

For further information about this service contact:

Children and Young People's Services Unit (Cambridgeshire)  
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*"Many parents experience problems with toilet training their children. All children are individual when and how they learn to use the toilet. Because learning social skills is more difficult for children on the autistic spectrum it is sometimes harder for them."*

Dr Eve Fleming, Senior Medical Officer

Information from:

Suzie Franklin-Family Liaison and Support Worker Inscape House School  
Anna Turner-Paediatric Continence Advisor PromoCon

## Continence and Autism

### Special Needs School Nursing Service (Cambridgeshire)

If you require this information in a different format such as in large print or on audio tape, or in a different language please contact the service on the details above.

If you have any compliments about this service or suggestions for improvements, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 0300 131 1000 (charges may apply depending on your network) or email: [ccs-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ccs-tr.pals@nhs.net).

For free, confidential health advice and information 24 hours a day, 365 days a year please contact NHS 111.



Many techniques used to toilet train children are not sufficient for persons with autism, but there are strategies which have been demonstrated to be effective.

There are two major and most common issues for autistic children, they are either:-

- afraid of the toilet or
- don't know what they are supposed to do.

NB - Make sure they do not have constipation!



### Social interaction - ASD children

- May not be socially motivated to wear 'big boy/girl pants' or use the toilet as their peers do
- Be less likely to copy others to learn new skills
- May not be motivated to please you by weeing or pooing in the right place
- May not mind if they are wet or have soiled themselves
- May go to the toilet in inappropriate places

### Social communication

- May not understand the words used
- May not understand what you are asking them to do
- May take language literally i.e. 'put the toilet roll in the toilet!'
- Less likely to communicate the need to go to the toilet
- May need instructions or information presented visually

### Social understanding

- They need help-they may not realise they need to communicate this
- May not understand that soiling themselves has an impact on others and why we don't like it
- May have difficulty in changing routines-need to keep things the same
- May not transfer their knowledge to unfamiliar toilets
- May develop fears and anxiety around using the toilet

### Sensory difficulties-sound

- Not flushing the toilet when they are in the bathroom
- Give warnings before flushing the toilet
- Distract the child with music/other sounds they like
- Use ear defenders or ear phones
- Desensitisation-gradually build up the child's tolerance to the sound of the toilet flushing-record the sound and play it quietly and with other sounds
- Sensory difficulties-touch and feel
- Make the bathroom feel as comfortable as possible, is it too warm or too cold
- Let them choose their own toilet paper, patterned/characters, soft, wet toilet tissue
- Use padded/heated toilet seat
- Put some toilet paper in the toilet beforehand if fear of splashing
- Place a soft non-slip rug on the floor
- Have a box of favourite sensory things, toys or books nearby

### Practical support

- Accessible toilets – Radar Key
- Changing Places website
- 'Just can't wait card'
- DLA – note down difficulties on form



### Where to get support

- Local Continence Team or School Nursing Service - 01223 218061
- Occupation Therapy (OT)
- PromoCon
- ERIC website
- Dry Like Me



### **Sensory differences-visual**

- Replacing strip or fluorescent lighting with low wattage bulb, coloured bulb or night light
- Cover up mirrors and reflective tiles if this is a problem
- Put up their favourite characters, pictures, posters or theme on the wall
- Think about if they want the door open or closed
- Sensory difficulties –smell
- Ensure that there is good ventilation to reduce smells
- Replace smells they dislike with something else they like - air fresheners
- Think about other smells in the bathroom they may not like-cleaning products

### **Sensory difficulties - smell**

- Ensuring that there is good ventilation and air circulation in the bathroom to reduce smells
- Replacing smells they dislike with something else they like – plug in air fresheners
- Think about other smells in the bathroom they may not like - cleaning products

### **Sensory difficulties – touch and feel**

- Make the bathroom feel as comfortable as possible, is it too warm or cold?
- Let your child choose their own toilet paper (patterned/characters, soft, wet toilet tissue)
- Use a padded/ heated toilet seat
- Put toilet roll in toilet if fear of splashing
- Soft (non-slip) rug on floor etc.
- Have a box of favourite sensory things, toys or books

### **Sensory difficulties-spatial awareness**

- Put in grab rails when using the toilet for balance
- Non slip mats
- A weighted vest or lap pad may keep the child sitting on the toilet longer
- Portable toilet seat to make the hole smaller or just more comfortable-heated/padded
- Try and enclose the toilet area if afraid of open spaces

### **Sensory sensitivities**

- Responses to sensory experiences-sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell, balance, body awareness-may be different –Hyper (over) or Hypo (under) sensitivity.
- May not register that their bowel or bladder is full so don't feel the need to go and may do more accidents
- Might not be aware if they are wet or have soiled themselves
- May like the sensation of having poo in their pad or nappy
- May not like the feel of toilet roll and have problems with wiping/cleaning resulting in smearing
- May feel unbalanced when sitting on the toilet
- May not like a drip of wee on their legs or to get water on themselves or their clothes
- Removes all their clothes when they use the toilet
- May dislike or love and seek sensory input from the bathroom (smells, sounds, touch)

### **So the difficulties you may see....**

#### **Basic toilet training skills**

- Constipation, withholding and soiling (restricted diet?)
- Smearing
- Going to the toilet in inappropriate places
- Develop anxiety and fears about using toilet
- Using different toilets
- Have difficulties transferring knowledge
- Bedwetting and/or day wetting

### **Before you start a toileting/continence programme**

- Is everyone 'ready' to start? Is it the right time for the child and/or family
- Involve the young person where possible
- Everyone-including school-working together with a consistent approach is the key to success

### **Readiness for toilet training**

Two major things are required for toilet training

- Physical development and maturity
- Social understanding and motivation

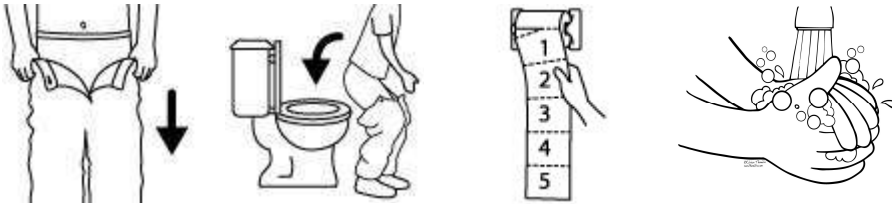
Children with additional needs can be successfully toilet trained, it may just take more time and support to achieve this

## Developing toilet awareness

- Always change your child's nappy in the bathroom
- Change to pad and pants during the day as soon as possible
- Change your child standing up if possible
- Help your child practice pulling clothing up and down
- Encourage the child to put their poo in the toilet, flush the toilet, help in cleaning themselves, wash their hands
- Introduce these activities as a part of daily routine

## Explaining what toileting is about

- Children need information about the whole process in a way they can easily understand
- Use clear and specific language
- Visual methods often work best
- Visual schedules containing manageable steps can help



## Managing constipation

- Sitting position – child's feet need to touch ground, knees should ideally be higher than their hips
- Foot stool, trainer or padded seat
- Hand rails – for balance
- Using massage - can help encourage bowel movements
- Child to blow bubbles whilst using the toilet
- – helps to recognise the muscles they need to use to push out poo
- We need to convince children that poo wants to go in the toilet!



## Smearing is a common problem

- Give them other sensory experiences which might stop them from needing to touch/smell their poo
- If possible, redirect touching the poo with another activity
- Have some sensory/tactile objects for the child to play with at other times of the day
- Does the child know they need to wipe themselves with toilet paper?
- Can they wipe themselves properly after going to the toilet-this may look like soiling
- Use wet wipes as an alternative to toilet paper which may feel harsh or scratchy on their skin
- Put the child in clothing that makes it easy for them to reach their bottom. Ensure the child does not see the aftermath of the smearing as a reward e.g. warm bath and time with you
- Show the child what you want them to do using visual supports
- Use wet wipes as an alternative to toilet paper
- Using different or unfamiliar toilets
- Use a consistent toileting routine when using ALL toilet reinforce this with a visual schedule
- Familiarise the child by showing them where toilets are in new places and practice going inside
- Take familiar objects to new toilets
- Take additional items for personal hygiene

