

Toilet Learning, Toilet Training, & Continence (Yes, they are different!)

To use the toilet successfully, your child needs lots of skills and information. Making sure your child has the tools they will set them up for success. Think of it as a series of steps, instead of an “event.”

Note: This tip sheet gives guidance that is appropriate for *most* children. If you are a parent of a child with a disability or a child over five years old, consider looking at our online resources for more targeted continence recommendations.

(go.uvm.edu/continence)

1. **Toilet Learning** is when a child learns about body functions, and about what we do in the toilet. Toilet learning can last months, or even years. It’s great to start toilet teaching when your child is a curious toddler.
2. **Training Readiness** is the skills and preparation that make it easier for your child to be toilet trained. Some of these are the same developmental milestones that your child is already working on. Parents also have to be ready to toilet train, so there are adult readiness steps, too.
3. **Toilet Training** is when you turn information into action! Your child puts together their knowledge and skills and starts using the toilet consistently. This happens for most children between the time they are 2 and 4 years old.*
4. **Continence** is when toilet training is mostly done. Your child may still need support with some steps, or have occasional accidents.*

Toilet Learning

- ☐ Teach your child about pee, poop, and the body parts that make them. Books like “Everyone Poops” by Taro Gomi are helpful and fun.
- ☐ Introduce toileting words. There are potty books and videos to match almost every child’s favorite cartoon character or other interests!
- ☐ Teach that bodies “tell” us when we need to eliminate: “Your grunting sound tells me that maybe you need to poop. Do you feel a pushing feeling in your bum?”
- ☐ Make diaper changes pleasant, and avoid words like “stinky” or “dirty”. Use the bathroom for diaper changes so your child connects the bathroom with pee and poo.
- ☐ Have your child observe others using the toilet

Child Toilet Training Readiness

These skills make it easier for your child to use the toilet.

- ☐ Able to squat and stand up without losing balance
- ☐ Able to dress/undress self (bottom down) with limited help
- ☐ Stays dry for at least an hour between wet diapers
- ☐ Observes and imitates adults
- ☐ Follows one step instructions

AND

- ☐ Interested in potty training – may ask to use potty or wear underwear
- ☐ Dislikes feeling wet/dirty

AND

- ☐ You have screened and (if necessary) treated your child for any digestive issues that could affect continence.

Sometimes children have all the skills in the first section long before those in the second section.

Remember: interest is a very important part of toilet readiness for most children! Focus on toilet teaching to spark your child's interest without pressure.

Family Toilet Training Readiness

- ☐ There are not currently stressful situations (new sibling, move, divorce)
- ☐ You are able to approach training in a calm, unemotional and positive manner
- ☐ You agree with other caregiver(s) about training method
- ☐ You have the equipment and supplies you need: a small toilet seat and footstool or training potty, underwear your child will get excited about, and easy on/off elastic waist pants
- ☐ realistic expectations (more laundry!), and a plan for toileting on the go (remember to carry extra clothes)

* If you have checked all of the above, continue on! If not, work towards those learning and readiness steps, and try again after **a pause:**

Child under 3 years old: Pause at least 6 months

3-4 years old: Pause 3-6 months

4-4.5 years old: Pause 1-2 months

Over 4.5: Communicate your concerns to your PCP. It's a good time to develop a more detailed plan.

You've got this!