



This Tool Kit is designed to take you through the steps of preparing for and planning toilet training for a child with special needs. As you begin, keep in mind that a child on the autism spectrum is likely to have unique challenges during this process. The goal is for the young person to be as independent with toileting and related skills as his cognitive ability, awareness, communication skills, and self-help skills allow.

This document is an abridged version of the complete Toilet Training Tool Kit found on milestones.org.

Milestones provides coaching services to all family members, professionals, and self-advocates. Services include connecting participants to resources and providing general information and assistance. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at (216) 464-7600 or info@milestones.org.

1. What to Consider Before Getting Started

To get started, it helps to gather information about the following areas:

- medical concerns
- toileting patterns using the Elimination Patterns and Daily Intake Record
- communication skills
- sensory needs
- toileting skills your child may already have
- any supports your child will need

Assessing where your child is in these areas can help you find the best place to begin.

2. When to Start Toilet Training

Deciding when to start toilet training can be challenging. Typically, toilet training occurs between eighteen months and four years of age. However, chronological age is not an exact indicator of toilet training readiness. Some children with autism have a developmental age that is different from their chronological age, which needs to be taken into consideration when deciding when to begin toilet training.

Generally, toilet training is most successful when both the child and the adults are ready.

For some children, signs of readiness may include:

- interest in the bathroom and curiosity in flushing the toilet, playing with toilet paper, etc.
- desire to observe others using the bathroom
- reports of a soiled diaper and/or asking to wear underwear
- anger when diaper is soiled
- starting to have periods of dryness and being able to “hold it”

Some children may not show signs of readiness; others may appear disinterested or even resistant. In these instances, parents often decide the best time to begin toilet training. In any case, toilet training for children with autism involves the development of a specific routine, a schedule, and a reinforcement system.

Typically, the goal of toilet training is to teach the child to be aware of the need to eliminate and to independently access the toilet. If this is not realistic for your child, **habit training** may be a better toilet training technique (see page 4). Through habit training, accessing the toilet becomes a learned behavior. The child creates a new habit of eliminating in the toilet versus in the diaper. By repeating the toileting routine over and over as part of a structured schedule, the goal is for the child to develop bladder and bowel control and more independent access of the toilet.

3. Toilet Training Steps

For most children, the adult(s) will be teaching, supporting, and supervising all of the steps in the toileting sequence. Some children may have already mastered some of these steps and do not need to be taught those parts of the sequence. To help your child learn and follow the routine, use pictures to represent the steps he needs to know. As you help him follow the sequence of the routine, show or point to the picture and say the words. You can find pictures online or in magazines, take photographs, or you can draw them with stick figures. Your child's school may also be able to help with acquiring the pictures you need. As your child learns the toileting routine, he may need less or even no help with some or all of the steps of the sequence.

Typically the steps of the toilet training sequence are (see a picture schedule below):

1. Enter the bathroom
2. Close the bathroom door
3. Pull down clothing
4. Sit on the toilet
5. Use the toilet
6. Get toilet tissue
7. Wipe with tissue
8. Throw tissue in the toilet
9. Stand up
10. Pull up clothing
11. Flush toilet
12. Wash Hands
13. Dry Hands
14. Leave the bathroom

4. Developing a Toilet Training Plan

As you get started, remember:

- Give it time. Toilet training a child with autism or other developmental challenges can be a lengthy process. Think in terms of accomplishments instead of days, weeks, and months.
- Set achievable goals.
- Start when you both are ready.

- Get everyone on board. Check with your child’s school, daycare, and other providers as you develop your plan. Consistency will help your child be more successful. Inform family and friends of your plan. Ideally, everyone should use the same language and the same routine. But, don’t be discouraged if everyone can’t commit to following the plan all of the time, including yourself. A written plan can help with keeping everyone on board.
- Be prepared to manage your own negative feelings. Expressing anger and reprimanding your child will interfere with success.

A toilet training plan includes:

Your **GOALS**

After getting a better understanding of your child’s needs and ability, you may decide to start small, with a skill he can easily manage. For example, you may decide that you will focus on your child pulling his pants down and up while you prompt all of the other steps. It is recommended that all of the steps in the toileting sequence be followed for each toilet trip even if you are beginning by focusing on one or two steps. The goal is for your child to participate in and to learn the sequence as a whole.

The **ROUTINE/SCHEDULE**

Track how long it takes in between when your child drinks and/or eats and when he is wet or soiled. Checking your child’s diaper frequently (e.g., every fifteen minutes) will help you decide when to schedule toilet trips.

Based on your observations of your child’s patterns, build a daily schedule around the time your child typically has to eliminate. Develop a reasonable schedule for waking hours that you can support consistently. Make toilet trips part of everyday life and plan them around your usual routine.

The **LANGUAGE** you use

Use words your child will understand. For example “Now we go to the bathroom” or “pee” for urinate. Parents and other caregivers involved in implementing the plan should use the same language. Consult with your child’s daycare and school regarding the words they are using.

If your child typically communicates using pictures, use them in the toileting routine also. Such pictures may include photos, drawings, and/or clip art. Consult with your child’s teacher or speech language pathologist about the visuals they are using at school. Using a simple picture schedule that includes potty times can help your child feel less anxious about this change to his routine.

The **LOCATION**

If you have more than one bathroom at home, choose the one where your child is most likely to be successful and start there. Eventually, you will add other bathrooms in both familiar and unfamiliar environments.

Remember that the environment and sensory issues should be considered to ensure success.

Any **SUPPLIES and MATERIALS** needed

Be prepared for success by having the clean clothing, wipes, toilet tissue, soap, and towels readily available in the bathroom. Keep books, music, and other calming and engaging activities on hand in the bathroom to help your child relax and to minimize any negative reactions to the bathroom and/or the routine. You may want to put together a ‘survival kit’ containing these items for trips away from home.

5. Habit Training

If the above process is not realistic for your child, habit training may be a better toilet training technique. Through habit training, accessing the toilet becomes a learned behavior. The child creates a new habit of eliminating in the toilet versus in the diaper. By repeating the toileting routine over and over as part of a structured schedule, the goal is for the child to develop bladder and bowel control and more independent access of the toilet.

Typically the goal of toilet training is to teach your child to be aware of the need to eliminate and to independently access the toilet. For children who lack the awareness of the need to eliminate and the level of independence needed to go on their own, habit training is an alternative to the usual toilet training techniques. Habit training is an adult driven and highly routinized and scheduled program.

Habit training is appropriate when:

- child has not been successful with other training techniques
- child lacks awareness and/or aversion to being wet or soiled
- child lacks awareness of the need to eliminate
- child is resistant to toilet training
- child is disinterested in toilet training
- toileting patterns are difficult to determine

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Using Pictures to Sequence the Toileting Routine

Place the pictures in the order in which each step will occur. You can glue them to a piece of cardboard or an open file folder. You may want to laminate the board for sanitary reasons and also so that your child can cross off each step as he completes it with a wipe-off marker. Afterwards, wipe off the board so it is ready for the next toilet trip.

As your child achieves some success, you can provide fewer reminders and prompts to follow the picture routine and complete the sequence. The eventual goal would be for your child to follow and complete each step of the routine without assistance or reminders from an adult.

