



by Karen Stephens

## Potty Struggles: Tips for Resistant Toddlers

Most toddlers are eager to please parents and caregivers, so they're generally cooperative with potty training. They'll do their pre-potty dance, you'll casually suggest they head to the toilet; and by golly, they'll do it! But not all kids are that flexible or compliant. In fact, some are outright angry and defiant. If a parent responds with his or her own anger and resentment, potty training can be derailed.

When a child resists toilet training, the first thing to do is to reassess the child's developmental readiness. (See Parenting Exchange library column, "Toilet Training: Signs That Suggest Prime Time for Potty Training.") Also consider the child's age. By age 3, barring disabilities, most kids are old enough to begin toilet training.

Next, review your own behavior. Have you been unerringly consistent? If you leave work dog-tired, you may be tempted to put aside training that night. If you do, your child's progress will be delayed or completely sidetracked. Are you being clear or are you confusing? If you save time in a rushed moment by putting your child into diapers, not pants, then you're sending mixed signals. That undermines success, which makes you AND your child needlessly feel like failures.

But let's say your child is physically ready. And we'll assume your expectations are consistent and predictable. Even then, kids may resist using the toilet instead of their pants. Some kids are just like that. Some are more easy-going, flexible, and adaptable, and others are . . . less so. And there are a few kids who are outright defiant. Some kids engage in power struggles over anything and everything—potty time being no exception. I've seen children stare a parent right in the eye, adamantly saying, "No, I DON'T have to potty," all while urine is running down their legs and into their socks and shoes! (Not a pretty picture, but realistic part of parenting.)

Though it's tempting to retaliate in kind, a parent's loud, angry response can escalate the power struggle. The whole toilet learning process becomes more complicated, volatile, and excruciatingly drawn out. Let me be unmistakably clear here. I've NEVER known a child to cooperate with potty training because he was spanked, ridiculed, called a "baby," or yelled at unendingly. Uncontrolled anger doesn't motivate kids; it mortars the walls of their conflict and defiance. Physical and verbal aggression alienates and frightens children. Violence, especially from loved ones, steals confidence and self esteem away from kids. A parent's unrestrained anger teaches a lot, but nothing positive or productive.

So how do I recommend that parents respond to resistance? First, if a child is slow to warm up to the idea of the toilet, relax. Remain as calm and casual as possible. Resist being heavy-handed and forcing a show-down. A highly charged cycle of power struggles can be lit when parents push a child too hard or too fast beyond their interest or pace. Be matter-of-fact about your wishes and expectations, but also respectfully listen to your child's comments. Don't allow your child to yell at or hit you, but do assist him with a good spirit and positive attitude as much as you can.

And here's a tip from a friend who recently surfaced from months of power struggles. Out of pure desperation, she finally just sat down and empathized with

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her daughter. She told her that she knew how hard learning to use the potty was, but she had faith she could do it. The three-year-old girl was very relieved to learn that her mom understood that the toilet was hard for her to master. Once she felt her mom understood her frustration, something clicked. After her worries and self-doubt were openly talked about, she became much more cooperative and proficient with the potty.

But not all power struggles end as simply. If a child is temperamentally difficult, or if they're angry over real or imagined hurts (such as sibling rivalry), kids can be stubborn and refuse to use the potty — even if they are ready to burst! If you say, “Do you need to potty, honey?” they’ll scream, “NOOOO!” Some even kick and throw themselves into a full-blown tantrum! Questions that allow a “yes” or “no” answer leave too much room for defiance. And when it comes to fighting over a potty issue, kids always win. After all, we can't make kids hold their urine or bowels. So we have to motivate them to want to do it through encouragement and consequences.

With challenging or toilet-hesitant kids, routinely and matter-of-factly say, “It's time to try to potty now.” Let your voice drop at the end of the statement, rather than go up. It's straightforward, conveys more self-assurance, and shows you mean business. Tell your child he doesn't have to potty, just sit on the toilet and try. (Say this ONCE; otherwise you end up in a long harangue with a two year old!)

As you speak, casually extend your hand to help your child make their way to the potty. Show respect by offering a developmentally appropriate choice: “Do you want privacy while you try or do you want me nearby?” If after five to ten minutes a child doesn't go, let her pull up her pants, thank her for trying, and encourage her to try again later.

If your child frequently argues with you, take advantage of calm times to tell her that it's your job to teach her to use the potty. Listen and be accepting of her concerns and comments, no matter how silly they may sound. Let your child know you need his help and cooperation so you can be a good mom or dad. And be sure to remind him that he can be proud of being a good helper and learning to use the toilet.

If your child is age four or older and still not toilet trained, some objective help from outside the family is warranted. If power struggles are continuous, rather than the exception, or if they become violent, it may be a child's cry for help or a symptom of another underlying problem. If so, turn to a good child counselor for help. (Many community agencies charge a sliding fee based on income.)

Likewise, monitor your own extreme reactions. If you reach the end of your rope, turn to a family therapist or psychologist for help. Even a few sessions can shed light on solutions.

If you need tips and guidance, you can also turn to experienced people who know your child well, for instance grandparents, child care providers, and friends who have toilet trained children. Their cool-headed suggestions can be especially helpful if you're in the midst of power struggles. The toilet training books I've listed below may also be helpful.

#### **Books on Toilet Training**

- *Parents Book of Toilet Teaching* by Joanna Cole (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).
- *Toilet Training Without Tears* by Charles Schaefer & Theresa DiGeronimo (New York: Dutton Books, 1997). This book addresses potty-training especially resistant children and those with disabilities.
- *Toilet Learning: The Picture Book Technique for Children and Parents* by Alison Mack (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1983).
- *Potty Training Your Baby* by Katie Van Pelt.] (Wayne, NJ: Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1995).
- *No More Diapers!* by Joae Graham Brook (New York: Dell Publishing, 1983).

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.