# Toilet Issues with Your Child Since Sexual Abuse

Who this information is for:

Parents / carers of children who……

* Sometimes or all the time don’t poo in the toilet even though they used to
* Wet or soil themselves
* Poo or wee in strange places like a bin, a wardrobe or in their bed
* Hide used tampons
* Have incontinence that is not explained medically

It can be frightening for the parents or carers who are faced with this, it can be difficult to manage and it can get in the way of everyday life.

This information could be helpful at:

* Identifying why this might be happening
* increase the child and the parent / carers understanding
* Consider what might help the situation

This information sheet looks at three common reasons for toilet issues that therapists who do this work can come across; fear, communication and nurture.

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| Image result for frightened**Image result for fear of the toilet**  **Fear:** | | |
| **Signs of this** | **Why** | **Hints and tips:** |
| When they enter a toilet or bathroom their body posture changes, they try and avoid using the toilet or they want the door leaving open.  The child wants their parent nearby  The child won’t use the toilet at night time  Reduction or a change in their eating or drinking (in order to reduce their need to use the toilet) | A frightening event could have happened to that child in or near a bathroom or something about the bathroom could trigger a memory for the child such as….  Being locked in?  The smell?  Being near the stairs?  The sensation of feeling a need to go?  It is possible that even the child might not know what the trigger is.  This memory could trigger a trauma response (the fight flight freeze response) which means the brain responds as if it is still in danger and increases the heart rate and breathing and adrenalin ready to protect itself.  This can lead to an anxious, hypervigilant state for the child and the bathroom becomes somewhere to be wary of or avoid. | Find out more about what happens for the child if you can (the child might not be able to explain it). Just be curious and interested. You could find out if it’s easier if (for example) the toilet door is open?  If you are stood nearby?  Which bit is the worst bit - Sitting down? Entering the room? The feeling of the poo coming out?  Learn more about the fight flight response system and help your child to understand and recognise how their body is responding at difficult times, for example, can they notice their heart beat, breath and thoughts?  Let your child know that their brain is working well, and doing what it should. The reaction is understandable but you and them could learn more about it and learn how to calm it to a more relaxed state, too. |
| **Signs of this** | **Why** | **Hints and tips:** |
| Child puts off going to the toilet or denies needing it | People need to be able to relax to do a poo and if the child’s anxiety is high, they will find it hard to release this when they need to. | Breathing techniques for relaxation might help |
| Child won’t go to the toilet at school or in public but can wet or soil themselves once home | If your child wets or soils themselves at home, are they avoiding the school or public toilets for fear of the unpredictable and not feeling safe enough to use them but then ‘lets it go’ or relaxes at home and it comes out too soon? | Find out more, this might be something the school can help with but the child might need to agree to what is being said – can you write to the school together? |
| Is clingy / wants their parent / carers nearby | They may need you or someone they feel safe with to be near by so that you are available to help them if anything was to happen | find out more about this. How near to the room do you need to be? What thoughts or worries do they get if they don’t feel like a parent is near enough? Don’t say things like “don’t be silly” because to them it feels real and frightening and they don’t want to be told they are silly for being scared and letting you know. |
| Wets the bed or wee’s or poo’s in the ‘wrong’ place like a bin or in a cupboard | If they use a container instead of the toilet, are they avoiding the bathroom? They may also hate the feeling of vulnerability of being sat on the toilet with their pants down. They could also fear the mess, the splash, the openness (etc etc). | You might have to do some investigating, use the ‘W’ questions (For example; when does this start….? would it be ok if….? Where do you first notice a feeling….?) **BUT** don’t use ‘Why?’ because it is too big to answer and the child might not know.  One parent let me know that they put some photos in the bathroom of happy memories or people the child associates with safety or happiness. This gave a different focus for their thoughts. |

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| **Communication** | | |
| **Signs of this** | **Why** | **Hints and tips:** |
| It provokes a feeling of disgust, or anger in you.  The child is often smelly  They show you or leave it for you to find | “He’s just doing it for attention” – YES!!!! He really might be so let’s listen and think about him and why he needs this and what attention will help him.  Children and young people can be unable to express their fear and confusion or anxiety in words. What has happened to them and how they now feel is just not possible to explain, it might feel messy, feel out of control, it might disgust them or feel very scary and the vocabulary they have just doesn’t match it. | Respond calmly, with thought, be curious about what else might be happening for the child and empathise with their situation.  Use it as an opportunity to support and talk to each other, be honest and open.  Punishment and criticising them and their actions never work. |
| The child has soiled themselves or the room has been messed up.  You feel annoyed and angry at your child for doing this | The child might be trying to say….  “Get away from me”  or “I’m so disgusting so you won’t want to come near me”.  Or: “I am scared to be close to people because I got hurt when I trusted someone”.  Or: “look at how messy and awful it is inside”.  The child has chosen what they think is the most disgusting thing to explain this. They may also be wondering…can you look after me even though I am so horrible. Will you still stick around? | Can you reassure them that you love them and will keep looking after them? Be curious, thoughtful and avoid using “why?” (its too big a question for them to answer).  It is a difficult thing to be managing and cleaning up, its Ok to wait until you feel ready for this conversation.  Some parents are able to notice how THEY feel – shocked, anger, disgust, dirty, upset that their rules have been broken and that things are out of control, maybe???? That’s okay, I think the child might want you to feel them so that you can understand what they are trying to explain to you. |

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| Related image  **Nurture** | | |
| **Signs of this:** | **Why:** | **Hints and tips:** |
| Wet or soiled pants  Not cleaning themselves / poor hygiene  Using containers such as a bin as a toilet | They might revert to an earlier time, a wish to return to a time they were a baby, were nurtured, experienced a feeling of closeness and safety, when their needs were met and they felt looked after. | Allow them to have times when they can feel nurtured, can you wrap them in a blanket? Stroke their hand when you watch the TV (if this was something you used to do when they were younger)? Mess with their hair? Paint their nails?  Just think what fits yours and their relationship. |
| Soiled pants, poor hygiene | Creating chaos, dirt and mess could be a way of keeping a sense of familiarity and therefore safety for them (if this is how things have felt for them at earlier times in their life).  It can also feel safe for them to be in control of that ‘environment’.  The child might feel as if they are not good enough, they don’t deserve nice clothes or to live in a clean environment (low self-esteem). | Keep things predictable and routine for your child with clear boundaries so their sense of trust and safety can develop.  Try to find out more from your child at times when you are both calm and not distracted by TV or other people. Could you ask them if they get thoughts in their head sometimes that make it difficult for them? Do they find it hard to relax? |