

A Letter to Preschool Directors and Teachers

Dear early-childhood educator,

As the father of three young girls who attended preschool, I admire the dedication, compassion, and expertise of early childhood educators. And as a pediatric urologist, I feel compelled to offer guidance on a topic that is fraught among educators and parents: toilet training.

At my Wake Forest University clinic, I treat children of all ages who suffer from enuresis (daytime and nighttime wetting) and encopresis (stool accidents). These conditions are almost always caused by chronic constipation, a condition that often develops during toilet training but goes unnoticed by teachers and parents because the symptoms can be subtle. Even when the condition is recognized, constipation is not taken seriously enough and is vastly under-treated.

Here I'll summarize the key findings of my research and clinical practice. You can find details and studies at BedwettingAndAccidents.com, and you are welcome to contact me directly.

- **The signs of constipation are often subtle and not well known.**

Pooping frequency is not a reliable indicator of constipation! Many constipated children poop every single day. They just don't fully empty, and incomplete emptying is the root of the problem.

The telltale signs of constipation are extra-large stools and stools formed like thick logs or rabbit pellets. Other red flags: the frequent or urgent need to pee, hiding to poop, "skid marks" on underwear or diapers, recurrent urinary tract infections, stomachaches, and, most tellingly, pee or poop accidents. Pooping less than once a day is a sign of constipation, but pooping multiple times a day also can be a sign, indicating the child is not fully emptying.

It's important for preschool teachers to become familiar with these signs and alert parents so the child can receive proper treatment. Left untreated, constipation tends to worsen rather than resolve.

Children, too, are capable of learning that mushy poops are best. I recommend printing our infographic "12 Signs a Child is Constipated" for parents and posting our "How's Your Poop?" chart in your school bathrooms. Both charts are available in English and Spanish under Free Downloads on our website.

- **Accidents are never a child's fault. They are a sign that either a) the child is constipated or b) the child is not ready to toilet train.**

Accidents happen because the child's rectum, stretched by a stool pile-up, is pressing against and aggravating the bladder, causing it to "hiccup" and empty without warning. In the case of poop accidents, the stretched rectum has lost tone and sensation, so stool just drops out of the child's bottom, often without the child noticing.

None of this is within the child's control! Accidents are not a behavioral or learning issue. Suspending children from school to work on their potty skills is like suspending children with a speech delay to work on their language skills: It won't help, because these kids' issues are not related to a lack of training. They're related to a lack of treatment.

The way to resolve the accidents is to resolve the constipation, so the floppy rectum can regain its tone and sensation and stop aggravating the bladder. Even with aggressive treatment such as suppositories, enemas, and laxatives, this process can take a while. The withholding habit becomes deeply ingrained in preschool-age children, and a stretched rectum can be slow to heal. It is important to be patient as families work through these issues and to make sure children have the opportunity to use the bathroom whenever they need to, including at lunch and recess.

- **Children should not be required to complete toilet training by a certain age or date.**

I know it's easier for preschools when children are toilet trained by age 3! However, deadlines prompt many parents to train their children before they are ready, dramatically increasing the risk that the child will develop the withholding habit and become chronically constipated.

With regard to toilet training, a child's maturity is far more important than the child's age. While plenty of 2-year-olds are able to pee and poop on the toilet, many do not possess the maturity and judgment to heed their bodies' urges in a timely manner. A child's ability to use the toilet right when the urge strikes — not 20 minutes or 2 hours later — is what matters most. Many children simply do not have that kind of judgment until after their third birthday. Requiring them to do so earlier can cause lasting damage to their bladder and bowels and can cause them to end up in a clinic like mine.

Children trained before age 2 have triple the risk of developing chronic constipation and daytime wetting compared to children trained between ages 2 and 3, my research indicates.¹ However, this doesn't mean training at 2 ½ poses no risk. My research and clinical experience suggest that for most kids, it's best to wait until about age 3, and it is critical not to set deadlines!

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions!

Sincerely,



Steve Hodges, M.D., shodges@wakehealth.edu
Associate Professor of Pediatric Urology
Wake Forest University School of Medicine

1 "The association of age of toilet training and dysfunctional voiding." Research and Reports in Urology. 2014; 6: 127-130. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4199658/>