

# Let's Get Started: A guide to toilet training children of school age



Because you ♥atter

# Contents

|                                                   |           |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>                               | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Assessing readiness</b>                        | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Getting started</b>                            | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Equipment and resources that will help</b>     | <b>12</b> |
| <b>Reminders for parents, carers and teachers</b> | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Troubleshooting</b>                            | <b>15</b> |
| <b>Sensory needs</b>                              | <b>16</b> |
| <b>Bladder and bowel health</b>                   | <b>18</b> |
| <b>Glossary of terms</b>                          | <b>22</b> |



This guide has been produced by your local Specialist Bladder and Bowel Nurses and Assistant Practitioner, Sensory Processing Occupational Therapy Support Service (SPOTSS) and Speech and Language Therapy Services (SALT).

# Introduction

## **Who is this guide for?**

Parents/guardians and professionals working with school aged children on their toilet training.

## **Who has created this guide?**

Specialist nurses and assistant practitioner team experienced with toilet training children. The information in this leaflet is based on best practice which has now been published as national guidance.

## **Why have we created this guide?**

We have had conversations with school nurses, teachers, teaching assistants, parents, families, and allied professionals who all told us that there was a lack of resource in supporting school aged children to toilet train. Significantly more children are starting school without being toilet trained. Sometimes it is thought that families are not trying to toilet train their children. However, this is rarely the case. Most families do all that they can to support their child's development but may not have the knowledge or experience with toilet training. They may have been advised to wait until their child is ready, without being given any information about what this means.

There is some evidence that Children are toilet training later than what used to happen in previous generations, remaining in nappies and this may be causing an increase in the number of children who have difficulties with their continence (being able to stay clean and dry). Some children may have an underlying problem that makes toilet training more difficult such as constipation, sensory differences or a physical or learning disability, **but it does not mean it is not achievable**. This information is your 'Go to Guide' of specialist advice to begin the toilet training journey irrespective of your child's needs.

“Delaying toilet training until the child has reached an arbitrarily decided age, such as 4 or 5 years, or until they appear to be showing readiness signs (e.g. awareness of passing urine or stools, able to sit on the toilet, understand language for toileting, wanting to imitate others), is not appropriate. There is good evidence to suggest that leaving a child in disposable products will delay acquisition of bladder and/or bowel control and lead to constipation, nappy dependence, urinary dysfunction and urge incontinence”<sup>(1)</sup>

*<sup>(1)</sup> Smith and Thompson 2006; Taubman, Blum and Nemeth 2003; Bakker and Wyndaele 2000; Barone, Jasutkar and Schneider 2009) and that toilet training promotes bladder maturity (Joinson et al 200*

# Assessing readiness

- To know your child's readiness, you will need to know how your child's bladder and bowel works and how to keep it healthy.
- A consistent approach at home and at school, including language/communication system used and deciding when to start makes things easier for the child.

## **It is helpful to follow our tips below**

- Constipation is very common in young children and can make toilet training really challenging. Being able to spot the signs of a problem (through their GP or School Nurse or Bladder and Bowel Nurse) can make a big difference.
- Lots of children only want to poo in a nappy or start to withhold poo when they start training. We use ERICs step by step guide to help a child in this situation.
- Think about the toilet environment – children need to feel relaxed to go! Make them a pleasant place to be with books, bubbles, posters, singing songs etc.
- Use toilet seat inserts and step stools to help children feel secure and get into a good squat position (feet supported, knees higher than hips).



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- Encourage boys to sit down to wee so that they empty their bladder fully. This also provides opportunities to poo that can be missed when standing.
  - Avoid encouraging children to empty their bladders too often – this can get very boring and confusing for them and doesn't allow their bladder to fill properly or learn to hold more. On average children should be able to go 1.5 – 2 hours between wees.
  - Work with the body's natural, prime pooing time e.g. 20 – 30 minutes after eating. Encourage a sit on the potty or toilet after lunch and not before.
  - Make sure children have a drink at regular intervals throughout the day. This will help them to recognise their bladder signals as well as keeping their stools soft.
  - Always reward effort and not just success.

**[www.eric.org.uk](http://www.eric.org.uk)**

Common Toilet training issues in early years.

## Getting started

**Remember:** Take things one step at a time. You can then move on to the next step once your child is ready. Do not try and rush this and be led by your child. Sometimes certain stages take longer than others, do not worry. Continue to give good praise for the process as you do the outcome.

For additional advice, please visit  
[https://www.mcht.nhs.uk/our-services/  
bladder-and-bowel-services](https://www.mcht.nhs.uk/our-services/bladder-and-bowel-services)

## STAGE 1

- Rule out your child has constipation. Being able to spot the signs of a problem (through their GP or School Nurse or Bladder and Bowel Nurse) can make a big difference.
- Ensure your child has 5-6 drinks in the day, ideally at mealtimes/snack times. Encourage them to take their drink quickly.
- Keep all changes of pull ups/nappies in the bathroom. Where able, ensure your child is standing up whilst being changed.
- Slowly introduce parts of the toilet training process to your child's routine at their change times, e.g include your child in with dressing and undressing where able, show your child their poos to be tipped down the toilet, washing and drying of hands.
- Start the change routine at key times that are reasonable and achievable such as brushing teeth or getting ready for bed, and include more frequently throughout the day as you progress.



## STAGE 2

- Assess the toileting area for your child. Decide if they would prefer to use a potty or the toilet, you could also include them in the process of choosing what potty or seat insert they want for their training. Communicate this preference to school also for continuity.
- If your child chooses to use a toilet, ensure you provide them with a step stool to enable the correct toileting position and comfort. Also consider a toilet seat insert or a toileting frame. You may need to speak with Occupational Therapy Team regarding suitable equipment.
- Develop verbal communication around toileting. Whenever your child is sitting on the toilet, give this time of the day a name such as 'Wee/Poo Time' or 'Toilet Time' and always try to use their name before using this statement.
- Find out what motivates your child or how you can effectively reward them for doing so well. Provide an instant reward, e.g Playdoh, sensory play, song, dancing, story time, as instant rewards boost confidence and engagement.
- Encourage your child to sit on the toilet 20-30 minutes after their lunch and tea, they are more likely to have a poo.
- Once your child has been following a drink routine, you will then be able to test how soon after a drink they will have a wee and this will inform you of their future toileting times. E.g. Placing a piece of strong kitchen roll in your child's clean pull up to test how soon after a drink, they have a wee.

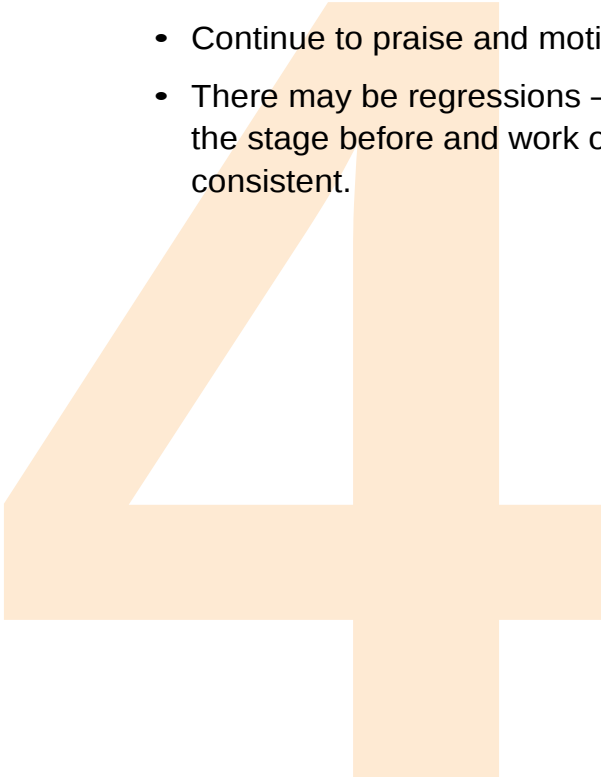
### STAGE 3

- Now you know how long it can take from having a drink to your child doing a wee, try and use this information as an opportunity for you to sit them on the toilet in time for their wee.
- Discuss with school what you are doing at home with a toileting routine. School will then need to introduce the same routine during your child's school day.
- Continue and be consistent with rewarding your child, even if they do not do a poo or a wee on the toilet/potty. Remember, sitting on the toilet/potty is really good progress at this stage and continue to praise or reward your child.



## STAGE 4

- If you're noticing your child is dry in between changes during the day, consider trialling wearing pants at home and school.
- To help develop awareness of them being wet, you can place a strong piece of kitchen roll into a nappy or pull up or alternatively, put them in fabric underwear and then place a nappy/pullup over the top. Remember – awareness of doing a wee or poo may not be there just yet, but over time your child will develop that feeling of recognising when they need a wee or a poo. Routine builds progress.
- Continue to praise and motivate your child.
- There may be regressions – if so, go back to the stage before and work on that to keep consistent.



# Equipment and resources that will help

There are many types of equipment which will help your child.

- Toilet seat and step can ensure your child feels safe and relaxed on the toilet. With the step, ensure it is high enough for your child to rest their feet on. Their knees should be higher than their hips (45 degrees). There are a range of toilet seats. Some have padding, some have handles if your child needs a little more stability.
- Timers – help your child know how long to sit on the toilet. You can use different devices to do this.
- Communication systems such as symbols, now and next boards and visuals will assist you in communicating the toilet training process to your child. Your child will benefit from you being the leader of this process as they may be developing their communication skills. Speech and Language Therapy can offer further support.
- PECs (Picture Exchange Cards) can help your child communicate with you, when they need to use toilet. If you have any questions about using this resource, please speak with your child's Speech and Language Therapist for further support.

- Stickers/sticker charts are excellent at encouraging your child.
- Sensory toys/fidget toys for them to play with when they are on the toilet.
- Bubbles are great; these can help your child feel relaxed and encourages them to possibly do a wee or poo.
- Absorbent washable pants can be great to use, this helps build your child's confidence whilst out and about.







# Reminders for parents, carers and teachers

Remember, some stages of toilet training will take some time. It is very important to keep focus but also to not set yourself any timelines, as this will only put yourself under pressure. There are parts of toileting which your child will progress quickly in and parts of their toilet training that they will need more time to work on. This is okay. If there are any stages your child is struggling with, you can take a break and go back a step and move to the next step when you feel you, your child's teacher and your child are ready to progress.

There is nothing more important than you when it comes to toilet training your child; your support, motivation and consistency will be the most effective tool.

## Who to ask for further support?

If you are struggling with any aspect of toileting, there is excellent information at Bladder and Bowel UK ([www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk)) and ERIC charities ([www.eric.org.uk](http://www.eric.org.uk)).

If you feel you need more support, you can discuss your concerns with your school nurse or GP.



# **Troubleshooting**

We understand that toilet training your child may come with extra considerations, especially if your child has additional needs. We have created this section to support you with these common, but difficult challenges that may be present during toilet training (or in some cases before you start the process).

# Sensory needs

We all have sensory preferences; many children fear hand-dryers when they are younger for example but can get used to them over time with support and understanding from you. Other children continue to be distressed by the noise, or bothered by other sensory experiences such as the toilet flush, temperature, lighting and smells.

## Strategies that can help

### For noise:

- Ear defenders if tolerated
- Listening to music/stories
- Standing outside the bathroom to start with whilst adult flushes the toilet, then stand in the bathroom before learning to flush themselves
- Some children will be happier if they flush as they are then in control of the noise and know exactly when it will happen
- Teach child to hum, sing or chat whilst drying hands which will override some of the noise.

### For lighting:

- Close blinds in bathroom to reduce glare and dull the room
- Consider how bright the tiles/décor is and consider either changing or adding a covering such as pictures
- Your child might like to wear sunglasses
- Change the light bulb to one with a soft/warm light.

### For smells:

- Open windows
- Give child a cloth with a preferred smell on such as weak perfume, citrus or just plain to cover nose
- Acknowledge and explain any smells and remind them that it will soon go
- Play wafting with a cloth or hands to send the smell away

# Bladder and bowel health

Making sure your child is having healthy wees and poos is very important, especially when toilet training is about to start. Children may struggle to progress with their toilet training if they are struggling with any discomfort. They may even associate any negative feelings, such as pain when having a poo, with the toilet itself.

Therefore, we recommend that your child's bladder and bowel health is monitored before introducing a new routine with using the toilet.

## **Anxiety with using the toilet**

A lot of children are very anxious about using the toilet, especially when they need to do a poo.

Making sure your child is sitting comfortably, is not straining, and is getting lots of positive praise will help to reduce any anxieties. This may take some time and patience, but once your child feels comfortable and confident with sitting on the toilet this will help reassure them.

## **Smearing**

Smearing is when a child likes to touch their own poo and sometimes play with it. This could be for a couple of reasons. Some seek the texture and warmth, or the attention they get when smearing. Some do it as a sign of distress or boredom. We understand that this can be a very difficult thing for parents or carers to deal with as it can be very embarrassing and unpredictable.

Working out the reason for smearing is key to support the child to stop the behaviour, and then adapt their environment and consider including more sensory activities during the day. For example, if your child is smearing only during term time, then you may need to speak to school staff about potential anxiety related situations in school, or if you feel it is for attention, then calmly clean your child and then ensure they are getting a lot of positive attention at other parts of the day.

## **Toilet refusal**

This can be overcome with time, patience, and commitment. By following ERIC's guide to toilet refusal, may help with navigating through this time.

## **School input**

School input from the beginning, try to have good and regular communication with your child's class teacher/ teacher assistant and discuss with them what you have been doing at home. Discussions around what works, what does not work, what rewards your child likes etc allows school to replicate this for consistency. Depending on your child's communication style, school may be able to support with appropriate strategies for use at home. Such as visual time tables, PECs or reward systems.



## **Drinking fluids**

Maintaining good drinking is very important – it will help keep your child's poos a healthy type and regular and can make their bladder stronger, so that their continence improves. If your child refuses to have their drinks, consider using motivators or rewards to encourage them. Remember, drinking small amounts at first will help establish a good routine and then slowly work on increasing the volumes over a period time. Consider discussion with your GP or Speech and Language Therapists (if known to one) any concerns you may have about your child's swallowing.

## **Level of awareness**

Children do not need to be aware of their Bladder and Bowel motions in order to be toilet trained. Whilst parents/carers may find it helpful for their child to be aware, it is not essential. Most importantly, is ensuring good bladder and bowel health as this regulates how much wee they make and when they poo which is the foundations of toilet training. Predictability ensures routine, and routine ensures success. As your child develops their communication skills they will be able to express their awareness more clearly.

## **Night time wetting**

Night time wetting is very common. Most children who toilet train will be able to become completely dry at night, but those who don't, can speak with their school nurse or GP about further support.

## **Accessibility**

Accessibility can be a real concern for parents to start toilet training. You can speak with your school nurse or GP (or if they are known to Occupational Therapy) about having a temporary commode at home whilst your child is toilet training. We would also recommend purchasing a 'Radar Key' – having this will allow you access disabled toilets.

## **Family crises which may cause delays**

Through years of experience of working with families, we have noted that children will struggle to progress if the family are facing difficult challenges (such as, divorce, ill health, change of schools and much more). It is okay to put a pause on any toilet training, and focus on your family's wellbeing.

## **Regressions**

Don't panic! Regressions are very common and normal. They don't normally last long and there is often a good reason for them – such as returning to school after summer holidays. This would be a time where you would go back a stage in the toilet training journey and slowly rework up to the next stage.

# Glossary of terms

| Word                              | Meaning                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Continence                        | Being able to keep clean and dry.                                                                     |
| Sensory<br>(Seeking or Avoidance) | Things such as smells, sound, touch, temperatures which a person may like or dislike.                 |
| Regression                        | When a child goes back a step in terms of their development.                                          |
| Fluids                            | Drinks such as water, light coloured juice or plant based                                             |
| Consistent                        | To stick with a task or goal.                                                                         |
| Resources                         | Equipment, leaflets, or websites which help.                                                          |
| Occupational Therapy              | a service which supports people with daily life activities including advice / provision of equipment. |
| Awareness                         | Your child knowing when they have done or need to do a                                                |
| Constipation                      | When a person or child struggles to poo often or have different types of poo.                         |

# References

Eric: The Childrens Bladder and Bowel Charity  
**[www.eric.org.uk](http://www.eric.org.uk)**

Bladder and Bowel UK  
**[www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk)**



**[www.mcht.nhs.uk/our-services/bladder-and-bowel-services](http://www.mcht.nhs.uk/our-services/bladder-and-bowel-services)**

**[mcht.nhs.uk](http://mcht.nhs.uk)**    **MidCheshireNHS**   **CCICPNHS**

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