Toilet training for children with additional needs

Guidance and tips on for when the time is right to start toilet training.

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Better Start Southend
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early years alliance

COMMUNITY FUND

Introduction

Having a learning or physical disability doesn't mean a child can't be toilet trained. Most children can learn to become clean and dry with time, patience, and the right support. Toilet training is an important life skill, and every child progresses at their own pace.

It is important to have a gentle, patient and positive approach to toilet training.

Toilet training is a big step for both you and your child, and it's important to approach it in a way that feels manageable and positive. Every child is different, and there's no one-size-fits-all timeline — it's about finding the right moment that works for your child and your family.

Parent/carers often ask:

- Can my child start school if they are still in nappies?
- My child has continence issues – where do I get help?
- How do I approach toilet training with my child who has SEND?

Top tips and ideas

Start toilet training when you feel ready
There's no rush, and there's certainly no pressure. Some children will take a little longer, and that's absolutely fine. The most important thing is creating a calm, supportive environment where they feel safe and encouraged to learn, and where they can go at their own pace.

Be prepared for accidents
Some accidents will happen — that's a normal part of learning. Try to keep things light, patient, and reassuring, and don't expect things to happen in a fixed timeframe. The more relaxed you are, the more confident your child will feel to get there.

Is my child ready?
Every child shows readiness in their own way, but here are a few signs to look out for:

- Showing interest in what's happening in their nappy (e.g. pulling at it or pointing to it)
- Using words, facial expressions, or gestures to indicate they've gone or need to go
- Going to a quiet or 'private' place to do a wee or a poo
- Staying dry for longer periods, or waking up dry after naps

Helpful Tips to Support Success:

- Make a simple plan and share it with everyone who cares for your child, so they can offer the same support and consistency
- Break the process down into small steps, one at a time, and celebrate each one
- Let your child take small steps toward independence — for example, helping with the final bit of pulling their trousers down
- Focus on encouragement and praise, not pressure
- Try not to comment too much on accidents — and especially avoid any negative response – accidents are part of learning, and a calm response helps your child feel safe
- Stay realistic, positive, and patient – and where possible, bring a sense of humour! — this can help everyone feel more at ease during this process

Top tips and ideas (continued)

Where can I get help with continence issues?
Contact the continence team for toileting products and support by visiting: https://eput.nhs.uk/our-services/children-and-young-people-s-bladder-and-bowel-service-cybbs/

Above all, be kind to yourself. Toilet training can be a learning curve for both of you, but with patience and encouragement, your child will get there in their own time.

It is also important to communicate well with your child's nursery or school if they attend, to share progress and any challenges, and also to ensure consistency of approach across everyone. Remember to send spare clothes, plastic bags to put any wet clothes in.

You might also want to use visual aids, chart, photos or pictures to help your child understand the process. This may be particularly useful if your child is autistic, as using a predictable routine will help.

Let's Go Potty

Let's Go Potty is an evidence-based 3 step approach on the ERIC website which you could also follow. It begins with preparation to use the potty, next is practising potty skills before eventually stopping using nappies as your child gains confidence.

Let's Go Potty website
www.eric.org.uk/potty-training

Let's Go Potty Podcast
www.vimeo.com/1077642247

Video and website links

Guidance from Gina Davies
This is the Gina Davies' video guide to toilet training your child with additional needs.

It is just under an hour long, really helpful – and broken down into manageable sections, so grab a cup of tea and a notepad and enjoy!
www.youtu.be/kX2NYL2BqVo

The Poo Nurses: discusses constipation and soiling issues
Childhood Constipation and Soiling Service
www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WqxJqLmKao

Parent's Story

My son was due to start nursery (attached to a school) on the term after his 3rd birthday. He was on the ASD assessment pathway but not yet diagnosed.

I was really struggling with toilet training him, as he would get very distressed when he was asked to use the toilet/potty and had some sensory issues around transitioning from pull ups to pants. I was told that the nursery he was joining did not take children that weren't potty trained, as they didn't have the provision to be able to change them. This made me start to worry that I may have to look at other options for my son or have to keep him home until he had cracked it.

After speaking to some friends, I decided to go to a SEN support coffee morning, to see if I could find out any further information on this subject and was pleased to hear that the nursery could not refuse to take my child because he wasn't potty trained.

I made an appointment to speak with the nursery and a plan was agreed that my son would be assisted by them to help potty training while in the setting. They asked me to provide plenty of pants/changes of clothes and they would take him to the toilet at regular intervals.

As time went by, my son started to wear pants into school (after trying out a lot of different types of underwear) and although there were accidents in the beginning, he is now potty trained and out of pull ups day and night.

I would always ensure that you speak to your child's nursery/school, get a plan in place and make sure you know where to go to get advice and support. Help is out there!

Useful sources of information and support

Useful sources of information and support on toilet training and continence

ERIC website – Tips and strategies
Lots of information and advice for parents on toileting at school and the impact school toilets have on children's health and wellbeing.

Lots of topics covered such as constipation, toilet anxiety, potty training approaches and much more. They also have a free helpline 0808 801 0343.

www.eric.org.uk/potty-training/children-additional-needs/
www.eric.org.uk/information/school-toilet-policy/

Toilet training advice, support and early intervention from the age of 18 months where it is known or anticipated there may be difficulties with toilet training
www.livewellsouthend.com/directory-record/3742/toilet-training-sessions

The local Family Centres also run sessions on toilet training which are free to attend.
www.southendfamilycentres.co.uk/

Continence team – toileting products and support
https://eput.nhs.uk/our-services/children-and-young-people-s-bladder-and-bowel-service-cybbs/

Gina Davies – Tips and strategies
www.ginadavies.co.uk/potty-training/trouble-shooting/
www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/toileting/parents

7 top tips for potty training children with additional needs
www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/articles/zbq8mbk

Useful sources of information and support (continued)

Andrex help with toilet anxiety
www.andrex.co.uk/parenting-advice/toilet-anxiety/school-readiness

Bladder and Bowel UK
www.bbuk.org.uk

Guidance for early years settings on supporting toilet training
www.help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/toilet-training

Toileting - a guide for parents and carers
https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/toileting/parents

ABSS SEND Family Resources

This Tip Sheet has been compiled as part of the A Better Start Southend (ABSS) Legacy, with the support of local partners and families – for other useful resources visit the ABSS website using the link below.

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Visit the ABSS Family Resources Page
www.abetterstartsouthend.co.uk/family-resources

Legal context

Schools cannot refuse to admit a child if they are still in nappies and the Early Years Teams and the SEND Team in Southend Council will be able to give you some advice around what schools are expected to do in Early Years.

For a child under 5, the Health Visiting Team will also be able to help to liaise with the school.

For a school aged child with a diagnosed continence condition - *this means the ability to control bladder and bowel movements (when doing a wee or a poo)* - their level of difficulty could identify them as having a disability and therefore, failure by a school to make a reasonable adjustment in such a case could be seen as disability discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. If your child is under the continence team, you can ask them to help in their communications with the school etc.

Jargon Buster

Continence
The ability to control bladder and bowel movements (when doing a wee or a poo)

CCA – Children's Continence Adviser
A specialist healthcare professional, usually a nurse, who supports children and young people (and their families) with bladder and bowel problems.

ASD/C
Autistic Spectrum Disorder / Condition

Neurodiversity
Neurodiversity is a framework for understanding how people think, learn, and behave. Most people are neurotypical, meaning their brains function as expected by society. However, it's estimated that around 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent. Neurodiversity covers a wide range of conditions, including dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, and autism.

City Family

City Family is a local organisation that takes the good practice from A Better Start Southend (ABSS) and weaves it into their support services for local families. They connect parents and carers to support, services, and community networks, making family life a little easier. Whether you need advice, activities, or access to more specialist support, they can help you. Whatever your journey, you're not alone.

If you have any questions or concerns around family services in Southend, or need support, please contact City Family's Information and Guidance Service where their Navigators will be able to help you.

- **Call:** 01702 844188
- **WhatsApp/Live Chat:** 07507 242398
- **Email:** yfsouthend@cityfamily.org.uk
- **or visit** www.cityfamily.org.uk

You can also visit City Family's Service Map to explore services available to families across the city of Southend. www.cityfamily.org.uk/search/

Visit City Family's website for more information
www.cityfamily.org

A Better Start Southend

A Better Start Southend (ABSS) was at the heart of early years support for families in Southend from 2015 until March 2025.

ABSS delivered services that helped families:

- improve how they communicate with their little ones
- build social and emotional skills
- live healthier lives

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As part of the legacy from ABSS, local partner organisations and parents worked closely with ABSS to assemble a range of resource packs for families and for practitioners who support families. This Information Sheet forms part of those resources.

Learn more about the ABSS Family Resource Packs
www.abetterstartsouthend.co.uk/family-resources