

Coping Strategies for psychological issues surrounding childhood constipation

Constipation is a symptom-based disorder that affects a significant percentage of children. The disorder is considered chronic if symptoms persist for longer than one month. Chronic idiopathic constipation most commonly affects children and has been shown to be associated with anxiety, depression and other psychological issues. This booklet will explore both the psychological and psychosocial impact of constipation on children, and the coping strategies that parents can be teaching their children whilst they are suffering the psychological effects of chronic constipation. We will explore a wide variety of coping mechanisms, designed to aid your child in their anxiety, whether it be with-holding, opening their bowels outside of the home, or generalised anxiety surrounding the toilet itself.



Coping Strategies Explored and Explained:

Feeling Faces Strategy

Just being able to verbalise “I’m feeling nervous” or “I’m scared” can take the sting out of uncomfortable emotions for children. Try to give your child the words they need to describe their internal feelings. Talk about emotions and how it makes them feel. A good way to do this is to look at ‘feeling faces’. When they become familiar with a feeling of anxiety, they will be able to verbalise it to you, or be able to show you through their ‘feeling Faces.’

These can become invaluable when your child struggles to verbalise that they are scared. ‘Feeling Faces’ fans are available to purchase online also.



Breathing Strategy

Deep breathing can help your child to relax their minds and their bodies. One way to teach your child to do this is by encouraging them to take 'bubble breaths.' Ask your child to breathe in deeply through their nose and then breathe out slowly through their mouth like they are trying to blow a bubble with a wand. An alternative strategy is to teach your child to 'smell the pizza.' Ask them to breathe in through their nose like they are trying hard to smell a piece of pizza. Then, ask them to blow on the pizza to cool it down. Repeat this process several times until your child is showing signs of calming. The Breathing Strategy is brilliant because it can be implemented anywhere and can ease a child's anxiety within one minute. It is also much harder for a child to with-hold. The breathing will distract them from with-holding and you may even notice them opening their bowels on the toilet.



Artwork Strategy

Whether your child enjoys painting with watercolours, colouring in a colouring book, doodling, sculpting with clay, or creating a collage, creating art can be an excellent coping strategy.

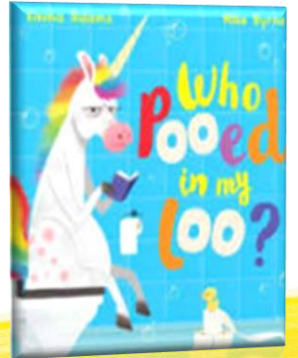
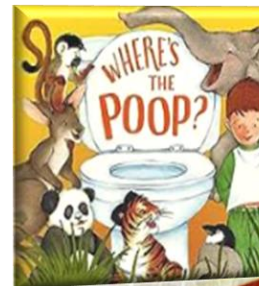
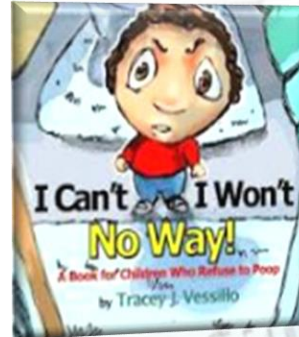
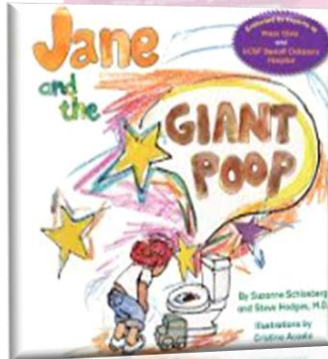
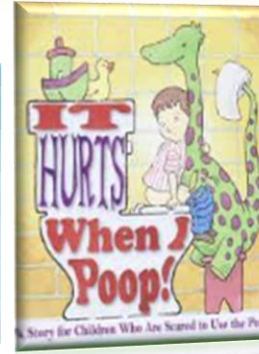
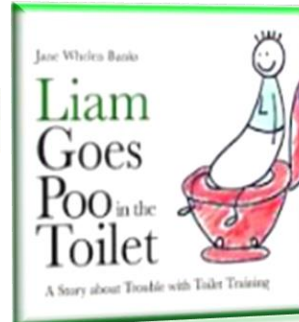
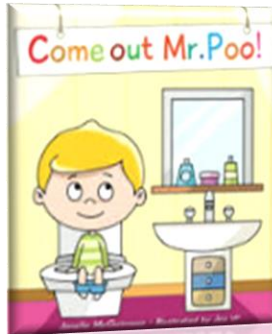
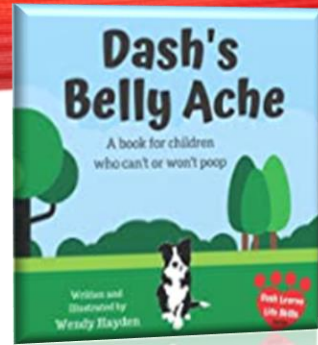
It is great at taking your child's mind off of the anxious feelings they are experiencing and distracting them from focusing too much on with-holding and toileting.



Reading Strategy

Reading books can serve as a great temporary distraction, especially for children who love to escape into stories. Often, when children have finished reading, they feel better equipped to tackle their anxiety. There are many books available to purchase or read online that are all constipated-themed, or toilet-based. These would be great to read with your child whilst they are sitting on the toilet.

As you are reading them with your child, ask open-ended questions such as “How do you think that character is feeling?” and “What do you think they could do to feel better?” This will in turn, encourage your child to problem solve their own anxious feelings towards toileting.



Yoga Strategy

Yoga provides many benefits to the mind and the body. A study published in "Body Image" found that 4 weeks of yoga led to better moods and improved body image in children.

Try to participate in yoga exercises alongside your child, to show them you are fully supportive. It can be a great tool with regards to constipation because it encourages your child's body to explore a range of different stances, making with-holding nearly impossible, whilst at the same time providing digestive massage. It will also allow the stomach muscles to relax and, in turn, prevent them from contracting their bowel muscles or anal sphincter. Certain poses have been designed specifically with constipation in mind (these are shown on the right.) You may notice that once your child has

partaken in certain yoga poses, their body will be relaxed so this is the best time to take them to the toilet.



1 MALASANA (YOGI SQUAT)

Firstly, this asana is the best to stimulate the colon to increase functioning.



2 VAJRASANA (THUNDERBOLT POSE)

Vajrasana is the only asana you can do after having a meal to digest the food because it boosts digestion and eliminates constipation.



3 PASCHIMOTTANASANA (SEATED FORWARD FOLD)

This yoga pose relaxes our minds and helps increase the blood flow to the brain to relieve stress. In contrast, the focus could be one of the reasons for your constipation.



4 MATSYENDRASANA (SEATED SUPINE TWIST)

Twisting enhances our gastrointestinal tract, increasing the blood flow to this part of the body and alleviating constipation.



5 BHUJANGASANA (COBRA POSE)

This asana is one of the best poses of yoga for constipation. Gas is linked with constipation.



6 ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA (DOWNWARD FACING DOG)

It works as an inversion posture and leads to increased lymph and blood circulation.



7 PAWANMUKTASANA (WIND RELIEVING POSE)

This asana provides a great massage to the abdomen that helps release the trapped gas due to toxicity in the colon.



Music Strategy

Whether your child likes to make their own music or they enjoy listening to calming songs music can have a massive effect on a child's mental wellbeing. Music is often incorporated into treatment programs for both physical and mental health. Music can have a positive impact on children's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and also give them new opportunities to express themselves, which can lead to increased self-esteem and confidence. You could try to find a song relating to toileting, or ask your child to pick their favourite song to go to the toilet to. Whenever they ask to go to the toilet, or you are trying to encourage them to sit on the toilet, use the same song so that your child realises when this song comes on, it's time to try and toilet. Sing along with your child whilst they are sitting on the toilet to their song also, to make the experience as fun as possible.



POSITIVE SELF-TALK WHEEL



Positive Self-Talk Strategy

When children are upset or anxious, their self-talk is likely to become negative. They may think things like “if I have an accident I’ll embarrass myself” or “None of the other children will talk to me if I smell of poo.” Sit with your child and teach them how to positively self-talk. An example of this would be making an imaginary problem and discussing it with your child, and then asking your child “What do you think I should say to my friend who has this problem? Or “What would you do to help them with their problem?” Your child is likely to respond with some kind, supportive words. Encourage your child to use these same kind words when thinking about

themselves. It can be a great way to coax out information from your child regarding the anxious feelings they have been internalising, without them realising they are giving you the information. Once they have offered this information, you can use techniques to change the way your child thinks about this feeling. It may be that you can flip a negative thought into a positive one.

THIS	NOT THAT
✓ Whoops. I made a mistake.	✗ I'm so stupid.
✓ I like me.	✗ No one likes me.
✓ I did something bad.	✗ I'm a bad person.
✓ This is really hard, but I'm going to keep trying.	✗ I give up. I'll never be able to do this.
✓ I haven't figured it out...yet.	✗ I never get anything right.
✓ I am enough. And worthy, too.	✗ I'm not good enough.

'Calming Box' Strategy

Fill a shoebox with items that engage your child's senses, like a stress ball to squeeze, lotion that smells good, or a picture that makes them feel happy. Ask your child for input when creating a calm box on which items they would like to be included.

When they are feeling anxious, particularly surrounding toileting issues, explore their calm box with them.

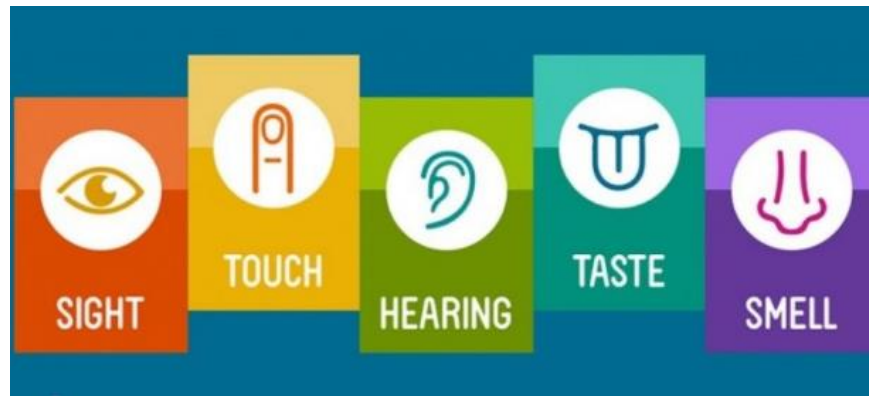
Their calm box could be kept in the bathroom, and explored each time they sit on the toilet. Squeezing a stress ball when sitting on the toilet may help them to pass a bowel movement, smelling something nice may distract them from the anxious thoughts inside their head and laughing at a funny picture can help to ensure the bathroom is a fun and safe place to be.



'5,4,3,2,1 Senses' Strategy

This involves bringing your child back to the present moment, through the use of engaging all of their senses. Ask your child to concentrate on what they can see, touch, head, smell and taste. For example, you could think together of 5 things that they can see around them, 4 things that they can touch, 3 things that they can hear, 2 things that they can smell and 1 thing they would like to taste.

This is an excellent grounding technique to use because it can be used as a distraction tool and can also be applied anywhere that you may be with your child, and can be repeated as many times as is needed until your child begins to calm.



'Progressive Muscle' Strategy

Most children tense their muscles when they feel anxious. Many even hold their breath. When a child is suffering from chronic constipation and are tensing muscles through anxiety, it can make physical symptoms worse, such as abdominal pains and cramps, and can actually lead to being unable to pass a bowel movement due to the sphincter muscles being constantly contracted.

A simple two-step process helps children learn to use their muscles to relieve the physical stress they experience when they become anxious.

1.) Ask your child to tense a specific muscle group (e.g arms and hands or neck and shoulders.) Ask them to hold these tensed muscles for 5 seconds.

2.) Ask them to now release the muscle group they have been tensing and ask them to notice how they now feel. Work head-to-toe to better understand all of the muscles affected by anxiety.

With a little practice, children can learn how to do this anywhere, whether it be on the toilet at school, whilst out playing with friends or even when you see them becoming anxious when asked to go and sit on the toilet.



'Physical Exercise' Strategy

Physical exercise can be extremely beneficial for your child's overall health, and can be a great tool to relieve anxiety also.



Every time your child moves, their bodies release chemicals. Exercise helps regulate the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal axis. This axis is a central player in directing how our bodies react to stress, particularly psychological. Being physically active can do wonders to a child's mood, self-confidence and even help them to sleep better. Some examples of good exercises for a child suffering with chronic constipation include:

- Ask your child to do some jumping jacks (this should help them to stop tensing their anal muscles.)
- Ask them to run on the spot.
- Put on some music and dance with your child. It should distract them and improve their mood.
- Bounce or kick a ball with your child.
- Get your child to squeeze a large ball and then release. It will encourage them to release all muscles at the same time.



A Word from us here at the Childhood Constipation Service...

Developing strong coping strategies takes time and patience. Please do not expect your child to use these strategies effectively straight away. It will likely take them a little time to determine what works and what does not. Additionally, they may find that some coping strategies are more useful than others. So, try not to force them to try them all. Instead, empower them to choose what works best for them.

And, above all....**Praise your child!**

When you notice that your child is using one of their coping strategies, provide praise. Saying something like, "I saw you taking some deep breaths earlier today, great job on calming yourself down!" will let your child know you saw them use their skills and will in turn reinforce their importance. Talk to your child as much as possible to see which strategies work best for them. Asking them; "Did colouring make you feel better?" "Do you like to read when you're on the toilet, does it help you relax?" will enable you to gain a better picture of your child's anxiety and see the fears they face through their eyes, whilst gaining a knowledge of what is helping them to overcome them.

Other Helpful Websites Available:

Anxiety Disorders Helpful Websites:

<https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/anxiety.html?WT.ac=ctg#catmental-health>
"5 ways to deal with anxiety" <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/anxiety-tips.html?WT.ac=t-ra#catmental-health>

Counselling Helpful Websites:

Free resources to help anxious children: <https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/blog/2017/09/28/new-free-resources-to-help-anxious-children>.

"Worry Tree" colouring activity: https://cdn.memiah.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/counsellingdirectory.org.uk/2017/09/Colouring_WorryTree_CounsellingDirectory_HappifulKids.pdf

Mindful colouring bookmarks: https://cdn.memiah.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/counselling-directory.org.uk/2017/09/MindfulColouring_Bookmarks_HappifulKids.jpg

Comic strips: <https://cdn.memiah.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/counselling-directory.org.uk/2017/09/Introducing-Worrypuffs-Comic-1-HappifulKids.jpg>

Health for Kids Website:

Provides young children with simple tips on how to stop feeling worried: <https://www.healthforkids.co.uk/feelings/feeling-worried/>
"visualise Worries Floating Away": <https://www.healthforkids.co.uk/game/lanterns/>

Kids Health Website:

Information sheets and advice about worries: <https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/worry-less.html?WT.ac=ctg#catthought> / <https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/center/relax-center.html?WT.ac=k-ra#catthought>

Factsheets for supporting your child with anxiety: <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/anxiety-disorders.html?WT.ac=ctg#catfeelings/>
<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/worrying.html?WT.ac=p-ra#catfeelings>

Young Minds Website:

Provides mental health support for children to develop resilience to overcome life's difficulties: <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/> / <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3673/anxiety-updated-dec-2019.pdf>

Parents helpline: 0808 802 5544 - Mon-Fri 9:30am to 4pm

Parents Lounge: <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/>

Setting up support groups for parents: <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/how-to-set-up-your-own-parents-support-group/>