



## TEACHING TOILET LEARNING: SENSITIVE SUPPORT FOR TEENS

Sooner or later, every child learns to use the toilet. Most parents realize this fact but find the thought of when and how to teach toilet learning overwhelming. Imagine how the teen parent must feel, then. Not only do teens have the usual parental worries, they also grapple with obstacles unique to their particular situation.

### Special issues with teen parents

Teen parents usually have issues related to their development and lifestyle situation that make parenting much more challenging. These factors generally affect the children in negative ways and make parenting more difficult. Some of these situations are:

- Teens are not always the primary caregiver of the children
- Teens often live at home and live a dual life as children of their parents and parents of their children

- Often, the teens' parents spend more time with the children
- Teens are often single parents and may have little or conflict-filled contact with the other parents
- Teens are in a stage of development which typically is demonstrated by risk-taking, volatile emotions and impulsivity
- Poor finances limit options for childcare, food, shelter and education
- Teens brains are not fully developed

Many teen parents attend school or work to help support themselves and their children. Good quality childcare is usually unavailable or far too expensive for typical teen parents. Often, they depend on their parents to watch their children while they are away. Given few options, teens have to hope that the available caregivers are knowledgeable and competent. On the other hand, grandparents can have a very positive influence on their grandchildren. Sometimes their role as caregiver surpasses the teens as acting parents. Conflicts can occur when teens and the caregivers, particularly grandparents liv-

ing in the same home, do not agree on child rearing and the roles they fulfill in the life of the children.

### Teen brains change and develop

During the teen years, the brain undergoes major changes. After a growth spurt in the brain between ages 10 and 13, the brain prunes and organizes neural pathways. Dramatic changes occur in the prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain is nicknamed the "CEO" of the brain because it is responsible for judgment, organization, planning and strategizing. Also, the cerebellum, in the back of the brain, changes quite a bit during the teen years. This part of the brain coordinates the thinking processes of the brain, facilitating higher thinking such as mathematics, music, philosophy, decision-making and social skills.

Teen parents have responsibilities that often seem overwhelming. The presence of their children can isolate them from their less-encumbered peers at a time in life when peer interaction is most important. Patience, forti-



tude and foresight help teen parents make good decisions about their children. These are characteristics that typically develop later in life, with the physical maturing of the brain.

## Teens face pressure to start toilet learning before their child is ready

Toilet learning is a complicated process that calls for patience from teen parents and requires physical and psychological readiness from the children. Teen parents often get messages from society that they need to push, prod, remind and manipulate their children into using the toilet. Pressure on parents to make their child conform comes from many sources:

- Parents' own wish to see their children as advanced makes them want to compete with other families
- Preschools often insist that children be "trained" before they come to school or can advance to the next level in childcare
- Other parents' advice
- Other people imply that toilet learning success is a measure of parental and child competency

Teen parents are particularly susceptible to social, personal and economic pressures. They may hear from trusted family and friends to start the toilet-learning when children really aren't ready. These people may mean well, but their guidance may be flawed due to lack of information about child development, faulty memory or a different understanding of independent toileting. Teens are characteristically unable to think into the future, when they will not need to change those diapers. Most teens are under tremendous economic pressure and hope to save money when their children are diaper-free.

## An early start in toilet learning only means that the process will take longer.

When parents start toilet teaching their children later, they will learn faster and reach the same point at the same time. Recent studies indicate that many children who begin toilet learning before 18 months are not completely successful until after age 4. By contrast, most children who start around age 2 are completely successful before their third birthdays.

## Negative effects of forcing the toilet learning issue

- Too much parental control undermines attachment between parents and children.
- Anger about toileting mistakes is a principal cause of child abuse.
- Children's feelings of self-worth may be damaged if they think their parents will be displeased about mistakes they are unable to control.
- Children who feel threatened to perform may be afraid to make efforts on their own.
- In resisting parents' demands, independent toddlers may hold back bowel movements, causing constipation.
- Parents' negative responses to their children's frequent, inevitable accidents may make them feel unable to learn.
- When parents constantly remind children to use the toilet, toddlers' only independent alternative is to refuse. This leads to defiance and its consequence- the power struggle.
- Using bribes to prompt children may make them feel that their parents lack confidence in their abilities



and motivations. They may begin to refuse to do other things unless a prize is offered.

- Rewarding children for a natural learning process can detract from their internal sense of accomplishment.
- Parental pressure can add guilt and feelings of inadequacy, but it won't change the child's developmental pattern.

## Positive effects of focusing the toilet learning issue on the child

Educators can encourage teen parents to empower their children to achieve success when the children are ready. If teen parents resist their urge to "train" and, instead, support their children's own attempts at learning, the benefits are tremendous:

- Children will feel that they are doing something for themselves.
- Children will include their bodies as part of their positive self-image.
- Children will be driven by a natural motivator—the desire to be "grown up" and to avoid the discomfort of being wet and soiled.

- Children will feel capable and confident.

## Strategies that may benefit teen parents

Toilet learning is an issue most teen parents want to talk about with their educator. Teen parents often get pressured into starting the process too early, resulting in bad experiences. Children can be made to feel like a failure for not accomplishing something that is not possible. Teen parents, like most parents, may have no idea how to teach toilet learning. Educators can help in many ways. They can offer detailed developmental information and talk about readiness signs. Also important is the educator's attitude of non-judgment. Different cultures teach toileting in different ways. Various cultural studies have found that regardless of the techniques that are used, most children can use the toilet successfully by three years of age. The child-centered approach is less frustrating for parents and children and will support, not damage, their relationship.

## What to do

- Calm anxious parents who feel pressured to hurry the toilet learning process.
- Encourage teen parents to follow accepted guidelines for readiness when introducing their children to toilet learning.
- Caution parents against becoming entangled in power struggles with their children over toilet learning.
- Remind parents of the negative effects of forcing toilet learning.
- Tell parents that toilet learning is a complicated process that takes time and mistakes before success.
- Relate the benefits of parents focusing on the children's development—rather than on their own timetable.
- Encourage teens to coordinate efforts with all caregivers in the children's life.

## How to do it

- Help teen parents identify internal and external influences and determine if these are unrealistic.
- Discuss information about readiness in the parent



handout, *Using the Potty: Easy Does It!*

- Explain that the more their children feel that the whole activity is in their own control, the less likely they are to avoid and resist it.
- Refer to the negative effects listed in (this) educator resource, *Teaching Toilet Learning: Sensitive Support For Teens*.
- Tell parents that their children have a better chance at toileting success when, at around 2 years old, they are able to go into the bathroom, manage their clothes, and get on and off the toilet by themselves.
- Each caregiver should understand the expectations for children depending on their level of competence.
- Teens should be specific with caregivers about routines, names for body parts and functions. They should never, never allow a caregiver to shout, hit or otherwise punish their children regarding toileting.

## Sources

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- Zweiback, M. (1998). *Keys to toilet training*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series.

# Using the Potty: Easy Does It!

**L**earning to use the toilet is a normal part of growing up. Your child will learn best when he is ready, willing and able. Do not rush your child. He will let you know when the time is right.

Think about all that is required when using the toilet. Your child will:

- Recognize when he needs to go to the bathroom
- Wait to go until he gets to the bathroom
- Pull pants off and on
- Get on and off of the potty
- Sit for a while on the potty
- Urinate/defecate into the toilet
- Clean self with toilet paper
- Flush
- Wash and dry hands

## When will my child be ready?

### Typically when he/she:

- Is close to 2 or 2½ years old
- Stays dry two hours at a time
- Urinates a larger amount at once instead of steady trickling through the day
- Shows you he is aware of eliminating with his words, face or body
- Wants to do what grown ups do
- Wants to do what you ask him to do
- Shows interest in toilet learning
- Pays attention
- Can follow directions
- Wants to be clean
- Pulls down pants
- Seeks privacy during a bowel movement

### How do we start?

- Teach him the words for body parts and elimination. Have others in his life use the same words around him
- Let him sit on a little potty with his clothes on at first.
- Let him watch other people, especially same sex people, use the toilet.
- Take him to the toilet after he has been dry about two hours.
- Praise him when he tries to use the potty, even if nothing happens.



### Accidents happen! What to do?

- Never, never criticize, punish or hit!
- Help him change his pants without shame.
- Tell him that everyone has accidents.
- Say, "Next time, just call for help."
- Praise him the next time he is successful.

### Don't start toilet learning because:

- Other people tell you it is time
- You are tired of changing diapers
- Diapers are getting too expensive
- You think it shows your child is smart
- You think it shows that you are not a good parent if you wait.

### Did you know?

Your child might fear the noise and swirling water when the toilet flushes. Some children wonder if they might disappear like their waste if they fall in. Tell your child that the pipes are too small for people and that only waste and toilet paper belong in the toilet.

# Tips and Techniques for Toilet Time

**Y**our child is one of a kind! Your child's temperament has an influence on how he learns to use the potty.

Think about your child and decide if he is:

**Active:** A more active child will have trouble sitting on the potty for very long. You might help by waiting until he is a little older to avoid the possible struggle. The less active child may not mind sitting for a little while.

**Rhythmic:** The rhythmic child likes to eat, urinate and sleep at the same times every day. His clues are easy to read. You will know when to place him on the potty. With a less rhythmic child, you will have to observe very carefully for any regularity. You can encourage regularity by setting up a routine and staying with it.

**Attentive:** The attentive child will focus on your directions and example. The less attentive child may not tune into your instructions. He may not read his own body's cues about when to use the toilet. This child may do better when he is a little older.

**Intense:** The very intense child is very expressive and passionate about everything. Avoid power struggles with the intense child

## Did you know?

Your temperament is also important. Remain patient, calm and kind as you teach your child how to use the toilet and stay dry. Make sure your relationship stays positive.

by working on cooperation in other areas such as mealtimes before you start on toilet learning. The less intense child will display less frustration and anger.

Your child will master toilet learning in stages. You can coach your child through these steps by doing these things:

**Stage 1:** This is the time to help encourage readiness.

- Talk about body parts and functions so that your child will know the words.
- Use positive language when discussing the topic of toileting.
- Allow the child to see others important in his life use the bathroom, particularly those of the same-sex.
- Watch for readiness signs and encourage those behaviors without pressuring the child.
- Allow plenty of time for your child to explore the bathroom, including the toilet paper and new potty chair, with your supervision.

**Stage 2:** At this point, your child is beginning to eliminate on a toilet.

- Establish routines based on your child's habits. If you notice a time when he usually has a bowel movement, for instance, have him sit just before that time and talk to him in positive words about using the toilet.
- Dress your child in pants that are easy for him to pull off.



- Provide a potty chair or an adapter for the toilet with a stool so your child can sit easily.
- Gradually add more opportunities for your child to use the toilet as part of the daily routine.

**Stage 3:** Your child is able to use the toilet and is becoming independent.

- Accidents will happen, especially when the routine changes or your child is upset or sick. Be patient and calm.
- Usually, children learn to stay dry during the day but still need a diaper at night. Much has to do with how deeply the young child sleeps. You may notice your child can stay dry through naptime before all night.
- Remain positive, but not excessive in your praise. Comment on your child's successes with an attitude of expecting success. Example: "You felt your urine coming and you told me right away."

**My child is showing these signs of toilet learning readiness:**

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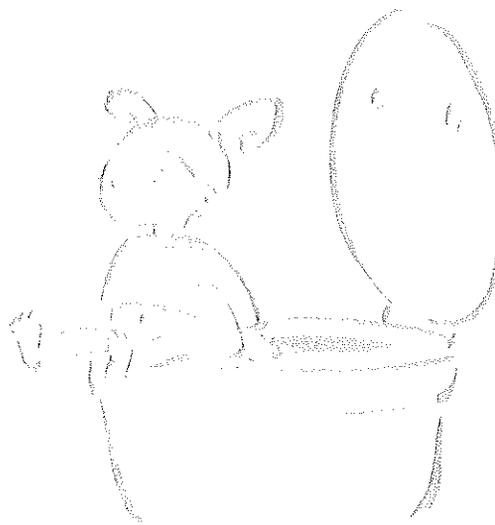
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Make toilet learning easier on you and your child with these suggestions:

- Read books to your child about learning to use the potty.
- Let your child bring a special toy or lovey with him to the bathroom.
- Remember that toilet learning takes patience and time.
- Make potty time a routine, like first thing in the morning, right before bath, right after mealtime. Your child and his body will get used to the schedule over time.
- Teach hand washing after using the toilet.
- Running the tap water helps trigger urination.
- Put your child in clothes he can take off easily.
- If your child is not making progress or resists, wait a few months then try again.
- Never force your child to sit on the toilet.
- Most children should sit for a brief time—under ten minutes.
- Make sure that all caregivers use the same words for body parts and functions.

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# Toilet Teaching

## Readiness and Temperament

Personal visit plan

### Discussion topics

- Readiness for toilet learning
- A child's perspective on toilet learning
- Temperament and toilet learning

### Objectives

- Teen parent will learn the signs of children's readiness for toilet learning.
- Teen parent will observe their child for signs of readiness.
- Teen parent will learn about temperament traits as related to toilet learning.

### Educator resources

- *Teaching Toilet Learning: Sensitive Support for Teens*
- *Understanding Temperament*, p. 69



### Parent handouts

- *Baby Biography: My Baby's Story*, p. F-13
- *Problem Solving: Eight Steps*, p. F-23
- *Problem Solving: Four Steps*, p. F-21
- *Using the Potty: Easy Does It!*
- *Tips and Techniques for Toilet Time*

## Process

### I. Rapport-building

- Review records.** Before the visit, review previous records and select a plan that meets the teen parent's needs.
- Teen parent's strengths.** Now and throughout the visit, point out the teen's parenting strengths. This is a time to build a relationship with the teen parent and his/her family.
- Teen parent's update.** Talk with the teen parent about what is going on in his/her life.
- Follow-up activity.** Reflect on the follow-up activity from the last visit.
- Topics and agenda.** Introduce the topics, and establish the goals and agenda for the visit. Build ownership in the visit by asking the teen parent what he/she wants to accomplish.

### II. Observation

- Share observations.** Encourage the teen parent to share some parenting joys and challenges by describing the changes he/she has observed in his/her child's development since the last visit.
  1. Use the handout, *Baby Biography: My Baby's Story*, to record the teen parent's own words as he/she describes his/her child's development.
  2. Give the teen parent the *Baby Biography: My Baby's Story*.
- Developmental characteristics.** Use the parent handout that is appropriate for the child's age from the Development section of this curriculum. Ask which of these characteristics the teen parent may be observing already. Select an activity from the *Ways You Can Help* section of the handout for the teen parent to do with his/her child.

### III. Discussion

- Goals.** Review the goals that the teen parent has established for the visit and integrate them into the discussion.
- Comments and concerns.** Address the teen parent's comments and concerns. Use the handout, *Problem Solving: Eight Steps* or *Problem Solving: Four Steps*, for reference or assistance.

### C. **Readiness for toilet learning**

1. Use the handout, *Using the Potty: Easy Does It!*, to discuss. Children's toilet learning can be a challenging time for teen parents. The easiest approach, which will support the teen parent and child relationship, is to start when the child shows many signs of readiness.
2. Signs of readiness for children include:
  - Is close to 2 or 2½ of age
  - Stays dry two hours at a time
  - Urinates a larger amount at once instead of steady trickling through the day
  - Shows he is aware eliminating with his words, face or body
  - Wants to do what grown ups do
  - Wants to do what you ask him to do
  - Shows interest in toilet learning
  - Pays attention
  - Can follow directions
  - Wants to be clean
  - Pulls down pants
  - Seeks privacy during a bowel movement

### D. **A child's perspective on toilet learning**

1. Children under the age of 2 do not have words to talk to their parents, their muscles are not developed to control toilet functions and they do not understand the toileting process. Often, they are not yet ready to be toilet trained.
2. A child's personality style remains fairly constant all his life. It can provide clues to help parents assist in toilet learning.

### E. **Temperament and toilet learning.** Use the parent handout, *Tips and Techniques for Toilet Time*, to discuss the temperament traits listed. (Refer to the resources, *Teaching Toilet Learning: Sensitive Support for Teens* **and** *Understanding Temperament*, for supporting information.)

1. Temperament of parent and child can contribute to the overall success of the process. Because toileting involves new learning, temperament traits such as activity level, rhythmicity, attention and intensity of child's personality influence readiness, style and rate of learning. These same traits in the parents can affect the way they approach teaching toilet skills.
2. When beginning toilet learning with their child, teen parents should consider activity level, rhythmicity, attention and intensity. These traits might affect toilet learning and the strategies to match the traits. For instance, the child who has a high activity level may not want to sit on the potty until he is a little older.
3. A parent's temperament can influence his/her child's success in toilet learning. Parents can make the process easier when they:
  - Take the time to explain and model behavior
  - Keep a regular schedule to adapt to the child's biological rhythms and develop rhythmicity when the child is less regular
  - Pay attention to their child's body language, elimination schedule and temperament traits
  - Remain calm, positive and supportive as the child masters toileting

## IV. Activity: **Potty Time**

### A. **Materials**

- Doll or stuffed animal and cup or bowl (for a pretend toilet)
- Children's book on toilet learning
- *Tips and Techniques for Toilet Time*
- Pen or pencil

### B. **Rationale.** Tell the teen parent why this activity is important.

1. Teen parents can practice being the toilet learning coach to a stuffed animal or doll before teaching their child.
2. A child can observe the parents and participate in the toilet learning play.
3. Teen parents will have more confidence and be more relaxed about teaching toilet learning with opportunity for practice.

C. **Instructions**

1. Talk to the parent about what stage of toilet learning she observes in her child. Use the handout, *Tips and Techniques for Toilet Time*, to discuss the stages.
2. Ask the teen parent to act out with the doll/stuffed animal some of the suggestions listed for toilet learning, like letting it sit on the potty, talking about body parts, and pretending to flush the toilet. Tell the parent she can pretend and have fun with her child.
3. Encourage the parent to involve her child in the play. The child may want to imitate the parent or expand the play. Parent and child can take turns helping the toy with toileting.

D. **Book sharing/literacy experience**

1. Convey to the teen parent the importance of nurturing his/her child's emerging literacy skills. Choose board books with bold colors and simple pictures. Explain that rhymes and repetition help the young child listen.
2. Select a book appropriate for the child's age. Hand the book to the teen parent and have him/her read the book to his/her child.
3. Affirm the teen parent's efforts; this will help the teen parent gain confidence to teach his/her child.
4. Encourage the teen parent to tell stories to his/her child. As the child listens, new words and ideas form additional connections in the brain.
5. Encourage the teen parent to read his/her child's cues and body language.

E. **Teen parent follow-up activity.** Ask the teen parent to complete the following activity during the time between visits.

1. Use the handout, *Using the Potty: Easy Does It!*, to discuss.
2. Encourage parent to observe the child for readiness signs.
3. Note any new or different observations.
4. Share observations at the next session

V. Summary

- A. **Key points.** Restate one or two key points discussed during the visit. Use the handouts to reinforce these points.
- B. **Teen parent's strengths.** Affirm a parenting strength observed in the teen parent during the visit.
- C. **Teen parent follow-up.** Remind the teen parent to continue practicing the follow-up activity.

# Toilet Teaching

## Readiness and Temperament

Group meeting plan

**Format:** Large Group Discussion  
**Topic:** Readiness and Temperament  
**Length of meeting:** 45-60 minutes

### Discussion topics

- Readiness for toilet learning
- A child's perspective on toilet learning
- Temperament and toilet learning

### Objectives

- Teen parents will learn the signs of children's readiness for toilet learning.
- Teen parents will observe their child for signs of readiness.
- Teen parents will learn about temperament traits as related to toilet learning.

### Educator resources

- *Teaching Toilet Learning: Sensitive Support for Teens*
- *Understanding Temperament*, p. 69



### Parent handouts

- *Virtues and Affirmations*, p. F-15
- *Using the Potty: Easy Does It!*
- *Tips and Techniques for Toilet Time*

## Process

### I. Welcome.

- A. **Ask the teen parents to make connecting statements.** Use a variety of connecting statements to help the teen parent's transition. Some examples include:
- Since the last meeting, my baby...
  - Since the last meeting, I...
  - In group today, I need...



- B. **Give the teen parents an opportunity to make affirmation statements.** Use the handout, *Virtues and Affirmations*, for reference or assistance. Give the teen parents a virtue or affirmation and ask them to give an example of how it relates to them.

- C. **Check-in with group members.** Ask questions that encourage discussion. Some examples include:
- What's new?
  - What challenges are you facing?

- D. **Reflect on the follow-up activity.** Ask questions that give feedback to the group about the follow-up activity. Some examples include:
- What behaviors did you observe?
  - Would you do anything differently? Why or why not?

- E. **Topics and agenda.** Introduce group meeting topics as they relate to the teen parents' needs.

### II. Discussion. Incorporate throughout the meeting.

#### A. Readiness for toilet learning

1. Use the handout, *Using the Potty: Easy Does It!*, to discuss. Children's toilet learning can be a challenging time for teen parents. The easiest approach, which will support the teen parent and child relationship, is to start when the child shows many signs of readiness.

2. Signs of readiness for children include:
  - Is close to 2 or 2½ years of age
  - Stays dry two hours at a time
  - Urinates a larger amount at once instead of steady trickling through the day
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**B. A child's perspective on toilet learning**

1. Children under the age of 2 do not have words to talk to their parents, their muscles are not developed to control toilet functions and they do not understand the toileting process. Often, they are not yet ready to be toilet trained.
2. A child's personality style remains fairly constant all his life. It can provide clues to help parents assist in toilet learning.



**C. Temperament and toilet learning.** Use the parent handout, *Tips and Techniques for Toilet Time*, to discuss the temperament traits listed. (Refer to the resources, *Teaching Toilet Learning: Sensitive Support for Teens* and *Understanding Temperament*, for supporting information.)

1. Temperament of parent and child can contribute to the overall success of the process. Because toileting involves new learning, temperament traits such as activity level, rhythmicity, attention and intensity of child's personality influence readiness, style and rate of learning. These same traits in the parents can affect the way they approach teaching toilet skills.
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3. A parent's temperament can influence his/her child's success in toilet learning. Parents can make the process easier when they:
  - Take the time to explain and model behavior
  - Keep a regular schedule to adapt to the child's biological rhythms and develop rhythmicity when the child is less regular
  - Pay attention to their child's body language, elimination schedule and temperament traits
  - Remain calm, positive and supportive as the child masters toileting

**D. Questions that stimulate further discussion**

1. Ask teens to pretend that they are 15 months old and someone has always changed their diapers. During changing time, people smiled and talked to them. They would smile back. People would rub them with lotion and sometimes even sing to them. One day, they stopped wearing diapers and the people stopped smiling. In fact, they would often scold or even hit if they wet their pants. Sometimes they would sit on the potty for a long, long time. They would try so hard, but they would keep wetting their pants. Things are different now. They no longer have those fun times with mommy or daddy. Ask: How were you feeling? What would you like to tell your mommy or daddy? Why does your mother or father continue to potty train you if you keep wetting your pants?

**E. Emphasize key points**

1. Start toilet learning when children shows signs of readiness.
2. Children's temperament affects toilet learning and it is important to match strategies with their temperament.
3. Remind teen parents that toilet learning is a process that takes time. Children will feel successful when parents pay attention to their children's body language, elimination schedules and temperament traits.
4. Remain calm and positive.

### III. Activity: **Ready, Set, Ready!**

#### A. **Materials**

- Paper
- Pen or pencil
- Children's book on toilet learning

#### B. **Rationale.** Tell the teen parents why this activity is important.

1. Parents and caregivers will make better decisions when they understand when their children are ready to learn to use the toilet.
2. The parent and child relationship is strengthened when parents are attuned and responsive to the children's needs.
3. Parents will have more confidence and be more relaxed about teaching toilet learning when their children is interested and ready.

#### C. **Instructions**

1. Divide the group into teams of three or four people each. Ask each group to choose a recorder and spokesperson.
2. Ask each group to make a list of as many readiness signs for toilet learning as they can in three minutes.
3. Time the session.
4. Ask the spokesperson from each group to read their list.
5. After each group takes a turn, ask if there are any signs that have been omitted. Discuss each sign of readiness with the teen parents.
6. Display children's books on toilet learning. Allow time for teen parents to look and read the books.

#### D. **Follow-up activity.** Ask the parents to complete the following activity during the time between sessions.

1. Use the handout, *Using the Potty: Easy Does It!*, to discuss.
2. Encourage parents to observe their children for readiness signs.
3. Note any new or different observations.
4. Share observations at the next session

### IV. Summary

- A. **Elicit final thoughts and unanswered questions from group members**
- B. **Summarize the discussion including group members' comments**
- C. **Preview next meeting**
- D. **Ask group members to complete a brief evaluation form (Optional)**