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Toileting

Points to note

- A school aged child with autism may be toilet *timed* not trained – he may rely on adults or routine cues to prompt him to go to the toilet.
- A child with autism may have associated learning difficulties that make it harder for him to learn the skills he needs to use the toilet independently.
- The child may need a very clean toilet and bathroom environment in order to be comfortable using the toilet. School toilets may be very different and frightening compared to those the child has used at preschool. They may be very dirty, noisy, smelly, crowded, in a poor state of repair, ie. doors won't lock, no toilet paper, taps too hard to turn on, etc. This is a sensory nightmare for a child with autism!
- The child may have trouble communicating his needs. He may not appreciate what other people may or may not know about his state of mind, so he may not tell an adult that he needs to use the toilet.
- The child may have difficulty generalising tasks that he has learnt from one setting to another. The child may be toilet trained at home but has difficulty using the toilets at school, or vice versa.
- The child may be lacking in social awareness; he may not understand that it is inappropriate to do a wee or a poo someplace other than the toilet.
- The child may have developed fears or phobias around using the toilet. He may be fearful of spiders, worry about being splashed with water or he may not clean himself for fear of making a mess and getting dirty. In extreme cases, these fears can lead a child to developing constipation and stomach upsets if he refuses to use a toilet at all for long periods.

What you can do

- Establish regular times for toilet visits throughout the day. Check with the child's family for suitable times. Try placing reminders on a visual timetable.
- The child may not recognise body signals that tell him he needs to go to the toilet – he may need frequent prompting.
- Use a picture chart that shows the sequence of steps for going to the toilet.
- Learn to recognise any non-verbal signals the child may use to suggest that he might need to go to the toilet. Make all staff aware of the meaning of these signals. Teach the child a standard phrase to use when he needs to go.
- Discover what works best as an effective reward; perhaps time spent at a preferred activity will motivate him to sit on the toilet.

- Reassure the child that he can return to his activity once he has been to the toilet.
- Ensure student toilets are regularly inspected and cleaned. A child with toileting phobias might be allowed supervised visits to the staff toilets if the student toilets are in a poor state of repair.
- Consult with an occupational therapist - the child may avoid using the toilet because of sensory avoidance issues, such as the sound of the hand dryer.
- Sometimes a child will try to establish elaborate routines around going to the toilet; this should be discouraged if possible. This can be a hard habit to break.
- A child who has frequent accidents at school may learn that this results in mum or dad coming to the school with a change of clothes (or taking him home for a bath) – another hard habit to break.