



by Karen Stephens

Toilet Training: Tips for Motivating Children

The first step in teaching toddlers (ages 2 to 3 years) how to use the toilet is recognizing readiness signs that indicate they are developmentally prepared for success. Another critical factor is motivating children to cooperate with your efforts. While you and I think the indoor toilet is a grand invention, children are more dubious. For them, using a toilet doesn't come naturally. Acquiring the skill takes training and practice. Some kids jump to the challenge, others are blasé, and a few are highly resistant.

To motivate cooperation, help kids see the benefits of the toilet. Give them incentives to comply. When I say incentives, I don't mean bribing with material rewards like stickers, candy, toys, or items that don't directly relate to toileting. I don't think it's respectful or ethical to treat children like trained seals in the zoo. Most adults are dependent on outside rewards to motivate effort at work and learning. We measure success by tangible results, like salary, house size, make of car, and clothes labels. But young children aren't readily influenced by such external tokens; their incentives are much different.

Before I describe successful ways to motivate toilet training, I'll address poor practices — strategies that don't work, are abusive, or are counter-productive. I mention them because I've seen parents use them . . . even as I cringed.

Counter-productive Practices Don't Motivate

Shaming children, by showing disgust or contempt over body parts or toileting waste, undermines cooperation. Name calling, like labeling a child a "stubborn, smelly brat" creates anxiety that erodes confidence. Such demeaning attacks distract concentration from toileting tasks. Shaming hurts feelings, builds resentment, and reduces a sense of trust that's necessary for learning.

Avoid using competition to egg your child on. Don't taunt by saying they should be potty trained before their same-aged cousins, neighbors, or child care classmates. Toilet training is not a race; treating it as one creates disabling pressure and stress.

If a first born was easily toilet trained, but a later sibling is more challenging, avoid negative comparisons between siblings. Each child's pace of development and maturation varies. Children slower to learn are not helped by rubbing their noses in their siblings' earlier successes. Unflattering comparisons increase a sense of failure, self-doubt, and inadequacy. And they set up unproductive sibling rivalry. Consider the effects of this choice quote I overheard a parent use with her son: "Your sister was toilet trained when she was just two. And here you are, a three-year-old baby still in diapers." Ouch.

Thinking it is motivating, some parents burden children with inappropriate worries. Avoid laying guilt trips on children by complaining about how much money you spend on diapers. Avoid telling them how much more time you'd have if they would hurry up and learn to use the toilet. Both of these strategies put emphasis on parents' needs, rather than the child's. Guilt trips don't build skill; they overwhelm children with conflicted feelings and emotional turmoil.

Beware of bribing children with coveted time and experiences with you. Time with you should be a child's birthright, not a reward. For instance, unhealthy tension and

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pressure is created if at child care drop off you promise an evening trip to a movie or a popular kids' fast food restaurant IF ONLY your child stays dry all day. If such a bribe is dangled for nine long child care hours and then a minor toileting accident occurs, a child's frustrated reaction becomes an emotional meltdown. The triple whammy is evident. The child feels unsuccessful. He knows he has disappointed and let down his parents. And on top of that, he lost out on a fun time with mom or dad.

Motivating Practices

What does motivate children during toilet training? Well, for most kids, it's some very basic developmental drives — needs that all toddlers crave to fulfill, regardless of culture, race, family size, or economic level. I'm talking about feelings that grow from a sense of competence, recognition, and responsibility. Satisfaction in accomplishment and the knowledge that they CAN learn, are indispensable factors when motivating toddlers to use the toilet. Toddlers have an impulse toward achievement. They want to (need to!) feel successful, capable, and independent. Their intrinsic drive for competence spurs them to learn new skills. They love to celebrate accomplishment. They want to be proud of themselves. And it means the world to toddlers to see their own pride reflected in their parents' adoring eyes.

Capitalize on these basic drives by encouraging kids at every step of toilet training. Do it in word and deed. Be genuine and authentic, not like a fake cheerleader. Make plenty of constructive comments such as, "Good job, Kamaria. You knew right where to go potty. You can be proud of yourself; I certainly am proud." Your response takes on greater meaning when delivered with smiling eyes and a proud smile. A pat on the back, a stroke of the bangs, or a kiss on the cheek tells kids you notice their cooperative effort.

Most kids take pride in growing up and are motivated by a new privilege they believe is enjoyed by adults or older siblings. Being able to wear grown up underwear is a natural and practical motivator that directly relates to toilet training. Tell children that owning and wearing underwear is one of the perks of being a growing boy or girl. Explain the responsibility of taking good care of their new clothing. Make the transition from diapers to underwear a rite of passage to be achieved, recognized, and admired. This helps kids realize being able to use the toilet is an important and respected skill.

Take your child to the store for the special event of buying a supply of big boy or girl underwear. Children will love choosing underwear decorated with favorite animals or cartoon characters. I've seen kids so thrilled with their grown up underwear that they pull down pants just to show them off! A little girl was so proud that she began using the toilet conscientiously when her mother mentioned, "Be sure to use the potty because you wouldn't want to pee on Mickey Mouse, would you?" That simple comment struck a chord and did the trick! Mom's little darling used the toilet instead of soiling poor old Mickey! (I'm sure Walt was smiling down from heaven.)

Kids learn to control body functions gradually, so accidents, especially partial ones, are bound to happen during toilet training. In the beginning, one or two accidents a day are common. It takes time for kids to remember to respond to cues their body gives them, especially during play. Kids must also learn how long it takes to get to the potty! Even after children are fully trained, accidents may crop up again. Such accidents are usually stress-induced. A child may regress if there is family discord, illness, birth of a sibling, or move to a new home.

When accidents do occur, don't spank, threaten, ridicule, tease, or otherwise punish. Reassure your child that every child has accidents when first using the toilet. Coach them on handling the consequences of toileting accidents; it teaches responsibility and motivates them to make it to the toilet sooner.

When accidents occur, don't over-react. (Red-faced irate parents put on quite a reinforcing show for kids who crave even negative attention.) Be direct and nonchalant. Matter-of-factly expect your child to help clean up the accident. That includes taking off soiled clothes, cleaning their hands, legs, and bottom, putting wet clothing in the washing machine, putting in soap, and starting the machine. If necessary provide a wet sponge or mop to clean a wet floor. Then start again fresh.

There's another way to help children become more comfortable with the toilet. It's by empathizing with their fears and worries about toileting. The Parenting Exchange library column, "Potty Shy: Flush Out Your Toddler's Fears" will help you sensitively respond to those issues.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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