



## Children's Campus at SF State

Center for Early Care & Education, Professional Development and Research

### Approach to Toilet Learning

#### When is a child ready for toilet learning?

There is no set age at which toilet learning should begin. The right time depends on your child's physical and psychological development. Children younger than 12 months have no control over bladder or bowel movements and little control for 6 months or so after that. Between 18 and 24 months, children often start to show signs of being ready, but some children may not be ready until 30 months or older. Your child must also be emotionally ready. S/he needs to be willing and not fighting the process or showing signs of fear. If your child resists strongly, it is best to wait for a while. It is best to be relaxed about toilet learning and avoid becoming upset. Remember that no one can control when and where a child urinates or has a bowel movement except the child. Try to avoid a power struggle. Children at the toilet learning age are becoming aware of their individuality. They look for ways to test their limits. Some children may do this by holding back bowel movements.

Keep in mind that regardless of the age at which children start learning to use the toilet, most children achieve full bowel control between 3 and 5 years of age. When the time is right, the child will show clear signs of readiness – what families and teachers have to do is trust them and be patient. Toilet training will happen rapidly when the child is truly ready physically, mentally, emotionally and socially.

Teachers and families need to remember that toilet training is a *learning process*. No amount of punishment or reward can make a child go to the bathroom. There are certain battles that we can win but toileting isn't one of them. Therefore, our flexibility and patience is the key to successful toilet-training.

School is such an exciting and distracting place that, when families begin toilet learning with the child, we suggest the first big push comes over a weekend at home. After two promising days at home, we try it at school. Remember that learning to use the toilet is something families do *with* a child, not *to* him/her. The adult's commitment to being sensitive, paying attention and planning ahead are vital parts of this process.

#### Look for most of the following signs that your child is ready:

- Your child stays dry at least 2 hours at a time during the day
- Your child is dry in the morning and/or after nap
- Bowel movements become regular and predictable
- Facial expressions, posture, or words reveal that your child is about to urinate or have a bowel movement
- Your child can follow simple instructions
- Your child can walk to and from the bathroom
- Your child can undress self (pull own pants up and down and pull ups or underwear up and down)
- Your child seems uncomfortable with soiled diapers and wants to be changed
- Your child asks to use the toilet or potty chair; shows an interest in flushing
- Your child asks to wear grown-up underwear

#### Stress in the home may make learning this important new skill more difficult. Sometimes it is a good idea to delay toilet learning in the following situations:

- Your family has just moved or will move in the near future
- You are expecting a baby or you have recently had a new baby
- There is a major illness, a recent death, or some other family crisis

*However, if your child is learning how to use the toilet without problems, there is no need to stop because of these situations. Keep in mind that regression is normal and children will resume their learning as long as we're all patient, calm, reassuring and supportive.*

## **General Guidelines at the Children's Campus for Toilet Learning:**

**Timing:** Children are observant, and most youngsters know what a toilet is used for long before they learn to use it. To help the child make the connection between the toilet and the urge to go, we will suggest a try whenever a bowel movement is expected- for instance, after snacks or lunch. A couple of minutes is enough time for a child to sit on the toilet; if nothing is accomplished, the child can get up and try again at another time. All children, toilet-learning are not, are encouraged to use the bathroom every 2 hours.

**Process:** We start with getting the pants down. It's best to dress a child in easy-to-remove clothing so s/he is able to pull down and pull up with no or little help. Next, we move to sitting still on the toilet seat so the child is able to concentrate. It's important to follow the child's lead, taking our time and praising each success along the way without overdoing it. Accidents are common and when they do occur, clean up matter-of-factly and then move on to something else.

**Cleaning up:** All children must be taught careful wiping techniques before they are allowed to use the toilet on their own. Girls are taught to wipe from front to back to prevent bacteria from entering the urethra and causing an infection. All children and teachers need to wash hands with soap and water after every visit to the toilet.

Some children become anxious about flushing. They may be frightened by the running water or troubled by the thought that a part of their bodies is being flushed away. We try to explain that we need to flush so the toilet is clean for the next person who might use this toilet. If the child still seems upset, we will flush it later after the child has left the bathroom. It's important to remember that bowel movements should never be referred to as "dirty" or "yucky" because the child may feel demoralized by such comments.

**Accidents:** Accidents really are no big deal. Like every new skill a child learns, toileting requires time for experimentation, practice and learning. We keep the mop handy and try to stay outdoors or on vinyl floors. The flooding stage doesn't last too long, especially if the child still wears a diaper for naps. Children are sometimes very distressed over accidents and need adult reassurance that they can learn this, just as they learned to climb a new slide or hook wooden trains together. Cleaning the floor and letting the child change her own clothes helps her to feel she is still able to manage her own needs, even when things don't quite go according to plan. We help your child by letting her know we have faith in him/her.