



# Understanding Children Who Will Only Soil in a Nappy

# Why Children Insist on Nappies

This is a very common problem in children aged between 2-4. For unknown reasons some children, those particularly with additional needs, develop a strong aversion to using the toilet to open their bowels. The majority of these children will happily sit on the toilet to pass urine but will flatly refuse to open their bowels on the toilet.

These children often prefer to open their bowels in their nappy, or pants. Often they will find a “special” place to open their bowels also, such as behind the sofa or under a table. Some children actively ask for a nappy to be put on them. Others will wait until their bedtime nappy has been put on before opening their bowels. The reason for their reluctance to use the toilet is often unclear, but is probably anxiety-based and may be related to a variety of factors, such as an earlier incident of painful defecation following constipation, or a fear around the toilet itself.

# Trying to Transition Out of Nappies

Treatment for children who will only open bowels in a nappy can be difficult, because any attempt to put pressure on them to use the toilet is likely to result in a stand-off, with the child refusing to open their bowels at all, sometimes for many days at a time.

When a child is constipated, their chances of passing a painful stool increases, and therefore so does their tendency to begin with-holding their stools.

The following steps can be applied to help ease a smooth transition out of nappies:

1. When your child asks for the nappy to open their bowels, take them to the bathroom (where all toilet-related items should be kept) to put on their nappy. Keep them in the bathroom if possible to open their bowels and then remove the nappy immediately after. Get your child involved in discarding the stools from the nappy down the toilet and ask them to flush their stools away, before washing their hands. This is the beginning of “shaping” more appropriate toileting behaviour.
2. After you have successfully mastered your child only opening their bowels in the bathroom with their nappy on, you can begin to progress to sitting them on the toilet with their nappy on and in place. They can still open their bowels in their nappy, they are simply sitting on the toilet to do so. Follow the same routine as above, engaging your child through every step of the toileting routine. Children thrive on consistency and routine so repeating the process often will help to reinforce the positive behaviour.

# Strategies to Loose the Nappies

Once your child is happily opening their bowels on the toilet with their nappies still on, various strategies can then be used to facilitate the removal of the nappy. The following ideas have been found to be successful:

- Placing the nappy under the toilet seat so the child can still feel it, then over a period of time the nappy is lowered so it is not touching their bottom and eventually removed all together. In some cases parents have replaced the nappy with toilet paper and this worked equally well
- Using increasingly smaller sized nappies until eventually the child is told that as there were no longer any nappies that fitted them, so they had to start opening their bowels on the toilet without the nappy. Please ensure they are fully aware along the process.
- Putting the nappy on without fastening which is then replaced by kitchen roll and then toilet paper until that is reduced to a couple of sheets before being removed completely
- A hole is cut in the nappy which is increased in size until the child is actually opening their bowels through it

Whichever method is used, once there have been a few successes the problem usually disappears, often by age 5. However, there is a risk that this behaviour may persist in children with additional needs as a 'learned' behaviour. As a result, it is recommended that in all cases this problem should be addressed as soon as possible and further advice always sought early on if progress is not made.

It often seems as though it becomes a battle of wills – but if you have a clear, consistent approach and use lots of praise and encouragement, your child will learn to open their bowels in the toilet or potty.

# What Happens When You Refuse Nappies

Children are excellent at with-holding their stools. When your child is suffering from chronic constipation, it is more important that they are opening their bowels, rather than where.

If your child is refusing to open bowels anywhere other than in a nappy, and you refuse, it can actually cause your child to with-hold their stools completely. Children contract their sphincter muscles, located around the anus, to prevent stools from escaping.

We would advise you to let them have that nappy on and then work on gradually changing their behaviour.

**WE WOULD ALWAYS ENCOURAGE YOU TO NOT WITH-HOLD THE NAPPY.**

**WITH-HOLDING YOUR CHILDS NAPPY MAY → LEAD → TO → YOUR CHILD WITH-HOLDING STOOLS**

If you think there may be psychological issues present, such as toilet anxiety and fear surrounding your child's urge to continue to soil in nappies only, then ask our team for "Psychological Strategies for Constipation" booklets – we can easily send these to you.

# Case Study - Annabelle

Annabelle was 6 when she entered our service. Poorly treated constipation as a toddler had led to toilet avoidance and, ultimately, refusal to open her bowels anywhere other than in her nappy.

We suggested the following guidance on transitioning from nappies:

Step 1: Annabelle was asked to sit on the toilet, with the lid shut, for 5 minutes twice a day and read a book or do an activity. Over a 2 week period, she was asked to lift the toilet lid before sitting, then remove her trousers. This had to be a gradual process and it was important to progress at Annabelle's pace. This gradual process of de-sensitisation worked as Annabelle lost her fear of sitting on the toilet, however she was still not able to open bowels unless she had a nappy on.

Step 2: After another 2 weeks, Annabelle was asked to undo her own nappy. This took a while to master, but eventually Annabelle's nappy was opened flat on the toilet seat whilst she passed her stools. Each time she opened her bowels, she was an integral part in discarding them into the toilet, before washing her hands.

Step 3: Over the coming days, Annabelle would then place an opened nappy flat on the toilet seat rather than on her and continued to pass stools that way.

Step 4: Once Annabelle was used to this major change, the nappy could be gradually moved away from the toilet. Remember, the slower you take this process, the more successful it is likely to be.

# Case Study - Jacob

Jacob, who was on the ASD pathway, was 9 years old. His parents had observed that, although he insisted on wearing a nappy, they were always invariably dry when changing them. When they took him to the toilet, he would happily pass urine, but would never open his bowels. He did really well in passing urine however continued to insist on wearing a nappy to soil in.

We suggested the following guidance on transitioning from nappies:

Step 1: Jacob's parents used brightly coloured tape to mark a cross in the place behind the sofa where Jacob favoured opening his bowels in a nappy.

Step 2: After a week, Jacob's parents marked a new cross on the floor with him, just a couple of centimetres from the first. When he next asked for his nappy, they took him to the new cross. When he had finished, he chose a sticker, which he was always delighted with.

Step 3: Over the next few weeks, that cross was moved closer and closer to the toilet. If it was moved too dramatically, Jacob became upset and tried to put it back, so small steps were the key.

Step 4: Eventually, that cross was on the lid of the toilet, then progressed to the toilet seat.