

Potty Training Constipation

What to Do When Poop Becomes
a Power Struggle

A CALM, PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF
CHILDREN AGES 2–6

Written by a Pediatric GI Nurse Practitioner

Educational information only. This guide
does not replace care from your child's
medical provider.



Why Potty Training Triggers Constipation

Potty training is one of the most common times constipation starts or suddenly gets worse.

During this stage, toddlers are learning control over their bodies.

When pooping becomes uncomfortable, scary, or pressured, many children respond by withholding stool.

Withholding is not defiance. It is a protective response.

Signs Potty Training Constipation Is Developing

Constipation during potty training often looks different than parents expect.

Common signs include:

- Refusing to sit on the potty
- Asking for a diaper to poop
- Stiffening, crossing legs, or hiding
- Pooping small amounts or skipping days
- Stool accidents or smears in underwear
- Big emotional reactions around bathroom time



The Constipation Cycle During Potty Training

Understanding the cycle helps break it.

1. A painful or uncomfortable poop happens
2. Your child avoids pooping
3. Stool becomes harder and larger
4. Pooping hurts more
5. Fear and avoidance increase

Without intervention, this cycle often escalates.

What NOT to Do (This Matters)

Well meaning responses can accidentally make constipation worse.

Avoid:

- Forcing your child to sit on the potty
- Punishing accidents or refusal
- Using shame or pressure
- Starting and stopping treatment too quickly
- Pushing potty training when fear is present

Your child is not being stubborn. Their body is protecting itself.

What Pediatric GI Providers Recommend Instead

The goal is to make pooping safe, predictable, and painless again.

Key principles:

1. Reduce pain first
2. Remove pressure from potty training
3. Create consistent routines
4. Praise effort, not results
5. Move at your child's pace
6. Make the potty the coolest thing ever
7. Practice sitting on the potty even when they don't have to go. The goal is to reduce fear from the potty

Progress happens when fear decreases.

When to Pause Potty Training

Pausing is not failure. It is often the fastest path forward.

Consider a pause if:

- Your child is withholding daily
- Pooping causes intense fear or distress
- Accidents are increasing
- Your child refuses to sit at all

Potty training can be restarted once pooping feels safe again.

When to Call your Pediatrician or GI provider

Reach out if:

- Constipation continues despite consistent support
- Accidents or withholding persist
- You feel unsure how long to continue treatment

Seek urgent care if you notice:

- Blood mixed inside the stool
- Persistent vomiting
- Severe abdominal bloating
- Poor growth or weight loss

The Takeaway

- ✓ Potty training constipation is common, temporary, and treatable.
 - ✓ With patience, consistency, and reduced pressure, most children regain confidence and healthy bowel habits.
 - ✓ You are not doing anything wrong
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