

Information Sheet:

Toileting resources for autistic children

Toilet training is seen by all parents as an important developmental stage for their child. For a parent of an autistic child this will take patience, understanding and observation of the signs of 'readiness' to move toward independent toileting.

Preparation

It may be helpful before starting your toilet training program to have a discussion with your GP or Paediatrician about your child's general health. This will assure you that your child's intake of fluids and dietary fibre is sufficient for urination and regular bowel routines.

Choose a block of time for toilet training. This will mean that the training will be constant and give your child an opportunity to learn this new skill set. The amount of time required may depend on your child's learning needs.

Signs that your child is ready

Children typically begin to show signs of bladder and bowel control at around 2 years of age. For autistic children, some of these signs can appear between 2 to 5 years of age (Wheeler, 1998).

These include:

- Showing an interest – Following a parent, sibling or family member to the bathroom
- They may have a dry nappy for up to two hours
- Your child may remove their nappy
- Awareness of a wet or soiled nappy
- Can sit between 2 to 5 minutes at a time

If your child is unable to remain unsoiled or dry for a 1 to 2 hour period but still shows some of the other signs of readiness, it may be possible to commence toilet training (Wheeler, 1998).

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Through 'habit training' which is also known as 'toilet timing' (going to the toilet at a fixed time), monitoring food and drink, and reinforcement, toileting is a skill that can be taught.

Prerequisite Skills

The Continence Foundation of Australia (2010) describes in detail (with tasks broken down into an easy table) the pre-requisite skills for toilet training.

They include:

1. Mobility: Can your child get to the toilet?
2. Sitting: Can they sit for approximately 2 minutes at a time? For an autistic child this could mean they can be engaged in an activity for 2 minutes.
3. Communication: Can they communicate their need for the toilet?
4. Dressing: Can they remove their clothing independently to use the toilet?

These skills may need to be taught explicitly to an autistic child before commencing toilet training.

It may be important to teach your child to undress using loose fitting, elastic band trousers or shorts, or skirt. Dressing your child in underwear with their favourite cartoon character on it may increase their desire to learn this skill.

Visual prompts, such as using a photo of the toilet, will assist with communication. When it is time for the toilet, take the photo with your child to the toilet, so they learn to associate the picture with the object.

Sitting for two minutes can be encouraged by reading their favourite book and building up concentration that way. Reinforce good sitting with another desired item, such as TV time or a favourite clip, whilst on the toilet. The reinforcement should be immediate (where possible).

Strategies for Toilet Training

As transitioning is an issue for many autistic children, many toilet training programs recommend not using a potty, but using a toilet training seat instead. Toilet training seats are an insert that sits under the toilet seat to make the hole smaller and more comfortable for the child. They can be purchased from most shops that sell baby products. Another step can be to have your child wear underpants during the day, and only wear a nappy at night. This will decrease the likelihood of your child holding on to void in their nappy. It also makes undressing for the toilet much easier.

Before commencing toilet training, change your child's nappy in the same room as the toilet. This will aid with your child associating being wet or soiled with the toilet. After commencing the program, change your child's night time nappy in the toilet, and follow the washing hands routine as you would after using the toilet.

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Strategies for Toilet Training

Children can be taught the entire routine of toileting at the one time. This involves:

1. Removing clothing
2. Wiping
3. Dressing
4. Washing hands

Even if your child can only complete some of these steps, it is important that the routine is followed so using the toilet then becomes one process. Begin with the least amount of guidance and increase as needed. This will ensure your child become more independent sooner.

Visual schedules, where the steps of the task are set out in pictures, may help remind or prompt your child of what steps come next. Some steps may need to be broken down even further, such as hand washing. One visual card per step, e.g. turn on the tap, use soap, etc. Once children have mastered the basic routine, they may only need reminding for some parts, e.g. wiping, or drying hands. Some parents may leave a visual schedule in the location where it is required, such as next to the bathroom sink to act as a prompt for hand washing.

Reward your child for using the toilet. Your child will not only feel good, but this will assist with teaching them the steps. The reward should be immediate, so your child then associates the reward to their success at toileting.

Sensory Issues

A large number of autistic children have sensory issues. This may cause them to be more sensitive or less sensitive to their environment.

Toilet training may place extra demands on a child with sensory issues. There are a number of things to consider:

- Your child may miss the sensation of wearing a nappy. It may help to cut a hole in the back of the nappy, to allow your child to still void into the toilet, with the sensation of the nappy. You can then very gradually increase the size of the hole over time.
- The height of the seat and the feeling of not having their feet on the floor might be an issue. A step may make your child feel more comfortable.
- Your child may prefer a padded toilet seat..
- Environment: Temperature, light, size of the room.
- Access to toilet.
- Sensation of their own body/fluids.

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Boys: Stand or sit?

When toilet training a boy, it is important that they begin their training sitting on the toilet to do both wee and poo. This simplifies the process and both skills are learnt simultaneously. If your son doesn't understand the difference between doing a poo or wee, then standing up to wee may not be a goal. Once both of these skills are taught, it will then be time for your son to learn to wee standing.

The easiest way for a boy to learn is to watch his dad or older brother do this. Modeling is an important learning tool. If this is not possible, a video such as Tom's Toilet Triumph (from the Are You Ready? DVD) is an excellent animation about a boy learning to use the toilet.

Things to Remember

Toilet training is a skill that takes time to learn. For an autistic children it is important to be consistent with the program.

If you need further advice or support regarding toilet training, or continence, please contact the following services:

Your child's GP or Paediatrician

Occupational Therapists

Parentline 1300 301 300

National Continence Helpline: 1800 330 066

Resources

Victorian Continence Resource Centre, (2019). Easy Guide to Toilet Training for children with special needs. <https://continencevictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/EasyGuideBook.2nd-Ed.-pdf.pdf>

References

Are you Ready? A Toilet Training Package This resource includes a DVD and a resource for parents, including data collection tables for monitoring progress.

Continence Foundation of Australia, (2010). One Step at a Time: A parent's guide to toilet skills for children with special needs. The PDF of this program can be downloaded from: <http://www.continencevictoria.org.au/resources/children>

Wheeler, M. (1998). Toilet Training for Individuals with Autism and Related Disorders: A comprehensive guide for parents and teachers.

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