

Toileting

Supporting Children and Young People with Autism in Toileting



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1. Understanding Autism and Toileting Challenges

Toileting can be a complex process for children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Many face difficulties related to communication, social understanding, sensory processing, and changes in routine. A structured and patient approach is key to helping children feel comfortable and supported.

Some children may struggle to understand verbal instructions related to toileting, while others might find it challenging to communicate their need to use the toilet. Social motivation can also differ, meaning they may not feel the same urgency to transition from nappies to pants as their peers do. Routine plays a significant role in daily life for many autistic children, so changes in toileting habits can be overwhelming. Sensory sensitivities may also contribute to challenges—bright lights, loud flushing sounds, or the texture of toilet paper might cause discomfort or distress.



"Learning to use the toilet, particularly in a way that others see as appropriate, can be a challenge for some autistic children. There are a variety of different reasons why some autistic children can experience toileting difficulties."

National Autistic Society



2. Common Toileting Difficulties

Transistion

Children with autism may experience a range of toileting difficulties that can make toilet training more complex. One of the most common challenges is delayed toilet training, where a child struggles to transition from nappies to using the toilet. This delay may stem from difficulty recognising bodily signals, reluctance to change established routines, or an overall lack of motivation to engage in toileting. Since many autistic children thrive on predictability, the shift to a new toileting routine can feel overwhelming and lead to resistance. Parents and caregivers should introduce changes gradually and consistently to ease the transition.

Anxiety

Another key difficulty is anxiety surrounding toileting, which can manifest in several ways. Some children may develop a fear of the toilet itself due to its size, the noise it makes, or its unpredictable nature. Others may feel vulnerable while sitting on the toilet, especially if they struggle with balance or feel uneasy about the open space beneath them. This anxiety can lead to toilet avoidance, making accidents more frequent and toilet training more stressful for both the child and their caregivers. Addressing these concerns with reassurance, gradual exposure, and adaptations—such as using a child-friendly toilet seat or footstool—can help build confidence.

Sensory

Sensory-related challenges also play a significant role in toileting difficulties for children with autism. Some children are highly sensitive to certain textures, making toilet paper or wet wipes uncomfortable to use. Others may have difficulty tolerating the feel of water splashing on their skin or may find strong bathroom smells overwhelming. Additionally, children who struggle with interoception—the ability to sense internal body signals—may not recognise when they need to urinate or defecate, leading to accidents or discomfort. Understanding these sensory differences and making appropriate accommodations, such as offering alternative toileting materials or adjusting the environment, can significantly improve a child's toileting experience.



3. Sensory Considerations and Adaptations

Auditory

Many autistic children experience sensory sensitivities that can impact their ability to use the toilet comfortably. Noise sensitivity is a common challenge, as sudden or loud sounds such as flushing toilets, hand dryers, or running taps can be distressing. For these children, introducing noise-reducing strategies, such as allowing them to flush the toilet themselves or using noise-cancelling headphones, can help them feel more in control of the experience.

Visual

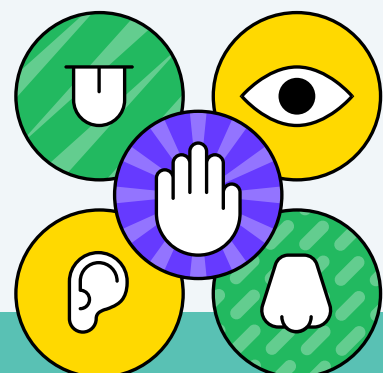
Visual sensitivities can also present difficulties, as some children may find bright lighting, patterned tiles, or reflective mirrors overwhelming. A more calming environment can be achieved by dimming the lights, covering mirrors, or using soft-coloured walls and fixtures. Keeping the bathroom uncluttered and visually simple can also reduce distractions and help the child feel more at ease.

Tactile

Tactile sensitivities can make certain aspects of toileting uncomfortable, such as sitting on a hard toilet seat, touching toilet paper, or feeling water splashes. Offering padded toilet seats, using soft wipes instead of traditional toilet paper, and allowing the child to adjust their seating position can make the process more comfortable. Additionally, some children may need extra support for balance when sitting on the toilet, which can be provided through footstools or grab rails.

Interoception

Finally, some children may struggle with interoception, meaning they do not easily recognise when they need to use the toilet. This can lead to accidents or reluctance to engage in toilet training. Caregivers can support these children by implementing regular toileting schedules, using visual cues, and providing gentle reminders. Creating a structured and predictable routine can help children develop better awareness of their toileting needs over time.



4. Environmental Factors to Support Toileting

The environment in which toileting takes place plays a crucial role in a child's comfort and success. A supportive toileting space should feel safe and predictable. Using the same bathroom consistently can help establish a sense of familiarity. Adding a visual schedule or social story about toileting can provide clear guidance, and keeping distractions to a minimum can make the experience less overwhelming.

Examples of Practical Adjustments

1

Child-Friendly Toilet Seat

A smaller, cushioned, or adaptive toilet seat can provide comfort and security. Many children find standard toilet seats too large or cold, which can increase anxiety. A seat with handles or a soft surface can make sitting more comfortable and reduce the risk of falls.

2

Footstool for Stability

Many children struggle with balance while sitting on a toilet. A footstool provides a firm base for their feet, helping them feel grounded and supported. This also aids in proper bowel positioning, making toileting more natural and comfortable.

3

Visual Schedule or Social Story

Some children may not understand the sequence of toileting. A laminated step-by-step picture guide placed in the bathroom can reinforce the routine. Social stories, with clear images and simple language, can help prepare children and reduce anxiety about the process.

4

Adjusting Bathroom Lighting and Sounds

Bright lighting and loud flushing noises can be overwhelming. Soft lighting or natural light can create a calmer environment. If the sound of flushing is distressing, allow the child to flush when they feel ready, or use ear defenders to reduce noise sensitivity.

5. Sensory Audit Worksheet

Every child has unique sensory needs. Completing a sensory audit can help identify triggers and adaptations that may support their toileting journey. Use the table below to assess the child's sensory responses:

Sensory Area	Potential Challenge	Adaptions Neded
Tactile (Touch)	Toilet seat Toilet rolls or wipes Nappy Splashes from the toilet Need to fiddle when sitting on the toilet Temperature Touching poo	
Visual (sight)	Walls Lighting Brightness Bathroom fitments Mirrors Items in line of sight	
Auditory (hearing)	Toilet flush Splashing in toilet Sounds from pipes, fans, hand-dryers Echoes	
Olfactory (smell)	Wee and poo Bathroom products (cleaning and toiletries) Air-fresheners	
Gustatory (taste)	Bathroom products (cleaning and toiletries) Air-fresheners Poo	

6. Medical Considerations

Some toileting difficulties may have underlying medical causes. Constipation, urinary incontinence, and other bladder or bowel issues are common concerns. Children with autism may not always recognise or express discomfort, so it is important to look for signs such as straining, avoiding the toilet, or frequent wetting.

✓ Food An Hydration Impact

A child's diet plays a significant role in their bowel and bladder health. Low fibre intake can contribute to constipation, while inadequate hydration may lead to infrequent urination or concentrated urine, which can cause discomfort. Encouraging a balanced diet with plenty of fluids, fruits, and whole grains can support regular toileting habits.

✓ Medication Side Effects

Some children with autism take medications that may affect bowel and bladder function. Certain medications can cause constipation, increased urination, or difficulty recognising the need to go. If toileting issues seem linked to medication, consulting a healthcare provider for adjustments or supportive treatments may be beneficial.

✓ Toilet Avoidance Due to Pain

If a child has previously experienced pain while toileting, they may begin to associate the toilet with discomfort and avoid using it. Conditions such as chronic constipation or urinary tract infections (UTIs) can make toileting painful, reinforcing avoidance behaviours. Ensuring that any underlying medical concerns are addressed promptly can help build positive associations with using the toilet.



7. Practical Steps for Toilet Training



Toilet training should be a gradual and tailored process, taking into account the child's individual needs and preferences. Preparation is key—introducing the bathroom and toileting concept through visual aids, books, or role-play can help build familiarity. Creating a structured environment before beginning the training process helps set a strong foundation. Caregivers can start by identifying a toilet training schedule based on the child's natural toileting patterns and making the bathroom a comfortable, inviting space. Familiarising the child with the bathroom outside of training sessions can also reduce anxiety.

Routine

Establishing a consistent routine by encouraging toilet visits at regular intervals can create structure. Some children may not instinctively recognise when they need to go, so prompting them at predictable times—such as after meals or before bedtime—can help build a habit. A visual schedule placed in the bathroom with step-by-step instructions can reinforce the process, making it easier for children to understand what is expected. Using consistent language and routines across different settings, such as home and school, is also important for reinforcing learning.

Independence

Encouraging small steps toward independence, such as flushing the toilet, pulling up trousers, and washing hands, can help build confidence. Breaking the process into manageable steps makes it feel less overwhelming. If wiping is a challenge, caregivers can guide the child with verbal instructions or provide flushable wipes, which are often easier to use than dry toilet paper. Some children may also benefit from wearing easy-to-remove clothing, such as elasticated waistbands, to reduce frustration.

Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement plays a key role in toilet training success. Encouragement, verbal praise, and small rewards can help motivate children to use the toilet. A simple reward system, such as earning stickers for successful trips, can make training more engaging. It's important to keep expectations realistic and avoid punishment for accidents, as setbacks are a normal part of the process. By maintaining patience, adjusting strategies as needed, and celebrating small achievements, caregivers can help children feel more comfortable and capable in their toileting journey.



8. Norfolk's Children's Continence Service

The Norfolk Children's Continence Service, provided by Norfolk Community Health and Care NHS Trust, offers specialist support for children and young people, between the ages of 4 and 18 yrs, experiencing bladder and bowel difficulties. Their team of healthcare professionals, including nurses and continence advisors, work to assess and manage toileting challenges through tailored intervention plans.

What They Offer

The service supports children with a variety of continence issues, including daytime wetting, bedwetting, constipation, and soiling. Their approach includes medical assessments, advice on toileting routines, guidance on fluid and dietary management, and, where necessary, the prescription of continence products. For children with additional needs, the team provides specialised strategies to help promote independence and improve quality of life.

How to Access Support

Referrals to the Norfolk Children's Continence Service can be made by healthcare professionals, such as GPs, health visitors, or school nurses. Families seeking support should first consult their GP to discuss any concerns and explore referral options. The service operates across Norfolk and works in partnership with parents, schools, and other healthcare providers to ensure children receive comprehensive support.

Contact Information

For more information about the Norfolk Children's Continence Service, visit their website: www.norfolkcommunityhealthandcare.nhs.uk



Our Mission

"Empowering autistic individuals and those around them, ASD Helping Hands is dedicated to fostering confidence, independence, and inclusion at every stage of life. We provide guidance, education, and resources to help individuals, families, and professionals navigate autism with knowledge and empowerment.

We champion the rights of autistic people, striving to create a more inclusive society while ensuring our services remain accessible, reliable, and built on trust."

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