Autism Centers of Pittsburgh

PARENT RESOURCE GUIDE

Toilet Training for Children with Autism

A step-by-step guide to toilet training children on the autism spectrum.

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The information in this guide is drawn from the clinical expertise of Dr. John Carosso, Psy.D. and Dr. Robert A. Lowenstein, M.D., current research findings, and authoritative sources including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the DSM-5. It is intended for informational purposes and does not replace a professional evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Toilet training is a big milestone for any family. For many children on the autism spectrum, it takes longer and needs a different road than the one most parenting books describe. Here's the good news: according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, most children with autism *can* be toilet trained. The process may take a few months, or a year or more, and that's okay.

This guide walks you through a simple, proven, four-step approach, the same one our clinicians use, plus practical ways to handle the bumps along the way.

Why Toilet Training Is Different for Children with Autism

It's almost never about stubbornness. More often, one or more of these is in the way:

- **Limited social motivation.** Praise like "Big kid!" may not mean much to your child, so we need to find the reward that does.
- **Language and logic.** Words like "potty" and "wait" can be hard to connect to what the body is doing.
- **Routine.** Diapers have been part of the daily routine since birth, and giving up something that predictable is a big change.
- **Sensory sensitivities.** Loud flushes, cold seats, echoing tile, and strong smells can make the bathroom feel overwhelming.
- **Body cues.** Many children have a hard time noticing the "I need to go" feeling until it's too late.
- **Tummy troubles.** Constipation is far more common in children with autism, and if pooping hurts, your child will avoid it.

IS YOUR CHILD READY?

Readiness matters far more than age. Look for these signs:

- Stays dry for one to two hours at a time
- Has a fairly predictable pattern of peeing and pooping
- Notices being wet or soiled, or seems uncomfortable in a dirty diaper
- Shows some curiosity about the bathroom or about family members using it
- Can sit for a minute or two and follow a simple direction, even with a picture or gesture
- Is generally cooperative and can help push pants down and pull them up

Your child doesn't need every sign. If you see several, it's usually reasonable to start.

> **Developmental age matters.** If your child's developmental age is below two years, wait about six months and re-evaluate. Starting before your child is ready usually means more frustration for everyone.

Before you begin, schedule a visit with your pediatrician. A quick checkup can rule out constipation or other medical issues that would make training harder.

THE FOUR-STEP APPROACH

This is a systematic approach, built in small, manageable steps. Move to the next step only when the one before it is going well.

Step 1: Keep an Elimination Record

For one week, check your child's diaper every 30 to 60 minutes and write down what you find: **dry**, **urinated**, or **bowel movement**. Note meals and drinks, too. By the end of the week, you'll usually see a pattern, and that pattern tells you when to schedule bathroom trips in Step 3.

Time	Dry	Urinated	Bowel movement	Notes
8:00 AM		✓		After breakfast
8:30 AM	✓			
9:00 AM	✓			Juice at 8:45
9:30 AM		✓		

Sample elimination record. A notebook works just as well.

Step 2: Goal Training

Toileting is really a chain of smaller skills. Start with one small, achievable goal, like pushing pants down and pulling them up, and practice it until it's easy. Then add the next link: sitting on the potty, then flushing, washing hands, and drying them. Small wins build confidence for both of you.

Step 3: Habit Training

Use your elimination record to set a schedule of regular bathroom visits, timed to when your child usually goes, plus right after meals and after waking. Keep each sit short and calm, a few minutes at most. Use a visual schedule (there's a printable one on the last page) so your child knows exactly what comes next, and reward your child right away when pee or poop lands in the potty.

Step 4: Initiation Training

Now we teach your child to notice the urge and start the trip on their own. Begin by pausing a moment before you prompt, so your child has a chance to head to the bathroom first. Teach a simple way to ask, like a picture card, a sign, or a word, and give an especially big reward when your child starts a trip independently. Over time, fade your prompts.

> **A quick tip:** If your child is wearing a diaper, the switch to cotton underwear during the day can speed things up. Underwear lets your child feel the difference between wet and dry. Many families keep a pull-up for naps and nighttime for now.

SUPPORTING THE PROCESS

Visual Supports

Many children with autism understand what they see far better than what they hear. Use picture cards or symbols for each step of the routine, like PECS toileting cards, and post the sequence at eye level by the toilet. The last page of this guide is a ready-to-print schedule you can start with today. Photos of your own bathroom and your child's potty often work better than clip art, because they're familiar.

Sensory Considerations

Small changes can make the bathroom feel a lot friendlier:

- Play calming music, and soften harsh lighting.
- Offer a favorite fidget toy to hold while sitting.
- Let your child control the flush, or wait to flush until your child has left the room.
- Use flushable wet wipes if toilet paper feels unpleasant.
- Warm the bathroom, and use a padded seat and a sturdy step stool so feet feel secure.

Rewards

Use whatever truly motivates your child, whether that's a favorite snack, a sticker, or a minute with a special toy. Only you know what truly motivates your child. Reward both sitting and success at first, keep the potty reward special, and fade it gradually as the skill becomes routine.

Social Stories

A social story is a short, illustrated book that walks through the routine one step at a time, often with one sentence per page ("When I need to pee, I go to the bathroom"). Read it together at calm times, not just in the bathroom.

HANDLING COMMON CHALLENGES

Accidents

Accidents will happen, lots of them. Keep your voice calm and neutral, say “Pee goes in the potty,” take your child to sit for a moment, and help with cleanup. No scolding and no big reaction. We want the potty to get the attention, not the accident.

Other Bathrooms

Children with autism often learn a skill in one place and don’t automatically carry it to the next. Bring the same picture cards, words, and routine to school, Grandma’s house, and public restrooms. A portable seat insert and noise-reducing headphones can help with loud automatic flushes.

Regression

A move, a new school, a new sibling, or an illness can bring accidents back. If that happens, return to the program that worked, and try not to make it a big issue. Most children bounce back, often faster than the first time.

Moving Away from Diapers

Some children are deeply attached to diapers. Introduce underwear gradually, for example by layering the diaper over underwear at first. Snug compression shorts (such as Lycra) can give some children a similar “secure” feeling without a diaper.

Nighttime

Staying dry at night usually comes well after daytime training, and for some children it takes years. Focus on daytime first, keep a pull-up for sleep, and limit drinks in the hour before bed. Nighttime wetting isn’t something your child can control by trying harder.

Working with Your Child’s School

Consistency across home and school makes a big difference. Share your elimination record and the cues you use, send consistent supplies, and keep a communication notebook going back and forth so everyone knows what happened that day.

WHEN TO CALL YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

Most toilet training struggles are a normal part of the process. But call your pediatrician if you notice:

- Pain when peeing or pooping, or holding in stool
- Hard, infrequent, or very large stools, or frequent diarrhea
- Blood in the stool or urine
- Sudden new accidents after your child was trained, or peeing far more often than usual

Constipation is common in children with autism, and treating it often makes training go much more smoothly. Never start a laxative or supplement without your pediatrician's guidance.

HOW ABA THERAPY CAN HELP

Toilet training is one of the most common goals in Applied Behavior Analysis, or ABA. ABA breaks skills into small steps, uses data to guide each decision, and rewards progress, which is exactly the approach in this guide. At our center-based ABA program in Monroeville, our team works on toilet training with children who need extra support and coaches parents so the same routine continues at home.

In Pennsylvania, the Autism Insurance Act (Act 62) requires many health plans to cover autism diagnosis and treatment, including ABA, for children and young adults under 21. Check with your insurer to confirm your plan's benefits.

> **Ready to take the next step?**
> Doctors Carosso and Lowenstein and our experienced team are here to help. Contact us to schedule an autism evaluation, start ABA therapy, or ask questions.
> **(724) 733-5757 | hello@acpitt.com | acpitt.com**

PRINTABLE: MY BATHROOM ROUTINE

Many children follow a routine more easily when they can *see* each step. Here's how to get the most from this schedule:

- **Print and protect it.** Print in color, cut along the dotted line, and laminate it or cover it with clear packing tape so it survives splashes.
- **Post it at your child's eye level,** on the wall right next to the toilet, not up where adults see it.
- **Point and say each step.** Touch each picture as your child does it, and use the same simple words every time. Praise each step, not just the finish.
- **Make it theirs.** If your child already uses picture cards (PECS) or another set of symbols, tape those over these pictures. Familiar images work best.
- **Take it with you.** Print a second copy for school, daycare, or Grandma's house, so the routine looks the same everywhere.
- **Fade the pointing over time.** As your child learns the routine, point less and let the pictures do the prompting.

cut along the dotted line

My Bathroom Routine

