

YOUR TOP TWELVE

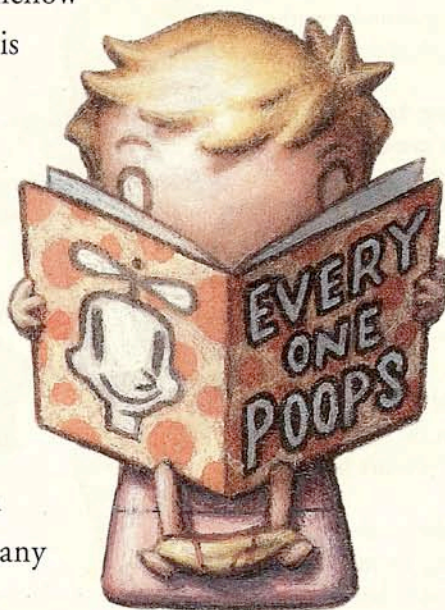
QUESTIONS ABOUT **toilet training** & BOTTOM-LINE ANSWERS FROM THE PROS

BY LESLIE GARRETT



It begins when our kids are about two. They've mastered eating and walking, but now comes the final passage out of babyhood. And the world is watching: If our child can master toilet training, we somehow feel validated as parents. With such lofty aims, is it any wonder that the bathroom can become a battleground?

Today's Parent is swamped with letters from parents for whom toilet training (or "toilet learning," as it's now often called) looms large. So to help, we took your questions and concerns to a handful of experts who deal daily with toddlers, preschoolers and their families. We learned a few things, not the least of which is that many parents share your frustrations.



1. All my brother's kids were using the toilet by age two. My daughter is almost three and shows no signs of wanting to even try. How can I know she's ready?

Whether your child is ready for toilet training isn't determined by the calendar. Forget age and instead look for definite signs of readiness. Shonagh Ramsay, head of the toddler program for Montessori House of Children in London, Ontario, suggests that parents ask themselves the following: Can your child physically hold her bladder for two to three hours? For example, is her diaper dry after a nap? Is she aware of her bodily functions? Does she tell you when a diaper needs changing? Can she understand directions? Is she asking questions about bodies and using the toilet, and showing an interest in the process? Does she have the coordination to pull her pants up and down?

If your child isn't quite ready but is showing some interest, it doesn't hurt to spend time talking about toilet training or reading about it in books such as *Everyone Poops* by Taro Gomi and Amanda M. Stinchecum, or *Koko Bear's New Potty* by Vicki Lansky.

2. At first my 20-month-old was showing signs that he was ready for toilet training. After a few weeks of routinely using his potty, he now resists or simply says no whenever I ask if he'd like to

use it. Should I just let up for a while?

A resounding yes! Although kids may be physically ready, they may not be emotionally ready, or vice versa. "If kids resist," says Ramsay, "there's likely something stressing them out." She recommends not making it a big issue, thereby avoiding a power struggle.

"It's control you can't change," says Karen Krug of University Preschool at the University of Western Ontario. Just relax, leave the potty out and wait for the next window of opportunity when your son is again expressing a desire to become toilet trained.

3. Our friends' daughter is toilet trained at 18 months. They give her a sticker each time she uses the potty and her dresser is now covered in them. We're uncomfortable with the idea of rewarding, but it seems to work. Should we give it a try?

The experts are somewhat divided on this issue. "We're not big into rewards," says Gwyneth Lewis, who runs parent workshops at the Family Education Centre in Brampton, Ontario. "They don't promote intrinsic motivation." In fact, Lewis even discourages excessive praise. She suggests using encouragement, which teaches kids to be proud of themselves, as opposed to praise, which teaches them to try and please us. "Point to what they did, rather than expressing how happy you are," she recommends.

Krug recalls a family for whom the reward system back-

fired. "Their son kept upping the ante," she says. "After a while, he wouldn't go to the toilet for one Smartie, but would for three, and so on."

Laura Oyama, a professor of early childhood education at Toronto's Humber College, has a more laissez-faire philosophy: "If the child is not going to be psychologically harmed and it works, then that's what you should do."

4. My daughter tells me she has to pee frequently, but when we take her to the potty, she just sits there producing nothing.

Oyama suggests that perhaps the child is just getting used to the process, although she doesn't in fact need to go.

Or it could be that she has discovered a way of guaranteeing mom's and dad's attention. Shonagh Ramsay recommends making going to the bathroom as independent as possible, so it becomes a source of pride, not an attention-getter. "Make it easy for kids to get to the potty," she

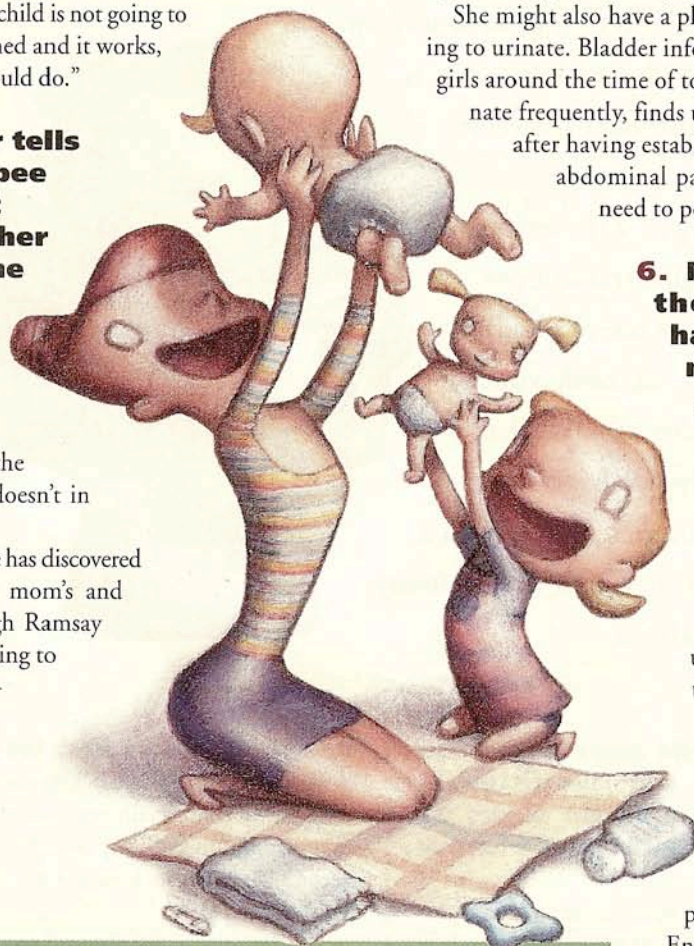
says, "and dress them in clothes that are easy to take off and put on." To prevent risk of infection, she also recommends that hygiene be stressed, such as teaching your daughter to wipe properly from front to back. Follow up by washing hands, again making it easy for your child to reach the sink and soap.

She might also have a physiological reason for not wanting to urinate. Bladder infections seem to be more likely in girls around the time of toilet training. If she needs to urinate frequently, finds urination painful, wets her pants after having established good bladder control, has abdominal pain, or feels the sudden, urgent need to pee, talk with her doctor.

6. My son will pee in the toilet, but won't have a bowel movement. He'll hold it for days — sometimes up to a week. We make sure he eats his share of fruits, vegetables and fibre. What else can we do?

Holding bowel movements isn't uncommon, since controlling them requires a different set of muscles and it can take longer to learn. The longer the child holds it in, the harder and more uncomfortable the stool becomes, making the prospect of dispelling it even more difficult. Ensuring he has enough fibre in his diet is a good place to start. (A good rule of thumb is 5 g plus one more for each year of age. For example, a three-year-old should have 8 g of fibre per day.) "Reassure the child that everything's OK," suggests Ramsay. "So much of toilet training is simply spending time."

Bowel movements can also be a little scary. (Beware the bathroom cleanser commercials that depict a monster lurking in the toilet bowl.) Even flushing can be frightening. You may want to wait until your son is completely off the toilet and let him flush it. Or simply wait and do it later. Keep in mind, also, that it can be frustrating for a child who's laboured to produce a stool in the toilet to have evidence of his achievement immedi-



5. Our three-year-old daughter was completely potty trained. Then four months ago, we had a baby boy. Now our daughter insists on wearing a diaper again, saying she wants to be the baby. We've told her we want a big girl, we've tried bribing, rewarding, everything. Help!

This common problem is part of a bigger picture, says Karen Krug. "Diapering a baby is a big part of parent-baby interaction," something this little girl has obviously figured out. "Try to let her know how nice it is that she's a big girl now, and try to figure out what would help her cope with this new baby." Maybe it's helping out with the baby or letting her play at being one, as long as you're careful to point out there's a difference between playing and being. You might want to give her a baby doll to look after while you attend to your son's needs.

And if she insists on a diaper? "I'd need to know the child to determine what to do," says Krug. "For some, I'd say no, others I'd say try it, knowing it would only last a day or so."

Shonagh Ramsay says she likely wouldn't put a diaper on the child. "I'd try to be reassuring and supportive in helping her cope with the change. I'd also go to the bathroom with her so she gets my undivided attention at that time. And I'd reinforce all the positive things she's accomplished — such as toilet training — that a baby simply hasn't."

ately flushed away.

And do your best to keep the problem in perspective, says Gwyneth Lewis. Learning to be comfortable with “number two” can take a while. “Parents can get restless and edgy about it. But it’s just a little blip in your child’s development.”

7. My 2½-year-old is day-trained but can’t go through the night. How can we hurry the process?

You can’t. “There’s a big difference between daytime and nighttime control,” says Laura Oyama. Most children can’t stay dry through the night until about age four. “And even then I wouldn’t be concerned if a four- or five-year-old wets the bed occasionally.”

Krug agrees that it’s a waiting game, and to help kids stay dry she suggests parents decrease liquids before bed.

8. Should my little boy sit or stand while urinating?

This is a case of individual preference, says Lewis. “Kids learn most by modelling, so boys tend to do whatever daddy does.” She says, however, that it’s probably easier for boys to sit when they’re just learning. One thing all the experts agree on is removing the little spray deflector on potties. Inevitably it scratches or scrapes little penises, making the whole process less appealing to new potty users.

9. Our toilet-trained three-year-old still has accidents and I’m tired of cleaning up. Is there anything we can do to help prevent this?

You can try, but start by accepting that accidents will happen and regression is quite natural. Accidents certainly don’t mean that toilet training has failed. For many kids, staying dry simply isn’t a priority at this age. Perhaps they’re focused on an activity, or maybe they don’t know how long they can wait. And sometimes, parents dress their kids in clothes that are hard for hurried hands to manage. “Accidents happen a lot in the winter,” says Oyama, when the situation is exacerbated by snowpants, boots, mittens and jackets.

If you notice your child focusing intently on an activity and it’s been a while since a bathroom break, ask quietly if he needs

to go. And of course, point it out to your child if he’s doing the full-bladder jig.

11. Our daughter regularly uses the toilet at daycare, but as soon as she’s home with us, she wants diapers again. What’s going on?

Oyama points out that daycare centres are set up with kids in mind — pint-sized toilets and sinks, and a caregiver who usually jumps when a child expresses the need to go to the toilet. Parents, however, might be less consistent about toilet training when it’s inconvenient. “We might sabotage the effort,” she says. “We want to lead a life and it’s a pain to toilet train.” Consistency between daycare and home — common language, common expectations — can make the transition easier for children. Don’t, for example, resort periodically to a diaper because you’re too busy or tired to deal with potty training. “You need to commit yourself to it,” says Ramsay. “There’s a lot of organization that needs to be done, although often for only a short time.”

Toilet training can also be a control issue for toddlers, warns Oyama. “Not using a toilet or potty at home is a very effective way for a toddler to say ‘You’re not the boss of me’ — whether consciously or not.” Again, if there’s consistent resistance, forget the toilet training for now.

12. Should we graduate our child to underwear or training pants?

There are valid reasons for going either way, and it comes down to individual preference. Karen Krug recommends going right to underwear to make the toilet training experience a real rite of passage. She suggests parents play up the whole accomplishment by purchasing special underwear. She also points out that underwear is more uncomfortable when it’s wet, so kids might be more inclined to make the effort to get to a toilet or potty. Since night training does take longer, however, she suggests keeping kids in training pants at night.

Gwyneth Lewis also recommends that parents move straight to underwear in an effort to keep the experience independent. Because they’re not as snug as training pants, it’s simply easier for kids to pull underwear up and down. □



10. Is it true that it's easier to train girls than boys?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that yes, it is. “There’s a big difference between sexes,” says Laura Oyama. “Boys are so much harder [to train] and they tend to get bowel control later than girls.” Some believe it’s more difficult to train boys simply because kids learn much of toilet training by modelling behaviour. And when the primary caregiver is a woman — and she usually is — it just takes boys longer to realize that they’re performing the same function with different equipment.