

4 TIPS to Help Your Child Manage Toileting Troubles at School

How to gain your teacher's cooperation and compassion

Only 18% of elementary teachers receive training on toileting dysfunction, so you will need to advocate strongly for your child.



Students with chronic constipation, urinary frequency and urgency, daytime accidents, and/or bedwetting face many obstacles at school. Here's how you can help.



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1. Explain, in person, that your child has a medical condition.

Only 18% of elementary teachers receive training on toileting dysfunction, according to a survey of 4,000 teachers conducted by the University of California School of Medicine.¹ And in a survey of 467 Iowa elementary teachers, conducted by the University of Iowa, just 15% suspected underlying health problems in children who wet or soiled their pants or asked to pee more frequently than normal.²

Clearly, school teachers know little about toileting difficulties!

There's a good chance your child's teacher perceives accidents and urinary frequency/urgency as psychological or behavioral — rather than medical — issues.

The teacher may have no idea that holding pee at school can exacerbate bedwetting; that the frequent need to pee is a sign of constipation, not disruptive behavior; or that children with encopresis can't feel their poop accidents. You may be the teacher's only source of information on this topic.

I recommend a face-to-face meeting with your child's teacher, ideally with the school nurse and counselor as well. Explain that you're quite sympathetic to the challenges of managing a classroom, but your child has a medical condition that requires accommodations and the school's active involvement.

Toward this end:

- Bring a doctors' note documenting the diagnosis and necessary accommodations.
- Use medical terms, such as *enuresis*, *encopresis*, *urinary urgency*, *dilated rectum*.
- Bring a printout of *The K-12 Teacher's Packet On Student Toileting Troubles*.

Ask to maintain a dialogue with your child's teacher and nurse throughout the school year. As the UCSF survey concluded, "many teachers believe that [voiding] health is an issue that does not require teacher participation." In fact, after witnessing accidents during class, the survey found, only 64% of teachers informed parents, and 77% had students change clothes.

Your child may be too embarrassed to ask the teacher for help or for permission to go clothes. So it's important to enlist the teacher's cooperation and to spell out how you would like him or her to handle accidents — with maximum discretion and consideration for your child's feelings.

A happy byproduct of advocating for your own child is that you will also be helping other students. As the UCSF survey found, "teachers who received training on managing restroom use and incontinence were more likely to promote lower urinary-tract health among their students."



The older their students, the less mindful teachers are about the need for children to practice healthy toileting habits, according to a UCSF study. Kindergarten teachers are the most aware.

"I think it helped us to use the technical terms. If I just said, 'Oh, my daughter has accidents,' I feel the school might have been less accommodating."

1 Lauren Ko, et al. Lower Urinary Tract Dysfunction in Elementary School Children: Results of a Cross-Sectional Teacher Survey. *Journal of Urology*. April 2016;195(4 Pt 2):1232-8. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4977192/>

2 C.S. Cooper et al. Do public schools teach voiding dysfunction? Results of an elementary school teacher survey. *Journal of Urology*. September 2003. 170(3):956-8. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12913750>

2. Insist on unrestricted restroom access.

It's critical for constipated children to pee or poop when the urge hits — not 10, 20, or 60 minutes later. It's a health issue, and it's no joke.³

Suppressing the urge to pee can damage a growing bladder, thickening and aggravating the bladder wall and increasing a child's risk for accidents, bedwetting, and urinary tract infections. Ignoring the signal to poop is what causes these conditions in the first place.

Yet many schools limit restroom access to the few minutes between classes or at lunchtime. Some even lock restrooms at lunchtime or after school, when kids head to the bus — even though students may have a 45-minute ride home!

While it's heartening that 81% of elementary teachers allow unlimited access to water intake in class, according to the UCSF survey, 88% of the same teachers encourage students requesting restroom access to hold their pee. Something doesn't add up!

Worse, 36% of teachers encourage kids to hold their pee or poop by offering rewards to students who don't use restroom passes or punishing those who do.

Often, restrictions are subtle: Students who don't use restroom passes can earn trinkets, "money" for the student store, even pizza parties. In some classes, students earn "pennies" for good behavior and then must use these pennies to "buy" bathroom passes!

Problem is, some students don't want to miss out on prizes or risk displeasing their teachers. Teachers and administrators may not realize these incentives are prompting constipated kids to ignore their bodies' signals and damaging these students' internal organs.

In one Texas school district, where students had to "earn" bathroom passes for good behavior, the district rationalized the policy as "simply one of many incentives created by classroom teachers to motivate and encourage students to maximize their instructional time."

It is important for you to ask your child directly whether any of these "incentives" or restrictions are in place in his or her classroom. Many kids don't want to tell their parents.

Chances are, your child's teacher will accommodate your request for unlimited bathroom access. Most will, when asked respectfully and when provided with educational materials and, especially, a doctor's note.

But sometimes, a teacher will push back. Or, the teacher may not even have the discretion to give out extra bathroom passes, because the school or school district won't allow it. The mom of one of my patients is a North Carolina elementary school teacher who isn't allowed to give her students more than four bathroom passes per quarter — unless the child has a doctor's note.

If you are up against a classroom or school policy that limits restroom access, involve the principal and school nurse in discussions. Hand all parties a printout of these two articles:

- "Here's a crazy idea — Let students go to the restroom!" by Shanna Peebles, 2015 National Teacher of the Year⁴
- "Trusting Students, Saving Bladders: One Teacher's Radically Humane School Restroom Policy." By Steve Hodges, M.D.⁵

Indicate your child must be able to use the restroom not just as often as she wants, but also for as long as she needs.

Ask your child's teachers to pass this information on to substitute teachers.

³ You Won't Believe Some Schools' Restroom Policies. <https://www.parents.com/parents-magazine/parents-perspective/you-wont-believe-some-schools-restroom-policies/>.

⁴ <https://medium.com/curio-learning/heres-a-crazy-idea-let-students-go-to-the-restroom-19e6d0b2e5eb>

⁵ <https://www.bedwettingandaccidents.com/single-post/2017/05/22/Trusting-Students-Saving-Bladders-One-Teacher%E2%80%99s-Radically-Humane-School-Restroom-Policy>



"Initially, the teacher would say, yes, fine, go when you need to, quickly. But my kid takes everything literally, so she did exactly that and didn't fully evacuate, causing more problems."

3. Consider a 504 plan.

A 504 plan is a legally binding document created to give students with medical conditions accommodations that will endure their “learning process” is not disrupted.⁶ All of a child’s teachers — including P.E., music, and art teachers — must follow the plan. You typically start the process by meeting with the school’s counselor and providing medical documentation.

Unrestricted restroom access is just one component of the plan. For children with enuresis and/or encopresis, other 504-plan accommodations might include:

- periodic reminders to use the restroom
- access to clean clothes stored at school
- access to a private restroom to change clothes
- toilet sits twice a day monitored by the nurse
- extra time to make up tests or assignments missed during a restroom visit

“The 504 plan has been life-changing for my second-grader. Before, he was bullied in the boys’ restroom when he tried to change, and we were always trying to pack extra clothes in his backpack. Now he has organized support and privacy, and it’s helped take the pressure off him. We regret we didn’t do it sooner.”

Meet with your child’s counselor, nurse, teacher, and principal to adjust the plan each year or as needed.

Make sure your child knows she is legally entitled to these accommodations and that if she gets push-back from a teacher, she can say, “It’s on my 504!” As one mom noted, “Just knowing she has those words makes my daughter more confident.”

4. Emphasize the emotional effects of your child’s medical condition.

The lead author of the UCSF survey, Lauren Ko, M.D., was prompted to develop the survey because she witnessed firsthand the embarrassment of students who have accidents the class. Before she went to medical school, Dr. Ko taught second grade at a charter school in New York City. “The discipline was pretty strict at our school, and there were only certain times of the day when students were allowed to use the bathroom,” she told me. “I noticed kids having accidents in the classroom, and I know it was really humiliating for them. It’s just a horrifying experience for a kid.”

While the medical explanation may get you the accommodations, the emotional component may help your child gain empathy. Explain how these issues are affecting him or her emotionally — that your child feels anxious or embarrassed and that it’s important for the teacher to be discreet.

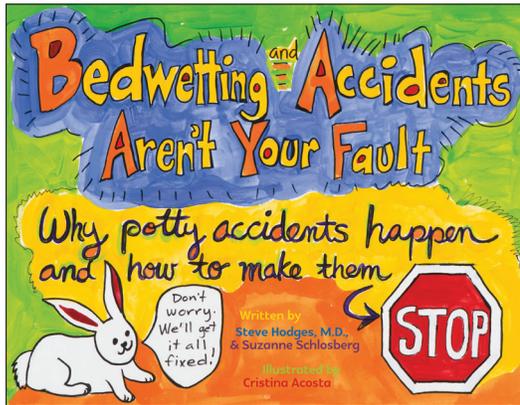
Many teachers will come up with a secret hand signal for the child to use the restroom or to go to the front office to change. That can even be part of the 504 plan.

“Last year my daughter had a bm that clogged the toilet at school. The next week she started coming home soaking wet. It took me a few days to make the connection: the clogged toilet incident had embarrassed her so badly she had stopped using the restrooms all together! Luckily, her teacher was very supportive, and we got through it, but the whole situation is so frustrating.”

6 Protecting Students With Disabilities: Frequently Asked Questions About Section 504 and the Education of Children with Disabilities, U.S. Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>.

Extra Credit!

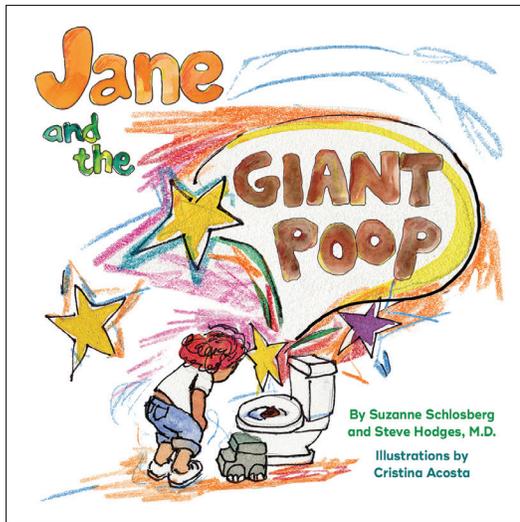
Help educate your child's teacher, as well as other students and families, by donating these children's books to your child's school library or nurse. These books are endorsed by Mayo Clinic and UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital!



“The illustrations are so much fun they remove any possible embarrassment, and the tone is friendly and supportive.”

– Laura Markham, Ph.D., author of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids* and founder of *AhaParenting.com*

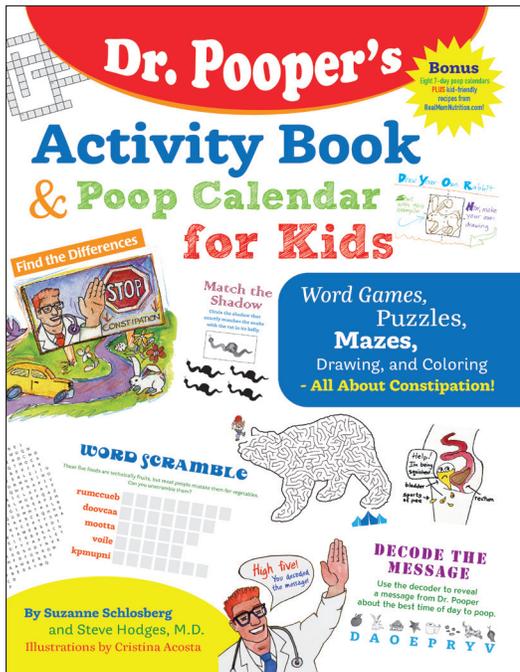
A supportive, engaging, highly informative, and cleverly illustrated book for children from preschool through elementary age. Little ones will love Dr. Pooper and the wily rabbit. Older kids will appreciate the respectful tone and amusing illustrations.



“Jane and the Giant Poop should be in the hands of every young child who has struggled with peeing or pooping problems. I LOVE this book!”

– Erin Kieley, P.T., pediatric continence specialist, Mayo Clinic Department of Pediatric Urology

The funniest and most educational book written about healthy pooping! This clever rhyming book stars Jane, a karate enthusiast who hasn't been her sunny self lately. When her giant poop clogs the toilet, Jane learns why her belly has been aching. Soon, she becomes an expert about all shapes of poop — pebbles, logs, globs, milkshakes, and cow patties. Her poop turns mush and then the toilet will flush!



“Clever book! My daughter hates talking about pooping, but she loves the puzzles and word games!”

– review from verified amazon purchaser

An activity book about about constipation? Heck yeah! Being clogged up is no fun, but learning about healthy pooping and peeing actually can be. The book features 100+ games, puzzles, and drawing activities that will entertain and challenge kids of all ages. Children will learn that peeing and pooping are just a regular part of life. Includes lots of great games that elementary-school teachers can use to educate their students.