

# THE NEUROMOTOR LINK

## TOILETING CHILDREN WITH NEUROMOTOR DISABILITIES

*Each person is unique and therefore must be treated individually. The suggestions here are general guidelines only. As with any health issue, you should discuss the matter with your primary health care provider and do what is best for your child and family.*

Children who have neuromotor problems like cerebral palsy most often can learn to use the toilet. They may learn later than other children and may have more difficulty learning partly because of the physical problems they have with their bodies. Children with cerebral palsy can have problems learning to control the muscles used for urination (peeing) and defecation (pooping), just like they can have difficulty controlling other muscles. With practice they can learn to use the toilet, just like they can learn to use other muscles for other achievements. Children who have other developmental delays in addition to their physical disabilities may have more difficulty or may be older when they are finally successful. Usually a developmental age of 18-24 months is needed to be able to learn to use the potty.

Children with cerebral palsy can have problems learning to control the muscles used for elimination.

### **BLADDER CONTROL**

Most children with cerebral palsy can achieve bladder control between 3 and 10 years of age. Bladder control may be delayed in some due to problems controlling the various muscles involved in urination. This problem with control is known as having a neurogenic bladder. Up to one third of children with cerebral palsy may have problems from a neurogenic bladder. Problems children with cerebral palsy may experience include incontinence (day or night-time wetting), with or without stress incontinence (like when laughing), difficulty starting a urinary stream, or symptoms of urgency (meaning the feeling that one has to urinate immediately without prior warning). If your child does not have these problems and can stay dry for 2 hours without urinating, urinates in large volumes rather than dribbling, and has not had frequent or recurrent problems with urinary tract infections, then it is less likely that he or she has a neurogenic bladder. If your child is quite delayed in mastering bladder control, then he or she should see a urologist. A urologist can make sure there is not a problem with how the bladder works and can test bladder and kidney function. Sometimes medications or other treatments can be helpful for children with a neurogenic bladder.

Children with cerebral palsy may have a neurogenic bladder meaning the muscles of the bladder do not work normally. A urologist is a doctor who may help with this problem.

### **BOWEL CONTROL**

Bowel control is often easier to learn than bladder control. Constipation may lead to problems with wanting to use the toilet due to the pain they feel when they stool. Please refer to a separate handout on constipation to learn how to treat this problem.

### **ADVANTAGES OF HAVING YOUR CHILD BE TOILET TRAINED**

- Increased social acceptance by reducing smells and odors.
- Reduced costs for diapers and laundering.
- Simplified ease of care that is required by your child.

- Improved self-esteem. Sometimes it not only makes your child feel better about him or herself, but it also changes way others feel about them.
- Improved hygiene with reduced rashes and sores.

### **HOW TO TELL THAT YOUR CHILD IS READY**

The most important factor in successful toilet teaching is the attitude of the family, who must be relaxed and positive about the process of toilet teaching and who must convey this attitude to the child. Realistic expectations of the family and other caregivers are needed. It is best to time toilet teaching when there are no other major changes taking place like a move, surgery or a change in school.

It is best to time toilet teaching at a time when no other changes are occurring.

Both the family and the child must be ready before beginning toilet teaching. One can help a child become ready for toilet teaching by labeling what one is doing and why when changing a diaper. Letting your child observe someone else use the toilet may help them understand what it is used for. It is helpful for everyone involved to use the same terms for the acts of elimination. It is also very important for everyone involved to be consistent. This means making sure that everyone who takes care of your child does the same things.

There are several ways for one to know that a child is ready to begin the process of toilet teaching. Some children with physical or developmental disabilities will not show these signs, however. Some of the signs indicating that your child may be ready include:

- Seeing that a child is indicating in some way awareness or understanding of urinating or having a bowel movement. A child may indicate this awareness by becoming fussy or quiet, wiggling, suddenly becoming very still, or changing facial expression.
- Being able to verbalize or otherwise communicate, for example, through gestures or signs, the fact that elimination happened or needs to happen.
- Wanting to have his or her diaper changed.
- Noticing that a child has a regular daily schedule for the timing of elimination with regular periods of dryness. Sometimes the use of a chart can help establish the daily schedule. Usually the child would be checked every ½ hour to determine whether they are wet or dry and this information would be noted on a chart for a week.

The family and other caregivers need to pay attention to these signs and be aware that they indicate that the child may be ready to begin toilet teaching.

### **WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD BE SUCCESSFUL**

- Regular mealtimes help to establish a pattern of elimination. In this way the stomach, bowels and bladder will be empty and full at regular times. Food in the stomach tends to stimulate the bowel and many people go the bathroom after a meal. If you can determine a normal pattern to your child's elimination, you'll know when is the best time to place him or her on the toilet. Once one starts toilet teaching it is best to have the child sit on the toilet or potty seat for a few minutes at regular intervals throughout the day at times when the child is most likely to have to use the bathroom. One point of a bowel program is to teach your child to have a bowel movement at the same time every day.
- It is important for the child to feel comfortable and relaxed when trying to use the toilet. Allowing as much privacy as possible is helpful for some children. Making sure the child is well supported is very important, too. Voiding requires the voluntary

relaxation of muscles, which is difficult to do when the body is struggling to maintain balance.

- The use of appropriate equipment that properly positions the child so as not to increase abnormal tone is very important. It is important that the child's feet touch the floor or some other surface to make it easier to push. It is also important to allow the child adequate time to become used to the equipment and to feel comfortable with it. Many of the chairs available for non-handicapped children can be adapted to meet the needs of children with cerebral palsy. Special equipment suppliers also offer a variety of chairs for children of all ages and disabilities. A physical or occupational therapist can help determine what kind of equipment is right for your child.
- Let a child learn how to push or bear down with his or her abdominal muscles by grunting or blowing bubbles while sitting on the potty.
- Minimize distraction, but find something like a book, a song, a video or toys to help your child to stay on the toilet for longer periods of time.
- Praise is extremely important. Rewards can be verbal like "good job", tactile like a hug or concrete like stickers or stars on a chart or maybe even watching a favorite video. Reward small steps first like just sitting on the toilet. Reward immediately. Rewards should be gradually phased out as the child gains further success although praise can continue.
- Emphasize how proud your child must feel when they try to do something for themselves. This is important as their self motivation is key to success.
- Ignore lack of success or say that the next time will be better. Remember accidents will happen. If it appears that the child is not really ready, then wait several months and try again.

Another excellent resource to help toilet teach a child with special needs is a book called "Toilet Teaching With Your Special Needs Child" by Michelle Gilpin, MA and Dorothy Harris, RN, BScN, CRRN. The lending library has some copies available to borrow.

This publication was developed by the Special Medical Services Section for the Neuromotor Program. For more information on toileting or other issues, contact your coordinator:

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