



The
Preschooler
Problem Solver

Tackling Tough and Tricky Transitions
with your Three- to Four-Year-Old

Carol Baicker-McKee, PhD

The Preschooler Problem Solver

Tackling Tough and Tricky Transitions
with Your Two- to Five-Year-Old

Carol Baicker-McKee, Ph.D.

*For my husband Steve—
who makes
cinnamon buns for Sunday breakfast,
things I need like garden gates and treehouses,
ten out of ten free throws every time,
the printer work again,
and me happy*



Published by
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112
www.peachtree-online.com

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Cover Design by Maureen Withee
Interior Design by Melanie McMahon Ives and Regina Dalton-Fischel

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Baicker-McKee, Carol, 1958-

The preschooler problem solver : tackling tough and tricky transitions with your two- to-five-year-old / written by Carol Baicker-McKee.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-56145-445-7 / 1-56145-445-1

1. Preschool children. 2. Parenting. 3. Child rearing. I. Title.

HQ774.5.B353 2009

649'.123--dc22

2009011165

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INTRODUCTION

There are already tons of parenting books on the market, many of them packed with good advice on how to raise normal, well-adjusted children, so you might justifiably wonder why the world needs another one. Well, the world needs another one because none of those other books have an adequate solution to the following nerve-wracking parenting dilemma:

Q. Suppose you never should have signed your four-year-old daughter up for ballet lessons because you have all the poise and grace of a psychotic robot (only without its fine sense of rhythm) and your daughter has unfortunately inherited your bad-dancing genes, but you let yourself get talked into it anyhow and now it is time for the end-of-year recital. And you are perched on a seat in the middle of a row in a hot auditorium packed with a gazillion people, most of them darling little girls in absolutely adorable pastel tutus, tiaras, butterfly wings, etc., except for your daughter and her classmates, who have ended up in the only number where the dancers are attired in what appear to be enormous hot pink loofahs with *slightly* smaller hot pink loofahs fastened atop their heads, and to make matters worse your kid is glommed on to you like some sort of giant mutant barnacle with bad fashion sense. And she is refusing to go backstage to wait with her best friend, cousin, and other classmates for her turn, much less tippytoe onto the stage and perform that classic ballet piece “Daddy’s Little Girl,” even though a mere hour ago she was so excited and eager to be in the show that she made you leave the house a half hour early. And the relatives are coming to watch, and the teacher has stressed how essential it is for everyone to be there as the number will not work properly without all the performers,

plus her name is already in the program and all the other moms are staring at you and looking rather smug and superior. What the heck do you do?

A. According to one parenting book I'd just read at the time this happened to me and my daughter, I should gather my young daughter up gently and take her home, since rushing children into new experiences they don't feel ready for only harms their psyches and sets them on a path of seeking out experiences that exceed their maturity, like juvenile alcohol use, premature sex, and maybe even talking to people on the phone the way pathetic grown-ups do instead of texting them like normal, wholesome teens should.

Of course, a couple weeks before that, I'd read another book by a different noted child development expert that said pretty much the opposite: that you should always take a firm tough-love stance and order your child in no uncertain terms to follow through when she starts something, whether it was joining a soccer team or doing an art project at home, because to do otherwise would set her on a path of shirking responsibility, avoiding challenges, and not paying at least the minimum balance on her credit-card bill, thereby triggering a global credit crisis.

Consequently, I was sitting there nearly as paralyzed as my daughter. But thanks to the combined body heat of the gazillion people around me and the loofah girl pressed tightly to my chest, I was sweating so much that I could feel little rivers of perspiration running down my legs into my shoes. And that reminded me that I really, really, really needed to pee, which finally unfroze my leg muscles enough that I could head to the ladies' room. With my daughter still plastered against me, I squeezed past the twenty-seven grandmothers sitting next to us, a process akin to going through a gauntlet of turnstiles while nine months pregnant with quintuplets, and made my way out of the auditorium into the relative cool and calm of the lobby, where both Sara and I instantly relaxed. I was able to peel her off of me, only losing a little skin in the process, and head to the bathroom.

We both peed and washed our faces, and I dabbed at the pools of sweat under my blouse and at the streams still coursing down my thighs until my brain began to function again. Then I reached a decision about what would *probably* be best for my daughter and devised my strategy.

I offered Sara a sip from my water bottle, and commiserated. “Pretty overwhelming, isn’t it?” I said. “No wonder you got cold feet.”

Sara looked down at her little pink ballet slippers. “My feet aren’t cold! They’re hot!”

I tried again. “I mean, I understand why you don’t feel like being in the show anymore.”

“Yeah,” said Sara, “let’s just go home.”

“I guess we should,” I agreed. “Though it’s too bad after you practiced so hard and got so good at your plié. And at that cute little part where you bend at the waist and poke your fingers in the dimples you don’t have.”

“Yeah,” said Sara, heading for the exit. “It’s too bad.”

“And it’s a shame lots of people will be disappointed,” I said. “Like Daddy, your brothers, your aunts, and the other girls who are counting on you to start the curtsy at the end of the dance.”

“Yeah,” said Sara, tugging on the heavy door. “It’s a shame.”

“And I’m really sorry about the sundaes,” I said. “I was going to let you get hot fudge *and* caramel sauce. You know, to celebrate.”

“Yeah...wait!” said Sara. “I can get hot fudge *and* caramel?”

“Well, you could have,” I said, “if you’d done the recital. But since we’re just going home, we can hardly go out for a celebration.” I stepped out the door.

“Just a minute,” said Sara. “I changed my mind. I feel like dancing now!”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Because I wouldn’t want to damage your psyche or anything.”

“I’m sure,” said Sara, grabbing my hand. “And can I have two cherries on top? And extra whipped cream?”

“We’ll see,” I said. And we skipped to where her class was waiting and got her settled in with her best buddy.

In the end, Sara performed pretty well, just a half beat or so behind the other dancers as usual, but with a practically elegant arabesque and curtsy at the end. And I managed to snap one of my favorite photos of her on the stage after the performance. In the snapshot her friend Rachel has her toes turned out in first position, her arms extended back gracefully, and she’s laughing. Sara’s cousin Erin stands tall in fourth position, arms

curved delicately overhead and a slight smile on her lips. Sara, on the other hand, looks like a street tough with her legs spread and arms crossed, glaring suspiciously at the camera out of the corner of her eye. I think she's just figured out she might have been sort of tricked. But the sundaes were really good, and Sara, who back then had the appetite of a ladybug with a stomach virus, actually ate all of hers. Which meant I didn't get to finish it. But it was worth it.

If you're the kind of parent who frowns at ever using a little guilt or trickery or invoking the persuasive powers of sweets, this may not be the right parenting book for you. In fact, if the account above has left your lips pressed tightly together and your eyes narrowed, you should probably stop reading this right now and see if you can exchange it for one of those other high-minded, here's-the-right-answer books. I do have a Ph.D. in clinical child psychology from the University of Virginia; years of experience working with young kids as a volunteer, teacher, and therapist; and the wisdom that comes from being the parent of three creative, lively, and strong-willed children—but I'm not above using guilt induction, deceit, and bribery occasionally, in the right situation, with the right parent and kid, along with other non-traditional methods like extreme silliness, peer pressure, and hoping the problem will just go away on its own.

If there's one thing I've learned from all my years with preschoolers, it's that not only is there more than one way to skin a knee, there's more than one way for Mommy or Daddy—and eventually even the kid himself—to make it better. What works best with a particular child at a given point in time depends on a complex array of variables, including the child's temperament and past experiences; his current stage of development; whether he's tired, hungry, thirsty, uncomfortable, sick, or in pain; whether there's some big stressful change going on his life; your family's values and your parenting style; the lunar stage; if it's a month with an "r" in it; and of course, whether he's wearing his lucky underpants.

All of which is a long way of saying that the main way this book differs from others on raising your preschooler is that it rarely prescribes just one approach to solving a problem, but instead offers options, usually lots of them—the behavioral techniques that experts have found to be most effective as well as the traditional methods that generations of parents have

fallen back on, plus the occasional bizarre approach I've stumbled upon. You're free to choose the one that seems to fit best for your kid and circumstances. And if that doesn't work, you can try a different one.

By the way, this is not to say I don't believe that there are some fundamental principles that work for pretty much any set of parents and kids that you should probably consider as basic necessities for your parenting arsenal. If you read this book cover to cover, you'll probably figure them out, because I repeat them over and over. And if you need more details about these basics, consult any good puppy-training guide, as the principles are much the same. People will look at you a little strangely, though, if you opt for the clicker method, so you should probably skip that, at least in public. I'm only sort of kidding, by the way.

Another way this parenting book differs from others is that it's nuanced, which is a fancy way of saying that I try to take real-life variables into consideration. For example, there is lots of good information in books, magazines, and on the Internet to help you answer your preschooler's questions about sex and reproduction. But I have yet to find another source that addresses how you might handle things differently when your child asks these questions in a piercing voice in a forum like a crowded subway car at rush hour or a public restroom along the turnpike.

Obviously, this book differs from others on preschoolers in its content and goals. This book focuses on the turning points of early childhood and helping your child through the challenges, new experiences, and life changes of this period of development. Some of these are situations faced by nearly all children, such as moving from a crib to a big bed, throwing or attending birthday parties, and nose picking. Others are common but by-no-means-universal experiences, like welcoming a new sibling, attending school for the first time, or wondering whether God has boogers. And still others are relatively rare things I hope your family doesn't have to face, like divorce, natural disasters, and a debilitating fear of ladies' lingerie.

There are also many potential problems not covered in this book. Luckily for you, many of them are discussed in my other books. For example, if you need help with daily routines, like getting your jellyfish child dressed in the morning, figuring out how to talk on the phone without constant interruptions or preventing homicide during the evening Arsenic

Hour (the period just before dinner), you should consult *FussBusters at Home*. Or if you struggle to get your kids through outings like trips to the grocery store, attending plays, or accompanying you to the gynecologist after the sitter cancels, or if you're trying to figure out how to make your next family vacation more fun and less hassle, you can read *FussBusters on the Go*. You can also ask me questions by emailing me at baickermckee@gmail.com or submitting them to my blog, www.doodlesandnoodles.blogspot.com. Or check out my website: www.carolbaickermckee.com.

There are some problems of the preschool years not covered in any of my books, though. For example, you won't find anything in my books on coping with lice, scabies, ticks, or pinworms. Partly this is because although I'm *Dr. Baicker-McKee*, I'm not a medical doctor and thus not qualified to offer professional advice on that stuff. But mostly it's because even thinking about those gross guys makes me start itching so much I have to stop whatever I'm doing to scratch for the next fifteen minutes. Um, I'll be back to finish this up in a little bit.

My first goal is to help you and your kid get through the challenges of the preschool years with a minimum of whining, pinching, peeing one's pants, or vegging in front of the telly excessively. The next goal is to help you support your kid in such a way that she acquires her own coping skills, a sense of optimism, and an ability to bounce back after difficulties. And my final goal is to give you the skills and attitudes to create a family culture that's inviting, comfortable, and invigorating—one that encourages every member to welcome friends, tackle creative projects or meaningful work, and contribute to the running of the household, and one that's elastic and roomy enough to allow for growth as you add new members and everyone gets older and bigger and has different needs and desires. I'm sure I fall short in places in this book, just as I have with my own family, but I've really tried.

By the way, some of you may be wondering whether I in fact scarred my daughter for life by manipulating her into participating in her recital when she obviously didn't want to. It's been many years now, and I can state with absolute confidence that I don't think so. Sara whined and clung to me more than usual the next couple days, but that's typical for many preschool-

ers after any stressful event, and she soon resumed her usual daily activities of being a dog, playing with miniatures under the coffee table, and pottering about in the mud by the slide. And the next fall when Rachel asked Sara if she wanted to sign up for ballet again, I was prepared to say, “No way unless you threaten me with a Barney and Friends marathon,” but Sara said, “Sure, and let’s take tap-dancing class too.” And she performed in those recitals with only her normal last-minute reluctance rather than full-blown panic attacks; I didn’t even have to mention hot-fudge sauce. Although Sara gave up dance after that year (probably wisely), since then she’s performed in many plays, programs, and band recitals, and she’s not fazed a bit by public speaking. Over the years, it’s gotten easier and easier for my slow-to-warm up daughter to try other new experiences, even all by herself. And not only has she not been arrested for underage drinking or surprised us with a teen pregnancy, she’s amazingly responsible and undertakes all kinds of challenges without prompting or nagging. Most importantly, though, she would never dream of talking on the phone when a text would suffice. *Phew.*

CHAPTER ONE

It's a "Big" Deal!

* * *

Saying Ta-Ta to Cribs, Diapers, Bottles, and Other "Little Guy" Stuff

Your baby is growing up! Giving up the crib and pacifiers, learning to use the potty, sometimes managing to ask for a snack in something other than a whiny voice! Maybe even learning to put on a sock by herself or to break only three knickknacks when she "helps" you dust!

So, do you want champagne? Or Kleenex?

Me, I usually needed both. For as proud as I was to see my tyke reach a milestone like giving up diapers, I felt wistful too, watching her shed her snuggly, innocent baby persona along with the Pampers. And replacing it with a do-it-myself, swaggering, big-kid one that liked to say things like, "You're an old poopy butt! Ha, ha, ha, HA!" (Plus, for a while there, changing diapers seemed a heck of a lot more appealing than mopping up pee puddles from the living room rug. Also, the stiff back I got from all that bending over made me notice that I was getting older too...)

All this is by way of saying that change, even when welcome, is hard. For you, for your kid, for the carpet. And that's why this chapter not only has lots of practical ideas for nudging your kid toward more mature behaviors, but also has oodles of suggestions for dealing with the immature reactions that inevitably accompany the shift. And tips for things like cleaning the urine

out of the carpet so the dog doesn't think, "Hey! I guess we're doing our business indoors now!"

Because I'm a trained Ph.D. psychologist, I know all the proper ways to potty train a toddler or help him substitute more mature comforting behaviors for his Nuk addiction. Luckily for you, though, my three kids have also taught me totally incorrect (but really effective) ways to accomplish these same tasks. You can pick whichever approach you prefer. And then you can try one of the ones that really works and know you at least tried to do it right.

Now that I've got you all freaked out about this growing-up business, I'm going to advise you to relax and enjoy it. Because really, life with kids just gets better and better (except for when they're thirteen). Babies are sweet and toddlers adorable—but preschoolers are so competent! Sort of! And funny as the dickens. And even though at times their growing maturity won't seem worth the trade-offs (like the loss of a certain baby cuteness or the rise of back talk), on the whole your kids will only get more interesting and capable as they grow. As the poet Robert Browning once said, "The best is yet to be."

Out of the Crib and into the . . .

* * *

Strategies for a Smooth Move to a Big Bed

Usually kids move to a big bed sometime between the ages of one and a half to three and a half; two is most common. The standard expert advice is "Don't switch your toddler from a crib to The Big Bed during any other significant changes or stresses in his life." If you follow this advice, though, your kid will be crammed into a crib until he is seven or eight years old, because the odds of finding a window of calm with a toddler or preschooler range from slim to none. So ignore that, and try some of these tips that might make the shift easier, even during a less-than-ideal period.

That said, there are definite times *not* to move your child. Make sure that there aren't other *major* changes in the works: avoid making this shift

when you're weaning, potty training, moving, or throwing away all his pacifiers in a sleep-deprived fit. You should also be sure to make the big move at least eight weeks before or after the birth of a new baby, so your child doesn't resent the baby for booting him out of his crib—but don't worry, he'll find plenty of other things to resent the baby for.

Of course, in real life, timing is often governed by practical issues, like the person you borrowed the crib from is having another baby and is starting to drop pointed hints about the due date. Or Houdini Jr. is risking a fractured skull nightly despite your having lowered the mattress as far as it goes and removed every item thicker than a sheet. The bottom line is that you'll just have to pick a relatively good time, take the plunge, and be prepared for some rough nights.

Sell the Idea

With some kids, you won't have to push at all—they can't wait to be grown up. Others need a little coaxing—or a good sales pitch. Peer pressure is always effective—a month or so before you switch, visit cool big kids and get them to show off their prized beds.

Offer some enticements and let your kid be involved. Go look at sheets together. Though most kids have zero interest in shopping for mattresses and headboards, linens are another matter. This is the time to be completely tacky—check out the options with licensed cartoon characters. Once your little guy has made his selection, make a big show of putting the new linens away “until he's big enough for a bed.” When the time comes to make the switch, have your child help with the assembly and disassembly process. Getting to use real tools is enough incentive for many kids to tolerate *any* change! If your child is reluctant to “get big” and you need him to move, try linking the switch to some other big-person privilege (like staying up later) or big-person possession (like, say, your broken calculator or the ratty pocketbook he covets).

Don't forget to sell the idea to *yourself*. For me, the shift to a big bed, more than changes like walking or even weaning, marked the transition from baby to big kid. And losing your baby is bound to be bittersweet. Maybe you need a little consolation prize too! I recommend chocolate, which cures just about anything.

Ease into the Change

A gradual change is easier for many kids than an abrupt switch. There are a few different strategies you can employ to make the change at a pace that will be easier for your child.

At first, have him just sleep on his crib mattress on the floor. It will feel and smell familiar, and your little guy won't get hurt if he rolls off.

When he's ready to move to a big-boy bed, consider buying a small-size toddler bed, which uses a crib mattress, has low sides, and feels crib-cozy. Put the bed in the same spot as the crib, and continue to use the same quilt, stuffed animals, and other accessories in the new bed for a while. Wait to do major redecorating until after your child is used to the switch.

Alternately, you can set up the bed and leave the crib up too. Use the bed for naps, and the crib for night. Or do the bedtime routine—stories, kisses, water, etc.—in the big bed and transfer your child to the crib for sleeping. If you're going to adjust your bedtime routine, do it well before you take the crib down.

Now the only problem you have to worry about is that your kid can get *out* of his bed whenever he wants to...

Wander-Unlusting and Fall-Proofing

* * *

Tips for Helping Your Preschooler Stay in Bed— Without Ropes or Magic

When my daughter Sara was two, I woke every night about 3:00 AM with a creepy feeling of being watched. Which I was—by Sara. She'd stand inches away, breathing heavily and staring at my face. A few weeks into this routine, Sara decided she had two mommies: the nice Day Mommy and the mean Night Mommy (though as more sleepless nights passed, the mean Night Mommy started to displace the nice Day one too).

Fortunately, the Good Sleep Chart described below turned out to be the cure for both our night terrors. It might work for your wanderer, too, but in case she has other tastes or issues, I'm offering a variety of stay-put tactics.

Bed Glue

Childproof your sleeper's room, and the rest of the house, in case she wanders at night. Gate off stairways, attach bookcases to the wall, and put up night-lights for the path to the bathroom. Also, close the door after your child falls asleep (if she objects while she's awake), as a fire-safety precaution. Then you can use one or more of these strategies to keep your child in her bed.

* *Teach the new rules.* It may seem obvious, but some kids get up simply because now they can—and they don't realize they aren't supposed to.

* *Make a sign.* Have your kid help you make a *big* sign that says something like "Stay in bed until morning" and hang it where she can see it from bed. (You might want to add the phrase "unless you have to go potty or barf.") Older toddlers are strong respecters of official signs even though they can't read them.

* *Create a good-sleep chart.* Charts and stickers work great with many toddler problems. Vary the incentive to fit your child, and be careful to keep rewards *small* and fairly easy to earn at first.

* *Lock her in—for pretend.* Sprinkle "fairy dust" across her threshold, telling her that it will keep her safe and happy *in her room* until morning, or "lock" a pretend gate across her corral. Or conjure up whatever barrier fits her current imagination passion. Some kids will prefer to pretend lock you *out!* (Boost this strategy by giving your child a real key.)

* *Lock her in—for real.* With a baby gate. If your child is constantly getting up, let her know the consequence will be a gate across her door (two-high if necessary). Just make sure you can hear her if she needs you during the night.

* *Provide a restroom pass.* Give your child a "ticket" she can use to go to the bathroom or if she feels sick. If she gets up, wordlessly collect her ticket and take her to the potty and then back to bed. (With or without a bathroom pass, the silent return method is *very* effective—just keep doing it, calmly.) If she gets up for another reason, give her another "ticket"—with a fine of no TV or something the next day.

* *Let her get up!* Just make the rule that she must stay *in* her (childproofed) room and be quiet. If she falls asleep on the floor, so be it.

Fall-Proofing

LITERATURE LINKS



Aside from the kind of books featuring licensed characters like Barbie or Elmo, there are surprisingly few books about giving up cribs. Try *MY OWN BIG BED* by Anna Grossnickle Hines for a choice that has literary merit. And kids who are Berenstain Bear fans will like *MY NEW BED* by Stan and Jan Berenstain.

If your kid is more the *fall-out-of-bed* than the *climb-out-of-bed* type, you'll need some special safety precautions. Although using portable bed rails is a popular approach, I think that option has a number of drawbacks. First, the rails have to be installed correctly and then checked *every night* (and nap-time) to make sure they haven't loosened enough to pose an entrapment or strangulation hazard (and you should also monitor safety recalls religiously). Second, using them just delays your child's learning how to stay in bed; eventually, you'll have to go through that step anyhow. My preference is a simple and free approach: just put the new mattress on the floor at first (she won't get hurt if she does roll off), and add the frame and box springs later once she's become a champion in-bed sleeper.

When she's ready to sleep in her big bed, position it with the headboard against the wall, well away from windows and other hazards. Place pillows, cushions, or the old crib mattress on the floor next to the bed to soften her landing in case she does fall. You can also stuff a rolled-up towel or blanket under the fitted sheet to create a hard-to-roll-over hill along the edge of the bed. Alternately try a long "body pillow" or a million stuffed animals lined up along the open edge. Or, if she doesn't object, tuck her in nice and *tightly*.

Daytime training can also help minimize night falling. While your child's awake, get her well acquainted with the size and boundaries of her bed. Have her roll around the whole bed, noticing how it feels whenever she gets near the edge. (Make it a fun game by chanting the "There were three in the bed and the little one said, *Roll over, roll over!*" rhyme, and having all the stuffed animals fall out until just your child remains.) We also played this game whenever we traveled and slept in new beds.

Some people find a bigger bed does the trick; you can always get your child a full or queen-size bed. There are some drawbacks to this approach: it can be expensive; it still may not work; and you can't usually get cute kid bedding. On the plus side, it gives you a little more space when you're cuddling at night or reading stories (and if, say, you do doze off in the process, you're less likely to fall out yourself!)

Ready or Not, Here I Go!

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A Readiness Checklist for Potty Training

You can toilet train with *much* less fussing by everyone if you start it when your child is ready. Which brings us to the tricky question: how can you tell if the kid is ready? Let me count the ways! But first, a few notes on the whole process.

The Big Picture

Parents today mostly train their kids between the ages of two and three and a half. A few start as early as eighteen months or as late as four years old. Keep in mind (and this was recently confirmed in a large study) that *the earlier you start, the longer training takes*. On the other hand, if you wait too late (toward four), your kid may encounter teasing or develop a rebellious attitude about the whole process. In general, girls are ready sooner than boys, and most kids are trained during the day long before they achieve night control. One more note: age of training is *not* related to intelligence—and they don't ask about it on college applications, not even for Yale.

The Readiness List

Here are all the types of readiness you'll want to consider in deciding when to start. Almost no child will ready in all these ways at once, but the more ways everyone's ready, the easier training will be.

* *Physical readiness.* Is your child staying dry for several hours? Does he *notice* the sensation of a full bladder or the need to poop? (You'll be able to tell by signs like doing the pee dance, or making a funny face before he poops.) Also, can he *hold* his pee or poop, at least for a minute or so, after he feels the urge to go?

* *Language ability.* Can your child tell you in words or gestures that he needs to go? Does he understand related words, like toilet, underwear, flush, before (as in "Tell me *before* you have to go"), and, for boys, the all-important "aim"? Also, can he understand and follow simple directions? After training dozens of kids as a parent and day-care teacher, I'm convinced that language development *strongly* influences how easy it is to potty train.

* *Emotional readiness.* Is your kid out of the "Terrible Twos" and able to be cooperative? (Despite the name "Terrible Twos," most kids have stopped being reflexively oppositional by age two and a half, making it a good age to start.) Can he handle making mistakes or having his play interrupted? Also is your kid eager to be "big" like you or Superman or other cool potty-trained role models? Finally, if your kid is not preoccupied with other stresses in his life, it will be easier for him to devote the necessary energy and concentration to succeed.

* *Self-help skills.* Can your child can pull his own pants down and up, wash his hands without help, and get on and off a potty or the big toilet alone?

* *Equipment readiness.* Do you have a little potty? (I recommend a sturdy basic one that your child can empty himself—and skip the little guard things for boys; they're *dangerous* if you get what I mean.) Another option is a portable seat that fits on the big toilet, but most little guys feel less secure with this arrangement. You'll also need a

stool for hand washing, stuff for cleaning up accidents (try the pet accident cleaners for carpets and upholstery), a rubber sheet for the mattress, and incentives of some sort (see suggestions on page 15).

* *Wardrobe preparedness.* I think nothing is cuter than a two-year-old in overalls—but they are a *big* mistake during training. So are one-piece ballerina outfits—one of my friends had a serious potty-training setback after her mother-in-law gave her daughter an all-in-one tutu thing that the kid insisted on wearing 24-7. Aim for easy-on, easy-off clothes with elastic waists. I'll also warn you that skirts end up in the stream pretty regularly. The main requirement of course is *LOADS* of underpants (at least ten pair). (See other underpants tips on pages 19–21.)

* *Family readiness.* Can an adult at home spend a *lot* of time over the next two or three weeks focusing on the process? And does that adult have reserves of energy, patience, and laundry-doing ability? Again, you'll want to avoid periods when the family is distracted by other big issues, like new babies, moving, or marital strife. Finally, try to complete potty training *before* your expensive new carpeting is installed.

Tinklers Anonymous

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A Twelve-Step Program for Becoming Clean and Dry

There is no one foolproof approach to training your child. This version borrows bits and pieces from methods recommended by a range of experts. If it doesn't work, or just doesn't seem right for your kid, check out the "innovative" methods that follow.

Step 1: Show . . .

When your child shows some signs of readiness, start inviting her into the bathroom with you. Let her watch what you're doing and ask you embarrassing questions (which you should answer). Or, better yet, find a slightly older sibling or peer to model the process.

Step 2: ...and Tell!

Talk about what you are doing, from noticing you need to go and holding your pee to pulling your pants back up and washing your hands. Make sure you introduce all necessary vocabulary.

Step 3: Introduce Mr. Potty

After a couple of weeks, get the potty out and set it up in the bathroom. (Some parents put it in other rooms, but I think that just confuses the issue at this point.) Let your child sit on it, fully clothed, if she wants to. Talk about what it's for.

Step 4: Read All about It!

Casually add books about potties, poop, making mistakes, growing up, and so on to your child's pile of bedtime and snuggletime books. Good ones to try: EVERYONE POOPS by Taro Gomi (a kid favorite), ONCE UPON A POTTY by Alona Frankel (different versions for boys and girls), and WHAT DO YOU DO WITH A POTTY? by Marianne Borgardt (a cool pop-up book).

Step 5: Call Attention to Your Child's Plumbing and Products

While you're changing her, start commenting on the fact that she has peed or pooped, and note that soon she'll be big enough to make her pee or poop go in the potty instead of her diaper. Talk about how, where, and why these products come out of her. If you notice her doing the pee dance or showing other signs of needing to go, comment on these too, and praise her for getting big and noticing when she's about to go.

Step 6: Have Teddy Demonstrate

This step can be powerful, especially if you don't have access to other kid models. Have one of your kid's favorite stuffed animals or dolls sit on the potty. Then "pretend" together to have him pee or poop. (You might have your child pour water colored yellow with food coloring or dump some brown clay into the potty.) Then make a *moderate* fuss over Teddy. "Good job Teddy! You peed in the pot! Here's a sticker."

Step 7: Get Lucky!

If your child tends to go poop about the same time every day, invite her to sit on the potty at that time to “see if her poop comes out.” Otherwise, offer her a chance to try to pee when she wakes up dry from a nap or has gone a couple of hours with a dry diaper. Give your child some time to be successful, but don't force her to sit on the potty. Some kids like to look at books or blow bubbles while they wait. Praise your kid for trying, even if nothing happens. If she does succeed, show her how proud you are—but don't go overboard. And let her help dump the pee or poop into the toilet (though she may make a bit of a mess). Wait to flush if the noise frightens her.

Step 8: Be Suggestive

Make a few tinkle sounds (e.g., *pssss*, *pssss*, *pssss*) when your child is sitting on the potty, or run the faucet on a low stream. You might laugh or feel silly—but a recent study shows this old grandma trick not only starts the flow, but it's also linked to lower incidence of urinary tract infections!

Step 9: Have a Go at the Real Thing

After your child has experienced a potty success or two, ask her if she'd like to try wearing underpants and using the potty. If she balks, back off, and ask again in a few days or so. But if she is interested, help her into those new pants!

Step 10: Remind—But Don't Nag

This is a fine line. I suggest the technique used in many childcare settings—a frequent schedule. Every hour or hour and a half, everyone (that means you too) treks to the bathroom to try. If nothing happens, so be it. Also stay alert for obvious signs, like the pee dance, holding herself, being restless, etc.—and whisk her off to try. Remind her she can return to making booger pies (or whatever she's doing) in a minute.

Step 11: Be Cool about Accidents

And hot about success! Remember that full training can take six months or more. It's very common for kids to start having accidents again after several weeks of seeming to have the hang of it. Just remind your child that learning new things takes time, and reassure her (and yourself) that she'll have the hang of it again soon.

Step 12: Night Train

If your child is normally dry in the morning, this step will be easy—but I'd still wait *at least* a month or two after day training to start, because the effort of staying dry all day is enough to make many kids *start* wetting the bed. When you're ready to try, put a protective sheet on the mattress and adjust your child's routine to increase success: reduce fluid intake in the evening, take her to go potty just before bed, and put her to sleep in thin underpants (or nothing at all). You might also start with the potty in her room next to the bed. If she does wake up needing to go, it's right there. Be matter-of-fact about accidents, and let her sleep on a sleeping bag if she does have one. Pile the wet linens in a laundry basket and deal with them in the morning.

Potty Games

* * *

Activities to Encourage Readiness and Cooperation

These games, which may *seem* to have nothing to do with peeing or pooping, can nonetheless help your child get ready—or ease issues that have cropped up in the process.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

Imitation games help kids develop the habit of watching models and copying what they do, including peeing in the toilet. Say, “Hey little monkey, can you do this?” and perform a simple action like hooting or jumping

up and down. Once your child can copy simple actions, increase the difficulty by stringing together a chain of several actions or having him copy complex actions like putting together a puzzle. If your child prefers kitty cats to monkeys, play Copy Cats instead. Other good games are Follow the Leader and Simon Says, Jr. (Usual game but you just say Simon Says every time—no tricking).

Wait, Wait, Go!

This game introduces both necessary vocabulary and your child's ability to postpone an urge. You can play it many ways. Start a race by saying, "Wait... wait... wait... GO!" A similar game is "Hold It... Let Go!" Sit on the floor while you and your child tug on opposite ends of a thick rope or hula hoop. When you say "Let go!" she drops her end—and you fall over. Very funny.

Before, After

Teach this important vocabulary in a playful way. Give your child silly commands, emphasizing the key word, e.g., "*Before* you stick out your tongue, clap your hands," or "Flap like a chicken *after* you give me a kiss." Let your child give you silly commands too.

Oops! That's Okay!

Oops games are great for kids who are easily frustrated or get upset when they make mistakes. Have your child do something like build a block tower or make a Play-Doh sculpture, then say, "Oops!" and have him knock it down or squash it *himself*. Follow up with, "That's okay! Try, try again!" (Make sure that your child knows he should only wreck or squash his own constructions.)

What a Mess!

Definitely, definitely increase opportunities for messy play and water play when you are training your child. (I guess Freud had to be right about something.) Try finger-painting on a cookie sheet with pudding or shaving

cream; “cooking” in the sandbox; making mud pies from “clean” potting soil; pouring soapy, bubbly water from container to container in the sink or tub; and “messing about” with small smooth objects like buttons, coins, or dried beans. (Watch to make sure they don’t go in mouths or ears or up noses.) Some kids like to smash graham crackers to make a crumb piecrust (Let them use a toy truck to run over crackers sealed in a heavy-duty zipper bag—that’s fun.). Some like to squish dough (Play-Doh or the real thing). Anything that involves dumping and filling is good too.

Yes Sir, That’s My Baby!

A little extra babying is soothing during this difficult transition and gives your child a chance to express his ambivalence about growing up. Pretend to change his diapers, feed him from a bottle, hold him and rock him, and generally give him a little TLC. Your child might also like a turn to treat you like a baby and showcase how grown up he is now.

Control Freaks

Games that let your child control you may release any tension that builds up between you during the training process. My kids liked playing Mom Robot, where they “pushed my buttons” (e.g., nose, belly button, elbow) to make me do silly things like stick out my tongue, cross my eyes, or quack like a robo-duck. Try also Simon Says, Mother May I?, and similar commanding games.

Peeing for Fun and Profit

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Effective Potty-Training Incentives

Think about it. What’s in potty training for the kid? Not much—most toddlers and preschoolers are content to keep doing their business in their diapers and let you take care of the mess. Fortunately, little kids like to please their parents and be big like them—and those things will be their main incentive. But sometimes, a more concrete reward acts as a reminder

or cements a child's resolve and keeps her trying in the face of frustration, just as a reward or chart can help you acquire a new habit. Here is a menu of some popular incentives—pick one that suits your values and your kid's preferences.

Token Rewards

Small things can have a big impact when you choose them well and use them wisely; big rewards wind up feeling like a bribe or too much pressure, and so are likely to backfire in a power struggle. Increase your child's sense of involvement and control by letting her choose between two acceptable options, and letting her be in charge of obtaining/using the reward—such as reaching in a jar to pull out a coupon or pasting the sticker where she chooses on her clothes or a chart.

* *Stickers.* They're cheap, readily available, and come in an infinite variety, so you're bound to find some that please your child.

* *Money in the bank.* Most kids enjoy making a deposit in a piggy bank after they've made one in the potty. Our favorite bank for this purpose was one that looked like a toilet—and made flushing sounds as the penny swirled down the drain. (You can find these at stores like Spencer's Gifts or on eBay.)

* *Nibbles.* I know nutritionists are always warning parents not to use food as rewards, but, well, treats *work*. Just keep the reward small and unavailable at other times. And brush teeth a lot. My kids loved M&Ms, but other tiny candies or snacks work too.

* *Coupons.* She can use them for things like one extra story or ten more minutes at the playground.

* *Tokens toward a (slightly) bigger prize.* When your kid reaches the goal, celebrate with a moderate treat, like a new book, a small toy, or lunch at a fast-food restaurant.

Symbols of Pride

When your child has a success, she may want to make sure everyone knows about it. She can try one of these ways to communicate the big news.

* *Brag button.* Make—or get a copy store to make—a button that says, “I peed in the potty today!” and let your child choose to wear it after a successful pit stop.

* *A ribbon—or a trophy.* It can be a powerful incentive, especially for a child with older siblings who garner sports awards.

* *Announcements.* No, not fancy engraved ones. But let your child call Mommy or Daddy at work, Grandma, Aunt Sal, and her best friend who’s already trained—if she’s eager to do so.

* *Have a pee party!* Just an informal get-together with a couple of trained buddies or a cake and balloons with the family. Cap off the party with a reading of *THE DUMB BUNNIES* by Sue Denim (Goldilocks gets flushed down the merry toilet—very funny). Don’t forget a potty break to prevent accidents while the cake is being cut.

Big-Kid Privileges

Growing up is a package deal, with both increasing demands and emerging opportunities. Underscoring the link between the big-kid *responsibility* of using the toilet with some big-kid *privilege* may help with a kid who wants the advantages of being a big guy without actually doing any of the work. This approach works best if you make sure the privilege is something your child really wants.

* *Wearing a cape.* Supergirl is potty-trained after all. Or maybe your kid prefers a tiara or a briefcase—just choose something off-limits to *little* kids. Purchase the desired item, and let your child know she can have it once she’s trained like her role model.

* *A big-people-only outing.* Take her on a trip alone with one parent to a movie, a sporting event, a meal at a restaurant with waiters and tablecloths (during an off-peak time, please), a fishing expedition, or something else exciting that only potty-trained guys can do.

Peer Pressure

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Other "Different" Approaches to Training

These are methods you're unlikely to find in traditional childcare manuals. Some of them would even earn me a frowny face from various child-development experts. But all are tried-and-true and if other ideas haven't worked for your child, you *probably* won't scar him for life with these.

Peer Pressure

This was the method that trained my first child—though as a trained psychologist I don't exactly *endorse* it because I hate it when people give me those frowny faces. But I must say it worked! My first child was potty-trained at two, *just weeks after the birth of his little brother*. How? Well, his visiting four-year-old cousin Scott announced scornfully that only *babies* wore diapers. That afternoon, Kyle asked for big-boy pants. I told him he'd have to pee and poop in the potty if he had big-boy pants. He gave me a withering look and said, "I *know*." And that was that. Since then I've heard numerous similar stories. It's not a method you can orchestrate, but if it happens, great!

Peer Tutoring

This is similar, but not *quite* so coercive. Most toddlers worship big kids and may well cooperate better with them than with you. You may be able to enlist an older sibling or friend to help by demonstrating and encouraging.

My second child had zero interest in even sitting on the potty, despite being offered every shade of M&M ever made. Then one day while I was trying to coax him to give it the old college try, his older brother said, "I want an M&M!"

"Okay," I answered, "you can have an M&M if you can get Eric to sit on the pot." Well, Kyle not only convinced Eric to sit on the potty, he got him to pee! We were all thrilled—and Kyle took over potty training, for which

he charged us the better part of a bag of M&Ms. (And in a rare burst of generosity, he shared some with his little brother!) With my third child, I just offered candy to the older two as soon as I thought she was ready—and she was trained within days.

The IKEA Method

This was the other key component to training my daughter. When my kids were little, IKEA, the Swedish home furnishings place, was one of the first places to offer a playroom for kids while their parents shopped. The kicker was that only potty-trained kids could stay there. My daughter was so anxious to hang out with her brothers in the ball area instead of being dragged to look at bookcases with us that she announced she was ready to be potty-trained just before her second birthday. Be careful—this method only works when the push (so to speak) comes from the kid, not from you, and when he is in fact ready to be trained.

Group Training Sessions

If your child is in daycare or one of those tolerant preschools that accepts untrained kids, you may not have to do any actual teaching yourself—the group may take care of it. When I taught toddler daycare, we'd invite the kids who were untrained but ready to come along when the trained kids went potty, and soon they'd be trained too. We simply switched them from diapers after they'd used the potty successfully for several days.

Summer Training Camp

Lots of parents swear by this method, which is easier on the carpets—and often on stores of patience as well. Introduce the potty—outside. Then let your kid wander around *au naturel*. When he pees, as he surely will, suggest that he try doing it on the potty next time. For some reason, being naked seems to make it easier for kids to be aware of their urges, and it eliminates the hassles associated with getting pants pulled down in time.

Just Add Water—The One-Day Method

This technique was popular in the 1970s, following the publication of *TOILET TRAINING IN LESS THAN A DAY* by Nathan Azrin. (It's still in print and

apparently still selling well.) The basic idea is that you spend one day trapped in the kitchen forcing liquids on the kid and trying out the potty until he “gets it.” It uses many of the steps I recommend (using a doll to demonstrate, getting “lucky,” and guiding the child through all the extra steps of the process, like pulling up pants), just in a compressed time frame. I know people who have used this method when they were desperate (e.g., had their kid enrolled in a preschool that only took trained kids—and it was starting in two days and their kid had zero interest in the whole matter). It worked well for them. I also know some parents who tried it and hated it. It feels strict and coercive to me, and, despite the title, it may actually involve more than one really intense day.

Sweetie, There's a Reason It's Called "UNDERwear"

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Panty Problems and Solutions

One of my friends had what I thought was an unusual potty-training problem with her son: he insisted on wearing his underwear back-to-front—and *over* his pants. She finally figured out the issue was twofold: 1) he wanted to see the picture on his underpants, and 2) he wanted all his buddies to know that he'd taken the big step out of diapers. Since then, I've discovered this issue is hardly rare. And there are all those other panty problems too—like what kind to use, etc. So here are some common problems and possible solutions.

The Picture Problem

Boys' underpants often have the bigger, more interesting cartoon picture on the back, a fact that many boys find distressing. Since almost no two-year-olds can work the fly anyway, I say go ahead and let the boys wear their pants backward. For kids who need to see the picture outside their clothes, why not let them wear a boring plain pair *under* their clothes, and the fancy ones on top? Their friends will only occasionally tease them about

it when they are teenagers—my twenty-year-old rarely brings up the under-wear-on-the-outside thing to his friend anymore.

Disposables Versus Training Pants Versus Underpants

What should your kid wear during the training process? Forget training pants. They're expensive, tricky to operate, and not absorbent enough to be worth the bother. As for expensive disposables, save them for times when you won't be able to get to a potty quickly. Regular underpants have many advantages: 1) they're cheaper, 2) they're easier to pull up and down, 3) kids can choose from a zillion designs, 4) they don't contribute to land-fill problems, 5) starting out in them eliminates another transition you'll have to make eventually, and most importantly, 6) *they're horribly uncomfortable when they get wet*. Why, you might ask, is this an advantage? Because feeling uncomfortable is one of the best motivators for a kid to use the potty! In my experience, kids who wear disposables take *much* longer to finish training.

Unsuitable Choices

One of my kids preferred to wear a ratty pair of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles underwear that had accidentally been included in a box of hand-me-down clothes. I confess I gave up and let him wear them almost daily (as often as they were reasonably clean) until they finally fell apart altogether. And that's the advice I'll give for most of the weird choices kids make. There are enough control battles inherent in toilet training that you don't have to go looking for more fights. Most kids will come around to reasonable choices before long.

The Part-Time Panty Guy

Some kids prefer to put diapers (or disposables) back on for certain activities (including pooping). As long as it's the kid's choice to wear a diaper, I see no harm in it. (You might even gently suggest the option of wearing a diaper during certain activities, such as when you're out shopping, if your child routinely has accidents then—just don't force him). Most kids choose to wear underpants full-time as they get more comfortable with the whole process.

Nightwear

If your child is not yet trained at night, feel free to keep her in a diaper or disposables until she's ready to try. Explain that it's hard for her to notice that she needs to go when she's asleep, and that her body will be able to hold her pee longer as she gets older. That's all the reassurance most kids need. If you're trying to night-train, though, I recommend either regular under-pants or nothing at all (see page 12).

Remedial Potty Class

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Coping with Refusal, Regression, and Other Problems

Don't panic if your three-and-a-half-year-old covers her ears when you even mention the "P" words. Or if your previously trained child is suddenly having accidents every time you leave the house. Problems like these are common—and surmountable.

Refusal

Some kids are more than ready physically, but flat out refuse to try. Most of the time, backing off and waiting a bit before broaching the topic again is the best approach. But if you feel it's absolutely time—you can't bear to change one more diaper or, as happened to one of my patients, you've run out of diapers and money but not time until your next paycheck try one or all of these approaches:

* *Make wearing diapers a nuisance.* Many kids don't like the hassles and interruptions that going potty entails. The solution? Make wearing diapers at least as inconvenient! Interrupt your child's play to change his diaper, change him every hour and a half whether he's dry or not, and make him go in the bathroom to wash his hands after you change him—all the things that would happen if he were getting trained. Store the diapers in a distant spot, and make him fetch them—in short, anything you can think of to make going potty seem at least as easy as wearing diapers.

* *Preserve the advantages of diaper changes.* Some kids don't want to give up the warm interactions that are part of getting changed. Make sure you continue to play tickle games, give hugs and kisses, or incorporate whatever rituals are part of your child's diapering routines during toilet time.

* *Make using the potty worth his while.* This approach is only for those emergency situations—like you just can't afford diapers anymore—because it involves enough pressure to endanger the real goal of toilet training, which is having your child decide to control his own body. Choose a powerful incentive. You might have to go out on a limb here—my patient used gum, which her older son didn't get until he was four. Place the incentive where your kid can see but not reach it. When he asks for it, remind him he can have it once he starts using the potty.

* *Set a date.* Some kids like the structure of a timetable. Count down the days until it's time for underpants and the potty. Just be willing to be flexible if the big day arrives and he's clearly not ready after all.

* *Find a training partner.* Everything is more fun with a friend! If a neighbor's child is ready to train, let the kids spend a few days together focused on potty activities. Start with a day of training their teddies, reading books, watching videos, etc. Then take turns hosting the trainees.

Regression

Many kids regress. Sometimes they're just tired of the hassle, but often there's another cause. Has anything else changed in your child's life? Visitors? Holidays? Has he been sick or had his schedule disrupted? Time plus a little TLC will usually take care of the problem. Other options:

* *Reassure him.* Some kids get so stressed out by the training itself that it starts to interfere with their skills. Normalize the accidents ("Everyone has them!"), tell stories about when you or other important people in your child's life had accidents (make up stories if necessary), and calmly predict that he'll be back on track soon.

* *Increase structure.* Offer a new incentive, resume a reminding schedule, make sure your child visits the potty to “try,” have him clean up after an accident (in case he’s just avoiding the hassle aspect), and play some of the potty games on pages 12–14.

Miscellaneous Problems

Your child may experience one or more of these common problems.

* *Fear of flushing.* If the noise or scariness of stuff disappearing down the drain bothers your child, allow him to leave the room before you flush.

* *Situational accidents.* Does your child always have accidents in certain situations, such as at a friend’s house or while watching TV? Some kids feel uncomfortable using unfamiliar potties or are shy about asking where the bathroom is. When you go someplace new, make a point of taking your child in to use the potty before he starts playing so he can see where it is and get used to it. Also, monitor kids engrossed in activities for signs that they need to go, like fidgeting, holding themselves, and irritability.

* *Helplessness—or excessive independence.* Some kids will use the potty—as long as you do all the real work, like remembering, pulling their pants down and up, wiping them, etc. (Not to be sexist, but this tends to be a male problem.) You can gradually build some independence by picking *one* problem behavior *that you are sure your child really can perform himself* and using an incentive plan to encourage the skill. See also pages 28–29 for more tips on handling dependence.

* *Bed-wetting.* It’s incredibly common and mostly not under your child’s control. I wouldn’t worry about it too much until the end of the preschool years, and then only if it bothers your child. Then you might want to talk to your child’s pediatrician about tactics like mattress alarms. Meanwhile, limit drinks before bed, take your child to pee before you turn in, and arrange things for easy changes (like having a laundry basket and a sleeping bag handy). Or just convince your child to wear Pull-Ups at night.

There's a Sucker Reformed Every Minute

* * *

Helping Your Child (and You) Give Up Bottles, Pacifiers, Thumbs, and Other Habits That Suck

There are good reasons to help a preschooler wean from whatever she sucks on. Sucking may harm her teeth (although this is less true for orthodontic pacifiers), interfere with speech and language development, make her seem like a baby to her peers, delay learning more mature ways to soothe or occupy herself, and become linked to other health or behavioral problems. For example, prolonged use of bottles is associated with higher risk of obesity, and thumb and pacifier sucking tend to be circularly linked to TV watching. These tips may ease the transition:

The Basics

Before you get started breaking bad habits, think about these key points.

- * *Involve your child.* One of the great things about preschoolers is you can reason with them—sort of. Tell them why you're weaning them and discuss ways to offer support during the difficult time.

- * *Decide on a gradual or cold-turkey approach.* Which is best depends on your child's—and your—temperament.

- * *Provide oral and tactile substitutes.* Offer thick liquids to suck through a straw, crunchy foods, bubbles to blow, or the occasional lollipop or Popsicle. Thumb and finger suckers need things to keep their hands busy too—a short length of silky ribbon to run through their fingers, worry stones or beads, or squeeze balls.

- * *Offer other self-soothers.* Make a picture list of comforting things—like hugging, playing with water, rocking or swinging, snuggling with a blanket or stuffed animal, reading a book, playing with toys, or deep breathing.

- * *Reward success.* Simple praise may be enough. Otherwise, reward your child with special time with you, a new stuffed animal or snuggle blanket, or another relaxing object or activity.

* *Be patient and understanding.* Expect whining, clinginess, irritability, etc.

Popular Approaches

These strategies have worked well for other parents.

* *The sucking room.* Limit your child to sucking in one place (usually her room). This approach is especially useful with thumb or finger suckers. Many parents also restrict sucking to certain times, such as the Arsenic Hour (just before dinner) or naptime and bedtime.

* *Nuisance laws.* Anything you do to make sucking inconvenient or bothersome will reduce its occurrence. Try telling your child to run around the room three times or assemble a puzzle before she starts to suck, have her give you a token or ticket to suck (you can also limit the number of these she has per day), have her wear a finger puppet or mitten which she'll have to remove prior to sucking, or require her to give up some other desired treat in exchange for sucking, such as watching TV.

* *The yuck factor.* Personally, I never liked this approach, but many parents swear by it. You can dip the sucking object in something that tastes bad (e.g., pickle juice, vinegar, commercial preparations) or, snip away at a pacifier so it goes flat and doesn't work right. (Just be careful that there are no loose parts for your child to choke on.)

* *The pacifier fairy and other substitutions.* Some parents have their child put all their pacifiers under their pillow—and in the morning the child discovers that the Pacifier Fairy has replaced them with some big-kid item the kid wants. Or they may offer an open trade for some desired big-kid toy or treat.

* *The big day.* Set a date for giving up sucking. Many parents use a birthday or similar occasion for this, but I think those days usually have enough stress all on their own. Some families throw a party to mark the occasion.

* *Lost and forgotten.* “Forget” the pacifiers when you’re going some place or coming home from a vacation—and just don’t replace them. Or taper off a sucker naturally by not replacing pacifiers as they wear out or get misplaced.

* *Throwing them all away in the midst of a sleep-deprived temper tantrum.* Well, this may not be a *popular* approach, but it worked with my kid. (I’m *not* recommending this method! I’m just telling you about my bad-mommy moment so you’ll feel better if you don’t manage to be as patient and understanding as you feel you should during the withdrawal phase.)

It’s Not What You Say, but How You Say It

* * *

Strategies for Minimizing Crying, Whining, Bossiness, and Baby Talk

Following a weekend visit to our house when my kids were small, a childless friend asked if there were ever days when no one cried or whined. And that’s when I realized it had been *years* since I’d gone twenty-four hours without wishing for earplugs. Fortunately, crying decreases during the preschool years; unfortunately, it’s replaced by whining and other verbal torture techniques, like bossiness and baby talk. Minimizing—forget eliminating—these behaviors requires a multipronged attack.

Prevention: The Usual Suspects

Structured routines, consistent rules, good nutrition, calm parenting, etc., really do minimize whining and crying, as well as other problem behaviors.

Identify the Source

Likely causes include: fatigue, hunger, frustration, sensory overload, boredom, the mere existence of siblings, and pain or illness. Many kids whine when they can’t perceive or communicate what they need. Name

what your child is feeling, and then ask, "What's a *better* thing to do when you're ____ (tired, hungry, etc.)?"

Only Reward the Behavior You Like

Okay, be honest. Do you sometimes give in and buy your kid candy at the store when he whines? And do you *never* buy candy when he doesn't? Instead, offer a reward when he uses his pleasant voice.

"I Can't Understand You When You Use That Voice"

It's a little more honest to say something like, "I'll listen when you use your big-boy voice (or nice voice or whatever)," but I'm not opposed to the occasional white (or even gray) lie when dealing with kids.

"Please Use your Gila-Monster Voice"

Same technique—but with a dose of silliness to lighten the mood. Ask your child to tell you his problem with a French accent or like a robot. Or have him whisper, sing, or quack what he has to say. Almost *anything* is better than whining or baby talk.

Make the Sign of the W

Cub Scouts hold up two fingers as a signal to be quiet—and in my house, three fingers (American Sign Language for the letter *w*) means, "You're whining and I need you to stop it before I go stark raving mad and start throwing Tinkertoys everywhere."

Give Your Child More Control in His Life

Helpless people of all ages are more likely to whine. Make sure you give your child chances to make decisions (between two choices) or to do things himself as much as possible.

“A Sock for You! A Sock for Me!”

* * *

Ways to Foster Your Child’s Independence

I’ll be honest: *it is always easier to do any task yourself than to let a preschooler do it for you.* Which is why many of us fall into the bad trap of doing everything for our kids—and then being thoroughly annoyed with them when they act helpless.

Childproof and Child-Enable Your Home

Busy daycare and preschool teachers set up the physical environment to make it both safe and easy for kids to help themselves. You can too. The bare minimum you should provide: a snack shelf in the fridge and a kid-tableware drawer, drinking water in sports bottles or other dispensers your child can work herself, a cubby or basket for outdoor clothing, toy bins on low shelves clearly labeled with pictures, and a step stool in the bathroom. And you can pray your child’s clothing obsessions involve garments she can manage herself.

Teach Your Child the Skills She Needs

Preschoolers can learn to do an amazing number of things *if* you teach them, breaking down the task step by step and offering both encouragement and praise. Whenever possible, let your child work alongside you with her own equipment. It takes a lot of energy to do this teaching, and you won’t see good results for a *long* time with most skills—but it does work and it’s worth it.

Promote a Sense of Competence

Kids who feel strong, coordinated, and knowledgeable are more likely to seek independence in a variety of areas. Preschooler playground skills—climbing the ladder and sliding down; hanging from the monkey bars; throwing, catching, and kicking a ball; pedaling a tricycle or small bike; or pumping a swing—are important not only for helping your child make and

keep friends, but also for helping her feel like a capable person who can also put on her own coat or set the table. Not sure how or when to teach these skills? Watch other kids on the playground (and encourage your child to do the same) or check out websites like www.teachkidshow.com.

Job Share

Do you have a child who resists doing things she's capable of? Agree to do half the job for her—she puts on one sock and you put on the other.

Build in Extra Time

A good rule of thumb is to triple the amount of time it will take a three-year-old to do a given task herself (like putting on her own coat), and double the time for a four-year-old.

Distinguish between “Hurry Times” and “Take-Our-Time Times”

Warn your kid when it's a “hurry time” and explain that you're going to help. Just take care to provide plenty of “take-your-time” opportunities, too.

Offer Choices Often

Two is a good number of choices for most preschoolers: “Would you like to wear the stained dinosaur shirt or the torn Spiderman one?” “Pick up your toys or brush your teeth first?” “Wear your underwear on your head or on your bottom?” Choosing can be hard work for kids—use humor, clear ground rules, and an occasional break to keep kids from getting frustrated or overwhelmed.

Minimize Hovering and Smothering

All kids need to learn to take *reasonable* risks, even if it sometimes scares their parents. They also need chances to make mistakes and learn on their own. They need to feel their *own* sense of pride and accomplishment. Show your kids how to do tasks properly and safely and then back off!

Isn't Child Labor Wonderful?

* * *

Putting Your Preschooler to Work

Our family policy is “Everyone pitches in, even if some people don’t feel like it, plus their legs hurt, and the sun is in their eyes.” This rule minimizes parental resentment, sort of—and forces you to teach your kids skills they’ll need to know. It also builds family cohesiveness, since the underlying message is that everyone matters. These tips may encourage more effective and persistent work from the smallest helpers.

Have Realistic (i.e., Low) Expectations

Preschoolers cannot go into a messy room and clean it up. But they can pick up all the Barbie heads and put them in the Barbie-head bin. Other jobs a preschooler can learn to do (badly) include the following: make his own bed (use just a comforter—no top sheet), care for his own body (brush his teeth and hair, get dressed himself, wash himself, maybe wipe after using the toilet), fetch and carry unbreakable objects that are not sharp, sort and fold some laundry (e.g., socks and towels), be a cleaning or fix-it assistant (favorite jobs include anything involving spray bottles—fill his with warm water and a splash of vinegar or a dash of baking soda), prepare and clean up after a snack or simple meal (like cereal and milk, or peanut butter and crackers if you can bear the inevitable mess), set the table, wipe up spills (sort of), and perform outdoor chores like picking up sticks before you mow. Preschoolers are also good at operating the TV remote for the family, or any other job that involves pushing buttons, including yours.

Scale the Job Down

A preschooler may not be able to carry a full bag of groceries, but he’ll feel very strong lugging in one bag “filled” with a box of cereal and a carton of yogurt. Or have him scrub the hubcaps when you wash the car.

Give a Clear Job Description

Break the task down into steps, and be sure to describe what constitutes being "done" (e.g., *no* Barbie heads left on the floor, not even bald ones). The Montessori method is particularly good at breaking down almost any task from closing a drawer properly to slicing apples. See Shu-Chen Jenny Yen's Montessori Album site (http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfsjy/mts/_link.htm) and click on "Practical Life Album" for fabulous instructions for teaching your child many tasks.

Add an Appealing Title

Want your four-year-old to empty all the pockets before you do the laundry? Make him the Official Pocket Master for the family. He might like a hat or at least a badge.

Provide Cool Tools

It's much more fun to empty the wastebaskets when you're dumping them into a box that you pull around in a wagon *in the house*. Kid-sized tools are popular too. My kids loved helping me do laundry by washing one item in a dishpan with a little Woolite.

Add an Element of Fun

And, as Mary Poppins says, the job's a snap! There are a number of easy ways to up the pleasure quotient of any task. Boppy music always helps move things along. Add a dash of suspense: assign chores by pulling out a slip from a job jar. Many kids adore a competition, even if it's just to see if they can pick up all the Barbie heads before you corral all the plastic dinosaurs. Treasure hunts rarely fail. For example, you can hide small rewards, like pennies that can be discovered as a child dusts the furniture. (I learned that technique from Sydney Taylor's classic chapter book *ALL OF A KIND FAMILY*.) Or have your child work toward a small reward for himself or for the whole family.

Offer Work That Matters

Build pride and self-esteem by making sure some of your child's jobs contribute to the well-being of others. Perhaps he can earn money for a charity by completing jobs. Or have him assist when you do volunteer work. My daughter used to collate papers when I volunteered in her big brother's classroom.