



Transitioning from Diapers to Toilet Use

Wild Lilac's guide to support your family in a healthy and positive transition.

The transition from using diapers to using the toilet is a phase in your preschooler's life that may have you feeling anxious and confused. At Wild Lilac we believe that, in order to support a successful transition to toilet use, parents and teachers must all commit to an encouraging, consistent, and bribery-free approach.

What is a "successful transition"?

Our ideal outcome is for your child to be empowered by using the toilet. Using the toilet is an important way for children to be responsible for their bodies, and it is our work as parents and teachers to encourage this in a positive way. Adults often find themselves engaged in power struggles over diaper and toilet issues (for example, a child does not want his diaper changed or a child is aware s/he needs to pee but does not want go to the toilet and instead demands a diaper).

Adults often resort to (or sometimes begin with) a rewards-based approach (for example, candy or sticker charts) that do not cultivate children's self-empowerment. The key to a successful transition is for adults to approach the process as one of learning by teaching—not training—children. It is important to teach children to listen to their bodies, to talk to others clearly about their needs, to get their own clothes off (sometimes with a little help), and to feel good about learning something new. Learning happens when we teach in a way that does not punish and does not use rewards or treats. The goal is for the child to feel proud of what he or she has done.

Signs of Readiness Checklist

Physical Readiness

- Child regularly stays dry for 2+ hours at a time
- Child knows the feelings that signal s/he needs to use the bathroom
- Child can pull down his or her own pants, and pull them up
- Child can get him or herself to the toilet

Mental and Language Readiness

- Child can follow simple directions
- Child can point to wet or soiled clothes and ask to be changed
- Child knows the words for using the toilet, and can tell an adult when he/she needs to go

Emotional Readiness

- Child seeks privacy when going in diaper
- Child shows interest in using the toilet
- Child shows curiosity at other people's toilet habits

Beginning Steps

- Ask your child if he/she would like to try using the toilet often
- When your child asks for a diaper change, explain that diapering is something an adult needs to do for a child, but going to the toilet is something your child can learn to do for himself/herself.
- Make sure the bathroom is a place where your child can be independent by making stepstools available and placing the toilet paper, soap and towels in reach of your child.



How Can Parents Help Set Children Up For Success?

- Dress your child in clothes that they can easily get off themselves. Pants with elastic waists are better than zippers, and overalls are really hard to get off in a hurry.
- Offer different choices: potty chair, potty seat, and toilet.
- Let your child flush the toilet himself/herself

Highs and Lows of Toilet Learning

Often, children get nervous about the increased responsibility of using the toilet. Your child may be enthusiastic about toilet use one week and flat out refuse it the next. This is normal and natural when children are learning to use the toilet. Respect your child's timing and let him/her take some time off from physically trying if s/he seems discouraged or uninterested while still casually offering the toilet a few times a day and talking about "cool things" about toilets versus diapers in a positive and no-pressure way. Sometimes, fear is at the root of a child's refusal to use the toilet. If a child develops a bad association with the toilet because he/she worries about falling in or is frightened by the sound of the flush, just putting the feelings into words for the child can help: "You seem afraid of using the toilet. I can understand why, but I am here and I will keep you safe," or "That toilet sounds very loud, doesn't it? That sound means the dirty water is going out and clean water will fill the bowl!"

Handling Accidents and Setbacks

It is best to handle accidents in a matter-of-fact way. You might say, "All kids have accidents once in a while," and then help the child get cleaned up and redressed. Talk with your child about what went wrong (maybe your child was focusing on an activity and did not notice s/he had to go, or maybe you were in an unfamiliar place and your child was afraid to use the toilet). Brainstorm with your child about how to handle the situation in the future in a positive way. No child should feel shamed for having an accident. Whenever possible, follow your child's lead about whether s/he would like to wear diapers or underpants. Show your child you believe s/he can wear underpants again. Your confidence in your child will inspire your child's confidence in him or herself.

The adult's job in toilet learning is to set the stage for success. The timing and the rhythm of toilet learning is up to the child. Allowing the child the freedom to decide to take the lead in his/her own toilet learning can be hard for many of us, especially if we have learned that it is an adult's job to "train" a child.

When your child can use the toilet, it is important to be consistent and not to bring diapers back into the mix (with the exception of nighttime diapers if your child needs them). Your child might say s/he would like a diaper, but once you and your child know that s/he is able to use the toilet, it is time to say goodbye to them forever. Going back and forth between toilet and diapers creates inconsistency for your child that invites power struggles. This is not a punishment or devaluation rather it is a celebration of their new found independence. The same way we would not go back to feeding a three and a half year old through a bottle because s/he can eat solid food on his/her own, we do not want to regress with a child who is able to know his/her own body and use the toilet independently. This is all about encouraging your child's self-empowerment!