



How Pull-Ups Could Be Delaying Your Child's Toilet Training (And What You Can Do About It)

Toilet training is one of the most significant milestones in a child's early development, and for many parents, it can also be one of the most stressful. Over the years, products like Pull-Ups and other training pants have been marketed as the answer to a smooth, stress-free transition from diapers to the potty. However, while these products are convenient, they may be unintentionally delaying the very process they're supposed to support. If you're finding that your child is past the "typical" age for potty training and still resistant, you might be wondering why—and whether Pull-Ups could be a part of the problem.

The Comfort Dilemma: Is Your Child Too Comfortable?

When Pull-Ups were introduced in the 1990s, they were marketed as a tool to make potty training easier. These absorbent training pants were designed to be worn like regular underwear, but with the comfort of a diaper, allowing toddlers to pull them up and down without making a mess. However, experts suggest that the very comfort and dryness Pull-Ups provide might be one of the reasons why some children are taking longer to master potty training.

"The more comfortable a child is, the less likely they are to feel motivated to transition to the toilet," says Dr. Harvey Karp, a pediatrician and author of *The Happiest Baby on the Block*. He explains that in the early stages of toilet training, the discomfort of wet or soiled diapers often acts as a motivator for children to learn how to use the potty. With Pull-Ups, however, children stay dry even after accidents, so they might not feel the same sense of urgency to make the switch.

When children wear Pull-Ups, the sensory experience of being wet or soiled is muted. Traditional diapers often leave children feeling uncomfortable when they have an accident, prompting them to want to stay dry. With Pull-Ups, however, the absorbent material wicks moisture away, reducing the discomfort that usually drives potty training. This lack of sensory feedback can lengthen the process as children are not experiencing the discomfort that would otherwise encourage them to try using the toilet.

The Power Struggle: Toilet Training as a Control Issue

One of the most common reasons parents struggle with potty training is that their toddlers are in the midst of the “no” phase—when they assert their independence by refusing to do what is expected of them. Toilet training can quickly become a battleground, and some children may use it as a way to test boundaries and assert control.

Pull-Ups, while helpful in some cases, can sometimes inadvertently contribute to this power struggle. By giving toddlers the ability to put on and take off their training pants like “big kids,” parents may unknowingly take away some of the natural urgency that would normally push children toward wanting to use the toilet.

Dr. Karp explains: “**When children are given too many options—like using Pull-Ups instead of regular underwear—they may feel less pressure to learn the skill. Potty training becomes less about mastering a developmental milestone and more about exerting control, which is something they’re doing in other areas of their lives at this stage.**”

If your child is using Pull-Ups but still refusing to use the toilet, it could be a sign that they’re exerting control over the situation. This power struggle can be especially challenging during the “no” phase, when toddlers are more focused on asserting their autonomy than on learning new skills.

Too Comfortable, Too Late?

One of the unintended consequences of Pull-Ups is that they may delay readiness for toilet training altogether. Parents may be less inclined to push the potty training process if they’re using Pull-Ups, because they don’t cause as much mess or discomfort. This can lead to children remaining in training pants for longer periods, even as they get older, potentially causing them to lose interest in the process altogether.

Many experts, including Dr. Karp, argue that “**delaying potty training beyond a child’s natural developmental window can cause frustration for both parents and children. Some kids lose interest in using the toilet when they’re used to the comfort of Pull-Ups. It’s essential to pay attention to signs of readiness, which can include staying dry for extended periods, showing interest in using the toilet, and expressing discomfort when wearing wet diapers.**”

The History of Toilet Training in the United States

To understand how we arrived at the current landscape of potty training, it's helpful to take a quick look at the history of toileting in the United States. Prior to the invention of Pull-Ups, children were typically potty trained at much younger ages. In fact, up until the mid-20th century, most children were fully trained by 18 months, sometimes even younger. The discomfort of wet diapers, along with cultural and medical expectations, created a natural incentive for early potty training.

The modern shift toward later potty training, however, began with the introduction of disposable diapers in the 1960s, which made it easier for parents to delay the training process. But the real game-changer came in the 1990s with the invention of Pull-Ups. These training pants were designed to be convenient and comfortable, but they also made it possible for children to stay dry and comfortable for much longer, delaying the need to use the toilet.

In addition to product innovations, **lobbyists from major diaper manufacturers** have been known to influence pediatrician recommendations, which has played a role in shaping the cultural expectation that potty training should begin later. Pediatric organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), started shifting recommendations to focus on a child's readiness, rather than a strict age. While this shift was rooted in an understanding of child development, the increased availability and convenience of products like Pull-Ups may have inadvertently delayed the process, as parents became more focused on convenience than on watching for signs of readiness.

What Can Parents Do?

So, what should parents do if they suspect Pull-Ups are delaying potty training? Here are some practical tips for getting back on track:

1. **Look for Signs of Readiness:** Every child is different, but most children are ready for toilet training before 18-24 months. Look for signs of readiness like staying dry for longer periods, showing interest in using the toilet, and expressing discomfort when wearing wet diapers. These are clues that your child may be ready to start the process.

2. **Limit the Use of Pull-Ups:** If you've been relying heavily on Pull-Ups, consider switching to regular underwear. While Pull-Ups can be easier for adults, they should not replace the process of learning to use the toilet. Regular underwear allows your child to feel the sensation of being wet, which can motivate them to use the potty.
3. **Make It Fun and Empowering:** Toilet training doesn't have to be a battle. Make potty time fun and empowering by using positive reinforcement, praising small successes, and creating a fun routine around using the toilet (like reading a potty training book or singing songs).
4. **Create a Stress-Free Environment:** Toilet training should be a positive experience, not a power struggle. If your child is refusing, it might be helpful to take a step back.

Conclusion: The Key to Successful Toilet Training

While Pull-Ups and other training pants are marketed as tools to help make potty training easier, they might actually be contributing to delayed toilet training for some children. The comfort they provide can lessen the natural motivation to stay dry, and in some cases, it may become a tool for asserting control during the "no" phase of toddlerhood.

The key to successful toilet training is recognizing when your child is ready and following their cues. By paying attention to signs of readiness, reducing reliance on Pull-Ups, and keeping the process fun and positive, you can help your child transition from diapers to the toilet at their own pace. And remember, as Dr. Karp wisely notes, **"Every child is different. What works for one might not work for another. The most important thing is to be patient and consistent."**