



Parents Partner

TUTORIAL **Pants soiling**

It is not unusual for kids to soil their pants after they are potty trained. The following are some reasons why it might occur:

- ① The child has a medical condition that leads to the soiling. This is not normally the case, but should still be checked out by your family doctor. Tell your doctor the problem and have the doctor examine your child to see if any physical problem is present. Remember less than 5% of kids with this problem have it caused by a physical disease. So it's not common.
- ② Some children become so preoccupied with their activity they forget they need to go to the toilet until it's too late. This child simply needs awareness of when to go to the toilet. If their bowel movements are regular then a gentle reminder just prior to their usual going should fix the problem.
- ③ Some children have a new toilet phobia. For this child it is more preferable to soil their pants than to use a new toilet. If your child is only soiling their pants at childcare, and not at home, this might be the reason. Again, gentle reassurance and understanding are essential qualities for dad and mum. With patience, the arousal caused by fear can be soothed. By soothing your child it will help them feel safe. When they feel safe that 'new' toilet won't appear so threatening.
- ④ Most older kids who soil their pants have one thing in common - at an earlier age they have experienced pain while doing poo. It is called encopresis. Ask yourself these questions:
 - When did my child begin to soil his/her pants after potty training?
 - Has my child always done it? Has it always been a problem since I began potty training?
Or has it arisen since potty training?
 - Has there been frequent accidents since my child has been potty trained?

Kids can get constipated, or they can have a small tear in their anus, so they learn to hold onto their bowel movement to avoid feeling pain. It then becomes a vicious cycle where they are scared to do a bowel movement. By holding on though, it builds up and stretches the wall of their bowel. This can make it harder for the child to know when to go to the toilet because they don't know when their bowel is full. It then becomes a learned response.

Also, sometimes by holding on, the faeces can break off and fall into the child's pants.

- ⑤ Another cause can be when a child is feeling anxious. If a child is fearful, or has been shamed for soiling their pants, it is likely to continue because of the stress they feel. It now becomes an emotional problem. Here are some questions to ask to identify if it has an emotional cause:

- Did the problem begin at a stressful time in your child's life? Or your family's life? On reflection, when did you first become aware of this pants soiling problem?
- Was it after the birth of another child?
- Was it at a time when you experienced marital distress?
- Were there other family problems?
- Were you shifting homes at the time it began?
- What other life stresses might have occurred around the time your child began to soil their pants?

⑥ It can be a symptom of trauma from sexual abuse. Now don't overreact to such a suggestion! That there is a very slight possibility doesn't mean it is, so don't imagine the worse. I share it because in very isolated cases it can be a cause. You need to reassure yourself that your child has always been in safe hands.

Summary

Identifying the cause is important because it determines what treatment plan you use. To find the cause I recommend you use the following process:

1. Firstly, your child needs a medical check-up to see if there are any physical causes. While it's only a slight possibility, better to have peace of mind that there are no physical problems causing it.
2. Are there any indicators your child is fearful of toilets, especially new toilets? If there is your child needs soothing because their fear will be creating a physical reaction within them. That means you are up against powerful chemicals flooding their system. Rather than trying to use a behavioural approach (like star charts), a more effective and quicker approach is to stop the flow of these fear hormones. When these danger hormones stop your child will feel soothed and safe, even when they need to use a new toilet.
3. If there are no physical causes, it could be caused by your child experiencing pain when they did a bowel movement in the past. The child now holds on to avoid the pain - but some is leaking out. With regards to this option does your child sometimes go to the toilet by themselves without fuss? And how often are they soiling: every day, once a week, once every few days, etc. Establish how frequently it is occurring to determine how serious the problem really is it. Some parents are so embarrassed by it they think a couple of accidents is a sign it is a huge problem. It's not.
4. If pain is no problem it could be caused by your child feeling emotional distress. If there has been child, family or any other emotional stress, your child might feel stressed. Stress can significantly affect your child's behaviour. Once he/she is soothed the problem will quickly diminish. For ideas on how to soothe a child read my brochures entitled *Changing Behaviour* and *Raising a co-operative child*.

One further point: It is very important that this child is not shamed, ridiculed or criticised. While such a parental response is understandable (because you are frustrated!) a shaming approach won't work. On the contrary, it may well increase the problem. That's because kids can't behave right until they feel right. This child needs plenty of understanding and patience. The worst response possible would be to criticise your child; criticism will never change it, but can do a lot of psychological damage.

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