

Coping with Toilet Training Resistance

Children who refuse to be toilet trained either wet themselves, soil themselves, or try to hold back their bowel movements (BMs), thus becoming constipated. Many of these children also refuse to sit on the toilet or will use the toilet only if a parent brings up the subject and brings them into the bathroom.

Any child who is over three years old and healthy and is not toilet trained after several months is probably resistant to the process rather than untrained. The most common cause is too much attention to the issue from the parent. Some children may have been forced to sit on the toilet against their will, occasionally for long periods of time. Some may have been spanked or punished in other ways for not cooperating. It is often difficult to toilet train children, especially if they are strong willed. Most children less than 56 years old who wet or have BMs in their pants and have no symptoms of illness are simply engaged with you in a power struggle. These children can be helped with the following suggestions.

Transfer all responsibility to your child.

Your child will decide to use the toilet only after he realizes that he has nothing left to resist. Have one last talk about the subject. Tell your child that his body makes “pee” and “poop” every day and it belongs to him. Tell him that his “poop” wants to be in the toilet and his job is to help the poop come out. You can tell your child you’re sorry you punished him, forced him to sit on the toilet, or reminded him so much. Tell him from now on he does not need any help. Then stop all talk about the subject. When your child stops getting attention for not using the toilet, he will eventually decide to use the toilet for attention.

Stop all reminders about using the toilet.

Let your child decide when he needs to go to the bathroom. Do not remind him to go to the bathroom and do not ask him if he needs to go. He knows what it feels like when he has to poop or pee and where the bathroom is. Reminders are a form of pressure and do not work. He should not be made to sit on the toilet against his will because this will foster a negative attitude about the whole process. Some children who have never used the toilet may need a pleasant reminder once a day when they are clearly holding back. You can say, “Do you know how you can make your tummy feel better? After your tummy gets rid of the poop, it will feel good.” However, do not go with your child into the bathroom or stand with him by the potty. He needs to get the feeling of success that comes from doing it on his own and then finding you to tell you what he did.

Give incentives for using the toilet.

If your child stays clean and dry, he needs plenty of positive feedback (i.e., praise, smiles, hugs). This positive response should occur every time your child uses the toilet. If a child soils or wets himself on some days and not others, reward him only when he is clean for a complete day. On successful days, consider taking 20 extra minutes to play a special game with your child or take him for a walk to the playground. One of your main jobs is to find the right incentive. For using the toilet for BMs, initially err on the side of giving too much (i.e., several sweets at one time). If you want a breakthrough, make your child an offer he cannot refuse. Remember, incentives work best if they are special and not available as rewards for other tasks or as part of daily life.

Give stars for using the toilet.

Get a calendar for your child and post it in a conspicuous location. Place a star on it every time he uses the toilet. Keep this record of progress until your child has gone two weeks without any accidents.

Make the potty convenient.

Be sure to keep the potty in the room he usually plays in. This gives your child a convenient visual reminder about his options whenever he feels the need to urinate or have a BM. If your child has been having BMs in his pants, he may need a pleasant reminder only when he is clearly holding back. You can say, "The poop is trying to come out and go in the toilet. The poop needs your help." Tell your child that you want sitting on the potty to be lots of fun. What would they like to do? A few children temporarily may need treats for simply sitting on the toilet and trying.

Diapers, Pull-ups, or underwear?

Whenever possible, replace Pull-ups or diapers with underwear. Help your child pick out some underwear with characters on it that "don't like poop or pee." This usually yields the correct decision on the part of the child. Even if your child wets the underwear, keep with the plan. If your child holds back BMs, allow selective access to diapers or Pull-ups for BMs only.

Remind your child to change his clothes if he wets or soils himself.

As soon as you notice that your child has wet or messy pants, tell him to clean himself up immediately (with your help).

Do not punish or criticize your child for accidents.

Respond gently to accidents and do not allow siblings to tease the child. Do not put your child back into diapers. Punishment or criticism will only delay successful training.

PEDIATRIC GASTROENTEROLOGY AND NUTRITION

Morristown Medical Center, 100 Madison Avenue, Box 82, Morristown, NJ 07960

Phone: 973-971-5676 Fax: 973-290-7365

Overlook Medical Center, Medical Arts Center (MAC) II, 11 Overlook Road, 2nd Floor, Summit, NJ 07901

Phone: 908-522-8714