A guide to toilet training

No more Nappies

Aisling & Coyle
Introduction:

Becoming dry and clean is an important developmental milestone for all children, therefore every child should be given the opportunity to be toilet trained. Introducing a child to an appropriate toilet training programme helps the child to develop self-caring skills, which will have a positive impact on self-esteem, independence and quality of life. Being toilet trained also supports integration into preschool, primary school and the community.

Children with Downs syndrome can be toilet trained at around the same age as a typically-developing child, however children with certain medical conditions or who have complex physical needs may need assistance from specialists, and advice from their medical team prior to commencing a toilet training programme.

As with most skills, toilet training is more likely to succeed if started early, as early intervention prevents the child from developing poor toileting habits and an over reliance on nappies. Therefore it is very important that a parent knows when the child is ready.
How do I know if my child is ready to start toilet training?

The check list below will help you decide if your child is ready to be trained, or has developed the physical and communication skills, as well as cognitive ability necessary for toilet training. You do not have to answer yes to all questions before you start, however if the answers are mainly no, perhaps you might like to wait and try again in a couple of weeks. The answers to the questions will give you some indication of your child’s readiness. As parents you know your child and how he/she reacts, therefore you are best placed to know when to begin toilet training.

Cognitive ability

- Is your child able to understand small amounts of information?
- Is your child able to follow simple instruction, such as searching for a toy, possibly by eye pointing?
- Does your child engage in make-believe or imitate actions when instructed such as putting a doll sitting on a potty?
- Is your child able to communicate needs by words, signs or gestures?

Toilet awareness

- Is your child aware what a potty or toilet is used for?

Bladder Development

- Can your child remain dry for 1 hour?

To check how often your child wets you can lay a piece of kitchen roll flat in your child’s nappy and every hour your child is awake open the nappy and record whether or not the nappy is wet, dry or soiled.

You can use the chart at the back of this booklet to record information about how often they wet and soil. This will give you some indication of how long after your child eats or drinks he or she will remain dry.

You can also use the chart to record the time, amount and type of drinks (milk, juice) your child takes throughout the 24 hours.

Later when you begin your training you can use the chart to decide what time to take your child to the toilet.
How do I keep toileting fun?

Children need to be motivated to learn anything. For young children this motivation comes by making learning fun and enjoyable. Moreover, being playful helps the child make a positive association with the toilet and with toileting. You can try the following strategies but use your imagination!

Let teddy or a special doll have a turn sitting on the toilet.

Sing/talk about toileting in positive way.

Put your child sitting on the toilet with toilet seat down if necessary... Place a mirror in front of the toilet so your child can see the BIG girl/boy sitting on the toilet.

Sing songs and read books while your child is sitting on the toilet (N.B. do not continue this practice after your child has learned to use the toilet as your child may learn to hold onto her/his wee until you finish singing and reading!)

Getting ready

How do I start

Begin by establishing good routine around toileting and try and make toileting a happy and relaxed occasion. When you know your child is ready, begin to establish a routine by:

Using consistent language around toileting and be aware that the words or phrases you use may be used by your child for a long time. Your child should be taught a word that he/she can use when needing to go to the toilet. This word or phrase should be used consistently by the child, other members of the family, carers and teachers.

Many children learn toileting skills by imitating their brothers/sisters therefore having an “open door policy” at home, where the child goes to the toilet with a brother or sister is often very supportive. If your child is attending school at this point ask the teacher if he/she can go to toilet.

Before your child starts preschool, you should meet with the class teacher to determine if the school has a toileting regime (establish when the other children go and who accompanies them). If you are about to start training then it is often a good idea to bring your child to the toilet at home at similar times as the school. If your child is already on a toilet training regime you will need to see how this fits in with the school regime. To ensure consistency between home and school you will need to provide the school with a copy of your program including:

The words/gestures you or your child uses.

The times your child goes to the toilet.
There are books available to help you teach your child the various steps used in toileting (being aware of the need to go, walking to the toilet, pulling down pants etc) however you need to choose your books carefully. In some books the toileting steps are built into the story and the story may be very detailed so the toileting steps get lost, or the child becomes so engrossed in the story or pictures they are no longer aware of the toileting steps.

Children can benefit from a homemade book, which includes the words or gestures and the steps used for toilet training at home. You may also wish to use discreet pictures (cartoon types) or home drawings of each stage of the toileting process.

**Children with Downs Syndrome** need clear, direct, repetitive messages so that they will remember the steps.

When you start training, nappy changing should always take place in the toilet so that your child makes the association between a wet or soiled nappy and the toilet.

Take your child with you when you buy his/her first set of underwear. You may consider using underwear with your child’s favorite cartoon characters. Later you can use the cartoon character to encourage the child to stay dry, you can do this by explaining to the child that if he or she does not want to get “Mickey Mouse wet”, they must ask mammy of daddy to take them to the toilet or potty.

Modern nappies are designed to keep wetness away from the child’s skin, so when a child passes urine into a nappy they are not aware they have passed urine, therefore they may not make the connection between needing to go to the toilet and wetting. To help your child make this connection, during the day take off the nappy and put on their underwear, this will allow the child to feel the wetness. Alternatively, you may start by laying sheets of soft kitchen roll in the nappy, the sheets of paper will slow down the absorption rate of the urine allowing the child to feel the wetness and make the connection between needing to go to the toilet and wetting.

Let family members, child-minders, or anyone involved in caring for your child know you have, or are about to start, toilet training. Having carers and family on your side will be a great support to you and your child during training.

Children will have wetting accidents so good preparation is essential. Simple changes like using an old throw or rug on the couch or chair or removing expensive rugs for a short time will make the inevitable “accidents” easier to manage.

**What equipment do I need?**

Most children with Down syndrome do not require special equipment to use the toilet. Children differ and have different needs and if you feel your child is unstable when seated, has poor balance or has other physical needs, you should contact an Occupational Therapist for an assessment prior to starting.
Should I use a potty or toilet?

Toilet or Potty?

There is no right or wrong answer here and most children will naturally gravitate towards one or the other. Potty’s are easier for transporting around the house and or when visiting, or on an outing but some children prefer the toilet from the start. Follow your child’s lead; the most important thing is that your child feels secure and comfortable.

Using the toilet: If your child uses the toilet you may wish to buy an insert seat for the toilet and a foot stool. The insert fits onto the toilet, and makes the bowl opening smaller so that your child can sit comfortably and not be afraid of falling into the toilet. A toilet seat with handles on either side will provide extra security. It is difficult for children to have a bowel movement if their feet are dangling, so a foot stool is essential.

Using the potty: There are lots of different children’s potty’s available, he/she may like a particular color or design. You may also encourage your child to dress up their potty with stickers of their favorite cartoon or television character. This will help your child feel connected to their new potty.

Toilet Training (“The Big Push”)

Starting the programme

Teaching a child how to become dry can be hard work, but well worth the effort. While you should not postpone training once your child is ready, getting the timing right is very important. Choose a time when there are no major changes (i.e. moving house, new baby, hospital admission) taking place in the family or in your child’s life.

Tell your child when you are going to start toilet training and what is going to happen. “In the morning when you get up, we are going to put on your new underwear instead of your nappy/pull-up” follow through by putting on the new underwear the next morning. Once you start training do not be tempted to use nappies or pull ups during the day. In the beginning your child will have many accidents and can be frustrating but remember allowing your child to feel the sensation of wetness on the skin is all part of learning how to become dry. A child that is never allowed to feel the wetness may take longer to make the connection between feeling wet and the need to go to the toilet.

Give regular drinks throughout the day (6-8 beakers/glasses). This will help to increase the amount of urine produced by the kidney, which is essential to develop the size of your child’s bladder. Regular drinks also increase the opportunity to go to the toilet. If your child has difficulty drinking milk or juices look at other ways of increasing their fluid intake, i.e. give jelly, smoothies, ice lollies, soups.
Stay with your child when they are on the toilet or using the potty, as this will make your child feel safe and secure and you will be able to encourage them to go. Always make eye contact when encouraging your child, use the same words or gestures every time such as “do your wee” or as the child is passing urine “shh listen”.

If your child’s underpants are dry before sitting on the toilet get him or her to feel the dry underpants and say “dry” and give lots of praise.

Your child should remain on the toilet for a maximum of 1 to 2 minutes, however if you are training your child to open their bowels you may need to leave them on a little longer but no more than 5 minutes each time. For a child with more complex needs e.g. Autism or hyperactivity you may need to use other signals such as a “wait” card or use an egg-timer to indicate how long they have to remain on the toilet. When your child uses the toilet give them lots of praises.

When it comes to training a child to open their bowels to do a poo there is a natural mechanism in the body known as the “gastro colic reflex” which sends signals to the brain to remind us we need to open our bowels. This is often referred to as the “getting the urge to go”. This reflex is triggered by eating food and is particularly strong 20 to 40 minutes after eating our breakfast and again after eating lunch. So if you are training your child to open their bowels, these can be the best times to sit your child on the toilet or potty as you will be working with the natural mechanisms in the body.

Toilet training is about teaching children a series of steps and repeating these steps time after time. One of these steps is teaching the child how to pull clothes/underwear up and down. To make this easier, do not use clothing that are difficult to open (small buttons, zips, hooks and eyes) or will distract the child from using the toilet.

Another step is to teach your child how to clean themselves by wiping their bottoms. This is the most difficult task to achieve and may be a long way off. You may start with getting the child to tear off a piece of toilet paper from the roll. Using a doll or teddy bear, show the child what you want them to do. The child should be taught to wipe from the front area to the back, particularly girls, as this will prevent any natural bacteria which live in the bowel, entering the bladder opening and causing infection.

Encourage your child to wash and dry their hands, with assistance if necessary.

The usual sequence of toilet training is urinary continence, bowel control and night time control.
Training for independence

The aim of any training program is to help the child to achieve as much independence as possible. As a parent you will want your child not only to learn how to use the toilet, but to do this by themselves, and where possible without assistance. Children with Down's syndrome need to be actively taught and encouraged to become independent. This can be achieved by teaching your child various skills such as recognizing the need to go to the toilet, and doing so independently. This will encourage your child to learn how their body functions and what they need to do to manage these functions. Achieving these skills will increase their self esteem and independence and ensure they reach their maximum potential.

To actively promote independence you should:

- Encourage your child to do as much for themselves as they can, use words like “by yourself”. It may take a little longer, but you are giving your child the important message that toileting is their responsibility.

- Give plenty of praise not only for the big successes but also for all the little achievements. Use words like “You’re great!” you “pulled up your pants by yourself!” This type of statement gives your child a clear message that they are responsible and they are meeting that responsibility.

- Using the same words is essential for establishing an association. It is equally important to use the same sequence of steps each time. Consistent use of both the words and the steps will help to establish a clear predictable pattern which will eventually develop into a habit.

When you are sure that he or she knows the steps and has made the association between the words for toilet and toileting time, pause before saying, or singing or showing the picture of the word, “toilet” this will allow your child the time to say the word before you do. When this happens give him or her lots of praise. When your child begins to let you know they want to go before you give them the prompt, respond immediately with lots of praise. Highlighting the reason why he or she is being praised e.g. “good boy/girl for telling me you want the toilet” or “what a big boy/girl you are, off you go to the toilet”.

As soon as you feel your child can safely be left alone in the toileting area, do so. If he or she still needs support or encouragement while on the toilet, then perhaps you might be able to leave them alone to wash or dry their hands, and then follow you back out from the toileting area. Leaving your child alone encourage him or her to take responsibility for little tasks which will help to develop their independence. On the other hand the longer the adult remains in the toileting area with the child the more dependent they can become.
Handling the accidents

All children will have toileting accidents particularly in the beginning. As they progress they will become less frequent and only happen occasionally or when the child is out of their normal routine. Expecting accidents to happen will help you deal more appropriately with them and try to find ways to lessen the impact (cover chair, couch). For the child a wetting accident can be very upsetting and embarrassing, especially if they leak urine on to the floor. This is all part of learning how their body works and how they can control their bodily functions therefore getting angry when accident occurs can hamper your child’s progress and set the training back.

Accidents are best management by:

Dealing with the situation very quietly and sensitively and not getting angry. An angry response may teach a child that his or her bodily functions are bad and they make mammy or daddy angry. All the child may learn is that wetting the floor makes people angry, but this will not teach him or her what to do or how to stop it happening.

Remain calm and matter-of-fact and use the accident as a learning experience. When accidents occur, allow your child to feel his or her wet pants and say the word “wet”. Then take the child to the toileting area so they can wash and change their clothes. Encourage your child to do as much for themselves as they are able to do, only give support if they are unable to manage alone.

It is important that you use the toileting area for changing and cleaning the child, this will reinforce the idea that this area is for going to the toilet. It also means that your child will have to take time away from playing or watching their favorite television program to get cleaned up, and they might be less likely to repeat the accident. They will also begin to recognize that cleaning up takes more time than going to the toilet in the first place.

Avoid cuddling the child or engaging in long cheerful conversation, as this may encourage your child to repeat the accident to get the attention.

You may also think about what led to the accident, e.g., did you forget to remind the child to go, was the child out of their usual environment, and were they unwell or frightened. This information should be noted on their chart and if at all possible should be avoided in the future.
Using Rewards

Many parents are tempted to use a star chart or other reward systems to motivate their child to learn to use the toilet and there are some children who do need this type of reinforcement to motivate them to become dry. Most children with Down syndrome are highly motivated by praise therefore “praise” is the most natural and the most readily available reinforcement system there is and for that reason it should be a parent’s first choice.

Toilet training is most successful when the child and family are ready and motivated to start and when each little success or achievement is celebrated with lots and lots of praise. Don’t forget to reward yourself! Toilet training is hard work, treat yourself, be kind to your self and acknowledge your achievements.

“Remember every child has a right to be provided with the opportunity to participate in a toileting programme regardless of their physical, intellectual or educational ability.”

Reference
## Bubble Chart

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