

Toilet Skills and Young Children on the Autism Spectrum

As with the development of other skills, young children with asd are often slower to achieve toilet independence or tend to get there in the end by their own rules! However, many people have very strong views on the right time to begin but your child's age is often little help when deciding so be strong in deciding on a plan that suits you and your child. Every child is different and so there are only guidelines and it is up to you as parents to decide on what suits.

Even those on the higher end of the autism spectrum may have difficulties recognising the sensations associated with needing to use the toilet or are often resistant to any attempts at potty or toilet training. Knowing when the best time to start helping your child achieve independence in this area can be unnerving and more complicated than attempting the task with other children who are developing along usual lines. However, quite often, parents of children with autism say that the process was not as fraught or as difficult as they imagined and was surprisingly quick to establish.

Therefore, it might be helpful, in the first place, to think about the reasons why your child may take longer to become clean and dry.

Toilet Issues for Young Children with Autism

- Unaware of the sensations associated with urinating and passing a motion and doesn't 'read' own body signals, indicating that your child is developmentally and physically not ready to begin
- Can let people know when they are wet after the event
- Not worried about feeling wet or dirty or oblivious to a dirty nappy because of super absorbency of the pad – so why do they need to change the routine?
- Resistant to new routine of removing nappy to begin training
- Fixed areas of where and when they perform – for example, always pooing in the bedroom in the evening
- Disinterested in using a potty or toilet or doesn't seem to know what it is for
- Unaware of peers' successes in this area or social expectation
- Unresponsive to the motivation of pleasing someone else by becoming clean and dry
- Difficulty waiting to 'perform' when taken to the toilet
- Suddenly becoming resistant after a period of some cooperation and success
- Weeing or pooing anywhere but the toilet or potty
- Anxious of the toilet in general – sitting on the seat, noise of the flush, washing hands etc

- Anxious and resistant when using other toilets outside of home
 - Anxious when realising bits are falling from their body
 - Fascinated with toilet furniture rather than it's function
 - Sensory activities mean that your child may be affected by the smells, temperature of toilet seat, noise of the flush or hand dryer etc in the bathroom
 - Frightened of passing a motion because it hurts to do so or unaware because motions are very loose
 - 'Holding' on and not urinating until nappy is placed back on
 - Resistant to stop a favoured activity to then be placed on the potty or toilet.
- Reasons why toilet training often takes longer for children with asd**

Social Interaction:

May not notice other children using the potty or toilet
 Little awareness of other children's habits
 No understanding or notice of peer pressure to succeed
 May not respond to verbal praise
 No shyness or inhibition when wet or soiled

Communication:

Cannot 'ask' to go to the toilet with language, so may need another form of communication
 May not hear speech directed to them
 Doesn't understand a question, such as, 'Do you want to go to the toilet?'
 Doesn't understand the concept of 'waiting'

Flexibility of Thinking:

Happily plays or occupies time to the exclusion of everything else
 Remembers unpleasant toilet experiences and reacts uncooperatively each time
 May have rituals around the bathroom which makes difficulties using the toilet appropriately

Sensory Issues:

May react strongly to the smells and temperature of the toilet
 May want to pursue fascinations with water, for example
 May be hypersensitive to water, for example
 May not be able to sit down on the toilet for very long

Knowing when and where to begin

Try not to worry if other people are telling you that your child should have mastered toilet training. Age is only a very rough guide to knowing when to start. A small steps approach often works for children on the autism spectrum and if things aren't

going to plan, hold back for a while and then start again. Try not to make the process a battle of wills but as calm and matter-of-fact as possible. Agree amongst the whole family on what you are trying to achieve in the first place, which may be just tolerating sitting on the toilet fully clothed for a while.

Here are a few pointers to hopefully help you begin:

- Attempt training only when you feel well and 'up for it' in terms of time and patience. For example, deciding to try to toilet train your child at the beginning of December because you are staying with relatives at Christmas would put extra pressure on you and your child to try to succeed.
- Watch for signs that they seem to know when they have been or need to go and 'offer' the toilet or potty. Perhaps your child is pulling at their nappy or trying to take it off because it is wet or soiled? Does your child take your hand for you to change the nappy?
- Decide whether to use a potty or go straight to the toilet and help your child 'make friends' with it. Is your child too big for a potty or too small to sit comfortably on the toilet?
- If you decide to use a potty, place it in either the toilet or a warm room without expecting your child to do anything but tolerate it being there. If your child likes a favourite character, place some stickers on it.
- Decide whether to go from nappy to pants or from nappy to trainer pants. However, it is worth remembering that children on the autism spectrum can get fixed on certain ways of doing things so possibly adding another step (moving from trainer pants to pants, for example) may prolong the process of independence even more
- Have a specific toilet toy kept up high to only be played with whilst sitting on the potty or toilet.
- Start to move towards the bathroom to change your child and 'pretend' to flush the contents of their nappy down the toilet with their help so they understand what it is used for
- Possibly use a picture that schedule which very clearly explains what to do in the toilet. For example.
'trousers down', 'pants down', 'sit on toilet', 'wait a little while', 'try to wee or poo', 'pants up', 'trousers up', 'flush toilet', 'wash hands'
- Let your child see what other members of the family use the toilet or potty for!
- Borrowing a doll who wees water over a potty or toilet may help your child understand what to do!
- Watch for signs of straining or shuddering which may indicate trying to pass a motion or weeing and offer the potty or toilet. This may help you begin toilet timing your child which is often a useful stage before they recognise the need to go themselves
- If your child uses a visual timetable, include 'toilet stops' to help toilet 'timing' at various times in the day when even a quick sit on the toilet is enough for a reward
- Use of a card or phrase, 'First sit on toilet then chocolate button', for example, might make it worthwhile for your child to have a go
- A social story setting out using a toilet in a clear, simple and matter-of-fact way may help with more able children on the autistic spectrum

- Talk to your child's nursery or pre-school and discuss your ideas about trying to begin training and enlist their help also. Try to use the same approach, language and rewards

Some ideas to try to make the toilet a carefree experience for your child:

- If your child feels unsteady when they are sitting down, use a trainer seat in the toilet, a handrail by the side of it or a stool underneath your child's feet
- Spray the bathroom with a mildly perfumed scent before and after your child uses the toilet
- Have some novelty or favourite soap or wash to encourage washing hands after using the toilet
- Try playing some soothing or favourite music as your child waits to 'perform'
- Try to help your child wait a little longer to go by blowing bubbles together or reading a story as they wait or have a special 'toilet' song to sing
- Place a small amount of paper in the toilet bowl to soften the noise of any splashing which could upset your child
- Give your child time and privacy to feel relaxed in the bathroom
- Visit other toilets together and reassure any anxieties around unfamiliar places and fears around hand dryers etc

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