A parent's guide to potty training

There are some aspects of being a parent that are more pleasant than others. Take nappy changing as an example. The chances are that you, like most parents, are looking forward to nappies becoming a distant memory.

So how can you help your child to leave nappies behind? When can I start potty training?

One of the hardest parts of potty training is being patient and knowing when your child is actually ready to use a potty. As with other milestones, such as walking, there is no set time by which all children are ready to leave nappies. Some are out of nappies at 15 months, while others will only be ready at three years old. The difference between children lies in their physical maturation, as the bladder and the central nervous system have to be sufficiently developed. Your child also needs to have enough speech to communicate his needs to you, and enough understanding of what to do when he needs the potty. It is worth waiting until your child is physically ready, as the chances are that the whole process will then only take a few days.

Look out for these signs:

n Is your child's nappy dry after a nap?

n Does your child tell you when they are dirty?

n Does your child try to pull off their nappy?

n Is your child interested in sitting on a potty or toilet?

In addition, see if your child is able to go upstairs using alternate feet rather than putting two feet on each stair. In France, this is used as sign that a child has sufficient physical control, and it may explain why early walkers are often earlier to be potty trained.

How should I start off?

Potty training is best done without too much fuss. Telling your child that they are too grown up for nappies can backfire if, after a few days, you realise that they are not ready. Think through when you will be at home and simply leave a nappy off and show your child where the potty is. You can also sit her on the potty or toilet with a training seat as you run the bath. The sound of running water is known to work well! To avoid becoming too stressed, make sure that your child plays in places where it doesn't matter if there is an accident.

What should I do if my child refuses to use the potty?

While it may be frustrating to know that your child needs the potty and is steadfastly refusing to go, it is important to avoid anything other than a mild suggestion. Forcing a child to sit down, bribing them or getting cross will only make the situation worse. Children need to be reasonably relaxed in order to 'let go', and pressure simply makes this harder for them.

There is also a danger that your child may learn some fantastic attention-seeking skills and will talk about the potty to get you off the sofa! Try to avoid telling your child when it is time to 'go', as it is important that he learns to do this for himself. If he keeps refusing to use a potty, just put him back into nappies without making any comments and try again in a few weeks' time.

I am worried because my child is five years old and not dry at night

The age at which children can remain dry at night varies enormously. While many children are dry at four years old, other children need much longer. You can help your child by having a good toileting routine through the day so that her body recognises when her bladder is full. Put a potty next to the bed and encourage her to use the toilet before going to bed. Avoid getting cross, as this only makes things worse, and remember that bedwetting is not deliberate. Visit your doctor for further advice if your child is not dry after the age of six years.