



# Coping With Your Toddler & Toilet Training

## Developing Independence

This stage of development is often called the "terrible two's." Some children go through it a little before they turn two and some not until many months afterward. During this time, children go from depending entirely on their caregivers to learning how to better control themselves and take charge of some of their everyday needs. Learning these skills takes time and practice. A toddler's attempts to gain control over the people and events in her life is a normal part of this learning process. Toddlers must go through this to become competent adults. Parents help their toddlers learn these skills by providing them with clear limits, firm guidance, and encouragement.

**F**amilies with toddlers face many challenges. A toddler realizes he is a separate person from his parents. One minute he wants to do things for himself and the next he is screaming for help. For parents, a toddler's struggle to be

independent often results in behaviors that are unpredictable and sometimes embarrassing. Being aware of what to expect, what these behaviors mean, and what you can do about them will enable your family to cope with this challenging stage of development.

Guiding toddlers through this stage takes a lot of patience, flexibility, and creativity. Toddlers are constantly testing what they can do to see how others react. Power struggles are sure to happen between parents and the child who has just figured out that she can say "No!" Wise parents have learned not to make every disagreement a battle. They "don't sweat the small stuff," giving up some of their power in situations where the outcome is less important. For example, a parent may let his child wear colors that don't match or eat jelly sandwiches for lunch 5 days in a row.

At other times, however, parents must stand firm. In order for your toddler to feel secure and know what to expect, he needs to know there are limits. This is especially true in situations where possible harm may come to others or to himself. Another publication in the Principles of Parenting series, HE-0719, "Helping Young Children Behave," offers several behavior management strategies to use with young children.

When a toddler begins to see herself as a separate person, she starts sounding very demanding. Along with "No," a toddler's favorite words include "Mine," "My," "I want," and "Me do it." Not understanding the idea of sharing yet, toddlers will hang on with all their might to what they believe is rightfully theirs—just about everything!

Temper tantrums are common at this age as many things seem to get in the way of what they want. Toddlers do not yet have the words or the skills to be able to control their strong negative emotions. But they can learn these skills from adults around them who remain calm and maintain firm and appropriate limits.

Another way to help your child learn how to control her negative feelings is by teaching her the words she can use to name them. For example, once your child has calmed down, you can say, "You really got angry with Mommy when she wouldn't let you stay at Grandma's." Let your child know you understand her feelings. "You really like to stay with Grandma! You can stay with her another day."

The independence-seeking nature of the toddler is both a trial and a triumph for parents and children. There are moments when the power struggles that arise over little things turn into large-scale battles, leaving both parent and child exhausted and upset. These are the moments when you know how the term "terrible two's" came about.

However, toddlers have a delightful side as well. They are active, curious, and often entertaining as they explore their environment and figure out how they fit into it. They can also be affectionate, enthusiastic, and reasonable.

Watching the strides toddlers make toward understanding themselves as individuals is exciting. It is even more exciting when parents recognize how their firm, consistent care and guidance help that to happen.

## Toilet Training

A toddler's developing sense of independence is encouraged when he feels he is in control of his body. Helping a child move out of diapers and into training pants is one way to promote the independence that every toddler seeks. There are many factors that go into moving from diapers to being able to use the toilet successfully.

Children develop these physical abilities at different times. For most children, the possibility of full control does not occur until after age two. While it is not possible to start toilet training too late, it is possible to start too early.

First, children need to develop the muscle coordination to control their bowels and bladders. This is the first sign parents can look for when they are wondering if it's time to toilet train their young child. One sign of this physical readiness is when a toddler stays dry for several hours, such as after a nap.

A second, very important requirement is that children be able to sense when their bowels and bladders are full. Some adults are surprised to find out that this awareness is not automatic but is learned over time. Adults can help a child recognize his toilet needs by pointing out his body cues, such as when he holds himself. When adults explain what is happening, children gradually tune in to their own internal signals.

When caregivers talk in matter-of-fact ways about going to the toilet, they give children the words they need to tell others about their toileting needs. It's important to present urination and bowel movements as a natural part of everyday life. Select words that you feel relatively comfortable with, and use them consistently. Having the words to talk about these important, everyday bodily events will help your toddler learn how to take care of these needs on his own.

You might find it useful to read storybooks to children about toilet training. This often encourages conversations between parents and children about toilet training.

Being able to understand simple conversations about urination, bowel movements, and how to manage them is another reason to delay toilet training until children are about two years old.

Once children develop muscle control, awareness of their bladders and bowels, and the language to talk about their toileting needs, parents should wait until the child shows interest in toilet training. Such signs may include announcing when she is having a bowel movement or urinating, or showing interest when parents, siblings, peers, or others use the toilet. Once your child shows interest, you can begin preparing them for training.

- Buy or borrow a potty chair and leave it in the bathroom for your toddler to sit on whenever she wants.
- Buy "big kid's underwear" and let your toddler wear them when she has stayed dry for a few hours.
- If you feel comfortable, you can let your child watch you use the toilet. Toddlers learn by watching and like to copy the behavior of their parents.

Training your child to use the toilet requires consistency, patience, and a positive attitude. Normal accidents and failures can occur during this process. Some children will catch on quickly, while others will learn over a longer period.

One way to begin is to help your toddler use the toilet on a regular basis, such as after getting up in the morning, after each meal, after nap time, and before bedtime. There is no need to force a child to sit until he goes. If nothing has happened after a few minutes or so, calmly say that you see he doesn't have to go now and help him get dressed.

Remember that accidents are a sign that the child is still learning. Just as you wouldn't punish a child for falling down when learning to walk, don't punish, criticize, or make fun of your child if she has an accident.

When your toddler is successful, be encouraging. For example, tell him you noticed he went to the bathroom "just like Mommy and Daddy."

Avoid making toilet training into a power struggle. Remember, your independence-seeking toddler is going to want to be in charge. Keep toilet training a fun experience for your child. For example, let your toddler play with a toy or read or talk to you while sitting on the potty. Be prepared to view the accidents that are sure to happen as part of the process, not as evidence of the child's unwillingness to mind you. Remember that when the child is feeling stressed due to other events in her life—such as a new sibling, moving to a new home, or starting a new day care—there might be setbacks. In the long run, consistency and a relaxed attitude will help your child be successful in her attempts at independence in this area of her life.

## Parenting for Independence

Some parents mistakenly equate successful parenting with early toilet training or with perfectly behaved children. They feel upset when their children fail because they are afraid it reflects badly on them. Parents need to keep in mind that it is the child's success that is the goal, not their own. Wise parents understand that their role in toilet training or teaching children to handle their strong emotions is to help their children accomplish an

important developmental task—to be able to take charge of themselves. When children control their bodies and manage their emotions in healthy ways, they feel competent and more sure of themselves.

## Additional Reading

Patricia H. Shimm and Kate Ballen. (1995). *Parenting your Toddler: The Expert's Guide to the Tough and Tender Years*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.



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