

Interoception - Toilet training a child with sensory difficulties

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We experience the world around us through our different sensory systems. These include touch, taste, smell, hearing, vision, vestibular (balance) and proprioception (body awareness). There is also said to be an 8th sense called interoception.

Interoception is the ability to recognize sensory information from inside our bodies, such as recognising when we are hungry or thirsty, when our bladder is full or when we need to empty our bowels. An inability to recognise when you need to go to the toilet will obviously have an impact on toilet training!

There are 5 stages of interoception

Noticing the sensation – at this stage, the child may not know what the feeling means, but they notice something is different.

Naming it – the child learns to describe what they have noticed including naming the sensation and where they feel it.

Linking the feeling to an action - for example, feeling a full bladder and linking it with going to the toilet.

Understanding the impact – this requires thinking, planning and reflection. Children who continue to play and ignore the feeling of needing the toilet will eventually learn that they will wet themselves.

Managing and acting on it - for example, knowing you have a feeling of fullness in your tummy means nothing if you don't know what it means and what to do about it. Managing would involve stopping what you are doing and going to the toilet.

Toileting issues

Children who are sensory seeking may:

- want to 'play' with and touch their wee/poo
- refuse to change wet/soiled pants
- want to keep washing their hands to play with the water and soap
- want to repeatedly flush the toilet
- 'hold on' to their wee/poo so the sensation intensifies

Children who are sensory defensive may:

- dislike sitting on the toilet seat if it feels cold or hard
- be reluctant to sit on the toilet because of a fear of falling in/off the toilet
- avoid going into public toilets due to different smells or noises such as the hand dryer
- dislike the feeling of different textures and refuse to wear pants
- not appear to recognise when they need to empty their bladder or bowels
- Struggle with the feeling of the wee or poo coming out of their bodies; they may even experience this as discomfort or pain.

Interoception and Toileting

Children who have specific difficulties with toileting related to interoception may:

- Struggle to interpret where a feeling is in their body
- Struggle to interpret what a feeling in their body means and what they need to do about it
- Find that their body interprets signals differently from what you may expect, e.g. they may not register pain or discomfort until it is significant, these children may experience issues with constipation and/or discomfort when using the toilet as they may withhold
- Feel the need to go to the toilet over and over again as their body responds to the tiniest of signals. These are the children that may need to keep going to the toilet but only doing a small amount
- Not realise when they have finished going and get off the toilet too quickly as a result leading to an accident shortly after

Strategies to help

The DSUK #pants4school Step by Step toilet skill development provides an adaptable toilet training framework for all children, including those with sensory issues, to help them become toilet trained. www.downsyndromeuk.co.uk/parents/toiletraining

However, for children with sensory processing issues, further attention may need to be made to the following:

Wet or dry - play wet or dry games to teach the language and concept. For example, with a pair of dry pants and a pair of wet pants so the child understands the concept and feeling of 'wet'.

Naming feelings helps the child recognise and associate their feelings with an action. You might say 'that was a big wee, did you feel your tummy hurting because the wee needed to come out, I'm sure your tummy is more comfortable now'.

Toilet - use a secure toilet seat reducer and stable step (the seat reducer with incorporated step ladder is often recommended). It is important that the child can sit comfortably with their feet flat, and knees bent higher than their hips. The child needs to feel secure with no fear of falling.

Visuals - use lots of visuals to help the child understand the steps of going to the toilet – such as pulling pants down, sitting on the loo etc. Social stories will also help with understanding different toileting concepts and the correct behaviours.

Makaton - if your child uses Makaton, sign as well as verbalise.

Visuals - have images of the potty or toilet around the house, for your child to indicate they need to go to the potty/toilet.

Bladder signals - sometimes, tight clothes /undies provide sensory input that distracts the child from the sensation of needing to wee. Wearing loose clothing such as boxer shorts /pyjama bottoms/jogging pants may help them recognise bladder signals and the need to go. Also allowing them to 'go commando' in the house/garden with no pants on enables them to have more awareness of when they are doing a wee. For some older children, a wetting alarm could be tried to see if tolerated.

Bowels - enable the child to sit well supported with feet flat so their knees are higher than their hips. Also, encourage the child to engage in blowing games whilst on the potty/toilet. This helps increase abdominal pressure which helps with opening the bowels.

For children who are sensory seeking:

Bathroom - if the child is sensory seeking you may want to use different smells/air fresheners and sounds/music while they are in the bathroom.

Toilet - Some children may benefit from holding a 'fidget' type toy while they are sitting on the toilet to distract them and help them relax.

Bladder - For children who tend to 'hold on' to their wee, due to liking the feeling of a full bladder, try trickling warm water between their legs while they are on the toilet /potty to help initiate a wee. You could also try turning the taps on or pouring water from a jug.

For children who are sensory defensive:

Bathroom - try and ensure it is not too cluttered and there are no strong smells or loud noises (such as an extractor fan). Take wet wipes with you when you are out and about so the child does not have to use the sink and hand dryer in public toilets.

Toilet - try and make sure the toilet seat is not too cold. If the child does not like loud noises, then try and delay flushing the toilet until they have left the room. Put some toilet paper in the toilet before the child sits on it so that there is no 'splash back' after they have been.

If you feel your child has sensory issues or you would like to know more about interoception then do contact your Occupational Therapist for further information and advice.