

Toilet Training and Autism Spectrum Disorders

Introduction

This pamphlet is written for parents and caregivers of young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) who are beginning the process of toilet training.

- ❑ **Why is toilet training important?** Along with learning to feed and dress oneself, becoming toilet-trained is an important step in personal independence. Socially, it opens up opportunities for interacting with others and taking part in a wider range of activities. In addition, there are practical benefits for caregivers, including time and financial savings connected with the cost of diaper changing and related supplies.
- ❑ **Why is toilet training a child with ASD often more complicated than training a typically developing child?** The main components of a diagnosis of ASD—social communication challenges and restricted interests/repetitive behaviors—can interfere with the process of toilet training.

First, children with ASD may lack the same social motivation to learn to use the toilet in order to show their parents that they are a “big boy” or “big girl” or because their friends are doing it. They may be less likely to show interest in watching and imitating others “go potty” and may also be less responsive to social rewards, such as praise for successful toileting.



Second, children with ASD often have difficulty understanding and following verbal directions and may have limited communication skills to express their toileting needs, such as being scared of sitting on the toilet.

Finally, because some children with ASD have difficulty with change in their routines, they may be resistant to the steps involved in toilet training, such as taking away diapers and interrupting their schedule with bathroom trips. They may also be anxious in new situations, have difficulty feeling when they need to go, or have sensory sensitivities. For example, they may have a larger reaction to the sound of loud flushing, the sight of fluorescent lights, the feel of the toilet seat, or the smells associated with bathrooms.

All of these issues may combine to make toilet training a challenge. However, we also know a lot about the strengths of children with ASD that we can use to help toilet training be successful!

- ❑ **How do I know my child is ready to begin toilet training?** It depends on several factors, including your child's age, awareness of toileting-related issues, physical readiness, and communication skills. Beginning toilet training too soon may make the process more frustrating for both you and your child. However, if you think your child might be ready, look for some of the following signs:
 - Notices when diaper or clothing is wet or soiled.
 - Shows interest in self-care (e.g., dressing, hand-washing, toileting).
 - Shows interest in other's toileting behavior.
 - Completely empties bladder when voiding and stays dry about 2 hours at a time.
 - Has bowel movements that follow a regular and predictable pattern.
 - Is able to walk to and from bathroom independently.
 - Has the balance to sit on toilet 2 – 5 minutes.
 - Follows a few simple directions (e.g., sit down).
 - Indicates need to go to bathroom through facial expressions, postures, gestures, pictures, or words.

Even if your child is not yet showing all of these signs, there are parts of the toilet training process you can begin to help prepare your child.

- ❑ **Am I ready to begin toilet training my child?** Since you will be guiding this process, you need to be ready to begin. This means that toilet training is a high priority for you, and that you have adequate time to commit to it. It also means that other people in your child's life—family members, babysitters, daycare providers, teachers—are ready to help. Toilet training will go more smoothly if all the people caring for your child use the same approach.

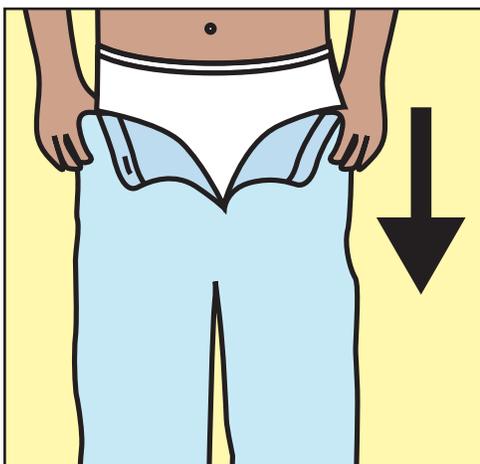
- ❑ **What can I do to prepare?** Before beginning toilet training, it is helpful to keep a "toileting diary" to capture information about the timing of your child's urination or bowel movements each day. This will provide you with clues about appropriate times to take your child to the toilet.

Depending on your family's comfort level, you may want to provide opportunities for your child to observe another person using the toilet to model the steps.

Select the specific words you will use consistently (e.g., pee and poop) and that you will use to prompt a bathroom trip (e.g., "let's go potty"). Choose words you will feel comfortable hearing your child use in public and when he or she is older and that all adults will use with him/her.

- ❑ **How do I begin the toilet training?** Even though some of the features of ASD complicate toilet training, the preference for routines and the desire for predictability seen in children with ASD may actually be used to facilitate the process. If you have kept a toileting diary, you will hopefully have good information about the best times to take your child to the potty. For example, the toileting diary indicates that your child is consistently dry when he wakes up at 8:00 a.m., but is wet at 10:00 a.m. This would suggest that a good time to have the child sit on the toilet would be between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. Set times in your schedule for bathroom trips during these times. Communicate them to your child as a regular part of the day, just like eating and dressing, rather than asking if they need to go since this might not be something they can understand at first.

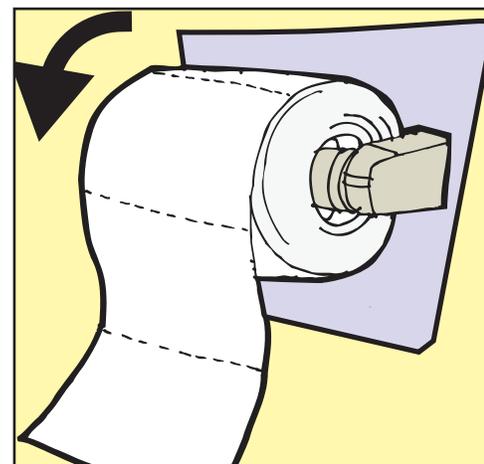
Visual Schedule



Go to bathroom and pull down pants



Sit on potty



Wipe

Other strategies such as developing a visual schedule may decrease language demands and promote understanding of each step of the process. For example, you can present your child with a sequence of drawings or pictures depicting the specific steps: enter bathroom, pull down pants, sit on potty, wipe, flush, pull up pants, wash and dry hands, go to next activity (see example below). You can also use a daily schedule to communicate to your child when the scheduled trips occur, so they can be prepared for them and more easily transition to them.

If your child is in the early stages of toilet training, you may have to begin by scheduling trips to the bathroom that only involve certain steps of this process, like being in the bathroom or sitting on the toilet for a few seconds. Deciding where to start will depend on how comfortable and compliant your child is with these first steps of the toileting process.

❑ What are other helpful strategies?

- Increase liquids and high fiber foods to increase the chances of “catching” your child when they need to use the bathroom.
- Make the bathroom a positive place (music, soft lighting, pleasant scents, etc.) and decrease things about the bathroom that may be seen as negative or anxiety-provoking for your child.
- Decrease discomfort or fear of sitting on toilet by providing foot rests for stabilization and a padded toilet seat insert.
- Plan clothing for ease of undressing.
- Assemble basket of preferred toys child is only permitted to use while sitting on the toilet.
- Use a timer to communicate the length of the sit and to

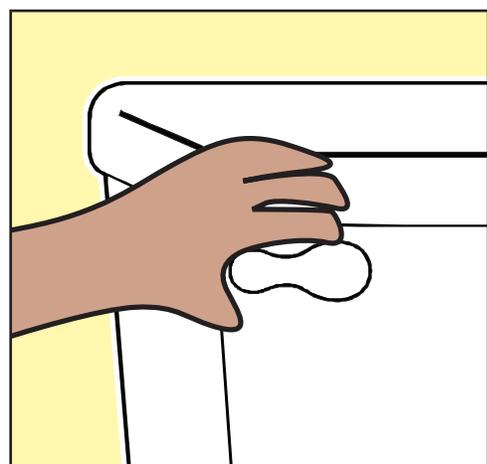
increase length of time as needed.

- Create a “first-then” board (for example, “First sit, then bubbles”—as a reward). Remember to provide rewards for the behaviors you want your child to do during the toileting process!
- Use social stories that describe each step of the process through a simple story format.
- Create a picture card to communicate the need to use the bathroom if your child is nonverbal or has a hard time using his/her verbal abilities in stressful situations.

❑ What if we have setbacks? It is common for children to experience setbacks in toilet training, particularly when they go through transitions or other stressful experiences. When setbacks occur, check with your health care provider to evaluate possible medical conditions, such as constipation or urinary tract infections. Once these concerns are treated, you may need to repeat some of the earlier steps of toilet training to get back on track. Also, be aware of leaving in the supports you successfully used (e.g., a visual schedule, rewards) for a while after success is seen to avoid a setback.

❑ Resources and References:

- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center: Download free resources and visual supports by visiting vkc.vumc.org and clicking on “resources” section.
- vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/ebip/toilet-training/
- Autism Speaks has a toolkit on toilet training, as well as other printable resources. Visit www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits
- Wheeler, M. (2007). *Toilet training for individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities* (2nd ed.). Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.



Flush and pull up pants



Wash hands



Next activity

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