

Why We Didn't Potty Train (and What We Did Instead)

My son turns 3 this month, and over the last year I have had many people ask me how long he has been potty trained when they notice he isn't wearing a diaper. When I tell them he has been fully (night and day) out of diapers since right before he turned two last year, they want to know how I did it. I can see their excitement as they think maybe I have a trick to help them, because usually they are really struggling to get their child to use the toilet. When I tell them we didn't potty train, they look confused and resign to the fact that I must have a "special" or "unicorn" child. As his mother, I certainly think so (☺), but I also believe that as a general rule, we don't need to "train" children to use the toilet.

I want to start off by saying that the use of disposable diapers is unique to western culture. There are so many other cultures who don't suffer through what we know as "potty training," and their children grow up not defecating on themselves just fine. First, (like so many things I write about) it is important to be willing to let go of some of your ideas about children and how they work/what they need. If we can be open to the fact that so many of our ideas are based in non truths then it will be easier to approach something like using the toilet with a brand new perspective. So how did I get my son to use the toilet without training him to?

1. I normalized using the toilet from day one.

I didn't wait until some arbitrary time in his life to introduce the concept of a toilet and not urinating on himself. I made sitting in his own poo and pee not normal from day one. I made using the toilet normal from day one. Some people call this Elimination Communication (EC), but you don't even have to do it full time. My son still wore diapers, mostly in public and at night. Even with a diaper on, I made it a point to take him to the bathroom and hold him over the sink or the toilet from day one. I didn't catch every poo and pee. He went in his diaper plenty, but he learned about using the restroom from birth. Can we really blame children for not using the toilet when from the time they are born the only concept of using the restroom they have is going on themselves, in their diaper? Of course introducing something radically new will be met with confusion and resistance. Some people use EC to a T, and I think that is great and preferred, but I also understand not everyone has the time or attention for that. The good news is that you can do it at a level that feels good to you. You can still introduce the toilet from day one without going diaper free (EC) full-time. They are never too young to learn about the toilet, which is the main mistake I see parents make. Often times a parent wants to start potty training but fear their child is "too young."

Read the book, ***Diaper Free*** for a complete understanding! My sons father read the entire book and was hooked instantly.

2. I kept him out of a diaper as much as possible.

This is important because I didn't want him to get used to the feeling of sitting in his own waste. I wanted it to be felt as something that was unwanted and uncomfortable (which it was). Many people are worried about poo and pee all over their house. I will admit, it helps if you have hard wood floors like we did. Yes, there are accidents, but for me they were worth it because my son was completely out of diapers by the time he was 2. Being diaper free really encouraged my son to use the sign (as in, sign-language) for potty. I noticed when he had a diaper on, he wouldn't sign when he needed to go. When he was a newborn we would lay him on waterproof pads at night so that he wouldn't ruin the bed. Once he became more mobile, we put him in diapers in public and at night, but still made it a point to take him to the bathroom when we thought he needed to go, and like I mentioned above, our timing wasn't always perfect, but it was the association we wanted to instill.

3. I let him mimic us.

Right around the time children become official toddlers, they get really into doing whatever it is that you are doing. This was really helpful when it came to using the toilet. When my son was about 14-15 months old, I bought him his own **toddler potty** and put it right next to the big toilet in our bathroom. When I would go to the bathroom, he would follow me in there (because no one can pee alone when you have a toddler) and want to sit on his potty too. When we were in the backyard or out in nature, he would also copy his dad and pee in the grass. It got to the point that from a really young age he would open our sliding glass door to the backyard and go outside. It was really exciting for him.

4. I never forced, bribed, punished, or shamed him about using/not using the toilet.

There were times he went in his diaper and even on our floor at home. I never made a big deal about it or demanded he use the potty. I never shamed him or punished him either. Often times kids' refusal to use the toilet is based on the amount of pressure we put on them. What you persist they will resist. If there is pressure or shame or anything like that around using the toilet in your home, then it is likely your child feels a lot of anxiety about it. Age is irrelevant. It is never productive or helpful to use these tactics to get a child to use the toilet. It just creates more problems.

One day, I decided to try and see what would happen if we just stopped using diapers altogether. My son had already been using the toilet a lot on his own, and I felt ready to try and go 100% diaper free. The first few days he had a couple of accidents, and went in the bed three nights in a row, but after those first few days, we literally had zero accidents and he would even get up at night and go use the toilet.

I believe being diaper free from an early age taught him that it's not comfortable or normal

to feel your own waste on your body. When I stopped using diapers at all, he already had the concept of going in the potty down, as well as the understanding that it doesn't feel good to sit in your own wetness or poo. Without diapers he learned quickly the discomforts of having wet pants/sheets, which I think motivated him to use the toilet. Again, without force from me, and it only took several days for the switch to happen. If you want to try the cold turkey method, then you must be ok with some accidents in the beginning. And consider that "cold turkey" might only work if there has been a lot of preparation up until that point.

So that is how I got my two year old out of diapers without ever using any "training" methods. The idea is not to train and enforce toilet use, but to simply create an environment where success is possible and conducive for confidence and self-sufficiency.

I understand that there will always be exceptions such as special needs children and those on the spectrum. I do not write about that simply because I am not experienced with it. I welcome anyone who parents a child with special circumstances to write about toilet topics for them because there can never be too much information and learning to be had.

As a general rule, though, children in other cultures from all over the world have managed to use the toilet early on, and American children have one of the oldest potty training ages in the world. It isn't because we lack the ability, it is because of our cultural practices and what is seen as normal. Mostly, at a certain point we all use the toilet on our own anyway, so some might wonder if this even matters. Maybe not at the end of the day, but if you are wanting to simplify and make parenting a lot easier (which I am all about), then this is just another thing to question and inquire about. I also truly believe it instills self-awareness and age appropriate independence.