



## Getting in contact with us

Telephone Contact a Family:  
**0808 808 3555**

Open Monday – Friday 10am – 4pm  
and Monday 5.30pm – 7.30pm

**This call is free**

We are happy to give information to family, friends or anyone who knows the family well.

Online:

**[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)**  
**[www.makingcontact.org](http://www.makingcontact.org)**

This leaflet is available from Contact a Family, translated in various languages.

## Telephone interpreter service

You can telephone Contact a Family and access qualified interpreters in over 100 languages who can assist in providing information.

To use this service:

- telephone Contact a Family on **0808 808 3555**
- give them your telephone number
- tell them which language you need
- if you can, let them know in English what type of help you are looking for
- within a few minutes someone will ring you back with an interpreter to assist your call.



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## Potty/toilet training

Information for parents of disabled children

Order code: C3

Parents & Paediatricians together

- All children learn to use the toilet at a different stage in their life. Most children start to show an interest in moving on to a potty or toilet at about two years old.
- Children with a physical problem or learning disability might not be ready to start until they are older. It can also sometimes take a longer time for them to learn to use the potty or toilet.
- It is important to speak to a doctor to check for physical problems if a child is having difficulty in learning to use the toilet.
- Some children, particularly those with profound and multiple impairments may never be able to use the toilet on their own, but they still need to have a toileting programme which will make sure they are treated with respect. Ask your health visitor or community nurse for advice.
- All children are different and the way they learn to use the toilet may be linked with the specific condition they have. It is a good idea to get in touch with the relevant support groups to get advice from people who have more experience.



## When should you start toilet training your child?

Look for signs that your child is ready to use the potty. These might include awareness of:

- Passing urine or having a bowel movement.
- Showing discomfort when a nappy is wet or soiled.
- Waking from a daytime sleep with a dry nappy.
- Showing an interest in a potty or the toilet.

## What if your child does not show these signs?

If your child's condition means that s/he is not showing any of these signs you should discuss it with one of the people looking after your child. This could be the health visitor, community nurse, occupational therapist, paediatrician or, if they are in a nursery or school setting, the teacher, teacher assistant or school nurse. You will need support from the people who deal with your child on a day to day basis and it is important that parents and professionals work together on different ways of addressing the problem.

## Before starting

- Choose a time when you can spend a lot of time with your child, when your child seems happy and there are no major distractions or stressful events like starting nursery, moving house, moving from a cot to a bed.
- Make sure the time you choose fits in with you as well – perhaps at a time when there is someone else to help you if this is possible.
- It may take some time for the child to learn, so make sure that the toilet training programme can be carried out in the other places your child visits such as the playgroup, nursery, or school. You will need to be sure that any one to one workers agree to keep to the routines that are put in place.
- It is a good idea to start in the summer so that you can dress your child in clothes that can be taken off and put on quickly, and if it is warm enough, your child can go without wearing pants or nappies.
- Look at the times your child is most likely to use the toilet, e.g. after meals, when s/he wakes up from a sleep.
- Plan a routine you can stick to, until it becomes established (e.g. put on potty half hour after meal).
- Make sure the potty or toilet is comfortable for the child and the child can sit on it without any fear of falling off. The child should be able to place his/her feet flat on the floor or foot step.
- If your child has difficulty in sitting, an occupational therapist should be able to help with equipment and check whether the toilet needs to be adapted so it is more comfortable for the child.

## Once you start

- Be patient-don't expect instant results.
- Keep to the planned routine as much as you can.
- Do not show any signs of concern – it will make the child feel anxious.
- If your child is reluctant to sit still, you could sing some songs or read a book with them just for a few minutes to get your child used to sitting on the potty. Never leave your child on the potty for more than five minutes.
- If the child is older and too big for a potty and still not showing interest in using the toilet then make sure they visit the toilet area regularly. You may need to put a favourite book, picture or toy next to the toilet or play a favourite piece of music to encourage the child to come into the room.
- Praise your child first for showing an interest in the potty or toilet, then for using the potty – every small step should be rewarded with praise.
- Make sure your child sees you washing your hands after wiping them so it becomes part of the process of using the toilet.
- Let your child get used to the routine of washing his/her hands after being on the potty or toilet.

## Bowel movement

- Sit the child on the toilet or potty when you think s/he is likely to have a bowel movement and encourage the child to push down gently. To encourage this, try making the child laugh or to blow into a toy or whistle – the child sitting upright will also help to encourage a bowel movement.
- If nothing happens, say nothing and try again a bit later.
- If it is acceptable to your family, take your child into the toilet when you or family members go, to show the child what is expected. It may take much longer than with other children, so be patient.



## Children who find it hard to communicate

- Make sure your child can communicate to you when s/he needs to use the toilet.
- Some children who are able to speak will be able to use words, others may not be able to ask to use the toilet and may need to use another system such as a signing system like makaton or the pictorial PECS system. Other children may be able to use a photograph or object such as a roll of toilet paper to show that they need to go to the toilet.
- Make sure the child knows where the toilet or potty is, and can get in and out of that room easily.
- Make it fun – find a special toy which your child only uses when in the toilet – this will help him/her to associate going to the toilet with fun and not stress.
- If your child needs to be cleaned, make sure that people working with him/her know this should be done in a private bathroom area in an age appropriate way. (It is not acceptable for a physically able young person to be 'changed' whilst lying down.)

## If your child takes a long time to learn to use the toilet

- Try to get clothes that are easy to wear, change, and wash.
- Items such as large size nappies, waterproof mattress covers, and covers for duvets and pillows may be available from the continence service, when your child is 3 – ask your health visitor. If not, you can get them from larger chemists.
- The Family Fund gives grants to families on low income for washing machines, tumble driers or towards cost of bedding and clothing.
- For children who are older, it is often the parents or carers who live with them who understand their needs and will devise their own strategies. Do not despair. Try and speak with other parents for support, advice and tips.

## Smearing

Some children with learning disabilities smear their faeces after going to the toilet. There can be various reasons for this. It could be the child has simply not understood the process of wiping with paper properly. Others enjoy the feel of the texture of the faeces and providing them with an alternative activity such as play dough can resolve the situation. Some will use it as a way of getting attention, or because they have learnt they are rewarded for such behaviour by being given a nice warm bath. Children can also behave in this way because they are extremely upset and agitated.

If your child smears:

- Try to stay calm.
- Avoid giving them lots of attention as a result of their behaviour.
- Reinforce good behaviour by give them lots of praise when they carry out other activities well.
- Try to see if there is a pattern to their behaviour, as it might help you understand why they are doing it.
- Seek advice from a professional such as a nurse, occupational therapist or psychologist on dealing with this.

This factsheet is available from  
Contact a Family, translated  
in various languages.

## Useful contacts

This is a leaflet offering general advice for families but you may find it more helpful to get in touch with specific support groups around your child's condition. Some are listed below and if you need help in finding one for your child's condition call the Contact a Family helpline.

### Contact a Family Help Line

Tel: 0808 808 3555

Mon-Fri 10am – 4pm,

Mon eve 17.30-19.30

Offers an interpreting service in over 120 different languages to callers using landline telephones in the UK

Email: [helpine@cafamily.org.uk](mailto:helpine@cafamily.org.uk)

Web: [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

Contact a Family, 209-211 City Road,  
London EC1V 1JN

### Education and Resources for Improving Childhood Continence (ERIC)

have a helpline for parents, and offer products and publications to buy from their web:

Tel: 0845 370 8008

Mon-Fri 10am – 4pm

Web: [www.eric.org.uk](http://www.eric.org.uk)

ERIC 34 Old School House, Britannia Rd,  
Kingswood, Bristol BS15 8DB  
(please include stamped  
addressed envelope)

### Family Fund

Unit 4, Alpha Court, Monks Cross Drive,  
Huntington, York YO32 9WN

Tel 0845 130 45 42

Email: [applications@familyfund.org.uk](mailto:applications@familyfund.org.uk)

Web: [www.familyfund.org.uk](http://www.familyfund.org.uk)

**National Autistic Society** provides information advice and support for people with autistic spectrum disorders and their families, including a fact sheet on toilet training.

Tel: 0845 070 4004

Mon-Fri 10am – 4pm

Offers an interpreting service in over 120 different languages to callers using landline telephones in the UK

Web: [www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

The National Autistic Society,  
393 City Road, London EC1V 1NG

**Scope** supports families of children with cerebral palsy and can provide written information on toilet training.

Tel: 0808 800 33 33

Mon-Fri 9am – 7pm,

Saturday 10am – 2pm

Email: [response@scope.org.uk](mailto:response@scope.org.uk)

Web: [www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)

Scope Response, PO Box 833,  
Milton Keynes, MK12 5NY  
(Please include stamped  
addressed envelope)