

Potty Learning:
The Do's, Don'ts and the
Oops of Poops!

By

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Dedicated to
Rachel, Jeremy, and Jonah,
Julie, Josh and Jake.

Thank you.

With love.

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Introduction

How many people actually talk about pee pee and poop for a living? How lucky am I? I still use those words because the more proper names of “urination” and “defecation” sound much too clinical. I use the words I use with kids. Of course, every family has their own vocabulary around toileting, but these are the words I use with my own kids, so they come most naturally to mind for me.

In working with families over the years, Potty Learning or Potty Training questions are, by far, the most popular questions I get in all settings of my work. I’ve decided to put my thoughts into this book, in an effort to help you understand the process better and prevent lots of potential obstacles along the road as your child learns to use the potty.

The best news of all is that potty learning is totally and completely the work of the child. This is not something in which mom and dad need to participate in an active role at all! It is my hope that this book will give you a sense of relief, some clues and a deeper understanding of how to guide the process without taking responsibility for its success.

Take a deep breath, relax and enjoy the process. This is a big step on the way to your child’s independence.

Chapter One

**Potty Training from the Child's Perspective
"Look What I Made!"**

Think about your child's art work. How many pictures do you have hanging on the walls and refrigerator in your home? How many pot holders with your child's handprints did you give to relatives for Mothers' Day? Your child knows that what he/she creates is beautiful and that you cherish every last creation.

Now consider pee pee and poop. Your child sees these things as just another creative process in which to take unending pride. "Look what I made," they think. Why would these things be any different from the painting he made at the easel at preschool or the playdough sculpture that you "ooed" and "aahed" over just yesterday?

Kids also feel as though poop is an extension of his/her body. The thought of sending it swooshing down into the huge mouth of a very loud and scary swallowing-up monster called a toilet is unthinkable! Some kids are even scared that other parts of themselves or even their whole bodies will be flushed away. Imagine what they might be thinking if they have fallen into what feels like a huge bowl compared to their tiny, little tushies!

The transition from diaper changes to using the potty also involves a loss for the child. The loss of having the loving attention of mommy or daddy changing their diaper – which often includes loving words, a belly blast or two, some tickles and ending with the comfort of a clean and fresh diaper.

Chapter Two

Physical Readiness vs. Emotional Readiness
“I CAN do it, but do I WANT to do it?”

The physical ability to go pee pee and poop in the potty comes long before the ability to process the enormity of the responsibility of staying clean and dry. They are two very distinct things and confusing one with the other is one of the biggest mistakes that parents make, causing potty learning to be very frustrating and go on and on for months or even years. In truth, potty learning takes place over the course of many months (for the child), but the transition from diapers to staying clean and dry in underwear can take merely one day, if parents just watch for the signs and allow the process to take its course.

Imagine how hard it is for you, as adults, to switch your mind from work to play. How about going from doing one thing to doing something very different? Many of us require a transition period in between things.

Think about this for our kids: They are engrossed (as kids are so “in the moment”) in playing with their trains, cars, dolls, electronics, or anything that captures their attention.

It would be a tall order to ask a 2 year old to:

1. stop what he’s doing,
2. listen to the cues his body is giving him,
3. remember that he can always come back and resume playing with his favorite toy in a few minutes,
4. tear himself away from the amazing creation he was just about to finish,
5. get to the bathroom in time (before the pee pee or poop begins coming out),
6. pull down his pants far enough so as not to get them wet,
7. sit down and finally,
8. to go.

Whew! That was a long process, in reality! But, wait! He’s not done yet!

Now, he has to:

9. listen to his body to make sure he's really done and that there's no more pee pee or poop that needs to come out.
10. he needs to finish – asking someone to come wipe him or not,
11. pull his pants up,
12. zip,
13. snap,
14. flush,
15. turn on the water,
16. get soap,
17. wash hands,
18. rinse hands,
19. turn off the water,
20. dry hands and then
21. run back to finally finish the amazing creation.

Ok, that was a 21 step process. Developmentally, a two-year-old can typically only handle a one or two step process. Twenty-one steps can be very overwhelming for a little one!

The emotional maturity that is required to handle potty learning is fairly great. Some kids can certainly handle it and are clearly ready to wear underwear and are successful at staying clean and dry at age two. That's great, but certainly more of an exception than the rule. It is more common as kids approach 3, 3 ½, 4, 4 ½ and 5.

The key is really to know your child. How would you measure your child's emotional maturity? Is he able to handle his feelings, delay his gratification, and accept the hard moments, such as disappointment and frustration? How about taking responsibility? Is he able to follow two to three-step directions? Being responsible to stay clean and dry all day long is a big job!

Chapter Three

The Signs of Readiness

A.K.A. the things that get parents excited that it's actually going to happen (Don't get too excited yet!)

There are several signs of readiness. I'll mention some of the most common, although there are many possible signs, some of which are not mentioned here. The most important aspect of signs of readiness is that many of these signs should be present before assuming that a child is ready for underwear. There should be many signs for an on-going period of time. The more signs, the better and the longer they have been going on, the better, as well.

Parents can and should deny their child's requests to wear underwear if many readiness signs are not present or haven't been present for an extended period of time. Once they are in underwear, there is no turning back without the potential for feeling a sense of failure. Keep the underwear as the ultimate goal to which your child can look forward. To kids, wearing that Superman underwear is the ultimate in super powers!!! Make sure they're really ready to fly!

Your child is interested in going on the potty or shows curiosity about going potty.

As kids are exposed to us going potty, older siblings, peers and even books about potty learning, they often begin to get curious. Some kids enjoy being like older kids and strive to act like them. Other kids will take notice, but feel no pressure to try it out, nor do they care to. Some other kids will ask to watch you and

ask questions as they watch you go potty. Be sure to answer their questions as openly and honestly as possible. This is how they learn and begin to process how they will do it when the time comes.

Your child understands the mechanics of what happens around going potty.

Kids need to be able to pull their pants up and down and redress themselves, at least partially. They need to know that they need to hold their pee pee and poop in until they reach the potty. They need to know that they need to flush and then wash hands after pulling their pants or panties up. The understanding of the multi-step process of going potty is a big job.

Your child needs to be able to communicate with you that he/she needs to go.

Many two or three year olds are either non-verbal or speak in a way that is difficult for others to understand them. It is essential that a child be able to communicate to any adult in charge that they need to go potty – even an adult who doesn't know him very well like a new babysitter or teacher. For kids for whom communication is challenging, sign language or a physical signal would be helpful for them to get their message across if they are interested in going potty.

Your child shows signs of staying dry for long periods of time or wakes up dry in the morning or after naps.

Having a dry diaper is a sign that the child has greater control over his/her pee pee and may even go on a fairly regular schedule. Poop may also appear on a very regular basis, for example, after lunch each day.

My kids woke up dry in the mornings and from naps for a long time before they were potty trained. That is also a sign of readiness in some kids, however, many kids are potty trained during the day long before they are dry at night.

Your child shows an awareness of going pee pee and poop even when wearing a diaper.

Before I had kids, my friend's son used to hide in the pantry and sit on the cans when he went poop in his diaper. I had never seen a child do this and I thought it was so cute! I didn't know at the time that this was a sign that he was getting ready for potty training.

If for a couple of minutes your child disappears to go poop, respect her privacy and know that readiness is increasing.

Your child is uncomfortable in a wet or poopy diaper.

Another sign of readiness is when your child decides that she doesn't want to sit in a wet diaper anymore or is annoyed with the big, stinky mess in her diaper. She becomes more aware of the discomfort and some kids even tend to get more rashes on their bottoms as they get older.

Your child can dress him/herself.

Being able to get dressed is an essential part of potty learning. Being able to redress after going potty is very important to the whole process of moving beyond diapers.

Your child is able to delay his gratification and has an understanding that the toy will still be there when he gets back.

The emotional maturity of delaying the fun of playtime and the knowledge that the toys will still be there waiting when he returns is another important step in the responsibility of potty learning.

Chapter Four

The Parents' Role in the Potty Learning Process Or "Butt Out!"

Parents sometimes take too much of the initiative in the process of potty learning. The process is really the majority the child's job, not the parents'. In fact, parents should want the child to take as long as possible to become potty trained. The later the better because they are more likely to be successful and the easier it is for you. The job of going to every bathroom at every public place you visit can lose its luster very quickly. Trust me!

Ok, parents, if you want something to do in this process, here are some things to think about and do with your child. Other than these steps, please stay out of it!

Modeling

Remember the days of going potty without an audience? Well, for now, those days are over. Allowing your child to watch you go potty and see the multi-step process over and over again is a great training ground for her. Let her watch, let her ask questions and be ready to answer them openly and honestly. Feel free to talk about each step as you do them. Who knew several years ago that one day you would be narrating your bathroom visits one day? Just laugh and enjoy the ride.

Let younger siblings watch the older ones. This is another opportunity for your kids to learn the process and even become motivated to be just like big brother or sister. Of course, the older child has to be comfortable with this. If not, honor his/her privacy.

Set the stage

There are several things parents can do to create the right environment for potty learning. Having a potty, or potty insert seat available at all times makes the opportunity available whenever your child is ready and leaves the decisions up to him. It's just always there for the taking. No pressure, just opportunity.

There are so many potty learning books available. Visit your local library or bookstore and have those books sprinkled in with the other books you read to your child on a regular basis. There are many available. Find a few that you like and that you think your child will enjoy.

Having pull-ups and underwear available, but just not using them yet is a great way to start. You can begin the conversation with your child that when he is ready to go in the potty every time, he can wear “big boy underwear”. Having some with his favorite TV or movie character might add an additional boost of motivation into the mix. Again, no pressure, just something fun to look forward to.

Let go of the outcome

As parents, doing the above actions is about all you can do other than just paying attention to the signs of readiness. Other than that, the job is entirely your child's. Let go and let the process happen. Be aware that you can't rush the process or make development happen faster than it wants to. You can't make a plant grow quicker or rush the days and nights. Be patient with the process and take deep breaths if you need to.

When you let go of the outcome of potty learning and development, you give your child the gift of honoring them where they are. When you try to rush them, you are putting undo pressure on them and they don't know how to please you in that way.

Avoid adding layers to potty development that have to be peeled off later

When you are pleased or displeased by your child's potty behaviors, you add layers of pressure and manipulation to the whole potty learning process. When you celebrate and call Grandma with the excitement of the first successful potty experience, the child is taking notes and thinking to herself, “Uh, oh, I'm not sure what I just did to deserve all of this attention, but it scared me and I feel overwhelmed.” On the flip side, if you become angry at your child for pooping in his underwear, you've now taught your child how to get you angry. Our kids just want our attention, so now he knows how to get it, albeit, not the kind of attention you want to give him.

We don't want our kids to have too much power to make us spin like a top. If you have a strong reaction, you teach your child how to get a strong reaction out of you by either pleasing or displeasing you through something they control completely – pee pee and poop!

You cannot win a power struggle around toileting, so don't even enter the boxing ring.

Keep the process clean and simple by staying out of it and keeping your emotions out of it completely.

If your child is successful and goes pee pee or poop on the potty, simply make an observation. You can be happy, but be sure not to overdo it. The observation might sound like this:

- *“Wow, look at that! You went pee pee in the potty all by yourself!”*
- *“I see that you pulled your pants up all by yourself. High five!”*
- *“I heard the water running! Wow, you remembered to wash your hands after going to the potty!” or “Uh, oh, don’t forget to wash your hands!”*
- *“Great job listening to your body. You knew you needed to go pee pee.”*

As parents, try to stay as unemotional throughout the potty learning process. Just observe quietly and take care of business. I know you don’t want to be changing diapers forever. I don’t blame you. I assure you that if you follow these steps, your child’s potty learning experience and yours will be easy and uneventful. Hang in there!

Chapter Five

Diapers, Pull-Ups and Underwear, Oh My!

The most exciting part of this process for the little ones is to wear their favorite characters on their underwear. I caution you not to put the cart before the horse, however. Do not put your child in underwear alone until he has shown some evidence that he will be successful. We want to make him feel good about his accomplishments and don't want to take away something he is excited about. Of course, wearing the underwear over a diaper or pull-up is always an option.

Graduation from a diaper to a pull-up is best done when your child is showing some independence, is showing great interest, and is having some success with the use of the potty. The pull-up allows the child to take his pants down and sit on the toilet independently and to have some autonomy to decide between the toilet and the diaper throughout the day.

In reality, however, a pull-up is still a diaper. If your child goes pee pee or poop in the pull-up, it's ok. This allows for the non-linear process that potty learning involves. Two steps forward and two steps backward still work with a diaper or a pull-up, however, not with underwear alone.

I encourage you to hold off having your child wear underwear until you have confidence that your child can stay clean and dry at least most of the time. Then, you will be happy and your child can be proud of herself for her successes!!!

I'm often asked "what if my child is already in underwear and has accidents a lot?" I believe that going back to pull-ups or diapers is not a punishment. It's all in how you present it. If you see your child's accidents as a communication to you that he's not ready for underwear, then you won't feel guilty "taking away" the underwear. Just let your child know that you can see that he's not ready for underwear yet. Let him know that it's ok and that he will have another chance when you think he is more ready. Watch your own emotional reactions and keep it neutral and compassionate, not punitive.

Chapter Six

Nighttime Training – The Shortest and/or the Longest Road

For some kids, being dry at night is the first sign that toilet readiness is approaching. They do it without being asked and without any effort whatsoever. For those kids, there is no challenge here.

For many kids, however, staying dry at night takes up to years beyond daytime training. It can actually be a very frustrating experience for some kids and even for parents. **Many kids are very sound sleepers and are unable to awaken when they need to go pee pee.** This especially becomes a problem when kids reach the age of sleepovers. Prior to six years of age, it is very common for kids to wet the bed. At or after the age of six, check with your pediatrician to be sure to rule out any physiological issues for night time urination.

Reassure your child that he isn't the only one if nighttime training is a challenge. It is very common and the less pressure we put on kids, the more likely they are to outgrow it.

Many kids who are nighttime trained, will wet the bed when they are experiencing increased stress, changes or pressures. This is also a very natural occurrence and should be handled without anger or consequence. Just change the sheets, pajamas and move on without lots of discussion.

Chapter Seven

Challenges Along the Way**The Oops of Poops (and pee pee)!**

The process of **potty learning is a very non-linear developmental process**. Just because something was accomplished yesterday, doesn't mean that today will present yet another step ahead. The general direction of movement should be forward, however, parents can expect their children to experience movement forward and backward all along the way.

This is another reason why remaining in a diaper or pull-up prior to switching to underwear full time is a good idea. The movement is fluid at times (no pun intended) and, again, we want kids to be successful as much as possible. Not to mention saving lots of unnecessary laundry!

Potty learning is such a huge developmental leap, that many kids actually scare themselves as they take such a huge step. Remember when your child began walking? They would often wander just a little ways from you and then come back and check in to make sure you're still there. Then, they would wander a bit further and come back again. This is how they feel safe to explore and expand their world because you're still there when they return from farther and farther away.

When kids potty train, they may become clingy as a backlash to the big developmental leap they have taken. This is just an appropriate insurance policy for them to make sure as they grow, you'll still be there for them.

In a similar way, **kids may regress in their potty training when other developmental leaps take place**. It's just a way that they get to remember when they were "little" if growing scares them a bit.

Big changes can also cause potty regression. For example, moving, starting school or changing schools, and especially a new baby can cause regression in the potty learning progress. Don't panic nor think that it will never get better. I remember feeling as though every challenging stage my child and I were in would last FOREVER! In case you have ever felt that way, remember that development is always moving. Sometimes it moves away from where you hope, but the overall trend will always be forward.

There's a beautiful quote from the Talmud that says, *"Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers, 'Grow, grow.'"* So, too, with our kids. They will grow. Perhaps not on our time schedules, but in their own time in their own ways. Be patient and just let it all unfold.

For many kids, they will be pee pee trained however their **poop training will be delayed**. There are many reasons why kids take longer to become poop trained.

As mentioned earlier, poop is considered to be a part of themselves and kids are sometimes afraid to let it go into the big toilet "monster".

Even long after they have been in underwear all day, kids will ask for a diaper when they need to poop. The containment of the poop in the diaper is much less frightening for kids and enables them to feel a sense of control over a situation in which they felt little control. This is all very normal and expected in the potty learning journey.

A painful bowel movement can cause kids to be afraid to poop and then **withhold their poop for days at a time**. They seem to remember that painful experience for a very long time. As parents, we worry about our kids and don't want them to hold in their pee pee or poop for extended periods of time. Again, the less you worry and let the process unfold, reassuring them along the way, the quicker it will resolve itself. Feeding your kids lots of fruits and juices will also help to make the poop softer enabling them to have poop experiences that are not painful. This helps them to see that it doesn't always hurt. If your child tends toward constipation, consult your pediatrician for possible use of stool softeners to help the process be less painful for your child.

Another potential hiccup for poop training can be **that big scary flushing monster** – the toilet. If your child is very sensitive and the noise is bothersome, it may have scared him. Be patient with your child's fears. The developmental time for fears to develop often coincides with potty learning, so hang in there and know that with a little more maturity, your child will handle all of this with grace and ease.

Chapter Eight

**The Big Payoff
It's worth the wait!**

There are always rewards at the end of the tough times. In the case of potty training, the reward is no more diaper changes.

In an effort to get to those rewards, here are some things to remember:

- Don't give up or get discouraged. No kid will graduate college or get married in diapers!
- It's ok to take a break and start the whole process over if you find that you've started some bad habits and you don't know how to get out of them.
- Your kids will be very forgiving of your mistakes and will love you at the end of the day no matter how bad your choices were around their potty learning. You will always have another opportunity to do it better.
- Be patient with your child's process. Kids' personalities will shine through in the potty learning journey and their style may not be the same as your style. Make every attempt to understand your differences and be patient. When you are compassionate about what they are going through, they will thank you with their behavior and will be grateful by pushing through their development without fear of displeasing you.
- The less you care about when potty training is accomplished, the better for both you and your child. The less stress the better for everyone!
- The longer you wait, the better chance that your child will come to you when he/she is ready to take the final leap into underwear for good. Even if your child asks to wear underwear, you can say "no" until you see that many signs of readiness are present, that your child is able to stay dry for periods of time and all of the emotional maturity necessary is in place. Only then, should you take that final plunge with your child.
- Remember, it's not potty training, it's a long process of learning, watching, growing and then having the confidence to go for it!

Don't forget to enjoy your child. The age of potty learning is a beautiful stage of childhood. Don't miss it by stressing about pee pee and poop. When the agenda is yours, you will cause stress for yourself and for your child. Just enjoy the process and trust that your child will travel the necessary developmental roads in his own time.

Also, keep in mind that potty training is not a competition. Even if every other kid in your child's class at preschool is in underwear or even every kid in your zip code has already mastered the tools of potty learning, that doesn't mean that your kid is running late. Don't compare and don't imagine for a minute that your child's potty training is any sort of reflection of your parenting. There is no trophy for being first.

Be sure to stay focused on respecting your child's process and keep your ego out of the picture. Your child will truly thank you!

I thank you for taking the time to read this book and it is my hope that you are able to take some pearl away from it that is helpful to you and your child in your potty learning journey together.