



Parents' Experiences of Supporting Children Through Toilet Training

A Qualitative Study

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Toilet training from infancy in the 1960s
(Image Source: United Archives International)



Change is coming...
Pampers advert late 1970s/early 1980s

Teachers spend hour a day changing pupils' nappies

One in four reception-age children are not toilet trained and many cannot say their own name, report finds



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School readiness concerns.
The Telegraph, UK, published January 2026

Children's bodies haven't changed much, but
the world around them has...





What does the
research tell us
about parents?

WHAT REMAINS UNKNOWN?

Research question:

How do parents experience supporting their child through toilet training, particularly when challenges arise?

Study aims:

Gain an understanding of what toilet training is like for parents.

Explore the impact toilet training has on parents and the support they find meaningful.



How did I explore parents' experiences?

16 parents

Mothers and fathers

Parents of children with and without additional
needs

In-depth, semi-structured interviews

Interpretive phenomenological approach



What was toilet training like for parents?

PRESSURE

QUESTIONING

RESPONSIBILITY

FRUSTRATION

DREAD

OVERWHELM

CONFIDENCE

CONTROL

PERSISTENCE



Balancing competing demands

"You've got to find where the demand line is and once the demand is put up too heavily on him, he shuts down and has the accident... It is just trying to keep that calm balance and still try and make progress."

Questioning yourself as a parent

"I constantly had parent guilt. I felt pressured and maybe like a little bit judged? It does feel like if you can't get your child potty training, it feels like you're a bad parent. You can't do what other people have been able to do."



Understanding your child and accepting uncertainty

*"It's difficult as a grown up to imagine how **big** it feels to a child. I still can't kind of comprehend why it's so difficult for them... I wonder what I would do differently? I probably could have been a bit less, "You have to do this" and a bit more trying to understand what might be going on with her."*

Key takeaways for practice



- ✓ Support parents, not just toilet training
- ✓ Build confidence, reassurance and self-efficacy
- ✓ Help parents feel able to take the lead rather than waiting for a 'perfect moment'
- ✓ Provide balanced messages about earlier toilet training and readiness
- ✓ Encourage flexible, child-centered approaches rather than one-size-fits-all expectations



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Please get in touch if you would like to find out more about The Potty Study:

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