

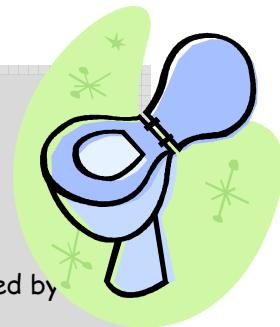
Child who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lines

## Incontinence: why it happens and how to handle it

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives sometimes seem to have difficulties with toileting behaviour, beyond the normal accidents that might be expected. This can be a difficult situation for carers to cope with both practically and emotionally.

### What you might see

- A child of eight, nine, ten years or more who repeatedly wets or soils the bed
- A child who wets in inappropriate places e.g. cupboards, corners of rooms
- A child who smears faeces.
- A child who may hide dirty or wet clothing
- A child who may leave wet or soiled clothing out for everyone to see and seems quite unmoved by "accidents"
- A child who constantly smells of urine or faeces but refuses to wash
- A child who begins to be incontinent again after having successfully conquered these problems



### How it can feel

- That both you and your washing machine can't cope much longer!
- That you are torn between sympathy and frustration
- Unclear whether the child is deliberately or accidentally incontinent
- Offensive, off-putting and embarrassing at times
- Bewildering, especially when the child seems to be so unconcerned
- That the issue is growing more tense between you and the child

### What might be going on for the child?

- The child may be unaware or not well tuned into their own body signals. This can go along with not being good at regulating their temperature or not knowing when they are hungry or full
- The smell of urine may unconsciously remind the child of his previous family or may even be a way of unconsciously marking out space in an attempt to keep safe
- The child may be unconsciously trying to be offensive to keep you from getting close to them
- Alternatively, the child may be seeking extra nurturing and comfort from you and sees this as an acceptable way of obtaining this
- Adults cannot have control over what comes out of children's bodies. A child who has a need to be in control may use this issue to feel better about their underlying helplessness
- Bedwetting may be associated with very deep sleep when the child is unable to sense or wake in time to body signals
- Some children will not get up in the night to go to the toilet, because they have been used to the room being locked or being forbidden to leave the room at night
- Nightmares can sometimes make children so distressed that they lose control of body functions. They may appear to wake and move around the room, wetting in a corner, but this is part of a night terror pattern over which they have no control or recall
- Being wet, smelly and repulsive may reflect how the child feels about themselves, that they don't deserve to take care of themselves
- Children who have been neglected may have learned poor toileting habits in their original family
- A return to wetting during a period of stress
  - Medical reasons



**A number of these reasons may apply to the child for whom you are caring or there could be other reasons more specific to them not mentioned here**

### Some suggestions that may help if you think the problem is accidental

- Do nothing, if you feel comfortable with that. This can be very respectful of your child's needs and sensibilities. Often children grow out of bedwetting and daytime incontinence. You may want to make the problem more manageable at home by using bed pads, pyjama pants, lino not carpet, waterproof bedding etc
- Your GP or specialist continence clinic may be able to help with various treatments. Make sure they first test for any health problems. Remember that many of the possible underlying psychological reasons cannot be addressed through gadgets and drugs
- Adopt a calm matter-of-fact tone, without recrimination for accidents. Encourage your child to take age and stage appropriate responsibility for wet bedding and clothing
- Reassure your child frequently and talk about future change. Their self-confidence might be really knocked, despite the brave or defiant face that sometimes gets put on
- Make plans with your child for accidents whilst out and prepare together a small pack of clean pants, wipes etc to carry around. Advising someone at school can also be helpful but needs to be handled sensitively
- Children who get smelly may not be able to recognise this. They become so used to the smell that their noses (and brains) "switch it off". Sympathetic discussion at a time when it's not an issue may help avoid a battle about getting changed. A code word and a ready "excuse" to their friends as to why they have changed may also be a good idea
- For children who hide soiled clothing or blatantly leave it around, calmly clearing up with them can be the most nurturing way of supporting them or taking the power out of any attempt to upset you.

### Some suggestions that may be useful if you think the problem is a deliberate challenge

- Recognising the issue as a battle for control may help you remain calm and make it lose its power for the child
- Try dropping all the reminders, battles, and nagging. You will be unlikely to beat the child at control as they have learned it because their lives depended on it
- If you feel that you can manage it, try stopping your involvement with the problem. Don't change their sheets, or return their washing to their room. Calmly ask the child to let you know if they want to wash these things - you're happy to help but the decision is theirs
- Alternatively, you could ask your child to do another job for you to compensate for all the time lost in clearing up. This is not a punishment but just a way of pointing out consequences so you may want to make it something not too difficult or off-putting
- If deliberate smelliness is an issue, set some consequences. For example "I'll give you a lift to football once you are washed", "we can snuggle up and watch that DVD after you've had a quick shower". You may have to allow natural consequences to happen; teasing, people refusing to sit next to them. Empathy about this might lead to the child asking for help
- For children who toilet in strange places, you could try marking the area officially with a "please now wash your hands" sign or something similar. A child fighting for control will be likely to resist doing what you want and may begin to use the bathroom. Use such humour carefully though
- You could suggest some different ways of marking their place in the home e.g. their own notice board, name signs etc

If you don't know whether it's accidental or deliberate, you'll need to experiment with these ideas and see if any have a better effect. Try them one at a time



It will take time for your child to gain new skills. Help, encouragement and praise will help this happen. In the meantime it may help you to understand their toileting issues as attempts to communicate their feelings.

Remember too to look after yourself as you deal with this difficult issue - perhaps replace the smell of urine with fine perfume or aftershave, or treat yourself and your family in some other way  
Please ask yellowhouse for more help if you need it.