

From recognizing readiness to correcting mistakes, here's how to . . .

Toilet-Teach

THE GENTLE WAY

When our son Christopher was about 22 months old, we tried everything to get him to use the potty," says Teresa Brittain, of Knoxville, Tennessee. "After two months, my husband and I decided we were getting nowhere, so we dropped the whole thing. But a few weeks later, Christopher came home from preschool and said, 'Mommy, I want big-boy underwear, with dinosaurs on it.' That's when we knew he was ready."

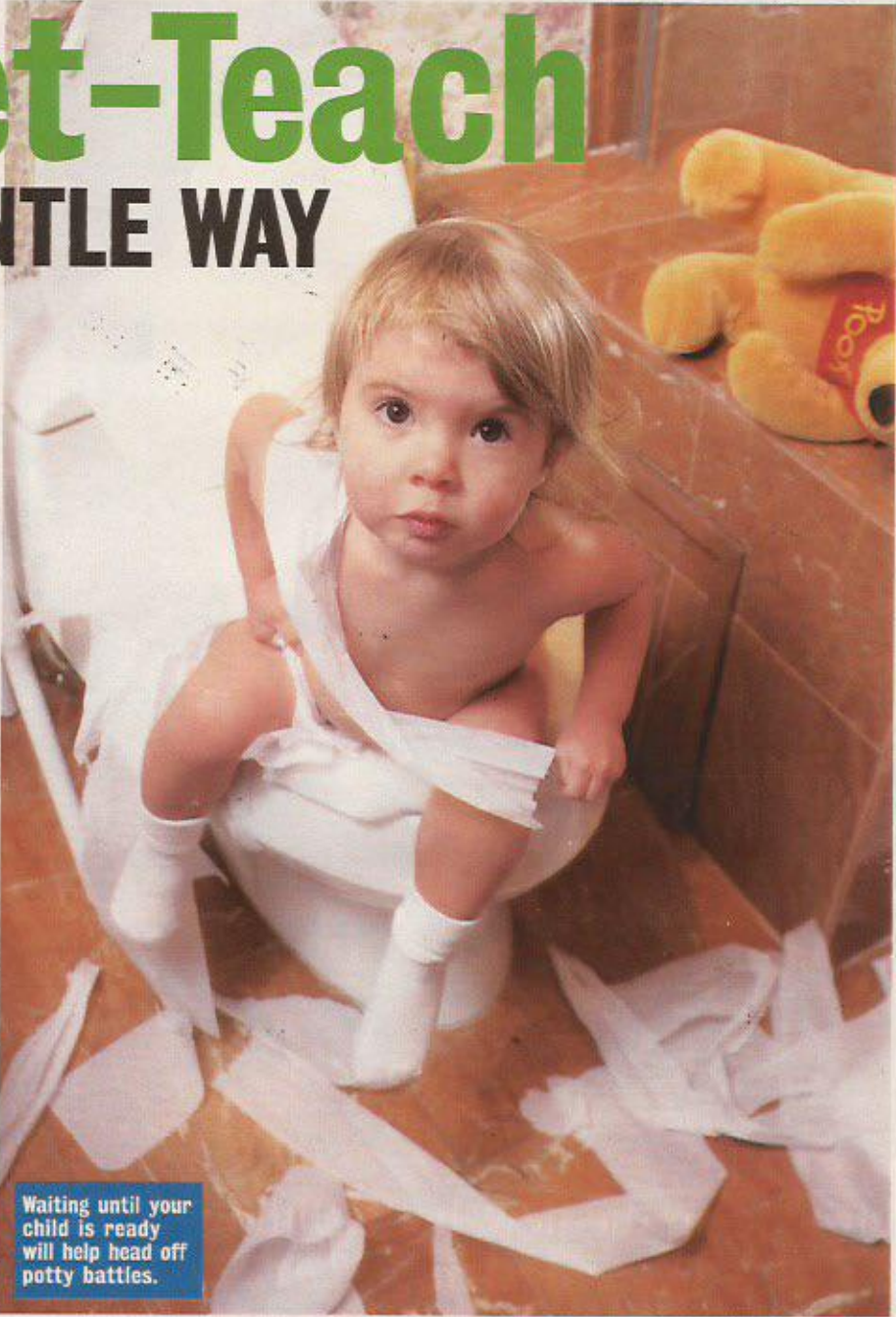
The Brittain's had discovered the biggest secret parents need to know about successful potty-teaching: Let your toddler decide when he's ready to learn. This kinder, gentler approach to toilet learning—first championed by pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, M.D., in 1962—has become the standard in this country, and with good reason. By being allowed to wait until they show one or more signs of readiness, receiving only positive reinforcement, and never being urged to sit on a potty longer than they want to, an astonishing 80 percent of the toddlers in Dr. Brazelton's practice achieve simultaneous bowel and urine control at an average age of 28 months. Even more important, by age 5, less than 2 percent of his young patients have

bed-wetting problems, compared with 15 percent of children taught using more coercive techniques.

Even if your child guides the process, though, don't expect her to become toilet-taught overnight. Some catch on more quickly than others, but for most

children, mastering the potty is a gradual process that may take weeks to months—or even longer. Most progress in stages: They may be able to pee in a potty successfully for some time before pooping, or vice versa. They may use the potty at home but

want to wear



Waiting until your child is ready will help head off potty battles.

BY DIANA TONNESSEN

diapers when they go to the park. And it may take a child with good daytime control a year or more to get through the night without an accident.

"The 'terrific twos' are a natural time for a child to become interested in using the toilet, because children this age are working to become more independent—and that means making choices and exercising control over their own bodies," says Susan Aronson, M.D., a Philadelphia pediatrician and board member of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Yet this is also an age when your child's struggle for independence can easily degenerate into a battle of wills—and toilet learning is particularly fertile ground for conflict, especially if parents pressure their kids to learn in just a few days, as some child-rearing books advise. Getting through the transition takes plenty of time, understanding, and patience—plus a willingness to accept that your child may simply not be up to the challenge just yet.

First, decide what words you want your child to use to describe bathroom functions, and ask everyone, including other caregivers, to use the same vocabulary. Then simply start talking about using the toilet. If you're comfortable with the idea, you can increase his comprehension by letting him watch you. "It's often helpful for a child to observe his parents or older siblings using the toilet," says Dr. Aronson.

As you explain, try to make it sound like a goal your child will want to attain rather than something you want him to do, says Daniel B. Kessler, M.D., a pediatrician in Phoenix. He suggests saying something like "When you're a big boy, you'll use the potty too. Won't that be great?" Don't use negative words like *dirty* or *stinky*, which can make children think of the potty as bad.

Signs of physical readiness include staying dry for at least two

THE PERFECT POTTY



SESAME STREET 3-IN-1 LEARNING POTTY

Nervous kids will be reassured by these familiar friends. The seat can also be used on top of a toilet; flip the lid down and it's a step stool. (The First Years, \$18.99; call 800-533-6708 for stores.)

BABYBJÖRN TOILET TRAINER

This sleek seat fits on any toilet, with an adjustable rubber ring to keep it firmly in place. The lightweight, scratch-resistant plastic and attached handle make it a breeze to take on vacation, and the ergonomic shape will help kids sit comfortably. (BabyBjörn, \$30; call 800-593-5522 for stores.)

ALL IN ONE POTTY TRAINING SYSTEM

The All In One features a toilet-paper holder, an "I'm done" button, and a spot to stash favorite books for when things go slowly. (Summer Infant Products, \$24.99; call 800-268-6237 for stores.)



MAGIC REWARD POTTY STEP STOOL

This three-in-one potty boasts a design inside the bowl that instantly changes from a target to a star when your child uses the potty successfully. The seat ring, bowl, and deflector also have built-in Microban protection to help inhibit the growth of bacteria. (Playskool, \$19.99; call 800-PLAYSKL for stores.)



STEP STOOL POTTY

With a flip of the lid, your child can turn this sturdy potty into her own step stool. Handles on each side make it easy to carry and give your child something to hold on to. (Fisher-Price, \$12.99; call 704-643-8400 for stores.)

hours during the day, waking up dry in the morning or after naps, or having a bowel movement at predictable times. Your child may use expressions, postures, or language to tell you he's about to go, or ask to be changed right after soiling his diaper. These cues suggest that he has enough bodily control to start using the bathroom. You'll know he's emotionally ready when he takes an interest in your bathroom habits, prefers clean, dry diapers, or asks to use the toilet or potty chair.

Once your child says she wants to learn, it's time to pick a potty. Many

parents choose a small one just for the child; some simply put a solid step stool next to the family toilet and buy an attachment to fit over the seat. The important thing is that your child's feet be supported while she's sitting, to help her keep her balance and give her something to push against.

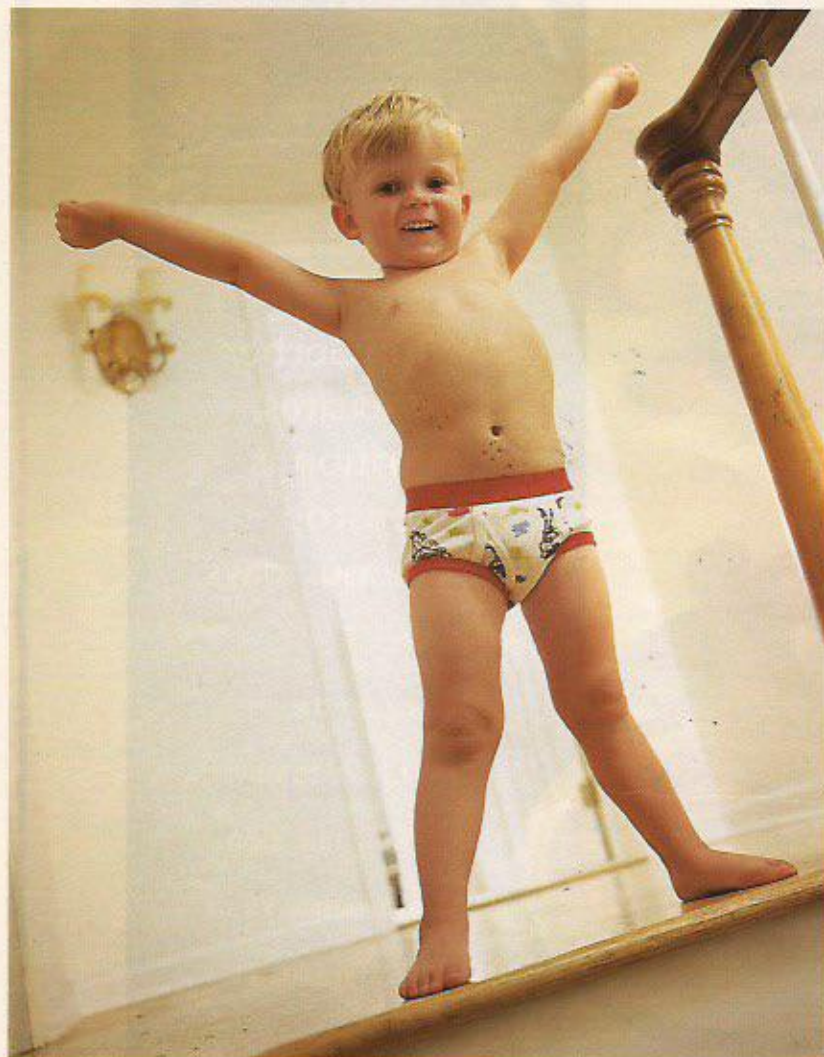
This is also the time to stock up on underpants so that you'll have plenty on hand for the next phase. Getting to wear big-kid underwear—especially if it's printed with favorite cartoon characters or bright colors—can be a major motivator.

Start out in a low-key way

Experts say it's best to begin by letting your child sit on the potty fully clothed while you read him a book. If you buy a small, free-standing potty, "let your child make it her own by putting her name on it or decorating it with stickers," suggests Greg Prazar, M.D., a pediatrician and member of AAP's developmental and behavioral pediatrics section, in Exeter, New Hampshire.

When you're sure your child feels comfortable around the potty—meaning he'll willingly go and sit down on it at your suggestion—it's time to try a few practice runs. "When your child gives you a signal, such as making a face or tugging at his pants, suggest 'Let's use the potty,'" Dr. Prazar says. You can also try making bathroom trips a regular part of your child's daily routine—right after naps or about 20 minutes after he eats a meal.

If he resists, though, don't pressure him. "You should never force your child to use the potty chair, and no practice session should last longer than five minutes," says Dr. Prazar. Don't be concerned if your child's accidents outnumber his successes at first: Children this age often pee or poop just before or immediately after a trip to the bathroom. (Continued)



Some other strategies to ease the potty process:

- **Praise your child's efforts.** Even if her progress seems slow, show your approval of what she can do—whether it's pulling down her own pants, getting on the potty, or sitting there for a full minute. But don't offer bribes. Your child should want to accomplish this for herself, not to earn stickers or a toy.
- **Give your child big-kid underwear.** After a week or two with no accidents, moving up to cotton or disposable training pants gives your child a

Getting to wear big-kid underwear can be a major motivator—especially if it's printed with favorite cartoon characters.

tangible reward and reinforces the connection between using the potty and being a big boy.

- **When you're out and about, carry a change of clothes and know where the bathrooms are.** "Whenever we went to a store, my son insisted that we

show him all the bathrooms," says Teresa Brittain. "He didn't necessarily have to go, but it was important to him to know that there was one around, just in case."

- **Prepare for extra cleaning, and put a waterproof mattress cover on your child's bed.** You may want to keep vinegar or anti-odor enzyme products on hand to deal with stains and odors elsewhere in the house.

- **Keep your cool about accidents—even if they seem deliberate.** Clean up in a matter-of-fact way and say you're sure she'll make it to the potty next time. Soon she will learn better control, and accidents will happen less often.

- **Anticipate your child's needs.** Encourage him to use the potty before going out. If he's engrossed in play, give him a gentle reminder—but if he protests, don't insist.

- **Work on daytime control first.** Don't worry about bed-wetting just yet. Some children achieve daytime and nighttime control at the same time, but many take several months or longer to learn how to stay dry all night. Use training pants or diapers at night until your child consistently wakes up dry—or insists on not wearing them.

- **Know when to back off.** If your child resists, or if you start to feel impatient or frustrated, drop the entire project temporarily. "It takes lots of

good-natured practice for a child to master this skill," says Dr. Prazar. If you feel you are forcing your child, it may be time for both of you to give it a rest.

Finally, try to keep everything in perspective. It may be the biggest cliché in all of child rearing, but it's true: No child yet has gone off to college in diapers. □

Diana Tonnessen is a freelance writer in Gainesville, Florida.

The Charmin "Honor Roll" Photo Contest is looking for pictures of toddlers in endearing potty moments. The child in the winning photo will receive a \$25,000 college scholarship. For more contest details, call 877-424-2768, or log on to www.4CHARMU.com. All entries must be received by April 15.