of an object when it isn’t there, for example, is at around 18 months, when she begins to wail every time you leave the room. For the first time, she can picture you and you continue to exist even though she can’t get to you, and it is the frustration caused by this understanding that makes her cry. In the coming months, her brain will develop to the point where she realizes she can crawl to the next room to find you—and walk to the bathroom to find her potty.

By age two, she may routinely picture her potty when she needs to use the bathroom. She may even know the potty when she wants to. She may still need your support, however, in making the associations required to go to the potty when she feels the urge and accomplishing her mission before other thoughts or events.

By age two and a half or three, your child's evolving interest in problem solving will support her ability to do this series of actions on her own. Solving problems requires picturing a solution and planning a way to achieve it. Seeing these skills develop is perhaps one of the most pleasurable ways of noting that your child is approaching toilet training readiness. As your child moves from her second to her third birthday, you will be able to observe her solve problems over and over, all day long—from how to get her toy shovel back from another child in the sandbox to how to get you to give her an extra piece of candy after dinner. The sight of your child's pensive face, pondering how to obtain the current object of her desire, is a sure sign that she is also cognitively mature enough to figure out how to solve the problem of staying dry without diapers (go to the bathroom and sit on the potty—now!).

More-Complex Thinking

A number of other cognitive developments greatly facilitate your child's ability to use the potty successfully, beginning at around age two and a half or three. Her memory will have improved a great deal, enabling her to remember where she is headed when she starts toward the bathroom but to recall previous toilet-training experiences and benefit from them. Her imagination has expanded, allowing her to explore potty use through imaginary play with stuffed animals, dolls, and puppets. (An expanded imagination may also create new toilet training challenges, leading to such anxieties as the fear of a flushing toilet or the fear of being flushed away.)

By age three she will have grown somewhat better at interrupting her focus on another task to go to the bathroom and resist distraction on the way. Chances are she will have achieved the verbal sophistication necessary, to communicate any problems or confusion she is experiencing, to express any fears that may have developed, and to ask for adults' help and guidance when she needs it.

These essential cognitive and verbal developments, just as important to toilet training success as physical growth, are the reason why most parents find that waiting until age two and a half or three to begin training makes the process much easier. Particularly if you have begun laying the groundwork at an earlier age, watching your child's natural development to fall into place can be a wise decision.

Source Guide to Toilet Training (Copyright © 2003 American Academy of Pediatrics)

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