

The impact of sensory issues on toilet training



What are senses?

The senses of touch, sight, taste, hearing and smell allow us to receive information and understand what is happening in the world around us. We also have senses that allow us to know what is happening within our body:

- The vestibular sense helps us balance, when we are moving, or sitting or standing still
- Proprioception is about our muscles and joints. It allows us to know where we are in relation to the rest of the world, but also allows us to coordinate our movements. It is because of proprioception that we know how to pick things up without dropping or breaking them and how to push or pull to move things.
- Interoception is the sense that allows us to know what is going on inside and outside our body. It brings together all the sensory information from the body, decides what is important and what can be ignored. It is how we know what is going on in our bodies such as whether we feel hot, cold, thirsty, that we need the toilet and so on. It also how we know what emotions we are feeling, such as, happy, excited, scared, angry etc.

Why do we have senses?

Our senses allow us to collect information about the world around us and about our bodies. This allows us to respond to different things in the right way to keep us safe and comfortable. Senses also allow us to enjoy the world as we experience so much through them e.g. music through hearing, colours and shapes through sight, good food through taste etc. However, they also allow us to avoid things that might harm us.

Because we learn and experience the world through our senses they are strongly linked to our memory and our imagination. That is why some things can trigger strong reactions or behaviours for some children and adults.

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Does everyone have the same senses?

While everyone has the same senses, we all experience them differently. So, everyone reacts differently to different things. What is enjoyed by some people may not affect others, and there may be others who dislike the same thing.

What sort of sensory problems can children have?

How we experience our senses varies, for everyone. However, some people may have problems with how they experience one, some, or all their senses. Many children who have problems or differences with the way they experience their senses will behave in ways to try and help them to manage these and make their world feel safer and more comfortable.

Being less sensitive

Being less sensitive means that the person is less aware or does not notice what is happening in one or all of their senses. This may result in children trying to increase the stimulation they are getting to that sense.

Being over sensitive

Being too sensitive means that the person may find certain things uncomfortable or upsetting and that they will actively avoid them.

Difficulty filtering senses

Our brains are receiving lots of information all of the time. For most people their brains will sort out what is important for us to know now, so that we can react in the right way, and ignore the rest.

If someone is finding it difficult to filter and ignore any information that is not needed at that point their brain can be overloaded. If the brain is trying to deal with too much information the person may get stressed and anxious. When this happens children or adults can withdraw and become unresponsive; they may get upset or they may have a meltdown.

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How do the senses affect toilet training?

How children experience their senses can result in them having certain behaviours and characteristics. These affect how children learn. Therefore, understanding how children experience their world and their senses can help us plan how to approach toilet training in a way that makes it most likely to be successful for them.

The different senses affect toilet training in different ways. There is information below about how the different senses affect toilet training, with some suggestions for things that can be done to help. The suggestions will not be appropriate for everyone, but should provide ideas about what may be done to help.

Balance:

The vestibular sense provides information that allows us to stay balanced and upright while we move, sit or stand. Children may feel that they have a problem with balance, but this might not be noticed by those around them. They may not be able to say that they have this problem.

Children with balance problems may feel frightened of falling off or into the toilet. This may be made worse if their bottom is not well supported by a toilet seat that is the right size for them and if their feet are not flat on a firm surface.

Space around the toilet may upset some children. They may prefer a cubicle or having a wall near them. A handle next to the toilet for them to hold may help.

Some children who are not getting enough feedback about their balance will try to move more to help them feel balanced. Children with this issue might find it hard to stay sitting still on the toilet or potty for long enough to pass urine or open their bowls.

How to reduce problems with balance:

- Make sure that the potty or toilet is the right size for your child. If your child is using the toilet have a reducer seat that fits firmly and does not move while your child is sitting.

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- If using a toilet make sure that you give your child a step for your child's feet that is high enough for them to be able to rest their feet flat on it. You can mark some feet on the step, so your child knows where to put their feet
- Use a reducer seat with handles or have a handrail or toilet frame for them to hold
- If your child likes to feel something behind them, try putting a pillow, cushion or rolled up towel behind them

Hearing:

Our ears provide lots of information about types of sounds and where it is coming from.

Bathrooms have lots of different noises and can be louder and more echoey than other places. This is because they often have fewer soft furnishings and have tiles or other washable floors. There may also be extractor fans, running water, pipes gurgling and in public or school toilets there may be other doors banging, flushes or hand driers. There is also the sound of wee or poo going into the toilet.

Children who are more sensitive to hearing may find the range of sounds in the bathroom difficult. They may make them feel anxious or frightened. Sudden and unexpected sounds, such as hand driers and flushes may be particularly alarming for them.

Children who are under sensitive may want to be in the bathroom, but may want to make noises, or play with the flush. They may be distracted by the sounds in the bathroom and so not be able to focus on using the potty or toilet.

How to reduce problems with sounds in the bathroom

- Put extra bathmats and towels around the bathroom to help reduce the echoes
- If your child does not like the sound of the flush, avoid flushing when they are near. Once they are toilet trained you can start to flush when they are outside the bathroom and gradually flush as they are nearer to reduce their anxiety about it. Always let them know when you are going to flush so that they do not get a sudden surprise from it. You could also try recording the sound of the flush and playing it quietly at a time when they are relaxed. Gradually increase the volume of the recording when you play it back as they tolerate it

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- Turn off any extractor fans while your child is in the bathroom
- Try to avoid toilets where there are hand driers, or lots of other people. You can purchase a RADAR key to allow access to locked disabled toilets in the community
- You could try using noise reducing headphones while your child is in the bathroom. These may be particularly helpful in nursery, school or public toilets
- If your child is anxious about the noise of wee or poo going into the toilet place some toilet paper over the water in the bowl
- For children who like to flush the toilet often, being allowed to use the flush can be a reward for weeing or pooing in the right place. Use a picture cue card to help them learn that they should only flush once and then move to the next activity
- Some children may benefit from having music played while they are in the bathroom

Interoception:

Most children gradually learn what the different signals from their body mean and how to respond to them. We usually respond to these signals in a way that keep us safe and comfortable. However, some children have difficulty in receiving the signals from their bodies: some are over-sensitive to them, some are under sensitive and some children struggle to understand them.

Children with poor awareness of their body signals (poor interoception) may struggle to notice the messages from their bladder or bowel that they need the potty or toilet. It may become more difficult for them to notice these signals if their brain is busy with a different activity.

Some children may notice the signals but not understand them and some children may be oversensitive so, once toilet trained, may want to go to the toilet frequently as they are noticing as soon as the bladder starts to fill.

How to overcome problems with interoception

- Timed toileting can be very helpful. This involves taking your child to the potty or toilet in a routine. After meals, drinks and waking from sleep can be good times.
- Using picture cue cards can help children to understand the routines and when it will be time to go to the potty or toilet
- Some older children may be helped by a vibrating watch to remind them of when to go to the potty or toilet

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Once children are potty or toilet trained and four years old or more, they should be going to the toilet about 5-7 times a day or about every two hours. If your child goes more often than this try to gradually increase the times between toilet visits. If this is difficult ask your healthcare professional for support.

- Watch your child's behaviour and point out to them when you think they might need the potty or toilet: for example, when they are fidgeting, wriggling, holding their groin
- Try allowing your child time without their nappy or with a bare bottom to increase their awareness of when they wee and poo
- Try using a wetting alarm for potty or toilet training.
- Talk to your child about how their body may be feeling at different times, such as when they are cold, hungry, hurt etc
- Ask your healthcare professionals for support working on strategies to help your child become more aware of the different parts of their body and how they feel

Proprioception:

Children who have difficulty with getting feedback from their muscles and joints, may not have much awareness of their bodies and where they are. Signs of this include being clumsy, more active than usual, struggling with zips, buttons etc. This might make it difficult to manage dressing and undressing to sit on the toilet. They may also have problems with sitting and with knowing how, where and how firmly to wipe themselves

Children who are under sensitive may need the feeling of something behind them when on the toilet. They may like the firm feeling of the nappy as it may help them to know where their body is. Therefore, they may be reluctant to move to pants.

How to reduce problems with proprioception

Trying to reduce problems with proprioception more generally will help affected children with toilet training. Working on an activity that helps with proprioception before a toilet or potty visit might be helpful for some children.

Things that help with proprioception include:

- Full body movements, so activities like running, jumping, stretching, rolling or any sport or other physical activity

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- Bouncing activities such as trampolining, or bouncing on a therapy ball
- Activities that need balancing, such as wobble cushions, scooters or bikes
- Activities that include smaller movements of one part of the body may help children to sit still on the toilet e.g. chewing, pushing their hands together, squeezing a squishy toy or stress ball
- Weighted items such as a warm hot water bottle, pat mat or weighted blanket on their lap while sitting on the toilet

Smell (and taste):

Although smell and taste are separate senses, they often work together. Children who are over or under sensitive to smell and taste may have more restricted diets, which can increase the likelihood of constipation.

Children who are more sensitive to smells may struggle with all the different smells in the bathroom: different cleaning products, toiletries and any lingering smells of wee and poo can be difficult.

Children who struggle to filter out different information may struggle to process all the different smells in the bathroom. This can distract them and make it more difficult to focus on toileting.

How to reduce problems with smell:

- Try to reduce the number of different smells in your toilet or bathroom. You can do this by using toiletries with the same smells, fewer cleaning products, unscented cleaning products
- Try to make sure that the bathroom or toilet are well ventilated. Extractor fans may help if your child is not over-sensitive to sound, or open the window if possible
- Give your child a piece of cloth or handkerchief with some essential oil or strong scent on it that they like. They can then sniff this which may help to reduce their awareness of smells that they find more difficult. This may also help children who look for strong smells. Scratch and sniff stickers or air fresheners may also appeal to these children

Touch:

Our skin has receptors that send information to our brain about touch. The receptors allow us to tell if something is hot or cold, hard or soft, rough or smooth, wet or dry. The most sensitive parts of our skin have the most touch receptors in them.

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Children who are over sensitive to touch may find a hard toilet seat cold or uncomfortable. They may also struggle with the feeling of toilet paper, with any splashes from the toilet and they may struggle with the feeling of opening their bowels.

Children who are under sensitive to touch may like the pressure of their nappy on their waist and hips. They may particularly like the weight of a full nappy. They may like touching different things in the bathroom. They may not notice when they have wet underwear, which can be a useful learning experience for other children during potty/toilet training.

How to reduce problems with touch:

- Children may find a padded toilet seat more comfortable
- Consider what you are using for wiping. Some children will find toilet paper difficult and may prefer wipes, a flannel and water or being washed with running water and then dried with a towel
- Children who experience passing normal stools as painful may benefit from a small dose of laxative to make sure their stools stay really soft: speak to their healthcare professional about this
- If children like the pressure of their nappy consider using tight fitting cycle shorts, leotards, leggings, tights or other firm clothing. Gradually reduce the time spent in these as your child tolerates or gradually provide these clothes in larger sizes.
- Some children may benefit from massage
- If your child finds the cold floor difficult make sure that there is a mat for them to walk on, or that they are wearing socks or slippers

Vision:

Being able to see helps is important for knowing where we are and for balance.

Children who receive too much visual information may find the bathroom difficult because of the bright lights, reflective surfaces on shiny tiles and mirrors. They may be distracted by lots of patterns on the floor, walls, towels or from toiletries on the surfaces. Too much visual information may make them feel upset or anxious.

For children who are not getting enough visual information may focus too much on the extra stimulation they enjoy from the bright lights, reflective surfaces, colours, patterns and so on. This may be distracting so that they are not able to think about using the potty or toilet.

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How to reduce problems with vision:

- Adjust the amount of lighting: for children who are over sensitive dimmer light bulbs and covering part of any mirrors with plain paper may help. For children who are under sensitive brighter light bulbs may be needed
- Try not to have too many things lying around the bathroom. You could try putting toiletries and cleaning products into a cupboard, drawer or box
- If possible, have plain walls, towels and bath mats with calm, neutral colours for children who are over-sensitive.
- Children who are under sensitive might like brightly coloured towels and lots of pictures, posters and ornaments in the bathroom

Why do we have senses?

Although sensory issues are more common in children who have autism, developmental or learning disabilities, they can affect any child. Children who have sensory differences are more likely to become anxious or upset about toilet training. There are some key things that can help:

- Try to work out what your child finds difficult and what they find easier. This can help you to make small changes that will help them to potty or toilet train successfully
- Try to find ways that help your child feel relaxed about potty or toilet training. Adjustments including some of the ones above may help. It will also help if you are able to feel relaxed.
- Ask your child's occupational therapist for an assessment of their needs for potty or toilet training. They should be able to help you find the right equipment, but should also be able to help you understand your child's sensory needs and how to respond to these.

Where can I get more information about how to potty or toilet train my child?

Find more information about child bladder and bowel health in our information library at www.bbuk.org.uk. You can also contact the [Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline \(0161 214 4591\)](tel:01612144591).

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For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.

There is also information about bedwetting at www.stopbedwetting.org.
