

## Toilet training: children with autism spectrum disorder

**Going to and using the toilet is an exciting and sometimes challenging step for any child. You can use some special strategies to make toilet training easier for your child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).**

- ✓ [Signs that children with autism spectrum disorder are ready for toilet training](#)
- ✓ [Steps for preparing children with autism spectrum disorder for toilet training](#)
- ✓ [Toilet training strategies for children with autism spectrum disorder](#)
- ✓ [Overcoming toilet training challenges for children with autism spectrum disorder](#)
- ✓ [Toilet training setbacks and difficulties for children with autism spectrum disorder](#)



Visit our **forum** to share your stories, advice and support with other parents of a child with ASD.



**Join the forum**

### Signs that children with autism spectrum disorder are ready for toilet training

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) generally show the same signs of readiness for toilet training as typically developing children do. But **these signs might appear when your child is older, and the training might take longer.**

Some signs that your child is ready include:

- being able to tell you (or show you with a sign or gesture) that she has wet or soiled her nappy or clothes
- being able to follow a simple instruction like 'Sit on the toilet', and being able to pull her pants up and down
- having regular formed bowel movements
- having enough bladder control to stay dry for at least one hour at a time during the day.



Before you start toilet training, it's a good idea to speak with your child's paediatrician or GP. They can rule out any medical problems that might get in the way of toilet training and say whether your child might be ready to start.

### Steps for preparing children with autism spectrum disorder for toilet training

The steps for preparing for and getting started with toilet training are much the same for all children. But children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) **might need a bit of extra teaching and some strategies** adjusted to suit their needs.

An important first step is to realise that toilet training is largely about **communication and working together** with your child.

It might also help to think of toilet training as a series of smaller goals, rather than one big goal. For example, start with simply familiarising your child with the toilet, what it's for, and how to use it. Then you could progress to starting the toilet training.



Our general article on [toilet training](#) can help you get started. Then you can use the extra

strategies below to help your child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) go from nappies to the potty or toilet.

## Toilet training strategies for children with autism spectrum disorder

Going to the toilet is a complex task, made up of many small steps. It can help to break tasks like toilet training down to their most basic parts and teach those smaller parts to your child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), step by step.

Below we outline three strategies to help with toilet training your child with ASD: **encouragement and rewards, visual aids and supports, and Social Stories™**. All children are different and what works with one child might not work for another. It's a good idea to try a combination of approaches.

### Encouragement and rewards

Rewards and positive reinforcement can help with toilet training. As your child learns each step involved in using the toilet, you can reward him, which encourages him to learn. Rewards and encouragement can include:

- descriptive **praise** – for example, 'Charlie, well done for sitting on the toilet'
- nonverbal praise, gestures (clapping) or signs (thumbs up)
- a favourite activity – for example, playtime with trains
- a star on a sticker chart
- a favourite healthy food.

Try a variety of rewards, and use the ones your child responds to best. Before you start, plan exactly what your child will be rewarded for, and ensure your child clearly understands what behaviour is being rewarded. Try not to overuse a reward.

Some rewards that motivate typically developing children – like stickers or stamps – might not interest a child with ASD. Work out what rewards your child likes by presenting a variety of rewards for a few seconds and watch your child's response. You could try rewards like hugs, high-fives, claps, foods, toys or activities.

Once your child has made progress on a particular step, stop using food, activities and toys as rewards. But keep using verbal and nonverbal praise.



We used a reward system – Sesame Street stickers for wee and a lucky dip bag for poo. He caught on straight away for his bladder, but it took longer with his bowels. We just kept asking if he needed to poo and waved the lucky dip bag in front of him, making it very clear he would get something if he went. One day something just clicked for him and we haven't had an accident since.

### Visual supports

Children with ASD are often visual learners. So you can support your child's learning by providing visual cues and prompts.

**Visual supports** can help to reinforce the routine of using the toilet, and provide reminders for taking regular toilet breaks.

You could try creating a visual schedule to show your child the toileting routine. You can use the **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)** or other visual aids. The schedule can be stuck on a wall close to the toilet or potty.

Go over the schedule with your child 2-3 times a day. Everyone who does toileting with your child will need to know and follow the routine. This way, training will be consistent.

On the right is a simple **example of a visual aid for toileting**. Download and print an [A4 version of this visual aid for toileting](#) (PDF: 111kb).



## Social Stories™

Social Stories™ are used to help children with ASD develop appropriate behaviour and responses. They might help children with ASD cope with challenging or confusing situations, like toilet training.

Social Stories™:

- use simple storylines with clear pictures
- are written from your child's perspective
- describe the situation, like using the toilet
- give details about what happens in the situation
- suggest how your child might respond in the situation
- explain why your child should respond in a particular way.

Trained speech pathologists, occupational therapists and early intervention or school teachers will be able to help you create a Social Story™ for your child's toilet training.

If your child will be going to the toilet at a friend's home or somewhere else other than home, practise a new story for this situation with your child ahead of time. When the event actually happens, your child can use the story to help guide her behaviour.



When you're writing a Social Story™, use words and pictures that are appropriate for your child's developmental level. Suggest possible responses and behaviours, rather than making the story an exact 'script' to follow.

## Overcoming toilet training challenges for children with autism spectrum disorder

Toilet training a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be more challenging than training a typically developing child. This is because children with ASD are often very attached to their routines and don't like change. This might make it more challenging to go from nappies to the toilet.

Try these tips to help your child make progress with toilet training:

- Consider skipping the 'potty' stage if your child with ASD has difficulty with change. Some parents go straight to putting their child on the toilet, sometimes with a toilet training seat. This limits the number of changes children experience in the toilet training process.
- Try washable reusable training underpants or underpants with a protective liner (which are less absorbent than nappies or pull-up training pants). If your child has trouble knowing when it's time to use the toilet, these might help your child become more aware of the feeling of wetness.
- Use specific language. For example, say, 'Eddie, sit on the toilet so you can do a wee'. This is clearer than asking your child to 'sit on the toilet', and will help your child understand what to do.
- Choose one word to refer to going to the toilet. Get everyone in the family to use it. For example, always say 'toilet' or 'loo' or whatever your family is comfortable with. The different words we use to describe the toilet – potty, loo, bathroom – can be confusing for children with ASD.
- Teach your child a way of letting you know he needs to go to the toilet. This could include nonverbal signing or the use of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).
- Five minutes sitting on the toilet is enough. If you get your child to sit on the toilet for too long, she could feel as if she's being punished.
- Try to stay calm and positive. Children with ASD can have difficulty understanding new situations and other people's emotional responses.

## Sensory overload

If your child with ASD is sensitive to or upset by the sensory aspects of going to the toilet, try ways of controlling your child's sensory experience of toileting. For example:

- Get your child familiar with sitting on the toilet seat by practising for a few minutes every day. Make him comfortable – for example, if the floor is cold, put socks on your child's feet. Try to match the temperature in the room to the rest of the house.
- Use a foot stool if your child needs foot support while sitting on toilet.

- Use a training seat if your child is frightened of the big hole over the water.
- Tell your child there will be a noisy flushing sound, and explain the reason for the noise.



For our son, it all revolved around change. We started by teaching him to wee in the garden, then into a bucket in the garden, then into a bucket inside, then into a bucket next to the toilet, then finally into the toilet. This took nearly a year! I tried to make the toilet a happy place for him to visit by putting Bob the Builder stickers all over the door and letting him have little matchbox cars.

### Toilet training setbacks and difficulties for children with autism spectrum disorder

Sometimes toilet training children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is associated with other **behaviour problems**, like being afraid of the toilet, going in places other than the toilet, filling the toilet with paper and other materials, continually flushing the toilet, smearing poo on the wall and other places, and refusing to poo. Constipation can also be a problem.

If you find you're having any of these problems or if there hasn't been any improvement after a few months, here are a few **ideas to think about**:

- Keep a record of the times your child wets or soils for a week or so. If a pattern develops, target these times by taking your child to the toilet just before your child would normally wee or poo in her pants.
- Speak to your paediatrician or GP for advice. There could be a medical reason for your child's lack of response to toilet training. Medical reasons might include [constipation](#) or a [urinary tract infection](#).
- Speak with the other people who are working with your child, like a [psychologist](#), occupational therapist or your child's early intervention service. They might be able to offer more intensive support.

#### Constipation

Constipation is a common problem in children. If your child avoids doing poos, she might be constipated.

Constipation is usually caused by not enough water or other fluids or not enough dietary [fibre](#). Some children with ASD are picky eaters, which can cause them to become constipated more easily than other children.

It's worth noting that normal bowel habits vary a lot among children. Some children do a poo 2-3 times a day, but others go only every 2-3 days. If you think your child is constipated, see your paediatrician or GP. Your health professional can rule out any underlying medical concerns, and help you with strategies to manage your child's constipation.

**If toilet training becomes a battle with no signs of progress, take a break for now.** Consider starting the training again in about three months. Don't feel that you've failed – it might just be that your child isn't ready.



Create PDF



Print



Email

Rated

★★★★☆ (464) ratings

#### More to explore

- › Everyday skills for children with autism spectrum disorder
- › Sensory sensitivities: children and teenagers with autism spectrum disorder
- › Cooperative behaviour: children and teenagers with autism spectrum disorder
- › Personal hygiene and teenagers with autism spectrum disorder

#### Web links

- › Do2Learn – Toileting picture cards
- › Visual Aids for Learning – Toilet Training
- › TEACCH Autism Program – Applying Structured Teaching Principles to Toilet Training

---

**Last updated or reviewed**

10-03-2017

---