



Emotional Issues and Potty Training Problems

Emotional causes of bathroom-related problems are among the most challenging to address, since young children are rarely able to express their confusion, anxiety, or fear in words. Behaviors such as defecating (pooping) in a corner of the bedroom, having daily accidents at school after many months of complete dryness, or pleading to return to diapers are disturbing and even frightening to many parents—more so when they do not understand the cause.



Once physical causes have been ruled out, however, the reasons behind many of these behaviors can be unearthed by considering any changes in your child's life or emotional development, observing their other behaviors and listening carefully to what they say.

Potty training regression: why it happens & how to react

A major change in a child's life can cause them to regress during toilet training. Regression can occur for similar reasons long after toilet training. A new baby in the family, a move to a new home, family conflict, or any other emotionally stressful situation may cause your child to revert to an earlier level of bathroom mastery. This may involve bedwetting (</English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/Bedwetting.aspx>), puddling, withholding of stool and even pooping in inappropriate places. Inner stress prompted by your child's normal development can affect her bathroom behaviors as well.

When your child tries to hide their accidents

At about three years of age, children start developing the capacity to experience discomfort, or shame, when they have done something they know is wrong. However, most children this age do not know what to do with these feelings. A child who longs for their parents' approval may suddenly start to feel embarrassed or ashamed after a bathroom accident, no matter how accepting their parents are actually likely to be. As a result, they may claim to have used the bathroom when they really urinated on the living room floor. They may hide their wet underwear, or even try to clean up the mess before you see it.

There is no cause to criticize or punish a child who behaves in this way. On the contrary, they have demonstrated that they know what proper bathroom behavior is and are trying as best they can to make it "come true." The best response when you find your child hiding their accidents from you is to gently tell them that you know they had an accident, that it's okay, and that you know they will do better next time. Then ask them to help you clean up, and talk with them about specific ways the two of you can help them get back on track.

Other feelings and emotional situations can overwhelm your young child and cause them to behave in ways that seem puzzling at first. A desire for more attention may cause them to stage more accidents just to engage you in conversation or emotional interaction. If they feel you have been too controlling about bathroom use—constantly asking if they need to go instead of letting them direct their own behavior—they may resist going until it's too late and they have an accident instead.

↳ active imagination and a tendency toward magical thinking may cause them to fear the toilet and start to regress. Even a desire to befriend another child by imitating them can lead to regressive bathroom behavior if the child is not toilet-trained. Finally, a temporary wish to return to coddled babyhood, which nearly all young

children experience at some time, may prompt your child to ask you if they can start wearing diapers again.

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Supporting your child

For toilet-trained children, as well as for those still being trained, regression in bathroom use usually does not last long. Respond calmly and use it as an opportunity to support and communicate with your child. Help your child identify the problem, sympathize with their feelings, and help them find practical solutions. Such evidence of your support and understanding will help her to relax and eventually move forward.

Meanwhile, try to avoid major concessions such as returning to diapers. Instead, consider offering to put them in training pants under their underwear for a while, put the potty in their room, accompany them to the preschool bathroom before the school day begins, or otherwise compromise until they feel more secure.

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