



Episode 5: Toilet Training  
with Sharlene Vlahos from Karitane

## Toilet Training

**We discuss all things toilet training, when to start, what to do, what to look out for! Plus, the benefits of starting early.**

**Tiffany:** Hi everyone, It's lovely to be joined today by Sharlene Vlahos, who is the Director of Education at Karitane and a child and family health nurse. This week, we discuss toilet training, when to start, what to do, what to look out for and what the benefits are of starting early. Thank you for coming on today. It's great to have you chat about this important topic today for everyone. Thank you so much.

**Sharlene:** Oh, thanks for having me, Tiffany. It is great to be here to talk about that really hot topic around toilet training because it's such a momentous event for all families, so it's great to be with you

**Tiffany:** It's such an important time and it can be a bit challenging, so it's great that we're going to be discussing it today. So Sharlene, before we get started, could you tell us a little bit more about Karitane? Because I think, for everyone listening, it'd be great to have a bit of a background about what you guys do?

**Sharlene:** Sure. Well, Karitane has been in Australia for almost a hundred years and what Karitane offers is really that support for parenting, particularly in those first five years, which tend to be our most challenging. So we have a range of services. We have a residential unit where families can come, we have parenting centers, we run education groups, perinatal infant mental health services and toddler clinics. So really anything to do with parenting in that first five years is where we sit and predominantly, our services are provided in New South Wales, but of course, our website is full with resources that parents could access, if they're looking for some of the most up-to-date information.

**Tiffany:** Yeah, that's great. So good to know that there's so many amazing resources out there and that you guys have all of this information that you've gathered in over a hundred years ago to be established. That's fantastic. So you must have so much experience in this realm. When do children typically start toilet training and is there a certain age or signs to look out for to indicate that they might be ready? Because I think as a first-time parent, it can be really challenging to work that one out, Sharlene.

**Sharlene:** And you're quite right, Tiffaney. So it is one of the most common questions. Parents certainly feel, "Oh gosh, my child's two and a half or they're three, should they be toilet trained? When do I start?" So age typically is where parents start to ask the question. And so we get parents to think about more about the signs, but typically what we see with families and children is they're generally ready from about the age of two. But in saying that, we certainly do see children as young as 18 months showing an interest and showing some really good signs they're ready to be toilet trained. But on average you're probably looking at about three to three and a half years and that's a great age to start for a lot of reasons. And some of those signs, I guess what we're looking for, is the communication skills in particular of your child.

So they need to be able to ask or let you know when they need to go to the bathroom. So think about your child's language, think even about the language that you use with your children, particularly when they're starting to get around that age of being ready to be toilet trained. Have common words that you might use. So things like, whether it's the toilet or the loo, whatever it might be for your family. So certainly starting to use those words really starts to build that repertoire of skills that you need for being toilet trained. And so they need to be able to tell you when they're ready to go. So age certainly isn't the most important thing. It's the signs that really go with that. So we talked about language. Also it's developing that independence, so they're walking independently, they're starting to remove their clothing.

They're certainly going to need your help. Don't leave it, thinking they have to be able to dress themselves and undress themselves, but get a sense of, they get very good at taking their nappy off or get really good at taking clothes off when they get hot. So that's another great sign that they're really getting ready. Yeah, and one of the other things as well is that you might be putting them down for their afternoon nap or something like that, and they're waking up dry and you think, "Oh goodness, are they dehydrated? Are they unwell?" But actually what happens in terms of their development is they're getting the ability to really hold that muscle around their bladder. They're able to control that a little bit better.

So that also might be a really significant sign that they're ready to be toilet trained. It's so cute really.

**Sharlene:** (cont...) They might go and hide when they need to go to the toilet if they need to do a poo and go off and have some bit of private quiet space and that's a good thing. You think, "Gosh, where are they?" And then you found out, "Oh, I need to change a nappy." And that's also their signs of that they need that space and they need that time. So they're all really key signs that they're ready to get going. So for parents, sure, age can be a guide, but be really tuned into your child's individual needs and where they are developmentally and you run with that most importantly.

**Tiffaney:** I think there's some great tips there because I found, I've got three kids, they've all been ready at different stages, all around similar times, but definitely showed a lot of those cues you're talking about. So it's great to give those new parents a bit of an idea about what it is that they're going to be looking for, I think. Because like you said, it can be different for each child and I think that's a great thing to point out there.

**Sharlene:** So no hard and fast rules, just let your child lead you. It's really that success.

**Tiffaney:** Yeah, that's great. So what equipment do you need? Is there anything in particular these days that you would recommend, Sharlene? Because I think, again, a lot of people, they like to know what they need and having these practical tools are often something that people can grasp onto and go, "Okay, well, if this is going to help me toilet train my child, then I've got to get it."

**Sharlene:** Yeah, you just think, "Gosh, it's toilet training, perhaps all we need is a toilet."

And that would be great, but there's also some anatomical and size and even the scary flush of a toilet can be daunting for a toddler as well. So there might be some equipment that can be helpful. Sometimes a potty can be. It's less overwhelming. It's really close to the ground. Let's talk about those anatomical differences and those size differences is that little bottoms on big toilets, actually children feel like they're going to fall through and their feet cannot reach the ground. So a potty can be a really great transition piece.

**Sharlene:** (cont...) It can be a great thing when you're introducing the whole toilet training process that you can pop that in a really common area. Maybe Teddy or the Dolly can sit on the toilet while you're doing all that educational part right there.

And even if they sit on it, you're really praising that. So just having a potty can be just, it's built for them and so really takes that overwhelming thought of sitting on a really big toilet away from your toddlers. So that's a great piece of equipment. They're really inexpensive and really relatively easy to find. So potties can be a great transition piece. What can also be helpful, so as they move from the potty, and maybe your little one doesn't want to use a potty, maybe they want to be really grown up like older siblings or like mum and dad or like the kids at preschool and they might want to use a toilet, so steps can be really helpful and they're becoming much more common. You can find them quite easily as well, but they allow them to put their feet on the ground. You don't want to be dangling and feel like you're going to fall in.

So you can really provide that right stability.

**Tiffany:** Having those little things that you might not think about, but knowing is going to provide them with that sense of like you said, that stability and being able to sit and feel confident and comfortable and safe and not wobbly. And like you said, I think sitting on the edge of a toilet, particularly, when you're very little and not being able to touch the ground, I think there is that sense, isn't there, of falling back or what have you?

**Sharlene:** Well, yourself, if you sit on a stool or a bench, you lose your balance, how that feels. So liken that to how your child might feel as they're trying to navigate big toilets. I guess the other piece of equipment, which we get a huge amount of questions about is do I use the training pants, the Pull-Ups and things like that? And I think that's really... I think they have a place, but I guess if you're really starting to begin your toilet training, that process with your little one, is that they actually need to have the sensation of feeling wet. So they get this feeling or this feeling in their tummy and their brain goes, "What's going on here?? And then they often, then they go to the toilet.

**Sharlene:** (cont...) But what they start to do is start to link that, "Ah, when I get that funny feeling in my tummy, I need to go to the toilet." Now, if they are wearing training pants the whole time, they actually never feel that sensation of being wet. It keeps them dry, which it's meant to do. So I think investing in some big kids' underwear, going shopping together, choosing those together. And the training pants are a great alternative or they're a great backup when you're still getting on top of toilet training and still allows you to do the pull up and pull down as opposed to changing a nappy and gives you that security when you're out and about. But I think when you're at home and you're really beginning the process, it's best to invest in that big, next stage of having big kids' underwear and they often really like that as well.

**Tiffany:** Yeah, I do remember that phase actually, particularly with my son. I remember he used to, yeah, used to love having his big kids undies. But it was definitely great to, like you said, to have the training pants as a bit of a backup, so when you went out, you'd have to worry about them having accidents in the car, for example, or when you went to someone's place that you knew had carpet and that sort of thing. So I guess there's those times, like you said, that it's appropriate to potentially use the training pants or training nappies, because I think that can take that stress away for some parents as well.

**Sharlene:** Yeah and I think that's the big thing that can make us really stressed. And we then say, "Do you need to go to the toilet? Do you need to go to the toilet? Do you need to go to the toilet?" when you're out and about because you know they don't have their training pants on and that can be stressful as well. So best when you're out, keep your training pants. When you're at home, try to keep them in their underwear and they really start to make those linkages much quicker when they actually have those little accidents in the beginning. But the time starts to extend when they tell you. You start with five seconds, then you get 10 seconds to get them to the bathroom. But that's the process of learning that, so really important.

**Tiffany:** Absolutely. Yeah, no, that's great. So Sharlene, what would you say are the best steps to prepare your child for toilet training? If they're not showing those signs or even if they are, and you're wanting to really make sure there's good preparation there, what would be the best steps, would you say?

**Sharlene:** Yeah, so I've already covered a couple of steps. So having the potty, having some toys around like bears and dolls using the potty or the toilet, but also have to put your privacy aside, which often you do as a parent, because you're your children's role model. They want to mimic and copy those around them. So if you're not already doing so, I'm sure children actually seeing their family around them go to the bathroom as well, because they're like, "Oh, I want to try that," or "I want to do that."

So that starts to, "This is part of what we do every day and then we wash our hands." We're showing some really good hygiene, but also that process. So that's one good way. Start talking about the toilet. It feels a little bit strange, but there's great books that have been written for children as well, and having the toilet around and getting Dolly or Teddy to use it and then linking that back to some of your books and I think that can be really helpful. And you can do, "Your turn, my turn, your turn. Teddy sits on there, now it's your turn." Just getting really to that. The other thing as well is really thinking about the time of the year. Now, once again, it shouldn't be set in stone, but the warmer months are actually ideal because it's just the logistics.

You just have less clothing to deal with. You don't have lots of long pants and sometimes when children want to go to the toilet, they want to take everything off. It tends to be easier just logistically. However, you would never hold off a child that is like, "No, I'm ready for this. Mom, I'm ready for this. Dad, let's get going." But it's one of those things that you might consider could be really helpful. And even if we're going to be home for, it might be a holiday period and if you're home over a long weekend, it's great to get started with that because you tend to want to be at home a little bit as well when you're getting all their messages there for them to understand.

**Tiffany:** I'd agree with that completely. I mean, I was quite lucky with all of my kids, actually. I had them sort of all interstate and mostly lived in Queensland for a long period of time, so there was obviously lots of time where they didn't have a lot of clothes on. It was a lot warmer, generally, as the climate is a lot warmer. So we spent a lot of time in the backyard and a lot of time in the garden and at the beach and things like that. So it was quite easy, to a degree, to start doing that toilet training and stay in that process because there was plenty of time where we were outdoors, so accidents weren't a big deal.

**Tiffany:** (cont...) And I think that's a great tip around starting when it is warmer. Definitely makes things a lot easier and not as many clothes to take off and that sort of thing.

And yeah, like you said, I do remember one of my daughters loved taking everything off when she had to go to the toilet. That brings back a lot of memories, very cute memories, but frustrating for parents at times. But yeah, if you do have less clothing on, much easier for sure, so great tip there. So now what are some of the best ways that you can go about teaching them? I know you've mentioned the potty and introducing dolls and that sort of thing, but are there any particular ways that aren't recommended when it comes to the teaching process?

**Sharlene:** Yeah. So I think you've touched on a good point there, Tiffany, around just being relaxed. So I think that's probably, and that's really hard for... It can be really hard. Sometimes you're pressured by preschool or at different stages, they have to be toilet trained. And so it really becomes our agenda or an earnest to toilet train them and sometimes that can actually put more pressure on the child. And once a child feels like that they actually back off and it can make it harder. So we often say to parents, "Deep breaths. Just give it a really good go and if it doesn't work, that's okay."

It's not a sign of how clever they are or anything like that. But once you see some really good signs that you're both ready to go, then like I just mentioned before, if you could have some time at home, if you really go, "Okay, this week, we're going to make a really concentrated effort to try and use the bathroom and use the toilet." Set yourselves up for success. Be home as much as you can because then you're not out and about and trying to find a toilet. And there's nothing worse than trying to find a kid-friendly, clean toilet out and about.

So try to be home and like I mentioned before, have them in their pants, their big kids' pants, and start to think about your routine. So often, it's just the biology of going to the bathroom often after you've eaten, you've had something to drink, you often need to go to the bathroom. And so just take that as a routine and talk about it. Even if they're a bit hesitant in the beginning, then just sit them on there, even if they sit for five seconds. You have to do lots of labeled praise, "Oh, you're so good. Look at you sitting on the toilet. I'm so proud of you." Those types of things.

**Sharlene:** (cont...) So always after snacks and meals, take them to the bathroom as part of their routine, wash their hands. Before and after nap is also a really good time of the day. So just think about their routine and where you put those toileting opportunities there, because you're going to get some success because it's good timing and that's great.

Try and take advantage of those really good times. As we talked a little bit about sitting and being comfortable enough, either on the toilet or on their potty, but if they haven't done anything, you don't make them sit there endlessly. After two or three minutes, you haven't done anything, "Okay. That's a really good try. Let's wash our hands," and you just keep building up that because they really start to link that. And as you're really relaxed with your approach, they are relaxing to it as well. So lots of praise, even if it's a bit of hit and miss. Any type of success, any type of hints that they've been compliant with you, then you're really building that confidence and you're doing a great job and that they're really building that independence. So be really patient with the process. And so what then they start to do, like we said, when they start to get wet, you're going to get accidents in the beginning.

You absolutely are because that's what they need to do as part of the learning process. So feeling wet, "Oh, that's my brain telling me. That's my tummy telling me. I better say something." They start to link all of those. If you really break it down, there's a lot of little steps in there that their little brains have to talk to their bodies and then they have to talk to you.

So really think about being really patient with that and they learn to hold for a little bit longer. But one of the key things as well is that you have to get this balance right of asking them too many times that it becomes stressful, but also reminding your child as well. So once again, go back to your individual child. Do they get really engrossed in their play? Do they really get... They forget, particularly in the early stages. They just love doing what they're doing at that particular time and can't be bothered going to the toilet. You might have to do little gentle reminders, but remember just balancing, being really obsessed about getting them on the toilet to remind them to go. So you'll find your rhythm. You just need to really be led by your child.

**Tiffany:** That's some great tips again. I think with my children too, I do remember that finding that balance could be tricky sometimes because you're not sure, "Okay, well have I asked them enough or have I not? I've asked them too much and how are they going to respond this time?" For example, last time they didn't do anything or the last few times you've not had success and then the next few times that you do remind them or you do ask them, you've had some great success. And like you said, I think those tips around doing it after meal time and doing around naps and then being consistent with praise and that sort of thing works really well. I don't know what other people have done, but I guess it'd be great to have some examples of different things that you could do to encourage your children. I know that throughout my kids' lives, I've done things like introduce rewards charts and that type of thing. Do they typically work well when it comes to encouragement?

**Sharlene:** They can, but once again, it really depends on your child's motivation. We certainly know that with all the brain development research that we know about children, your praise and attention absolutely supersedes any type of other rewards, so that's really important. Some children really strive on a reward chart and I think it's really finding what we call your child's currency. So if you're using reward charts, then what we often encourage at Karitane if you're using them, you don't have them for everything, everything they could do in a day, if they finish eating their dinner or if they pick up their toys. If it's toilet training that you're focused on, then the reward chart should just be about the toilet training. It shouldn't be about absolutely everything because they start to lose their effectiveness.

**Tiffany:** That makes sense.

**Sharlene:** So we always certainly think about that. Don't think about it all encompassing. This is what we're focusing on and so your child might really love that. Other children have different things. It could be that we're going to go for a walk or we're going to do something special. You have to find what really motivates your child. But I mean, you don't have to think about lollies and things like that necessarily, but reward charts are great. They're a great alternative to that type of rewards, but also thinking about your language, your attention to that, because children are wired to be connected to their parents. They're really wired to want to please and make the parents really happy and so that's a really great motivation.



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**Tiffany:** That's great. It's good to have that clarification there, I think, because I think rewards charts to work, like you said, differently with different children and at different ages. And I think that's a great tip around, like you said, just having, if you are going to have a rewards chart or some type of reward, to have it specific to what you're focusing on at that time with your child. I think that's a great tip there. So if there are setbacks or I guess regression, what are the types of things we can do to avoid that or to help out with that?

**Sharlene:** Yeah, so these are really inevitable and like I said, accidents are going to happen. And if there is a little accident, that's okay, you clean it up without fuss and, "It's okay. Next time it'll be okay. We'll get to the toilet." Because some children can take that really, Oh, I've done a terrible job. Mom's going to be real or dad's going to be really unhappy with me." So really taking that away, because once again, that makes the process really positive, they're going to be far more engaged with working towards being able to be toilet trained. So that helps with those day-to-day accidents, but setbacks can occur and certainly children are really sensitive to what's happening around them to their environment and that shows us in some of their behaviors.

Some things that really set children back are, you probably heard it before, younger babies, new babies arriving. Children are like, "What's going on here? My world's upside down. I don't like this," and so they don't want to be compliant. They'll want to do things opposite because they're fighting for their space around, "Well, where do I fit? No one's paying any attention to me. And if I have accidents or if I'm not doing that, then I get more attention," and you get more of that. So it's about flipping that. So look, that's inevitable and some children will regress. They act like the baby. "I want to be like the baby. I want to have a nappy like the baby." So you just ride that out, still encourage them to continue with their toilet training or using the bathroom and lots of praise when that goes well.

So even holidays, any change in routine can make a child regress. So even if they're at daycare, and sometimes you might get different carers or some accidents are happening at home, try to really think about what's being different. What have we done differently? And you can't control the world. Things happen, jobs and you might have illnesses in the families or you need to go away. All of those things are going to happen. You can't stop that. It's about really helping your child transition well through those periods. Just to get back to your routine.



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**Tiffany:** I think that's really great in the sense that you can understand that yes, their environment's really important because like you said, even just a holiday or a weekend doing something different and you're not at home much and there's all these different things happening around them. And like you said, definitely with a new baby, if you do have another child, that can play a huge part. And in my experience it definitely did. But there is... You do get through it and there's definitely a way out, but I think it's great to just have a few tips there from you as well. So I know that bed wetting overnight can be a really tricky one to manage. What's the best thing to do at night, typically?

**Sharlene:** It is. And I think that really normalizing it. Bedwetting is actually not uncommon for children well into primary school. And I think parents can become very worried about if their child is still having accidents at night time or still wetting the bed. But it's also important to think about your own childhood because you may have the same thing. We can often see it in families. So try not to stress about it. Also, if they do have an accident at night time, change the sheets. They may be really embarrassed, particularly if they're getting on a little bit older. So making sure that your sheets are set up in a way that you have a mattress protector, that it's not so stressful that they're going to have a wet mattress and it becomes just quite laborious for parents.

So certainly there are alarms and things that you can get for children. Some children are really heavy sleepers and they just don't wake up. So you might want to take your child to the bathroom just before you go to bed yourself at nighttime to help them with that. But it depends if that's going to be more disruptive to their nighttime routine. So you just have to take it individually, but like I said, you can get the alarms. You need to see your GP and get a referral to get something like that, but they really wouldn't entertain that until a child was really hitting eight to nine years of age. But there are some reasons why children might be wetting the bed.

Once again, it could be changes in routine, some stress in the family. Sometimes children get urinary tract infections and that can affect them as well. So just think about your child. Are they a really deep sleeper? What has been going on in the house? And it's just normal and often they just grow out of it and they might have the one or two accidents here or there, but it's more normal than we think.



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**Tiffany:** Yeah, I remember one of the things I used to do with one of my daughters was make sure that she didn't have too many drinks leading up to bed. So when it came to drinking, we'd try to do that. The drinking of water and other things sort of earlier in the day, a lot more and sort of slowly giving her less just before she went to bed because she was a very deep sleeper and struggled to wake up at night. So I think that was one thing that worked really well for me, but obviously every child is different and I wouldn't want to dehydrate a child, but I guess there's those things to think about when you're, yeah, when you're putting your child to bed and around those night times as some of those things that you can consider thinking about doing for parents out there.

**Sharlene:** Absolutely. Yeah, that's great too.

**Tiffany:** So what are your top tips around toilet training, just to finish off so that everyone can go away with some great takeaways today, Sharlene?

**Sharlene:** I guess the top tips for parents is be led by your child, not their age. Okay? So you're looking for those key signs that we talked about. Take your time, don't rush your child. Remember we often come with their own agendas so certainly don't rush them. Using the potty or the seat, all those steps to make it much easier so that the whole anatomy and physiology helps the process. Clean up those accidents just without fuss, without stress, and often, I haven't mentioned this, but being able to do a wee often comes first and then they often end develop being able to go to the toilet and use poos a little bit later, so one usually comes before the other. And the toilet training overnight just takes longer. That's okay. There's nothing wrong. It's just that process of learning and their bodies all becoming in sync. So it's a great milestone, it's an exciting milestone, but it's also a big milestone as well.

**Tiffany:** Well, thanks so much for the amazing information you share with us all today. Sharlene, I know you've got a very busy schedule, so thank you so much again for taking the time to chat with us today. I really appreciate it.

**Sharlene:** Thanks for having us. It's been great to talk about all things toilet training.



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**Tiffany:** Well we hope you've learned a few things while listening today, everyone. If you'd like to know more about this or any other parenting support in any other areas, you can head to [www.karitane.com.au](http://www.karitane.com.au), follow them on their socials or you can call the Karitane care line on 1300 227 464. I hope you found this helpful. Don't forget to subscribe and tell your friends about this podcast and if you like listening, please leave us a review. See you next time.