

A Montessori approach to toilet training

Is your child ready to use the potty or toilet?

With summer around the corner I'm getting more questions in class about toilet training and if I have any Montessori tips. So today, here is the approach I prefer when your child is showing interest in using the toilet.

“Learning to use the toilet is a natural process that begins when your child’s desire to be grown up and his neurological development have reached the point where he can control his bladder and bowels. We don’t train children to use the toilet, we support them when they are ready.” (How to Raise an Amazing Child: The Montessori way to bring up caring confident children, by Tim Seldin)

1. A natural, gradual process

Using the toilet is a very natural and gradual process that develops at the child’s pace, rather than when the parent decides the child is going to be toilet ‘trained’.

We can begin very naturally when the child is young, talking with them about their bodily functions as we change their nappy. It is a normal process and we can explain that everyone used the toilet to get rid of the parts of food that our body does not need. It is also a good idea not to give them a negative feeling towards these bodily functions, for example, by making faces when changing their nappy.

A potty can be available from a young age so the child can sit on it and imitate others in the household, even before they have bladder and bowel control.

Children often begin to be interested in toilets around 1 year old. From around this age, the child develops the physical ability to control their bladder and bowel but mostly they just want to flush the toilet or play with the water. The child can be redirected to a more appropriate place for playing with water such as the bathroom sink.

Then when the child becomes interested in dressing and undressing themselves, we can choose clothing they can manage themselves so they can learn to pull their own trousers up and down. Elastic-waisted trousers can be very useful at this time! As disposable nappies are so good at keeping a child dry these days, it can also be nice

for your child to wear underpants or training pants around the house as much as possible so the child feels wet and dry. They begin to learn that it feels nicer to be dry and begin to hold for longer periods.

After this very gradual preparation and when the child is showing more interest in sitting on the toilet or potty, you can slowly teach them how to pull down their pants, sit on the toilet/potty, use toilet paper, pull up their pants, flush the toilet and wash their hands.

2. Give independence

Once the child is showing interest in using the toilet and potty, the bathroom can be set up to give the child as much independence as possible.

1. If using a potty, it is a good idea to keep it in the bathroom rather than moving it around the house so your child can always find it
2. The bathroom can also have a pile of cloths for cleaning, a bucket for wet clothing, and a pile of clean underpants.

The child can help by getting some dry underpants and putting any wet pants in the bucket. When a child has involvement in the process, the child has ownership of the process too, not the adult.

3. The adult's role

“There should be no pressure, no reward or punishment, no adult deciding when the child should learn to use the potty. The environment is prepared and the child is free to explore and imitate in these natural developmental stages.” (The Joyful Child)

It is best for the parent to support the child but not become emotionally involved. To assist the child in the process of learning to use the toilet, the adult can:

1. Find ways to make the child feel confident, for example, a stool for their feet when using a toilet
2. Incorporate toileting into the child's routine. Offer the potty/toilet at times when the child normally pees, for eg, on waking, before going outside, after coming in from outside, after lunch/before nap etc.
3. Say “It's time to use the toilet” rather than “Do you want to go to the toilet?” (the answer will always be no) or “I think you need to go to the toilet” (the adult becomes involved). As the child becomes more aware of their body they will be able to tell you, “No, I don't need to go.” You can then say something like, “Of course, I know you will tell me if you need any help when you need to go.” You

can also use an alarm clock set at regular intervals to remind them to go, “The clock says it’s time to use the toilet.”

4. Never force a child to use the toilet or potty
5. Never scold or over-congratulate—going to the toilet is the most normal thing to do and we should keep it in its proper place, for eg, avoid clapping and celebrating
6. Do not interrupt the child to use the toilet—for example, wait until they have finished their puzzle etc before offering the potty.

4. When they don’t make it in time...

If a child becomes wet, stay calm and be reassuring. Do not make them feel ashamed. You may wish to say, “I see you are wet. Let’s go get some dry clothes.” Your child can get them from the supply in the bathroom and even help wipe the floor and wash their hands. Let them change at their own pace and give help if they ask for it or if they are overwhelmed.

If they have wet clothes but they are playing with a toy, you can wipe up around them and wait until they are finished before suggesting you get some dry clothes.

Some issues can cause a setback to toileting, for example, the birth of a younger sibling, a divorce, or some other upheaval in daily life. The problem tends to resolve itself if the adult does not make a big deal about it.

Really the most important tip is to follow your own child.