



Kate Makes it Great!

LEARNING STRATEGIES

Kate's Top Two Tips for Toilet Training Children with Different Abilities

By **Kate C. Wilde**

No matter how daunting it seems to you or how many times you may have attempted toilet training in the past, you have nothing to lose by giving your child the opportunity to gain this incredibly life-affirming skill. I say life-affirming because this skill gives our children who fall somewhere on the colorful spectrum of developmental delays many hidden delights. An independence over their own bodies abled persons take for granted. A boost to their self-esteem and confidence. More options in educational and recreational settings. From my 30 years of helping educators and parents toilet train children from two-years-old to 30 and beyond, here are my top two tips.

1. Be inspirational: Make it fun!

Yes, toilet training can be fun! There is so much research that confirms we learn skills for life when we are having fun. If our children are having fun, they will go the extra mile to do what is challenging. If we are having fun, we will more likely stay with it. How do we make it fun?

- **Bring the fun to the toilet**

Instead of quietly taking yourself off to the toilet, make a whole Broadway production of it. Announce it to the entire household. Tell everyone what you are about to do. Afterward, have your partner, your child's siblings, or



whomever else is in your home come and clap, give you a high five, or bang a drum for using the bathroom. Create "I used the toilet today" certificates for each member of the family. Present them with great fanfare at the dinner table. Using the bathroom for everyone in your household is now a cause for celebration. It is okay if your exceptional child does not seem to notice at first—you do not have to get them to celebrate you. The idea is to start making using the toilet an event in your house. They will soon be noticing and experiencing this new fun vibe around using the toilet!

- **Use your child's motivations**

What does your child like the most? Is it Spider-Man or Paw Patrol? Is it vacuums or fans? Is it watching a piece of string or ribbon dangle in front of their eyes? Is it airplanes, helicopters, rainbows, the alphabet, or numbers? Road signs or subway maps? Whatever it is your child is into, make that a central part of your toilet training. Here are some ex-

amples of what happened when some amazingly creative parents and educators did just that. One child loved anything to do with airports. His mom created a runway that went down the hallway into the bathroom and ended at the toilet. Another decorated their child's potty with hundreds of yellow ribbons; one put a fan next to the toilet, while another covered their otherwise plain potty with the rainbows their daughter loved. This inspired each of these children to want to spend more time around the toilet or the potty. This not only made toilet training more fun for each child but sped up the process too. We move towards what we like the most. Make the toilet or potty a point of interest for your child by using their unique motivations.

- **Give control: The toilet training superpower**

This is so key. You can make the toilet fun by doing what I suggest above and then sap all the fun out of it by adding pressure, pushing, or force to the process. There can be a lot of outside pressure from family members, educators, and therapists to toilet train your child. If you take this on, it can spill over to your child, resulting in you pushing or even physically forcing your child to sit on the toilet. Parents have shared with me that they thought this would speed up the process for their child and make it a little easier. However, it mostly has the opposite effect. When we feel pushed, we tend to tense up; when we are tense, as I am sure you can all relate to, it gets harder, not easier, to pee. If we force our children to sit on the toilet, they will

associate the toilet with this force, making it something to avoid. As long as the toilet remains something our children want to move towards, we have all the opportunities we need to help them master its use. You can do this by respecting their "No." If they say or physically indicate they do not want to be near or sit on the toilet, respect that; let them know you heard them, and you will try again later. Let go of any timeline or pressure from outside sources. This is not their child; this is not their journey. What matters is the fun and ease between you and your child. This is the way forward.

2. Build interoceptive awareness

Interoception is often referred to as the "eighth sensory system." It is the ability to feel the inside of your own body, listen to the messages it gives you, and take action. For example, if our children are to successfully learn to use the toilet, they must first feel when their bladder is full. Then they must understand this feeling means it is time to use the toilet. This is called interoceptive awareness. The great news is interoceptive awareness can be increased and improved just by putting our awareness there. You will want to build this awareness if:

- Your child does not notice they have just peed or pooped.
- They do not show signs they are about to pee or poop (like a potty dance or a poop posture).



- They will go to the bathroom and use the toilet if you suggest it and take them. But they do not initiate it themselves or go on their own.

Building interoceptive awareness will make the process much easier. You can do this by:

- **Taking off the diaper**

Diapers today are wonderfully-advanced. They are built to be an anti-interoception device. The whole point of a diaper is to make it so you don't feel it when you pee. If we want to build interoceptive awareness, it makes sense the first place to start is to take off the diapers. Introduce new and fun big girl or big boy underwear and sweatpants that can easily and quickly be pulled down. Use some ground-sheets to cover the carpets and sofas that your child may be sitting on while they are diaper-free. This way you do not have to be concerned about ruining your carpets or furniture and can keep a relaxed, easy attitude when your child has toilet accidents.

- **Modeling listening to your own body signals**

You can do this by standing still and put on what I like to call an active listening face. You can do this by slightly tilting your head with a curious expression on your face. It helps if you are really listening to your body. While you do this, touch your lower abdomen where your bladder feeling is and describe how it feels. Then go to the bathroom in the fun ways suggested above.

- **Bringing body listening into your play with your child**

If your child loves to play with figurines, have one of them tell you they have a feeling in their body and need to pee. Then have the figurine use the toilet. If your child likes plastic letters, that's another way they can tell you they need to pee.

- **Explaining and showing them what is happening in the body**

One amazing mom helped her 26-year-old son use the toilet independently by helping him understand what was happening inside his body. She got a balloon and showed her son how his bladder fills up with fluid, and once it

filled, he needed to release it into the toilet so it could fill up again. As she explained this, she filled up the balloon with water. This visual, along with an age-appropriate detailed explanation, really helped her son recognize his body messages and gain independence.

The good news is that learning to inspire your child through fun and building your child's interoception will serve your child in countless ways far beyond the toilet. Have fun and enjoy your journey to toilet independence. If you want more, you can read my whole toilet training plan in my book, *Autistic Logistics: A Parent's Guide to Tackling Bedtime, Toilet Training, Tantrums, Hitting and Other Everyday Challenges*. (Second edition is coming out later this year).

Kate C. Wilde has spent the past 30 years working with children and adults on the autism spectrum and their families, as well as with therapists, educators, and schools. She is the author of the acclaimed books, Autistic Logistics: A Parent's Guide to Tackling Bedtime, Toilet Training, Tantrums, Hitting, and Other Everyday Challenges and The Autism Language Launcher: A Parent's Guide to Helping Your Child Turn Sounds and Words Into Simple Conversations, and is renowned for the well-attended courses she teaches throughout the US, Europe, and Asia. Her YouTube autism quick tip videos, delivered with her trademark infectious enthusiasm, have garnered a following worldwide.

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