DOWN'S SYNDROME ASSOCIATION

Toilet Training

August 2024

Toilet Training

Children who have Down's syndrome are usually daytime toilet trained around the age of three and half to four years. Children with additional or more complex needs may take longer to develop daytime continence. If your child is still in nappies at four years old, then they should be seen by a medical specialist to make sure that their bladder and kidneys are working properly. Prolonged use of pull ups or nappies into full time school years may delay success with toilet training.

Top tips for toilet training

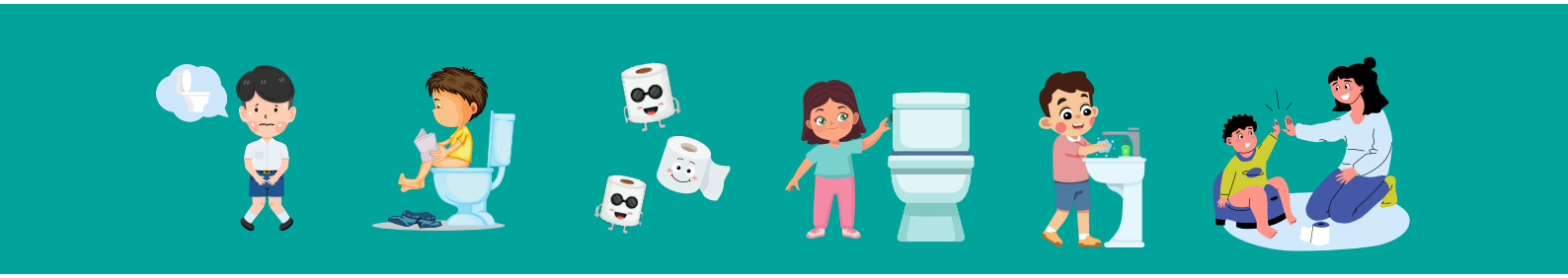
Children's awareness isn't always essential before beginning toilet training, particularly as it can be difficult to judge whether a child is aware of when they are having a wee or a poo. Having an occasional dry nappy or a noticeable period of time between wees or poos can be a sign that your child is ready to try toilet training.

As a starting point (normally between two and four years of age) find out if there is a pattern to when your child is having a wee if they are still in nappies or pull ups; making notes of times etc; and when they tell you what they've done or if they ask to go. Sometimes parents can tell when their child is urinating or defecating because they pull a particular face or go quiet for just a moment. Your child might already have a natural pattern of needing the toilet. If this is the case, try to anticipate it and take them to the toilet to fit into the pattern.

If there isn't a pattern, you could try to establish one by taking them to the toilet immediately after waking, before going to sleep, after eating or drinking and at regular intervals. Sometimes asking a young child if they need to go to the toilet can be confusing. It may be easier to say 'it's time for the toilet'.

Children who have Down's syndrome have good visual memories, and consequently learn much more easily this way than verbal instructions. It could help if you use a sign and picture when you tell them it's time to go. They could take the picture with them and 'post' it into a box (that they have decorated) each time they visit the toilet.

You might also want to think about making toilet time fun (singing songs whilst they are sitting down, books etc). Making a social story, visual guide or storyboard to use at home and at school may help learning. Some children prefer to see a picture of themselves doing each thing as it is more 'real' to them.



Try to be consistent with toilet training so that your child is being given the same message from different adults.

Build in a trip to the toilet every 40 to 60 minutes (or less time depending on what you think will work best for your child) for them to sit on the toilet or potty. They don't have to stay there for more than a minute or so. It's important that they aren't taken away from an activity that they are enjoying. Try not to make comments if they don't have a wee. It's better not to say anything so that they relate the praise with using the toilet. Looking in the toilet when they have got off might help too so they can see when they have had a wee or poo.

It is important to also think about what happens when an accident occurs so you don't inadvertently encourage accidents because the child enjoys the attention they get when this happens. Try not to make the changing after an accident a fun 1:1 activity. Even when children are fully trained, it's normal for accidents to happen especially if they are excited, fearful, unwell or concentrating hard on something else. Accidents might also happen if they feel unsettled by a change to their normal routine.

In school the teachers should take your child when all the children go to the toilet before or after break and snack times and at home time too. It is important to be consistent. The toileting needs and strategies can be written into your child's education and health care support plan as something you are working towards at home and in school.

Don’t force your child to stay on the potty or toilet; instead, encourage them when they do, and try to gradually increase the time. You can make this less stressful for them by making it fun – play a singing game or read a story to them as they sit on the potty/toilet.

You may want to use rewards for when your child uses the toilet. A reward can be anything your child responds to – high five, clap hands, sticker on a chart or in a little note book, or even a small amount of an edible treat. You will know what will work best.

Some parents put their children straight into pants (not using a pull up) during the period of toilet training. Some parents put a pair of the child’s pants inside of a pull up. These approaches help children learn about having a wee.

Night time toilet training may take a little bit longer for your child. Disposable sheet protectors are useful for easy changes if your child has an accident during the night. Limiting drinks one hour before your child's bedtime and using the toilet half an hour before they go to bed—and again right before bedtime is helpful with night-time training. You can incorporate going to the toilet into your child’s bedtime routine at the same time you visit the bathroom to brush their teeth.

Every child develops differently. Toilet training will not happen overnight, so don’t worry, it is important to remain patient.

It helps to choose a good time for the family as well as the child. If following the toilet training programme is stressful for everyone, you can stop and try again later.

USEFUL LINK: A parents guide to toilet skills for children with special needs

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A Down's Syndrome Association publication
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