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# Poop Smearing | Causes | Solutions | Autism

By [Lisa Lightner](#)

## Feces Smearing

One of the most unpleasant parts of parenting is the gross stuff we sometimes have to encounter. It starts out fine, right? A little baby throw up and dirty diapers—no big deal! But what if you, ahem, have some issues long after your child is no longer a baby? What about poop smearing? Yes, I'm going there!

And, based upon the email I get—families have this issue. And, let's just clear the record up now. It is NOT just kids with autism who struggle with this. I have heard from parents of kids of all kinds of disabilities who were poop smearers or smearing feces on walls.

## MY LATEST VIDEOS

Rather than have you reach out via email, and then wait for a response, I just wanted to put this out there. That way, you can hopefully find solutions that work for you.

## **Is smearing feces a psychological disorder?**

The actual name for poop smearing is scatolia. Scatolia rarely exists on its own, and usually co-exists with other conditions. This is called comorbidity. I want to say this loud and clear: This does not happen only with autistic kids and adults. It is prevalent in many other conditions, such as:

- obsessive-compulsive disorder
- anxiety
- schizophrenia
- depression
- bipolar disorder
- ADD

- autism
- post-traumatic stress, especially trauma related to physical or sexual abuse
- dementia (older adults)

Statistics on scatolia are not readily available. I would assume that this is because many parents are embarrassed. We are not comfortable in our society talking about poop.

However, it also should be mentioned that shaming children rarely works in any circumstance, and I would not expect it to work in clearing up this issue.

Yes, it's gross. Yes, we want to fix this as soon as possible. But it's important, as a parent, to stay clear-headed about this and not assume intent. Most kids (or even adults) are not doing this to gross you out, make you mad or get back at you.

All behavior tells you something, so it is your job as the caregiver to figure out the message. Sometimes adults need to be reminded that our lived experience—what we see, smell, touch and feel during a day, is not the same as our kids, especially the disabled ones.

## Stopping Your Child from Poop Smearing

I'm going to get into possible causes in a minute, but for the moment, you need this to stop, right? So consider restrictive clothing that blocks your child's access to the fecal matter. And, make sure they are toileted and changed regularly.

That alone can cause a child to remove the feces from their drawers themselves—because it feels uncomfortable back there. [Prevent-A-Wear](#) is one company that makes these garments.

But again—*restrictive clothing to stop feces smearing does not get at the cause of the problem*. It's a band-aid fix.

## Causes of Poop Smearing

Poop smearing causes fall into 3 main categories—sensory, medical and behavioral. And, the causes can overlap. The child may have GI upset or chronic constipation, and the way the child communicates this discomfort or sensory issue is through poop smearing. That scenario is all 3 causes and would have to be addressed as such.

I would make an appointment with a GI doctor to talk with them about this. Many actually specialize in this area now. You want to rule out any medical problems your child may have, that is causing them to want to smear feces on walls (or doors, or windowsills, or beds....).

While you are waiting for a GI appointment (and appointments and workups/diagnostics can take a while), I would start keeping a diary about this.

Note when it happens, what happened before, during and after the *ahem*, event. You want to look for patterns—either sensory or behavioral.

Many kids with disabilities struggle with [interoception](#)—knowing what is going on inside the body. Therefore they may “dig” back there due to discomfort or sensory issues. Or, they may not feel a bowel movement coming on due to a lack of interoception.

Keeping a diary will also help you figure out antecedents to this behavior. Many incorrectly assume that the child is doing this for attention. That may be the case, but many other reasons should be considered. For example, avoiding a non-preferred activity.

## Poop Smearing Sensory Issues

Yes, smearing feces can be a sensory issue. The child may lack interoception as mentioned above. He/she may be trying to relieve themselves of unpleasant feelings such as constipation. They may enjoy the squishy feel and the smell may truly not bother them.

- Perhaps sitting on a traditional toilet is not comfortable or in fact is even unpleasant for them. Try: squatty potty
- Child does not like the feeling of toilet paper against their bum, thus resists using the toilet. Try: cleansing wipes or cloths
- Child really does not know where feces goes. Try: consistent toilet training and even [toilet training in the IEP](#)
- They also may not fully understand what feces is and why most people think it's so gross. Try: social stories and story books about this, videos, etc.
- Child enjoys the feeling of how their body feels after a bowel movement. Try: instill other habits and patterns as part of a toilet training protocol

I would work with your co-parent or the child's other caregivers using the above suggestions while you wait for appointments with professionals. I know that seeing medical specialists can be a long wait sometimes.

## Cleaning up Feces Smeared on Walls

Or anywhere, really.

I have not had much experience in this area. However, for 25+ years, I owned high-maintenance needy dogs that had a lot of urinary and other issues. Trying to get my house to not smell like a kennel was an everyday chore for me for decades.

And, I would offer that same advice here—look at pet products that claim to reduce smell.

Invest in disposable gloves for cleaning, they were a lifesaver for me. Especially when my dog got older and would vomit more frequently. Sure, rubber gloves work. But then you have to clean the gloves. A box of 100 latex gloves saved my sanity many times over.

Also, keep a box or bin of old dog towels or car wash towels. You know, old rags that you only use for cleaning. I use detergent and Lysol laundry sanitizer. Magic erasers. Vinegar. Rubbing alcohol is great for removing odors if the surface can tolerate it.

If the poop is dried on the surface, I've found the easiest way is to use lots of water to loosen it. And hey, we all have a box of disposable masks on hand now, don't we? It will help mask some of the smell while you're cleaning.

I often use the soak cycle on my washer, that helps. I keep a "kit" handy of everything I need when there is such an incident. That way, when I hear a dog retching, I can grab my stuff and head to the room before it sets in.

## **Cleaning the Child**

We've only had this incident happen one time, and it was not fun. And it was more of a "explosive bowel movement and he didn't understand what was going on" and didn't smear it anywhere. Was just trying to get this unpleasantness out of his pants. With his hands. Yuk.

We put him in the shower fully dressed. We disrobed him in the tub before turning the water on. Cleaning under the fingernails was the worst part. Having him soak in the tub rather than take a shower helped. Give them toys to get them to sit longer and keep hands under water.

And, while you're doing all of this—be aware of the attention you are giving the child. It is rare that smearing feces is solely a gimmick to get your attention. But, in the event that it is, you don't want to reinforce it.

The cleaning up should be a neutral experience. Not unpleasant, but not pleasant and fun either. Keep talking and conversation to a minimum.

I have found with dog bedding, the fabrics may still be stained as far as color, but the detergent and sanitizer will remove odors.

## **Preventing Poop Smearing**

Once you get at the root cause of the poop smearing, you can begin on prevention.

Until that happens, be aware of the child's environment. Remove anything that you don't want damaged permanently. This is not the time to display grandma's handmade heirloom quilt, if it risks being ruined.

Protect mattresses with covers. Remove favorite stuffed animals from rooms, and other items that cannot be thoroughly cleaned.

Lastly, you are not alone and you will get through this. While it's not yet an issue that we talk about openly with our kids, I hear from many of you.

And, you will get through it. If you have an idea that worked for you and you'd like to see it added to this post, go ahead and email us.

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