



Problematic Toilet Behaviors

Some problematic toilet behaviors have physical origins. Others are caused by anxiety or other overwhelming emotions. Many behaviors, however, are quite typical expressions of a normal child's ongoing cognitive development.

The younger toddler's ability to comprehend and respond to the body's signals was noted as a necessary development before toilet training should be attempted. Further developments that manifest over time can support or sabotage bathroom habits—and, in some cases, do both. Forgetfulness and distractibility continue to challenge children, whose memory capacity is still limited—particularly when a lot is happening or things are changing in their lives. Difficulty breaking focus in time to get to the bathroom leads to accidents as well.

Toddlers' and preschoolers' cognitive growth allows them to think more about and test the limits parents impose—leading to deliberate violations of bathroom routines. Finally, while preschoolers' greatly expanded imagination helps them think and learn about toilet use through play, it can lead to resistance as children imagine disaster looming each time the toilet is flushed. Enhanced imagination is also responsible for such "magical-thinking" practices as depositing stool in strange places, avoiding certain bathrooms or insisting on using only one particular potty, refusing to flush the toilet or flushing a ritual number of times, and so on.

Strange as some of these behaviors can appear to adults, they are perfectly reasonable from a child's point of view. Again, there is no point in criticizing your child for behavior he cannot help. In some cases, particularly those involving confusion about toilet use, a series of brief, thoughtful conversations may ease the situation.

At other times, as when bathroom practices are violated as a way of testing boundaries, it's important to reinstate your rules and stand firmly behind them. As in the other instances described, your knowledge of your particular child remains your best tool in deciding how to respond. As long as your child knows that you support his efforts but that you expect him to return soon to correct bathroom behavior, the two of you will eventually reach your goal.

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