

Preschool

Toilet Training: The Sequel

Your child mastered the potty months ago — so why are you wiping up puddles again?
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Lynette McDonald was dismayed when her 3½-year-old daughter unexpectedly began wetting the bed. After having been dry for well over a year, Cailin was now waking up in the middle of the night soaking wet.

With a new baby on the way, these sudden sleeptime interruptions were the last thing McDonald needed. “I couldn’t believe it was happening,” she recalls. And she worried about what would happen in a month, her due date. “I didn’t want to get up for two babies.” Turns out McDonald, of Maple Ridge, BC, may not have been the only family member fretting about the future. Gary Direnfeld, a Dundas, Ont., social worker specializing in child development, explains that change is one of the most common causes for a previously toilet-trained child to suddenly start wetting the bed or having daytime accidents (referred to medically as secondary nocturnal and diurnal enuresis, respectively). It seems likely that Cailin’s regression was related to her soon-to-be sibling.

“It’s a stress reaction,” Direnfeld says. “Children can’t sit there and say, ‘Gee, this is all different, and it’s very upsetting to me, and I’m having trouble coping.’ Rather, it shows up in their behaviour.”

That’s what appeared to happen in the Canete household in Fort McMurray, Alta. Three-year-old Adam had been out of diapers for months; a sudden wave of wet pants during the day had his mother, Leanne, perplexed. “I didn’t know why it was happening. He had done so well, and it was so sudden.”

Then it occurred to Canete that the accidents had coincided with the arrival of a new puppy — and the ensuing process of house-training their furry friend. Canete admits that this may have created a small upheaval in their household. “We haven’t had any pets,” she concedes, “so it’s been a gradual thing to get used to it. It may have been a source of stress for Adam.”

There are other causes for a toilet-trained child to experience some backsliding, but anxiety or stress is often a good bet. And the problem usually resolves itself after the anxiety is eased. Once McDonald and her husband had finished renovating the new baby’s room and painting Cailin’s “big-girl furniture,” the bedwetting tapered off.

The average age for a child to complete toilet training is three, but there is a wide range of normal, from under two to well over four years. Nighttime control typically comes later — 15 to 20 percent of five-year-olds still wet the bed at least three nights a week, even though they’re out of diapers during the day. It’s considered secondary enuresis if wetting appears after a child has been generally dry for at least three months.

Tracking the Cause

It’s worth a visit to the doctor if your child at any age is experiencing regular accidents after having been consistently dry. In particular, daytime accidents that occur together with bedwetting need investigation, says Denis Leduc, a Montreal paediatrician and president-elect of the Canadian Paediatric Society. “You have to rule out some urinary tract and bladder abnormalities.”

Urinary tract infections and chronic constipation can both set the stage for sudden daytime and nighttime wetting. And both are treatable. “Diabetes is not common but certainly

something you have to rule out," adds Leduc. A feeling of bathroom urgency can also be caused by an inflammation or irritation of the urethra, which would be detected by a urine culture or urinalysis (a close examination of the urine).

"A physical cause won't be picked up that often," Leduc stresses. "But a urine test is such a simple thing to do, and it's non-invasive...it can alleviate some of the anxiety in the parents and the child." Another level of tests can be conducted to check the child's bladder function and urine retention. If all the tests come out negative, "then we wait for resolution," says Leduc.

Apart from behavioural and medical causes, some cases of enuresis are associated with individual quirks. For some children, according to Direnfeld, bladder control is an on-again, off-again affair during their development. "It will come and go of its own accord, independent of anything the parent does." Other kids get so involved with playtime that they have no interest in stopping for a bathroom break, especially once the novelty of toilet using has faded.

In some cases, Direnfeld suggests, bladder accidents may be the result when a child is pushed into training before he is emotionally ready (signs include showing an interest in using the toilet and being proud of the results). If a child isn't ready, the training may appear successful at the outset but can lead to a tug-of-war with the child trying to win back some control by withholding his waste — and then ending up wet.

Heather Juby's four-year-old daughter, Allison, started wetting the bed a couple of weeks after she stopped using a soother at night. Juby, who lives in Ontario's Prince Edward County, suspects that without the soother, Allison began to sleep more soundly. There may be something to her theory: "Children who wet at night usually are more profound sleepers for sure," says Leduc. "It's more difficult to wake them up."

Juby's daughter was prescribed desmopressin, a hormone that can help children with enuresis by reducing the amount of urine produced by the kidneys. But after about six weeks, during which time Allison did urinate a smaller volume at night — but still soaked the bed with it — Juby discontinued the medication. The slim risk of side effects did not seem worth the trade-off. "We'd rather get up a couple times a night and change a wet bed than be dealing with something like that," Juby says.

Keeping your Cool

While the majority of these scenarios are sure to resolve themselves with time, it can be discouraging for the parent who is doing the laundry now. If a child has previously stayed dry, it is sometimes an effort to believe she is not having accidents on purpose. "You don't want to yell and get mad at her," says Juby. "And yet it's so frustrating. You think, why is she doing this?"

In fact, a child who anticipates a negative reaction from mom and dad may end up trying to conceal the problem — making it harder for parents to help. Sometimes four-year-old Jessica Doucette "feels scared that she's going to get into trouble for having these accidents," says her mother, Roxanne, of Keswick, Ont. Jessica has been battling a series of urinary tract infections that have interfered with bladder control. "She's starting to hide her underpants in her closet and not say anything to me." Doucette tries to make her daughter understand that she's not upset about the wet pants, and reminds her, "If it's hurting, you need to tell Mommy so we can get it fixed."

Experts agree that a low-key response is best. "Punishment will not work. Period. Full stop," says Direnfeld. "Don't go there." Leduc notes that accidents can occur when children retain their urine for so long that they start to dribble. Instead of scolding, you can reinstate bathroom breaks at regular intervals — even if this means backtracking your way through previously charted waters. Sandra Pereira of Toronto found that communicating with teachers and showing them a doctor's note helped them understand that her school-aged daughter needed to be excused from class frequently to visit the bathroom.

And as for nighttime, there are alternatives to stripping the sheets at 3 a.m. Training diapers or absorbent underpants may be a good temporary solution for children who wet the bed almost every night. "There is a sense that it may remove some of the incentives children have not to wet, but you're not dealing with a child who wants to wet his bed, in the vast majority of cases," says Leduc. "It might just make it easier to avoid changing the bed."

While children may not be able to control the underlying cause of the wetting, they can often take some responsibility for managing it. Many four-year-olds are old enough to put wet pants in the hamper and select clean clothes. An older child might take on the task of watching the clock and remembering to go the bathroom at pre-set times, or limiting her fluid intake before bed.

McDonald makes a point of praising and rewarding her daughter when she wakes up dry. She also uses sticker charts to keep track of accident-free days or nights. Direnfeld says that praise, while sometimes appropriate, should be offered "not just for the toileting behaviour, but any time you put a demand on your child — like pick up their shoes." And rewards don't have to be "a buy-fest...sometimes [a reward can be] just the greatest smile, hug and kiss — the affirmation that he's listened and complied. You apply that same thing to toilet expectations."

The most effective response, Direnfeld says, may be to ignore the accidents altogether. Parents often feel that they have to do something, but "leaving it alone is doing something. Waiting is a reasonable solution." Given the likelihood that the problem will resolve itself without intervention, this may be the best advice of all.

"You just have to allow time and maturity," says Direnfeld. "Have patience and faith."

The Bedwetting Blues

Chances are young children who experience some backsliding after toilet training will get back on track before long. But children who have never been regularly dry at night (more commonly boys than girls) can experience nighttime accidents into adolescence. While bedwetting does decrease with age, three percent of kids still wet the bed at age 12. And although a preschooler may be relatively unconcerned about a set of soiled sheets, it can be a source of shame for an older child.

Deep sleep is the culprit in most cases, according to the Canadian Paediatric Society. A child is also more likely to wet the bed if either or both parents did. Parents can help ease the humiliation by being supportive and **downplaying accidents**. You can also make sure your child's routine is helping, by keeping fluid intake to a minimum for the two hours before bed, making sure he empties his bladder at bedtime, even getting him up to use the toilet if necessary.

If the bedwetting is upsetting your child, his doctor can recommend treatment after a thorough examination and history. One option is an alarm system with a sensor that tucks into the child's pants and triggers a sound to wake him at the first drops of urine. It may take a few months to have a permanent effect, however, and is most successful in children older than seven who want it to work. Or the doctor may prescribe the drug desmopressin to reduce the amount of urine produced at night, but the drug can be costly and cause side effects. It may be handiest for short-term use such as sleepovers or overnight camp. Older children can change their own sheets, and use charts to track dry nights. But try not to let these set the stage for conflict. Remember, the statistics are on your side; only rarely does bedwetting continue into adulthood.

For more information, visit caringforkids.cps.ca and search for bedwetting.