

Sensory Strategies: Toilet Training

Children's Therapy Services



Toilet Training

Toilet training can be a real challenge to children who have sensory integration difficulties. Successful toileting requires receiving and interpreting the sensory information that signals a full bladder or the need to have a bowel movement. The child must form the motor plan to get to the bathroom and then must conquer the sensory challenges of the bathroom.

Toilet training is one of the tasks of childhood that can reflect stress, and a child can exercise a great deal of control by controlling toileting. Try not to enter a battle of wills on the issue. Things tend to run much smoother without stress and expectation. If you experience set backs with your child, know that this is absolutely normal. Take the pressure off and go back to it after some time has passed. The bowel and bladder are smooth muscles, and the sensory signals they send up to the brain to indicate a full bladder or bowel are like soft whispers in comparison to the messages received by striated muscle (in the arm or the leg).

Sensory Strategies

- If your child does not seem to be aware of when they empty their bladder let them go naked – they will see when they urinate and connect the sensation with the consequence.
- If your child wears nappies, draw attention to information from other senses, such as smell and added weight of a wet nappy (cloth nappies give more sensory feedback than disposable nappies).
- If your child is sensitive to toilet paper, try wet wipes or a wet flannel. If your child cannot tolerate sitting on the toilet, try to make it as safe as possible:
 - Make the hole smaller with an infant toilet seat
 - Put a step/foot support under your child's feet
 - Try having your child wear a weighted vest to encourage sitting for a longer period of time

- Try a handrail for your child to hang on to
- Use distractions like books, songs, music, and pictures on the walls
- Children love the feeling of security when they wear a nappy; if they require this security, allow them to wear a nappy while they are on the toilet.
- Try a padded toilet seat because it is softer and warmer

- If the visual input is too stimulating, turn off the lights or dim them.
- If the noise is too much, place sound absorbing towels in the bathroom or try earplugs, music, or running water.
- Never force; respect your child's tolerance.
- Nappy changes may be difficult if your child is uncomfortable with movement; try changing your child while he stands.

Other Strategies

- Use visual aids and social stories to increase your child's understanding of the task.
- Try to make this task as pleasant as possible.

Ideas for Self Help Skills – for children with Sensory Issues

Adapted from 'Building Bridges through Sensory Integration' by Ellen Youch, Paula Aquilla & Shirley Suttan

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