

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?**

Each of the three main components of autism – social impairments, communication deficits, and restricted interests/repetitive behaviors – can interfere with the process of toilet training.

First, children with ASD may lack the social motivation to learn to use the potty in order to show their parents that they are a “big boy” or “big girl.” 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. Conversely, they may not be as sensitive to the negative reactions of others when they lack this skill or have an accident.

Second, children with ASD often have difficulty understanding and following verbal directions and may have limited communication skills to express their toileting needs.

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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. They may also be anxious in new situations, have difficulty feeling when they need to go, or have sensory sensitivities. For example, they may overreact 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.

❑ **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 will make the process more frustrating for both you and your child. However, if your child is around 3 years or older, look for some of the following signs of readiness:

- 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.

❑ **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?**

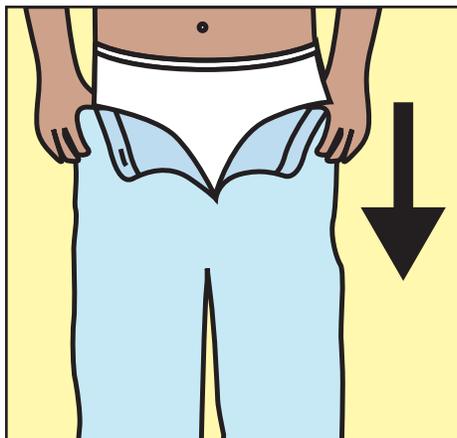
Before beginning toilet training, it is helpful to keep a "toileting diary" for 2 weeks that will capture information about the timing of your child's urination or bowel movements each day. This will provide you with clues about appropriate times to take your child to the toilet.

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 undressing, sitting on the toilet, wiping, washing hands, etc.

Select the specific words you will use consistently (e.g., pee and poop). Choose words you will feel comfortable hearing your child use in public and when he or she is older.

During this preparation phase, set up the environment to promote success. This may include purchasing a potty chair or adapted seat for the regular toilet,

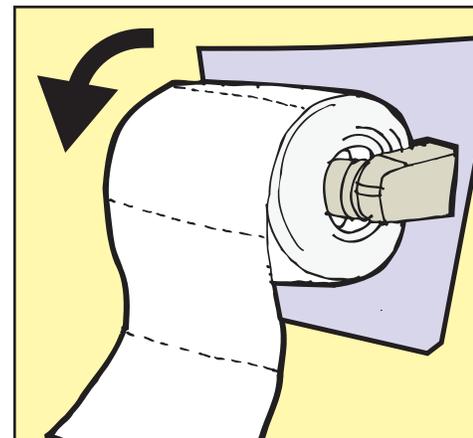
Visual Schedule



Go to bathroom and pull down pants



Sit on potty



Wipe

removing distractions, purchasing training pants, and/or selecting rewards.

❑ **How do I begin the toilet training?**

Even though some of the features of autism tend to 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.

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).

❑ **What are other helpful strategies?**

- Increase liquids and high fiber foods.
- Make the bathroom a positive place (music, soft lighting, pleasant scents, etc.).
- Decrease fear of sitting on toilet by providing foot rests for stabilization.
- Plan clothing for ease of undressing.
- Assemble basket of preferred toys child is only permitted to use while sitting on potty.
- Use a timer to increase length of time sitting on potty.
- Create a “first-then” board (for example, “First sit,

then bubbles” – as a reward).

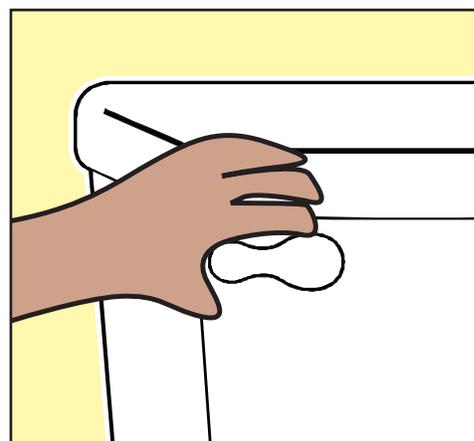
- Use social stories that describe each step of the process through a simple story format.
- Create a picture card to communicate the need to use the bathroom, if your child is nonverbal.

❑ **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.

❑ **Resources and References:**

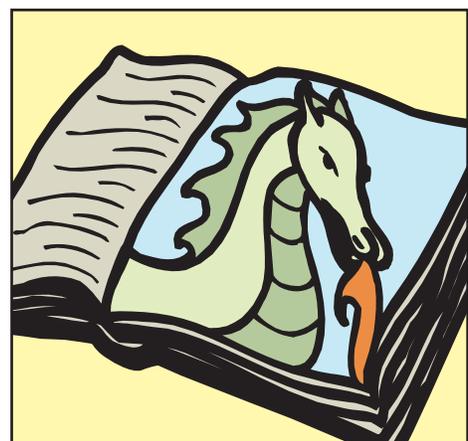
- [Vanderbilt Autism Resource Line](#)
Toll free: 1-877-273-8862
Local: 615-322-7565
Email: autismresources@vanderbilt.edu
- [Autism Society of Middle TN \(ASMT\)](#) Contact <http://tnautism.org/> for information about toilet training resources in their Lending Library.
- [TEACCH Autism program](#) See <http://teacch.com/educational-approaches/applying-structured-teaching-principles-to-toilet-training-susan-boswell-and-debbie-gray> for guidance about applying structured teaching principles to toilet training.
- 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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