

There is great variation from child to child as to when, and how easily, they are toilet trained. It can depend on family history. If parents were late to be toilet trained as children, their children may be late. Girls tend to be trained slightly earlier than boys. At the age of about two and a half years about 70% of girls and about 50% of boys will be dry most of the time. However, there is still a great sense of urgency about toileting at this age, and it is not uncommon for many preschool children to have toilet 'accidents', particularly if they are busy doing something they like.

### **Toilet training the child with autism**

As autism is a developmental disorder, it is reasonable to expect that your child with autism will be toilet trained later than other children. Although it may also take somewhat longer, the majority of children with autism do become toilet trained or toilet timed by the time they start school. The following section looks at readiness, toilet training methods, and dealing with specific problems related to toileting.

Independent toileting involves many different things, such as controlling bodily functions, deciding where it is appropriate to relieve oneself, and self help skills of dressing and undressing oneself. In addition children with autism may have behaviours, fears, and sensory problems that also need to be overcome to achieve successful toileting.

### **When is a child ready to be toilet trained?**

- When he can stay dry for a few hours at a time
- When he urinates a lot at once, rather than small dribbles throughout the day
- When he appears to know he is about to go, as shown by certain movements or facial expressions
- When he shows some awareness that he is wet or dirty
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Until your child shows some signs of readiness it is not really worth starting serious toilet training - it will be a very frustrating experience for your child and yourself.

### **What is the best way to toilet train my child?**

- Even before he shows readiness signs, you can begin to introduce your child to the process of toileting. Start by taking him into the bathroom/toilet whenever you go, so that he gets used to the room. Don't force him if he seems nervous, try having something in there he will like, like a poster or mobile.
- Take him to watch you empty his nappy into the toilet.
- Once he is comfortable being in the toilet, try lifting him onto the seat for brief periods. A child will feel more secure if he has something solid to put his feet on, and an inset seat will also help. It's probably easiest not to use a potty, as you will then later have to change to a toilet, which a child with autism may resist. Allow him to keep his nappy/pants on initially - it will be warmer and less "fussy".
- Once he seems relaxed about sitting for brief periods, take him to sit on the toilet at change time, with his nappy off.
- Gradually increase the length of time he will sit on the toilet to a maximum of five minutes. There is really no point in making a child sit longer than this.
- When your child is sitting well for a few minutes at a time, try to have him sit briefly on other toilets, these may be at a grandparent's house, a friend's house, or at Playgroup.

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- Now it's really a matter of waiting. Keep toileting relaxed, use music, special toys (that are kept only for toilet time) if it will help with sitting. Use praise and other rewards just for sitting, and of course when your child does finally urinate in the toilet you can use a special reward, given immediately so that your child can make the connection.
  - When the child is showing signs that he is more ready to be trained (see above), start taking him to the toilet regularly, maybe every one and a half hours, but do not make him sit for longer than five minutes.
  - It is probably best to start serious toilet training when the weather is warmer. There are less clothes to manage, and it is easier to get wet clothes dry.
  - Also, when you feel your child is ready to achieve some success, put away the nappies and plastic pants and put your child into trainer pants, which are thicker and more absorbent, or just ordinary pants. Your child is then more likely to be aware if he is wet or dirty.
  - Throughout this process keep your language simple; "sit on toilet", or just "toilet", "do a wee". Also use the sign for toilet, and COMPIC picture of toilet to give your child extra cues. Use the same words when praising; "good sitting", "good-you did a wee".
  - Keep records so that you can see what progress is being made. This may first just be recording the length of time your child will sit, then also recording successes. It is also useful to keep some records of the times your child does actually wet and/or dirty his nappy during the day, to see if there is any pattern.
  - Remember punishment for wet pants will have no effect in speeding up this process. Your child will not understand what he is being punished for.
  - Learning toileting is simply a skill - it should not be viewed as a behaviour problem if your child is having difficulty mastering this skill.
  - Remember to use rewards. Choose something that will motivate your child and make it worth his while to use the toilet.

### **Why am I having problems toilet training my child?**

- He may not be ready.
- He does not understand what you want.
- He is resistant to sitting.
- He is resistance to touch, either a person touching him, or the touch of the toilet seat against his body.
- A fear of new situations or of a small room.
- A preference for unusual routines, such as pooing in a nappy or out in the garden.

### **How can I make the toilet less frightening?**

- If your child fusses or screams when put on the toilet, don't force it. Give up for a few weeks then try again with brief visits and reassurance. Try to work out what may be causing the screaming and change this if possible.
- Use a seat insert with a small hole so that the child doesn't fear falling in.
- Make sure that the insert is stable on the seat as this can be frightening to a child if it moves. Put a foam cover over it, this makes it non-slip as well as warmer.
- Make sure the child has a small stool or box for him to put his feet on. The Yellow Pages phone books bound together make a cheap footstool.
- For boys it may be easier and neater to straddle the seat, facing the back of the toilet. You can teach him to stand later.
- Put up posters or mobiles to make the toilet room more inviting.
- Make the room a bit warmer by using special heat and light globes (available from electrical stores).

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- Do not flush the toilet while your child is still sitting on it. Even wait till he is out of the room if he is sensitive to sounds.
  - Give the child something to hold or play with, or music to listen to if this will help him be more relaxed. Make these special toilet toys, and do not allow your child to have this toy at other times during the day, because he may just get bored with it and it will lose its effect. Be prepared for it to go into the toilet. Disinfect it and try not to show your natural distaste.
  - Try changing the disinfectant you use to clean the toilet - it may be that your child is very sensitive to smells and can't cope with the one you use.

### **My child will sit for five minutes but has still not urinated in the toilet. How can I get him to "let go"?**

- This is quite a complicated process as your child needs control over his muscles both to hold on and then to let go. It may still be that your child is not ready to achieve this. Keep going with the sitting.
- Make the toilet experience as relaxing as possible as it is difficult for the child to 'let go' if he is tense. Music may help him relax. A child with autism is also very responsive to your moods, so if you are getting uptight and frustrated with the whole toilet process he will react to this.
- Continue to be a 'model' for your child by taking him into the toilet when you and other family members go, so that he can see people urinating or having a bowel motion. If your child is a boy, it is probably most useful for him to see males urinating, as this is a little more visible than females, who will of course be sitting.
- Distract the child with activities.
- Massage with downward pressure on the abdomen can be useful.
- Turn the tap on in the bathroom so the child can hear the water running.

### **My child is dry during the day but still wets the bed at night**

- In normal development children achieve bladder control at night at about four years of age. However, night-time bed wetting is a relatively common childhood occurrence. Approximately 1 in 6 children who are five years old, 1 in 8 seven year olds, and 1 in 20 ten year olds still wet the bed. Even though your child with autism is six years old, he may be at the stage of a three year old in this area of his development, so be realistic about what he is ready to achieve.
- Keep him in nappies until he begins to have a few dry nights.
- Many parents find that getting the child up and putting him on the toilet late at night when they themselves are going to bed means a dry night may follow.
- Do not get a child up at night if it means that he will be awake and active for the next few hours while everyone else is trying to sleep. It's not worth it.
- Do not punish wet beds, or even make a fuss. Be matter of fact, change the bedding, and the child's pyjamas, without giving the child any extra attention.
- Make sure you are not rewarding wet beds. You might be getting your child up in the night, giving him lots of extra attention by talking to him, perhaps even giving him a warm bath, before putting dry clothes on. The child may be enjoying this night-time attention so much that it's not worth his while to be dry. Save your attention for when he has had a dry night and then be lavish in your praise and attention. Also make sure he is getting enough attention at other times in the day.
- When the problem of bedwetting has gone on for a number of years past what would be considered normal, a bedwetting alarm program may be useful. If you are considering a bed alarm program it is worth discussing it with your Paediatrician, or a Psychologist, as it will involve quite a lot of time and effort by the parent.

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**My child has been using the toilet but suddenly he has started having "accidents" again. Why is this, and what can I do about it?**

- This is a very common story from many parents, and applies to many things a child with autism seems to have learned and then 'forgets'. Don't panic. It is much quicker to relearn a skill rather than to learn it the first time.
- Many preschool children will still have accidents at times, either because they are too busy, too engrossed in what they are doing, or they wait till the very last second to go to the toilet at which stage it is too late.
- Possible reasons for changes in toilet behaviour are a change in routine, attention seeking, or changes in your toilet training program which put unrealistic expectations on your child.
- Check possible medical reasons first. Your child may have a bladder, or urinary tract infection, which could be the reason for the accidents.
- Go back a few steps in your toilet training program - you may have moved on too fast. Even if your child had taken himself to the toilet previously, go back to reminding him to go, and give lots of praise and reinforcement for his successes.
- Make sure your child gets little attention for his accidents. Stay calm and matter of fact. Even things we might think are negative, such as yelling, can excite children with autism and thus be reinforcing for them.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of attention at other times during the day.
- Reintroduce a reward program.

**My child will use the toilet when I send him, but how can I get him to take himself?**

- This child is what we call "toilet timed". That is he can stay dry for a certain length of time, and will go to the toilet when someone reminds him to go, but does not take himself. A number of children with autism will not get past this stage, particularly those who are more delayed in their development. However this need not be seen as a big burden as many schools will toilet time children, and it's certainly a lot better than continually wet and dirty nappies or pants.
- A child is ready for independence when he shows signs that he knows he needs to go to the toilet. These maybe by jiggling around, going quiet, or by moving to a particular area in the house or backyard where you know he often 'does his business'.
- Begin training for independence as part of your toilet training program. When you give your child the cue "toilet", also using the sign and/or COMPIC picture, get him to either say the word, point to the picture, with you helping him to point if necessary, or help him make the sign. Make sure your COMPIC picture of the toilet is handy so that you don't have to hunt around for it each time. You may want to have a few around on the fridge, the bedroom door, the lounge room door, and the toilet door.
- If you feel your child has become too dependent on these cues try to 'fade' them by perhaps getting your child's attention, just pointing to the picture and not saying the word. If he responds by going to the toilet give heaps of praise for 'taking yourself'. If he doesn't respond, use the word as you would normally do.
- Try to gradually increase the time between sending him to the toilet, which may help him to experience what a full bladder actually feels like and may cue him that he needs to go.
- Give reminders at times rather than actually telling your child to go, by asking if he needs to go. If he does, most children who are toilet timed will just head off to the toilet. If he ignores you, or says no, let him be and remind again later. Remember to keep up the praise whatever his response - he's doing his best.
- Do not fade or change your cues until your child is well and truly toilet timed, and having only one or two accidents per week over a long period.

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## **How can I get my child to use other toilets? He hangs on all day at school**

- This is also a common problem with many children. With children with autism this is often related to either fear of different places, resistance to change, or just part of their toilet routine. It could be that the toilet at school has electric hand dryers, which a number of children with autism fear enough to not want to even go near the school toilet block. It could be the fluorescent lights in the toilet block, the smell of the toilet cleanser, or the very size of the toilet block, which at school will naturally be much bigger than at home. A gradual desensitisation program can help with these fears.
- The best time to introduce different toilets to your child is when he is comfortable with short periods of sitting on his own familiar toilet at home. Try at a familiar house like Grandma's first. Take anything you normally use at home as part of your toilet training program, seat insert, a toy, music tape, and use this in the "new" toilet. Reward the child when he sits, just as you would at home. Don't force him to go into the new toilet if he is reluctant. Try again next time.
- If your child is older, and has been holding on at school for a number of years, it will be difficult to change this (unless he has a specific fear that may be able to be overcome), and unless it is causing specific health problems you may just need to accept this behaviour. This doesn't mean that you should not suggest using the toilet in different places, and rewarding any efforts at all to go near another toilet. Again, don't force - the child may have some very real fears that he is unable to express to you.
- If your child refuses to use other toilets, and you are going to be away from your home for a number of hours, it is best to put a nappy on him for that time, and for older children, put them in dark pants so that wet pants are not as obvious. Take spare pants with you.

## **My child 'holds onto' his bowel motions**

This happens for a number of reasons. Children with autism often have fears that are very real to them, even if we can't see what there is to be frightened of. With toileting it may be that it is that a part of themselves, a visible part, is disappearing down a little hole. Or perhaps they did a bowel motion on the toilet once and the water splashed up onto their bottom. That one fright could be enough to make them actively resist trying again. They could be holding on because it hurts to do a bowel motion. Constipation can be very common in children with autism who may have a diet consisting of very little fibre. They get into a cycle of holding on and when they finally having to go but it is uncomfortable to do so, so they try to hold on next time because they don't want to feel pain again. Another problem with long term constipation is that the child can no longer tell when he needs to go to the toilet because his stretch receptors are too stretched to send accurate messages.

If fear is the problem, a desensitisation program is the most appropriate way to deal with it. A brief list of some of the gradual steps this could involve follows, but it is important to discuss this type of program with a professional so that it can meet your child's individual needs. Do not move from one step to the next until your child is completely comfortable at each stage.

1. Allow your child to have a bowel motion in his nappy or pants, then show him how you empty it into the toilet. At this stage it may be best not to flush it away until the child has moved away.
2. As above but flush the toilet while he is nearby.
3. If your child is regular have him sit on the toilet, keeping his nappy on, and do his bowel motion there. Once done, empty into toilet and flush.
4. Place a cloth nappy across the toilet bowl, held in place by the seat, so the child has no pants or nappy on, but can defecate onto the nappy. Finish up as above.
5. Gradually lower the nappy until it is virtually hanging in the toilet

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6. Remove nappy, but put a bit of toilet paper into the toilet before the child goes so that there is still something for his bowel motion to land on.
  7. You may well want to teach the child to do this last step himself - it stops a splash coming up.
- If constipation is the problem, the most natural thing to do is try to increase the amount of fibre from fruit, vegetables, breads and cereals in your child's diet. We all know that this is much easier said than done with a child with autism.
  - See your Paediatrician who may recommend daily taking of fibre, or other preparations, to make bowel motions softer and easier to pass. These are now available in a wide variety of flavours, and can be mixed into a drink. They may have the added advantage of making your child more regular, so that you can 'catch' him at the right time.
  - If your child does his bowel motions in places other than the toilet, for example in the back corner of your yard, then go with him and pick it up (with paper towel or rubber gloves). Be matter of fact and don't give extra attention. Take the bowel motion and put it in the toilet, show the child and say "poo in toilet". Sit the child on the toilet for a few minutes, then let him get off. Look into the toilet and say "good, Adam, poo in toilet", and immediately give reward. The idea is that you are trying to get the child to understand that if the faeces are in the toilet he will get a reward.
  - If long term, consistent programming fails to change the pattern, you may need to make use of suppositories. This is a last resort and should first be discussed with your Paediatrician. They are only a very short term measure, but may help to give you something to reinforce, for example faeces in toilet. Once the connection is made in your child's mind that faeces in the toilet means a piece of chocolate, then the use of suppositories can be gradually phased out.

### **What can I do to stop my child smearing his faeces?**

Firstly look at why this is happening. It could simply be developmental, in that many very young children will at some stage play with their own faeces - it possibly feels good. If your child with autism is still at a very young developmental age, this is quite a normal behaviour. He could be smearing to get attention. Or it could be that he is having trouble using his bowels because of constipation and instead is putting his fingers into his anus to get his faeces out.

- If the problem is developmental, try to avoid, rather than cure. You can do this by making it harder for your child to get his hands into his nappy or pants by putting him in one piece overalls that do up at the back.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of other sensory experiences that are appropriate including finger paint, water play, wheat play or massage creams on the hands.

The following are appropriate only when you know your child is past a developmental age where smearing occurs, when he is already successfully sitting on the toilet, and perhaps has even had some success in there with his bowel motions:-

- The child may be smearing for attention. It may have happened quite innocently the first time, but because of the reaction the child got, it was worth repeating the behaviour just to see the reaction again. It is extremely difficult not to react to smearing of faeces because, let's face it, it's pretty awful. However it is important to try to remain as neutral, and calm, as possible. Clean your child up, and the area, then have the child sit briefly on the toilet to let him know where he should go, before putting him back to bed (or wherever he was at the time). If you do not make a big deal about it the first time, chances are it will not become a problem.

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- Are you rewarding the behaviour without knowing it? People with autism are unusual with regards to what excites them and gives them pleasure. It could be that your yelling, long lectures about where to go to the toilet, heavy sighing, expressions of revulsion, rushing around cleaning, spraying the room with air freshener are all big 'turn ons' for your child. As much as is humanly possible stay cool, calm and collected.
  - Or is your child getting a nice warm bath or shower after the event, which most children enjoy, and thus he is doing the behaviour to get a bath. If you feel this could be the case, reschedule bathtime to just before the time the smearing has been happening. If the child still smears, wipe him down with a flannel rather than giving a bath. If it is in the afternoon, wait a few hours before he has his bath so that the two things are not connected.
  - When the smearing has gone on consistently for a long period, and you feel it is deliberate, and the above suggestions have not helped, more harsh measures may need to be taken. Some parents have found putting the child in a cool shower instead of a pleasant warm one has worked. It is important not to get too emotional. Stay matter of fact, use simple language with "no smearing, poo in toilet", and always get your child to sit on the toilet for a few minutes after the event.
  - Using rewards with your other children for appropriate toileting can be an incentive. When one of your other children has done a bowel motion in the toilet give him/her lots of praise and attention and be specific what it is for, with "well done - poo in toilet". Make sure your child with autism sees what is going on. Give him the chance to sit on the toilet if he gets cross about not sharing the reward.
  - If your child has been smearing regularly at night in his room, be sure to give him lots of praise for the nights he doesn't smear, "good boy-no smearing/no poos - clean room", using whatever you know he may understand.
  - If your child is putting his fingers into his anus to get out his faeces, he may be having difficulty with constipation, or fears of 'letting go'. See the section above for ideas. It may also be necessary to put this child in overalls so that he is unable to continue this behaviour. Alternatively, the child may be seeking the sensory stimulation of the smell, in which case other strong smells should be offered to him.

### **How do I stop my child pulling off all the toilet paper or continuously flushing the toilet?**

These can be very irritating things that will make toilet training much more of a chore than it need be. The behaviour may begin quite innocently, but continue either because of the response it gets (a parent ranting and raving), or because it is pleasurable. The behaviours are most commonly reported by parents of younger children, and seem to be a stage many children go through, and then grow out of. They are the sort of behaviours that are best treated by changing the environment rather than trying to work directly on the behaviour.

- Tell the child "no", then distract with something else.
- Supervise in the toilet and only let your child flush the toilet once before taking him to the bathroom to wash his hands.
- Take the toilet roll out of the toilet. It makes it a bit inconvenient for others but it may help break the pattern of behaviour your child has established.
- Keep an empty toilet roll in the toilet and reroll six to eight squares on it. That way there is always some in the toilet, but if your child with autism pulls it off there is not much wasted, nor does he get such a big thrill from it. Again it may help break the pattern.
- Toilet locks that latch the lid down are available from variety and department stores.
- If you are still in the process of training, or toilet timing your child, a small latch on the outside of the toilet door, above the height your child can reach, will keep him out of the toilet except when you take him.

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- If you are in the process of teaching your child independence, and encouraging him to take himself to the toilet, you will not want to lock the door. Instead follow the earlier suggestions for the toilet paper. If repeated flushing is a problem, turn the water off at the tap once the cistern is full. That way your child will get one flush, which is appropriate, but nothing will happen if he pushes the button again. Do not show him what you have done, or he'll work out that he can turn the tap on again himself, but instead go into the toilet at some later time, and allow the cistern to fill before turning the tap off again. As with other suggestions it may be inconvenient in the short term, but is often enough to break the pattern and you can go back to having things 'normal' again later on.

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**A few final words on toilet training:-**

- Don't start too early
- Don't force the child
- Don't panic
- Keep it in perspective – don't let it rule your life.