Weaning from the Bottle

Pediatricians recommend that parents start weaning their child off the bottle before the age of 12 months. The two major reasons are:

- **Prolonged bottle drinking can damage baby teeth.** Mobile toddlers tend to tote their bottles around, drinking on the go, as opposed to infants, who are usually fed in a parent’s arms, with the bottle being removed as soon as the feeding session is over. If the bottle contains anything other than water, what you have is an acidic solution that is washing over the teeth and decalcifying them, which can lead to cavities.

- **Bottle drinkers tend to ingest more milk—typically up to 32 ounces a day.** Toddlers only need two to three servings of dairy a day, equivalent to 16 to 24 ounces of milk. While milk is a healthy food, kids who drink too much of it may not want to eat enough solid food, missing out on important nutrients like iron. Remember, whole milk should be given until two years of age and cow’s milk should not be introduced until the age of twelve months.

By the time children are a year old, they have the motor skills to sit up, hold a cup, and drink from it, so they no longer need a bottle, at least not for nutrition. One-year-olds are much less stubborn, have a shorter memory, and are more interested in pleasing their parents than a child just six months older. If you’ve missed this window and your toddler is strongly attached to his bottle, don’t despair. You can get him off of it.
Before the Big Switch

By the time babies are between 9 and 12 months old, they're often ready to make the switch from bottle to cup. At this age, they're more interested in what's going on around them than they are in sucking on a breast or bottle. But phasing out the bottle this early means planning ahead. Here are some tips:

• Let children get used to a cup while they're in the tub. They can pour water out of it, drink from it, or even make a mess with it.

• Don't offer only juice in the cup and milk in a bottle. Otherwise your child may refuse to drink milk from a cup when you get him off the bottle. Offer milk in a cup to your child.

• If you breastfeed exclusively until baby is 9 to 12 months, simply skip introducing the bottle entirely. At this age, babies have the necessary coordination to drink from a cup.
The Gradual Phase-Out

This moderate approach works best with younger toddlers. Over a period of about a month:

- Decrease the bottles you offer, one at a time, and replace them with cups of milk or snacks.
- Phase out the least important bottles first (usually the midday ones).

During this transition, these creative ideas may ease the process:

- Let your child pick out a special new cup, or decorate one that you already own.
- Try using a funny straw--it may make cups more appealing.

If you wean your 12- to 15-month-old gradually, chances are he'll be able to give up even the morning or bedtime bottle without a fuss.
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**Going Cold Turkey**

For a child who is strongly attached to her bottle as a comfort object, a gradual approach may be too agonizing. And she may already be down to just one or two daily bottles. A sudden withdrawal can be painful for everyone, but it may be the most effective method. Here are some ideas to ease the process:

- **Get your child used to the idea of no bottles before you actually phase them out.** About a week before the big day, tell him that now that he's such a big boy, it's time for him to give up his bottle. Remind him every day that soon he's not going to have bottles anymore. Then physically remove the bottles from the house and let him see that they're not around.

- **Let your child participate in the process.** Explain that you understand how hard this change might be for him.

- **Offer him a reward for making it through a day or night without his bottle.**

- **Have a cup of water or juice ready for the time of day when she seems to demand the bottle most.**

- **Talk with your child about replacing the bottle with a soothing object.** For instance, suggest that she hug the teddy bear whenever she misses the bottle.