

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Toilet Training

Promoting the Life Skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges in Toddlers/Preschoolers
Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: How will I know when my child is ready to learn how to use the toilet?

Toilet training is one of the necessary life skills you need to teach your children as they grow up. Learning how to use the toilet can also be an opportunity for you to promote the life skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges with your toddler or preschooler.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that you wait for several developmental signals that indicate your child may be ready to begin the toilet training process.

- 1. Make sure your child is developmentally ready.** There is so much involved in learning how to use the toilet. Watch for the following clues:
 - Your child shows an interest in the potty and talks about going to the bathroom.
 - Your child is able to recognize what it feels like to have the physical urge to go to the bathroom.
 - Your child is able to pull his or her pants up and down independently and be aware of when he or she is going to have a bowel movement, in addition to figuring out the right amount of time to get to the toilet before going in his or her diaper.
 - Your child should be able to remain dry for a period of about two hours and knows the difference between being wet and being dry.

Your child is learning Critical Thinking skills in this kind of awareness.

- 2. Think of this development milestone as an opportunity to teach your child skills, not as an upsetting or stressful time.** Even so, mastering a developmental milestone can cause stress. The difference between it being normal or difficult stress is YOU!

Study after study reveals that children who have warm, caring, and trusting relationships with the adults in their lives are less prone to stress. Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota says:

[S]tress is when challenge overwhelms your capacity to manage it. With a trusting relationship with a parent who's been there for you and [who's] accessible, you're not overwhelmed.

- 3. Provide support for your child's learning.** Your child is better able to learn the skill of Taking on Challenges when he or she feels supported and encouraged by you and other important adults.
 - Make sure to praise your child's efforts, successful or not. You can say things like:
 - “You worked so hard to make it to the potty in time. We'll try again next time.”
 - “You did it! You used the toilet!”

- Provide your child opportunities to practice toilet training in his or her play. You can encourage sitting on the potty anytime, even with your child's clothes on, or letting a stuffed animal use the toilet and do all of the steps.
- Read books or tell stories with your child about using the toilet.
- Provide your child with visual reminders in the bathroom like pictures or drawings of the steps

Researcher Nathan Fox and his colleagues at the University of Maryland have found that parenting styles make a difference in how children respond to stress. Fox differentiates between parents who are *guiding* their children's behavior and those who are *interfering*.

- 4. Have your child come up with his or her own strategies to try to use the toilet.** Studies have found that one of the best ways to guide children is to give them practice in coming up with their own solutions. You can ask your child:
- “What ideas do you want to try in learning to use the toilet?”
 - “Tell me when you want to try to wear big boy/big girl pants for a little while.”

Even young children can become part of the solution by being given opportunities to suggest ways to take on this challenge.

- 5. Acknowledge that mistakes are part of learning.** Your child learns from trial and error. In fact, when you react to your child's mistake as simply a normal part of learning, you are doing more than helping your child become toilet trained. You are teaching your child a fundamentally helpful approach to life.
- Rather than being judgmental or critical when your child has an accident, talk to him or her the way you would like to be talked to when you make a mistake. You can say things like:
 - “Everybody has accidents when they're learning to use the toilet. Keep practicing and you'll get it!”
 - “Maybe next time we will try to go to the bathroom after you drink your water.”

Children take their cues from what you do, not just what you say. They pay close attention to your facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice to gain information about what's happening and to learn how to manage challenges.

These five strategies promote the life skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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