

# Potty/toilet training

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Information for parents of disabled children in England,  
Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales



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## Introduction

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All children learn to use the potty or toilet at a different stage in their life. Most children start to show an interest in moving on to a potty or toilet at about two years old.

If your child has a physical or learning disability they may not be ready to start until they are older. They may need longer to learn to use the potty or toilet.

It is important to speak to a doctor to check for physical problems if your child is having difficulty in learning to use the toilet.

Some children, particularly those with profound and multiple difficulties may not be able to use the toilet on their own, but will need to have a toileting programme which will ensure their needs are treated with respect. Ask your health visitor or community nurse for advice.

All children are different and the way they learn to use the toilet may be linked with the specific condition they have. It is a good idea to get in touch with the relevant support groups to get advice from people who have more experience.

# What do we mean by ‘toilet training’?

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## **Toilet training helps children:**

- recognise the need to go to the toilet
- control the need
- communicate the need to go to the toilet
- complete the toilet sequence as far as they are able.

## **We are aiming for a child who is able to:**

- pull their underwear down
- get onto the toilet
- sit on the toilet
- have a wee/poo
- wipe themselves
- get off the toilet
- pull their underwear up
- flush toilet
- wash and dry hands.

# When should you start toilet training?

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Look for signs that your child is ready to use the potty or toilet. These might include awareness of:

- passing urine or having a bowel movement
- showing discomfort when a nappy is wet or soiled
- waking from a daytime sleep with a dry nappy
- showing an interest in a potty or the toilet.

## **What if your child does not show these signs?**

If your child’s condition means that s/he is not showing any of these signs you should discuss it with one of the professionals involved with your child’s needs. This could be the health visitor, community nurse, occupational therapist, paediatrician or, if they are in a nursery or school setting, the teacher, teaching assistant or school nurse. You will need support from the professionals who deal with your child on a day to day basis and it is important to work together on ways of addressing the issue.

## Before starting

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Choose a time when you can spend a lot of time with your child, when your child seems happy and there are no major distractions or stressful events like starting nursery, moving house, moving from a cot to a bed. Make sure the time you choose fits in with you as well – perhaps at a time when there is someone else to help you if this is possible.

It may take some time for a child to learn, so make sure that toilet training can be carried out in the other places your child visits such as the playgroup, nursery, or school.

You will need to be sure that any one-to-one workers contribute to the toileting plan.



### Tips before starting:

- look at the times your child is most likely to use the toilet, for example after meals, when s/he wakes up from a sleep. It is worth making a chart for a few weeks to establish any patterns. The chart can be very simple where you note the times when the child wees or poos
- plan a routine you can stick to, until it becomes established
- make sure the potty or toilet is comfortable for the child and the child can sit on it without any fear of falling off. The child should be able to place his/her feet flat on the floor or foot step
- there are various toilet seats and steps available from retail outlets. It is worth looking at the range and deciding what would be good for your child
- if your child has difficulty in sitting, an occupational therapist should be able to help with equipment and check whether the toilet needs to be adapted so it is more comfortable for the child
- make sure you change the child in the toilet so that they get used to the toilet as a place where wee and poo happens
- try and make the bathroom as welcoming as possible. You could put stickers on the walls to make it an exciting place to be.

## Once you start

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- Be patient – don't expect instant results.
- Do not restrict fluid intake – plenty of drinks should be given so that the need to go to the toilet becomes familiar.
- Ensure your child has a healthy diet with plenty of fibre, for example brown bread, fruit, Weetabix – to help their bowel movements to be soft and easy to pass.
- Take your child to the toilet at the times you expect they may need to go – refer to the chart you have made.
- Avoid taking your child too frequently. If they have just used the toilet, they will not need to visit for at least one hour.
- Keep to the planned routine as much as you can.
- Do not show any signs of concern – it will make your child feel anxious.
- Remember there are several steps in the whole process and each one needs to be reached – they may not all happen at once.
- If your child is reluctant to sit still, you could sing some songs or read a book with them just for a few minutes to get your child used to sitting on the potty or toilet. Never keep your child on the potty or toilet for more than five minutes.
- If your child is older and too big for a potty and still not showing interest in using the toilet then make sure they visit the toilet area regularly. You may need to put a favourite book, picture or toy next to the toilet or play a favourite piece of music to encourage them to come into the room.
- Make sure all toileting needs occur in the toilet or bathroom so that your child associates the changing of nappies/pants with the toilet area.
- Praise your child first for showing an interest in the potty or toilet, then for using the potty – every small step should be rewarded with praise or stickers.
- Make sure your child sees you washing your hands after wiping them so it becomes part of the process of using the toilet.
- Let your child get used to the routine of washing his/her hands after being on the potty or toilet.



# Bowel movement

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Sit your child on the toilet or potty when you think they are likely to have a bowel movement and encourage them to push down gently. To encourage this, try making your child laugh or to blow into a toy or whistle – if they are sitting upright it will also help to encourage a bowel movement.

If nothing happens, say nothing and try again a bit later.

If it is acceptable to your family, take your child into the toilet when you or family members go, to show the child what is expected. It may take much longer than with other children, so be patient.

## Smearing

Some children with learning disabilities smear their faeces after going to the toilet. There can be various reasons for this. It could be a child has simply not understood the process of wiping with paper properly. Others enjoy the feel of the texture of the faeces and providing them with an alternative activity such as play dough can resolve the situation. Some will use it as a way of getting attention, or because they have learnt they are rewarded for such behaviour by being given a nice warm bath. Children can also behave in this way because they are extremely upset and agitated.



If your child smears:

- try to stay calm
- avoid giving them lots of attention as a result of their behaviour
- reinforce good behaviour by giving them lots of praise when they carry out other activities well
- try to see if there is a pattern to their behaviour, as it might help you understand why they are doing it
- seek advice from a professional such as a nurse, health visitor, occupational therapist or psychologist on dealing with it
- set a period of time to try any strategies and if nothing happens, wait for a while before starting again.



# Children who find it hard to communicate

Make sure your child can communicate to you when they need to use the toilet if they are able.

Some children who are able to speak will be able to use words. Others may not be able to ask to use the toilet and may need to use another system such as a signing system like Makaton or a symbol. Other children may be able to use a photograph or object such as a roll of toilet paper to show that they need to go to the toilet.

Make sure your child knows where the toilet or potty is, and can get in and out of that room easily.

Make it fun – find a special toy, which your child only uses when in the toilet – this will help them to associate going to the toilet with fun and not stress.

If your child needs to be cleaned, make sure that people working with them know this should be done in a private bathroom area in an age-appropriate way. It is not acceptable for a physically able young person to be 'changed' whilst lying down.

## If your child takes a long time to learn to use the toilet

- Try to get clothes that are easy to wear, change, and wash.
- Items such as large size nappies, waterproof mattress covers, and covers for duvets and pillows may be available from the continence service, when your child is three or four– ask your health visitor. If not, you can get them from larger chemists.
- If your child is older, it is often you as their parents who understand their needs, and you may be able to devise your own strategies.
- Do not despair. Try to speak with other parents for support, advice and tips.

## Useful contacts

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This is a leaflet offering general advice for families but you may find it more helpful to get in touch with specific support groups around your child's condition. Some relevant groups are listed below and if you need help in finding one for your child's condition call the Contact a Family helpline.

### ➤ Education and Resources for Improving Childhood Continence (ERIC)

A helpline for parents, and offer products and publications to buy online

 0845 370 8008

 [www.eric.org.uk](http://www.eric.org.uk)

### ➤ Family Fund

Gives grants to families on low income for washing machines, tumble driers or towards cost of bedding and clothing.

 01904 621 115

 [www.familyfund.org.uk](http://www.familyfund.org.uk)

### ➤ National Autistic Society

Provides information advice and support for people with autistic spectrum disorders and their families, including a fact sheet on toilet training. Offers an interpreting service in over 120 different languages to callers using landline telephones in the UK

 0808 800 4104

 [www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

### ➤ Scope

supports families of children with cerebral palsy and can provide written information on toilet training.

 0808 800 3333

 [www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)

# How Contact a family can help

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Contact a Family is a UK charity that provides support and information to families with disabled children, whatever the condition or disability.



## Our helpline

Our freephone helpline can give advice about any aspect of raising a disabled child, including help with finances, education, emotional and practical support.

 **0808 808 3555**  **helpline@cafamily.org.uk**



## Guides for parents

We have guides that are free for parents on a range of topics, including:

- *Helping your child's sleep*
- *Feeding and eating*
- *Concerned about your child* (the role of the different health professionals)
- *Developmental delay* (explanation and developmental milestones)
- *Claiming Disability Living Allowance* (the main benefit for disabled children)

A full list of our guides is at the link below. All our guides are free to parents who call our helpline, and are free to download.

 **[www.cafamily.org.uk/publicationslist](http://www.cafamily.org.uk/publicationslist)**  **0808 808 3555**

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## Get in contact with us

209–211 City Road, London EC1V 1JN

☎ 020 7608 8700

✉ info@cafamily.org.uk

🌐 www.cafamily.org.uk

f www.facebook.com/contactafamily

🐦 www.twitter.com/contactafamily

📺 www.youtube.com/cafamily

## Free helpline for parents and families:

☎ **0808 808 3555** (Mon–Fri, 9.30am–5pm)

✉ helpline@cafamily.org.uk (Access to over 200 languages)

## Our free family linking service

🌐 www.makingcontact.org



Charities Evaluation Services



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