

Dr. Vera's
CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES



stop the potty struggles!

and help them feel ready

An OT's Step-by-Step Toileting
Plan for Kids with Autism

DR. FERNANDO VERA, OT

DR. VERA'S CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

Stop the Potty Struggles

An OT's Step-by-Step Toileting Plan for Kids with Autism

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StartEmpowering.com

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Important: This guide is for education and support. It does not replace medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or individualized therapy. Every child with autism is different. Talk with your child's doctor about constipation, pain, blood in the stool or urine, frequent accidents after being trained, or any sudden change in toileting, and before using laxatives or supplements. If anyone is in danger, call 911.

A note on language: this guide uses person-first language, such as "child with autism" and "child on the spectrum."

A LETTER BEFORE YOU BEGIN

You are not behind.

If you picked up this guide, you have probably tried the three-day method, the sticker chart and the fun underwear, and you are still buying pull-ups.

As an occupational therapist, I want you to know this first: **children with autism often learn to use the toilet later than other children, and that is not your fault or theirs.** Toileting asks for a lot at once: feeling the signal inside the body, stopping an activity, coping with a loud, echoing room, managing clothes and sitting on a seat with a hole in it.

That changes what helps. Pressure, shame and waiting for your child to “just decide” rarely work. What works is **a comfortable body, a bathroom that feels safe, a predictable sitting schedule and rewards that come right away.**

Most children with autism can learn this skill. It takes more steps and more time, and every one of those steps is in this guide.

How to use this guide

Right now

Find your situation in the contents. Read the “Instead of... Try this” swaps on the left page. Each one takes about 30 seconds.

When things are calm

Read the right page: what to say, what to do, what to avoid and how to set up for next time.

Get to know your child

Fill in the toileting profile and keep the toilet diary for a week. They show you when and where to start.

Share it

The “My Toilet Plan” page is made to hand to school, grandparents and sitters so everyone uses the same words and steps.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Treat constipation first. A child who is backed up or afraid it will hurt can't learn to use the toilet, no matter how good the plan.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Contents

Part one: Getting Ready

1	No Signs of Being Ready	10
2	Doesn't Notice Being Wet or Dirty	12
3	Afraid of the Bathroom	14
4	Won't Sit on the Toilet	16
5	Attached to Diapers and Pull-Ups	18
6	Starting Again After It Didn't Work	20

Part two: Learning to Go

7	Sits But Nothing Happens	23
8	Pees in the Toilet, Poops Only in a Diaper	25
9	Holding It In	27
10	Afraid of Flushing	29
11	Accidents Right After Sitting	31
12	Wiping and Cleaning Up	33

Part three: Sensory and Body

13	Constipation and Painful Poops	36
14	Playing With or Smearing Stool	38
15	Too Much Paper and Playing in the Water	40
16	Pulling Pants Down and Up	42
17	Hand Washing Battles	44
18	Standing or Sitting to Pee, and Aiming	46

Part four: Out in the World

19	Will Only Go at Home	49
20	Public Restrooms	51
21	Toileting at School	53
22	Setbacks After Illness, Change or Stress	55
23	Staying Dry at Night	57
24	Asking to Go	59

Start here

Which toileting problem is it?	5
The toileting ladder	6
The S.E.A.T. method	7
My child's toileting profile	8

Tools and printables

A bathroom that feels safe	61
Rewards that really work	62
My toilet steps	63
My Toilet Plan	64
Toilet diary	65
When to get more help	66
Taking care of you	67

More

About Dr. Vera	68
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START HERE

Which toileting problem is it?

Most toileting struggles fall into three groups. Find the one that fits best, and start there.

	NOT TRAINED YET	PEE YES, POOP NO	WAS TRAINED, NOW ACCIDENTS
What it looks like	Still in diapers or pull-ups. Won't sit, or sits and nothing happens	Uses the toilet to pee but asks for a diaper, hides or holds to poop	Dry for months, then wetting or soiling again
Often behind it	Not feeling the body's signal, fear of the bathroom, attachment to the diaper routine	Constipation, a painful poop in the past, fear of "letting go" or of the splash	Constipation, an infection, illness, a new school or home change, stress
What helps most	A comfortable bathroom, a sitting schedule and quick rewards	Soft stools first, then small steps from diaper to toilet	A doctor's visit, then back to basics without blame
Find it in	Parts one and two	Parts two and three	Part four

See the doctor first if

Your child has hard or painful stools, goes fewer than three times a week, has pain when peeing, or was trained and started having accidents again.

When is a child ready?

You don't need every "readiness sign." A good time to start is when your child can stay dry for an hour or two, has fairly regular poops, and can sit for two or three minutes.

START HERE

The toileting ladder

Using the toilet is a chain of small skills. Find the step your child is on now and work on the next one. Skipping steps is what leads to battles.

enter

STEP 1

1 • The bathroom is okay

Your child can walk in, stay a minute and be changed there.

- Change diapers here
- Fix sound and light
- Keep it short

sit

STEP 2

2 • Sitting

Sits on the toilet, first with clothes on, then without, feet supported.

- Start at 10 seconds
- Reward sitting
- Never force

go

STEP 3

3 • Going

Pees and poops in the toilet on a schedule, with your help.

- Sit at set times
- Reward right away
- Calm about accidents

myself

STEP 4

4 • By myself

Asks or goes alone, wipes, dresses, washes, and uses other bathrooms.

- Teach asking
- Fade your help
- Practice new places

DR. VERA'S TIP

Stay on a step until it's easy and boring. Moving up too fast is the most common reason toilet training falls apart.

START HERE

The S.E.A.T. method

One simple plan behind every page in this guide. When you feel stuck, come back to these four letters.



Schedule the sits

Take your child to the toilet at set times: after waking, after meals, before leaving and before bed. Don't ask "Do you need to go?" Say "Time for the toilet."



Environment that feels safe

A seat that fits, feet on a stool, a quiet fan, soft light and nothing that flushes or blows by surprise.



A comfortable body

Soft, regular stools, plenty to drink and help learning what a full bladder or bowel feels like.



Treat success, stay calm about misses

Reward right away, every time, with something saved only for the toilet. Clean up accidents with few words and no blame.

What NOT to do

- ✗ Punish, shame or scold accidents
- ✗ Hold your child on the toilet
- ✗ Start during illness, a move or a new school

Remember

This is a skill, like riding a bike, not a test of will. Your child isn't refusing to learn. They need more steps, more practice and more time.

PRINTABLE

My child's toileting profile

Check how often you see each one. Bring this page to your child's doctor or OT. It shows where to start.

MY CHILD...	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
Stays dry for one to two hours at a time	☐	☐	☐
Poops at about the same time most days	☐	☐	☐
Has hard, large or painful stools	☐	☐	☐
Notices or shows when wet or dirty	☐	☐	☐
Hides, squats or goes quiet before pooping	☐	☐	☐
Will walk into the bathroom calmly	☐	☐	☐
Will sit on the toilet for two minutes	☐	☐	☐
Is bothered by flushing, fans or hand dryers	☐	☐	☐
Can pull pants down and up	☐	☐	☐
Follows a simple picture schedule	☐	☐	☐
Asks for a diaper or pull-up to poop	☐	☐	☐
Uses the toilet in some places but not others	☐	☐	☐

The rewards my child would work hardest for are:

part one

Getting Ready

Before the first sit. How to tell if your child is ready, make the bathroom feel safe and say goodbye to diapers without a fight.

- | | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | No Signs of Being Ready | 2 | Doesn't Notice Being Wet or Dirty |
| 3 | Afraid of the Bathroom | 4 | Won't Sit on the Toilet |
| 5 | Attached to Diapers and Pull-Ups | 6 | Starting Again After It Didn't Work |

1

PART ONE · GETTING READY

No Signs of Being Ready

What it looks like

Your child is past the age other kids train, but doesn't seem to care about being wet, never asks, and shows no interest in the toilet.

What's really going on

Many children with autism don't show the usual signs. They may not feel the body's signal clearly, or care about being a “big kid.” Readiness often has to be built, not waited for.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wait for your child to show interest on their own.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Start building the steps now: the bathroom, sitting and a schedule.

Why it works: For many children with autism, interest comes after practice, not before.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Don't you want to be a big boy like your cousin?”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“After breakfast, we sit on the toilet. Then bubbles.”

Why it works: Routine and a reward mean more to your child than comparisons.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Guess when your child pees and poops.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Keep a diary for a week to find their natural times.

Why it works: A pattern tells you when a sit is most likely to succeed.

More things to say

“Toilet time. Then bubbles.”

“This is where pee and poop go.”

“You sat! High five.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Check diapers every hour for a week and write down wet, dry or dirty.
- ✓ Change diapers in the bathroom, standing up if possible.
- ✓ Let your child watch a parent or sibling use the toilet, if you're comfortable.
- ✓ Read or watch a simple story about using the toilet.

Avoid

- ✗ Comparing your child to others.
- ✗ Asking “Do you need to go?” over and over.
- ✗ Starting during illness, a move or a new school.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Ask the doctor to check for constipation before you start.
- ✓ Choose rewards that are saved only for the toilet.
- ✓ Pick a calm two-week period with few outings to begin.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is over four and you're unsure where to start, ask your doctor or OT for a toileting plan. Earlier help is easier help.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Readiness is not a feeling your child will announce. It's a set of skills you can teach one at a time.

2

PART ONE · GETTING READY

Doesn't Notice Being Wet or Dirty

What it looks like

Your child plays happily in a soaked or dirty diaper and never tells you. They seem surprised when an accident happens.

What's really going on

Signals from inside the body can be faint for children with autism. Modern diapers also pull moisture away so well that there's little to feel.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"How can you not feel that? You're soaking!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You're wet. Wet means pee came out. Let's change in the bathroom."

Why it works: Naming it calmly teaches the link between the feeling and what happened.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep your child in super-absorbent diapers all day.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Try cotton underwear at home, or underwear inside the pull-up.

Why it works: Feeling wet is information your child needs in order to learn.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wait for your child to tell you.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Take them on a schedule and check for dry pants at set times.

Why it works: The clock stands in for the signal until your child learns to feel it.

More things to say

“Dry pants! Feel how dry.”

“Wet. Let's go change.”

“Your tummy feels tight? That might be pee.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Do “dry checks” every 30 to 60 minutes and praise dry pants.
- ✓ Have your child help with changing: pants down, wipe, clean pants up.
- ✓ Name your own body signals out loud: “I need to pee. I'm going to the toilet.”
- ✓ Give plenty to drink so there are more chances to practice.

Avoid

- ✗ Scolding for not noticing.
- ✗ Leaving a child in wet clothes as a lesson.
- ✗ Limiting drinks to prevent accidents.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Use a picture card for “wet” and “dry.”
- ✓ Spend some time each day in underwear at home.
- ✓ Notice your child's signs: stillness, a look, a wiggle, going quiet.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child never seems to notice being wet or soiled, or leaks small amounts all day, tell the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Praise dry pants more than you correct wet ones. “You're dry!” ten times a day teaches what you're aiming for.

3

PART ONE · GETTING READY

Afraid of the Bathroom

What it looks like

Your child won't go into the bathroom, covers their ears at the door, cries when the fan comes on or runs when the toilet flushes.

What's really going on

Bathrooms echo. They have loud fans, sudden flushes, bright lights, strong smells and cold, hard surfaces. For a sensitive child it's a room full of alarms.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"There's nothing scary in here. Come on."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"The fan is loud. I'll turn it off for you."

Why it works: Fixing the trigger works better than arguing about it.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Start toilet training in a room your child fears.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Spend short, fun visits in the bathroom first, with no sitting.

Why it works: The room has to feel safe before the toilet can.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Flush while your child is in the room.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Flush after they leave, or let them decide when.

Why it works: Taking away the surprise takes away much of the fear.

More things to say

“Fan off. Light low. All quiet.”

“Let's wash the toy cars in the sink.”

“You can stand by the door.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Turn off the fan, soften the light and add a rug or towel to cut echo.
- ✓ Do something fun in there: bubbles, bath toys, a favorite song.
- ✓ Let your child wear headphones.
- ✓ Stay a little longer each day.

Avoid

- ✗ Carrying a crying child in.
- ✗ Air fresheners and strong cleaners.
- ✗ Closing the door if that frightens them.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Take photos of the bathroom and look at them together.
- ✓ Put a favorite picture or character on the wall.
- ✓ If the toilet itself is the fear, start with a potty chair in a calmer spot.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child panics in every bathroom, ask an OT for a sensory plan before you begin training.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Stand in your bathroom, close your eyes and listen. Then fix what you hear. The fan alone ends many bathroom fears.

4

PART ONE · GETTING READY

Won't Sit on the Toilet

What it looks like

Your child arches, screams or runs when you try to seat them. Or they sit for one second and pop right up.

What's really going on

The seat is cold and hard, the hole is big, and feet dangle with nothing to push on. It feels like falling in. Being placed there against their will makes it worse.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF~~Hold your child on the toilet.~~✓ **TRY THIS**

Start with sitting fully clothed for ten seconds, then reward.

Why it works: A sit your child can handle is the first step. Force sets you back.

DO INSTEAD OF~~Use the adult seat with feet dangling.~~✓ **TRY THIS**

Add a child-size seat insert and a sturdy footstool.

Why it works: A stable seat and supported feet make the body feel safe.

SAY INSTEAD OF~~"Sit there until you go."~~✓ **TRY THIS**

"Sit until the song ends. Then you get your sticker."

Why it works: A clear, short ending makes sitting something your child can do.

More things to say

“Feet on the stool. Hands on your knees.”

“Ten seconds. Count with me.”

“All done! You sat so well.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Build time slowly: ten seconds, thirty, one minute, up to three.
- ✓ Give a special toy, book or song that's only for toilet sits.
- ✓ Let your child sit on a closed lid first if needed.
- ✓ Reward every sit, whether or not anything happens.

Avoid

- ✗ Sits longer than three to five minutes.
- ✗ Screens that make your child forget where they are.
- ✗ Showing frustration when they get up.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Try a padded or warm seat cover if the seat feels cold.
- ✓ Practice sitting with a doll or stuffed animal first.
- ✓ Use a visual timer your child can watch.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't sit for even a few seconds after several weeks of practice, ask an OT to look at seating and sensory needs.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Feet flat on a stool is not a small detail. It gives stability, and it's the position that makes pooping easier.

5

PART ONE · GETTING READY

Attached to Diapers and Pull-Ups

What it looks like

Your child insists on a diaper, brings you one when they need to go, or panics at the idea of underwear.

What's really going on

The diaper has been part of going to the bathroom for their whole life. It feels snug and familiar. Without it, peeing and pooping feel strange and exposed.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Throw away all the diapers in one day.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Move in steps: diaper changes in the bathroom, then going in the diaper while sitting on the toilet.

Why it works: Your child keeps the comfort while the place changes.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Diapers are for babies."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"You can have your diaper. We put it on in the bathroom."

Why it works: No shame, and one step closer to the toilet.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Switch to stiff or scratchy underwear.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Let your child choose soft, snug underwear with a favorite character.

Why it works: Snug feels safer, and choosing gives control.

More things to say

“Diaper on in the bathroom. That's the rule now.”

“Pick your underwear: trucks or stars?”

“Underwear for home. Pull-up for the car.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep diapers in the bathroom only.
-  Have your child sit on the toilet in the diaper to pee or poop.
-  Later, loosen the diaper, then lay it open in the bowl.
-  Praise each small step.

Avoid

-  Mocking or shaming.
-  Going back and forth between diapers and underwear all day.
-  Rushing a step because of an outside deadline.

Set up for next time

-  Wash new underwear and remove tags.
-  Use underwear in the daytime at home first, then on short trips.
-  Keep pull-ups for sleep until nights are dry.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child refuses every step away from diapers for more than a month, ask your OT or a psychologist for help.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The diaper is not the enemy. Where it's used is the thing to change first. Bathroom, then toilet, then goodbye.

6

PART ONE · GETTING READY

Starting Again After It Didn't Work

What it looks like

You tried before. It ended in tears, accidents and a return to pull-ups. Now your child resists as soon as the toilet is mentioned.

What's really going on

A hard attempt leaves memories for both of you. Your child may link the toilet with pressure or pain. You may be dreading it too.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Restart with the same plan, only stricter.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Take a break of a few weeks, then begin again at an easier step.

Why it works: A fresh start at a level your child can manage rebuilds trust.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"We're doing potty training again, and this time you have to."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"We have a new toilet plan. First step: sit with your pants on."

Why it works: New words and a small first step make it feel different.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Use the same rewards that stopped working.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Pick new, stronger rewards saved only for the toilet.

Why it works: A reward has to be worth the effort to your child.

More things to say

“New plan. Easy first step.”

“We go slow this time.”

“I’m not mad about before.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Ask the doctor to check for constipation before restarting.
- ✓ Write down what went wrong last time and change those parts.
- ✓ Use new words: “toilet time” instead of “potty.”
- ✓ Start on a calm week with a clear schedule.

Avoid

- ✗ Reminding your child of past failures.
- ✗ Starting under pressure from a deadline.
- ✗ Changing the plan every few days.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Agree on the plan with every adult who cares for your child.
- ✓ Change something in the bathroom so it looks new: a seat, a stool, a picture.
- ✓ Give the new plan two to three weeks before judging it.



GET MORE HELP IF

If two or three careful attempts haven't worked, ask for a referral to a toileting program or a behavioral specialist.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A failed attempt was not wasted. It told you which step was too big. Start one step below it.

part two

Learning to Go

Sitting, waiting, holding and flushing. How to get from “sits on the toilet” to “uses the toilet,” one small win at a time.

7 Sits But Nothing Happens

9 Holding It In

11 Accidents Right After Sitting

8 Pees in the Toilet, Poops Only in a Diaper

10 Afraid of Flushing

12 Wiping and Cleaning Up

7

PART TWO · LEARNING TO GO

Sits But Nothing Happens

What it looks like

Your child sits nicely for three minutes, nothing comes, and they pee in their pants five minutes after getting off.

What's really going on

Your child has learned to sit, but not yet to relax and release on the toilet. They may be holding, or the timing may be off.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Take your child at random times.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Use your diary to sit them just before they usually go.

Why it works: Catching the right moment is how the first success happens.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep your child on the toilet until they go.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Sit for two or three minutes, then try again in 15 to 20 minutes.

Why it works: Short, frequent sits beat one long standoff.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Push! Try harder!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Blow the pinwheel. Nice slow breath."

Why it works: Blowing relaxes the muscles that need to let go.

More things to say

“Sit, relax, wait.”

“Listen for the pee. Shhh.”

“Nothing this time. We'll try again soon.”

Do this in the moment

-  Offer extra drinks 20 to 30 minutes before a sit.
-  Run the tap quietly or let your child put their hands in warm water.
-  Have your child blow bubbles or a pinwheel while sitting.
-  Celebrate the first success big, right away.

Avoid

-  Sits longer than five minutes.
-  Showing disappointment.
-  Skipping sits because the last one didn't work.

Set up for next time

-  Shorten the time between sits if accidents happen right after.
-  Try sitting right after a meal, when the body naturally wants to go.
-  Keep recording times; the pattern becomes clearer.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child has no success after three or four weeks of regular sits, ask your doctor or OT to review the plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The first pee in the toilet is often an accident your child didn't plan. Your job is to have them sitting there when it happens, and to make a big deal of it.

8

PART TWO · LEARNING TO GO

Pees in the Toilet, Poops Only in a Diaper

What it looks like

Your child pees in the toilet with no trouble but asks for a diaper to poop, hides in a corner, or holds it for days.

What's really going on

This is very common. Pooping takes longer and feels bigger. Your child may fear the splash, the feeling of letting go, or pain from a past hard stool.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"No more diapers. You poop in the toilet now."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You can have your diaper. We go in the bathroom to use it."

Why it works: Refusing the diaper leads to holding, and holding leads to pain.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Jump from diaper to bare toilet.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Move in tiny steps: in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet in the diaper, then a diaper with a hole cut in it.

Why it works: Each step changes one small thing.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Focus only on behavior.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Make sure stools are soft and easy to pass first.

Why it works: No plan works if pooping hurts.

More things to say

“Poop goes in the bathroom.”

“You're safe. Your feet are on the stool.”

“Bye-bye, poop. All done.”

Do this in the moment

-  Note the usual time of day and plan a sit then.
-  Keep feet on a stool with knees above hips.
-  Let your child have privacy if they want it.
-  Reward each step, not only the final one.

Avoid

-  Punishing or shaming pooping in a diaper.
-  Withholding the diaper so that your child holds it in.
-  Big reactions to the poop itself.

Set up for next time

-  Empty the diaper's poop into the toilet together and wave goodbye.
-  Read a simple story about where poop goes.
-  Put tissue in the bowl to stop the splash.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child holds stool for more than three days, has pain or leaks liquid stool, see the doctor. This often needs medical treatment.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Go at the speed of the slowest step. Some children spend two weeks sitting on the toilet in a diaper before the next step. That's normal progress.

9

PART TWO · LEARNING TO GO

Holding It In

What it looks like

Your child crosses their legs, stands on tiptoes, hides, goes stiff or dances around, and refuses to go. They may hold stool for days.

What's really going on

Holding usually starts after a painful poop or a frightening moment. It makes stools bigger and harder, which hurts more, which leads to more holding.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just go! Why are you holding it?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Your body has poop to let out. Let's sit and blow bubbles."

Why it works: Calm, simple words lower the fear that is causing the holding.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wait it out and hope it passes.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Call the doctor about softening the stool.

Why it works: The cycle of pain and holding usually needs medical help to break.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Insist on the toilet when your child is in distress.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Let them go in a diaper for now, in the bathroom.

Why it works: Getting the stool out comfortably matters more than where.

More things to say

“It's okay to let it out.”

“It won't hurt. Your poop is soft now.”

“Blow out the candles. One, two, three.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Sit your child after meals for a few minutes, feet supported.
- ✓ Offer plenty of water and fiber foods they accept.
- ✓ Use blowing games or gentle tummy rubs to relax.
- ✓ Praise every poop, wherever it happens, during this stage.

Avoid

- ✗ Punishing or showing frustration.
- ✗ Giving laxatives or enemas without the doctor's advice.
- ✗ Long, forced sits.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Follow the doctor's plan for as long as advised, even after things improve.
- ✓ Keep a stool diary to share at appointments.
- ✓ Go back to an easier toilet step until your child is comfortable.



GET MORE HELP IF

See the doctor for holding that lasts more than three days, a hard or swollen belly, pain, blood, or leaking liquid stool in the underwear.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Liquid stool in the underwear of a child who hasn't pooped in days is not diarrhea. It's often leaking around a blockage. Call the doctor.

10

PART TWO · LEARNING TO GO

Afraid of Flushing

What it looks like

Your child screams or bolts when the toilet flushes, or won't sit at all in case it flushes underneath them.

What's really going on

The flush is sudden, loud and echoing. Things disappear down a hole, which can be alarming. Automatic toilets that flush on their own are the worst of all.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Flush while your child is still on or near the toilet.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Wait until they've left the room, or let them choose when.

Why it works: Flushing isn't part of learning to go. It can come later.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's only water. It can't hurt you."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"It's loud. You can cover your ears. I'll count: one, two, three, flush."

Why it works: A countdown and a way to protect themselves make it bearable.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Insist your child flushes every time.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Build up: listen from the hall, then the doorway, then next to you.

Why it works: Getting closer in small steps shrinks the fear.

More things to say

“You tell me when to flush.”

“Hands on ears. Here it comes.”

“Bye-bye, pee. All gone.”

Do this in the moment

-  Let your child flush a single square of paper while standing back.
-  Close the lid before flushing to cut the noise.
-  Offer headphones in the bathroom.
-  Praise staying in the room.

Avoid

-  Surprise flushes.
-  Making jokes about being flushed away.
-  Making flushing a condition for a reward.

Set up for next time

-  Watch a short video of a toilet flushing with the sound low.
-  Explain where it goes with a simple drawing.
-  Carry sticky notes to cover the sensor on automatic toilets.



GET MORE HELP IF

If fear of flushing keeps your child from using any toilet, ask an OT for a step-by-step plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A sticky note over the sensor stops an automatic toilet from flushing early. Keep a pad in your bag.

11

PART TWO · LEARNING TO GO

Accidents Right After Sitting

What it looks like

Your child sits, gets down, and pees on the floor two minutes later. Or they're dry all morning and wet as soon as they start playing.

What's really going on

Your child may not yet feel the signal, may be too absorbed in play to stop, or hasn't linked the feeling with the toilet. Accidents are part of learning.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"You were just on the toilet! Why didn't you go?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Pee goes in the toilet. Let's go finish there."

Why it works: A calm reminder teaches. Blame adds stress, and stress adds accidents.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Clean it up yourself while your child plays.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Walk to the bathroom together, sit for a moment, then change.

Why it works: It links the feeling of peeing with the place it belongs.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep the same schedule and hope.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Shorten the time between sits for a few days.

Why it works: More frequent sits mean more chances to succeed.

More things to say

“Oops. Wet. Let's go to the toilet.”

“Accidents happen when we're learning.”

“Next time, pee in the toilet.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Stay matter-of-fact: few words, no sighing.
- ✓ Have your child help: pants down, wipe, clean clothes on.
- ✓ Note the time in your diary.
- ✓ Give a big reward for the next success.

Avoid

- ✗ Punishment, lectures or making your child feel ashamed.
- ✗ Putting diapers back on in anger.
- ✗ Long cleanups that turn into extra attention.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Use a timer that rings for toilet time, so the timer does the reminding.
- ✓ Take a toilet break before favorite activities and screens.
- ✓ Dress your child in pants that are easy to pull down.



GET MORE HELP IF

If accidents continue many times a day after a month of steady practice, or your child seems unable to hold urine at all, see the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Count successes, not accidents. If there are more toilet pees this week than last, it's working.

12

PART TWO · LEARNING TO GO

Wiping and Cleaning Up

What it looks like

Your child refuses to wipe, wipes once and misses, uses half a roll, or is upset by the feel or smell and wants you to do it.

What's really going on

Wiping is hard. Your child can't see what they're doing, it takes balance and reach, and it involves a texture and smell many children can't stand.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to manage wiping alone right away.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach it in steps: you wipe, then they do the last wipe, then more.

Why it works: Doing the last step first lets your child finish with success.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"That's disgusting. Do it properly."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Wipe, look, drop. Wipe until the paper is clean."

Why it works: A short script tells your child exactly what "done" means.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Use thin, dry paper only.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Try moist wipes or thicker paper, if your plumbing allows.

Why it works: A more comfortable texture makes the job easier to accept.

More things to say

“Count out four squares.”

“Front to back.”

“Clean paper means all done.”

Do this in the moment

-  Put a mark on the wall to show how much paper to pull.
-  Practice the reaching motion with clothes on.
-  Use a picture strip of the wiping steps.
-  Always finish with hand washing.

Avoid

-  Shaming smells or mess.
-  Taking over every time because it's faster.
-  Rushing.

Set up for next time

-  Practice wiping peanut butter or lotion off a plate or a balloon to learn the motion.
-  Throw wipes in the bin unless the pack says flushable and your plumbing can handle it.
-  Fade your help slowly: watch, then wait outside the door.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't reach or balance to wipe by school age, ask an OT about strength, balance and adaptive tools.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Wiping is usually the last toilet skill to be mastered, often a year or more after the rest. Helping with it is not a step backward.

part three

Sensory and Body

Constipation, smearing, clothes and hand washing. What's going on in your child's body and senses, and what to do about it.

13 Constipation and Painful Poops

15 Too Much Paper and Playing in the Water

17 Hand Washing Battles

14 Playing With or Smearing Stool

16 Pulling Pants Down and Up

18 Standing or Sitting to Pee, and Aiming

13

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Constipation and Painful Poops

What it looks like

Hard, large or pellet-like stools. Days between poops. Straining, crying, a swollen belly, less appetite or streaks in the underwear.

What's really going on

Constipation is very common in children with autism, often because of a narrow diet, low fluids, holding and some medications. It makes toilet learning almost impossible.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Carry on with toilet training and hope it sorts itself out.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

See the doctor and treat the constipation first.

Why it works: A comfortable body is the base that every other step stands on.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop being silly and just poop."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Your tummy hurts. We're going to help your poop get soft."

Why it works: Your child learns that you understand and that there's a plan.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let your child sit with feet dangling.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Feet on a stool, knees higher than hips, leaning a little forward.

Why it works: This position straightens the path and makes pooping easier.

More things to say

“Soft poop comes out easy.”

“Drink check! Five big sips.”

“Sit after breakfast. Feet up on the stool.”

Do this in the moment

-  Keep a record of how often and what the stool looks like.
-  Offer water all through the day.
-  Add fiber in foods your child already accepts.
-  Sit your child for a few minutes after meals.

Avoid

-  Laxatives, enemas or supplements without the doctor's advice.
-  Stopping treatment as soon as things improve.
-  Blaming your child for leaks or streaks.

Set up for next time

-  Build in daily movement: walking, jumping, playground time.
-  Ask a dietitian about fiber and fluids for a child with few foods.
-  Keep the after-meal sit as a daily habit.



GET MORE HELP IF

See the doctor for fewer than three stools a week, pain, blood, a swollen belly, vomiting or leaking stool. Ask how long treatment should continue.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Constipation treatment often takes months, not days. Stopping early is the most common reason it comes back.

14

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Playing With or Smearing Stool

What it looks like

You find poop on the walls, the crib, the toys or your child's hands. It often happens at night, during naps or when your child is alone.

What's really going on

This is upsetting, and more common than people admit. It may be sensory seeking, discomfort or itching, an attempt to clean up, or constipation. It is not done to upset you.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"That's disgusting! What is wrong with you?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Poop stays in the toilet. Let's get clean."

Why it works: A big reaction can make it more interesting. Calm and plain is best.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Leave your child in a loose diaper at night.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use a one-piece sleeper or a zip-up suit worn backward.

Why it works: Making it hard to reach buys time while you solve the cause.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Only clean up and move on.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give other strong textures and smells: play dough, slime, scented lotion.

Why it works: If your child is seeking the feeling, give them a better way to get it.

More things to say

“Hands stay out of your diaper.”

“You need a change? Come get me.”

“Here's your squishy dough.”

Do this in the moment

-  Clean up with few words and little eye contact.
-  Change your child as soon as they've gone.
-  Check for redness, itching or signs of pinworms.
-  Offer messy play every day at planned times.

Avoid

-  Shaming, punishing or showing disgust.
-  Long baths with lots of attention right afterward.
-  Leaving your child alone for long after meals.

Set up for next time

-  Note when it happens and what came before.
-  Teach a sign, word or card for “I need a change.”
-  Ask the doctor to check for constipation and skin irritation.



GET MORE HELP IF

If smearing happens more than once or twice, tell the doctor and an OT. There is almost always a cause that can be treated.

DR. VERA'S TIP

You are not the only family dealing with this. It's one of the things parents are most afraid to mention, and one of the things professionals hear about most.

15

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Too Much Paper and Playing in the Water

What it looks like

Your child unrolls the whole roll, stuffs the toilet, flushes again and again, or puts hands and toys in the bowl.

What's really going on

Water, spinning rolls and things vanishing down the hole are fascinating. Your child may also not know how much paper is “enough.”

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Stop wasting paper! Stop playing!”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“Four squares. Count them with me.”

Why it works: A clear number tells your child what to do instead.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Leave a full roll within reach.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Put out a small stack of folded squares, or a mark showing where to tear.

Why it works: A limit your child can see works better than reminders.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Take away all water play.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give water play elsewhere: the sink, the bath, a tub outside.

Why it works: The interest is fine. It needs a better place.

More things to say

“One flush. Then wash hands.”

“Toilet water is not for hands. Sink water is.”

“Lid down. All done.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Teach the sequence with a picture strip: wipe, drop, flush once, lid down.
- ✓ Stay close during the flushing step for now.
- ✓ Give a job right after: turn on the tap, pump the soap.
- ✓ Keep toys out of the bathroom.

Avoid

- ✗ Laughing at toilet play.
- ✗ Chasing or grabbing.
- ✗ Leaving your child alone in the bathroom if this is a habit.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Use a lid lock when the bathroom isn't in use, if needed.
- ✓ Offer daily water and pouring play.
- ✓ Praise “one flush” every time.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is fixated on toilets or flushing to the point it gets in the way of daily life, mention it to your OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Give the fascination a home. Ten minutes of water play at the sink after a good toilet trip makes a perfect reward.

16

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Pulling Pants Down and Up

What it looks like

Your child gets to the toilet but can't manage buttons, zippers or tight waistbands in time. Or they take everything off, even their shirt and socks.

What's really going on

Dressing takes coordination, strength and planning that may be delayed. Some children undress fully because clothes bunched at the ankles feel wrong.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Dress your child in jeans with a button and a belt.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use loose, elastic-waist pants during training.

Why it works: Fast, easy clothes prevent accidents at the last second.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Hurry! Pull them down!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Thumbs in. Push down to your knees."

Why it works: Short steps tell the hands exactly what to do.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Do it all for your child every time.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Help with the hard part and let them finish the last bit.

Why it works: Finishing the task themselves builds skill and pride.

More things to say

“Pants to your knees. That’s far enough.”

“Pull up the back. Check your bottom.”

“You did the last part yourself!”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Practice pants up and down at dressing time, when no one is rushed.
- ✓ Stand behind your child and guide their hands.
- ✓ Let your child strip off extra clothes if that helps them go, for now.
- ✓ Choose underwear that’s easy to pull.

Avoid

- ✗ Overalls, tights, belts and tricky fasteners.
- ✗ Rushing or taking over in frustration.
- ✗ Shaming a child who undresses fully.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Work on hand strength: play dough, tongs, squeezing toys.
- ✓ Teach “pants to knees” with a picture.
- ✓ Practice in different bathrooms, wearing different clothes.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can’t manage clothing by school age, ask an OT about dressing skills.

DR. VERA'S TIP

For the first weeks at home, many families use a long t-shirt and underwear only. Fewer layers means faster success.

17

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Hand Washing Battles

What it looks like

Your child refuses to wash, hates wet or soapy hands, panics at the tap or the dryer. Or they'd play in the water for twenty minutes.

What's really going on

Water temperature, slippery soap, a strong smell and a loud tap or dryer are a lot for sensitive hands and ears. For other children the water is too much fun to stop.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"You're not leaving until you wash properly."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Wet, soap, rub, rinse, dry. Then we're done."

Why it works: A short, fixed sequence makes it predictable and quick.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Use strongly scented liquid soap.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Try foam soap or unscented soap, and let your child choose.

Why it works: A texture and smell they accept removes the main objection.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Stand at the sink negotiating.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Sing one short song as the timer for washing.

Why it works: The song starts and ends the job, for both avoiders and players.

More things to say

“Warm or cool water? You pick.”

“Rub, rub, rub until the song ends.”

“Towel or paper? No dryer.”

Do this in the moment

-  Set the water temperature before your child puts hands in.
-  Use a step stool so they can reach easily.
-  Put up a picture strip of the steps by the sink.
-  Keep a towel within reach.

Avoid

-  Hand dryers if your child fears them.
-  Water that's too hot or cold.
-  Skipping washing to avoid a fuss.

Set up for next time

-  Practice at calm times, with toys in the sink.
-  Carry wipes or sanitizer as a backup when out.
-  Praise finishing all the steps.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child can't tolerate water on their hands at all, ask an OT about touch sensitivity.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Hand washing is a perfect place for a picture strip. Five photos of your child's own hands doing each step work better than any poster.

18

PART THREE · SENSORY AND BODY

Standing or Sitting to Pee, and Aiming

What it looks like

Your son wants to stand like Dad but sprays everywhere. Or he will only sit, and you're wondering what to teach.

What's really going on

Standing takes balance, aim and attention all at once. It also adds a decision: sit or stand? For many children, that's too much in the early stages.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Teach standing from the start.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach sitting for both pee and poop first.

Why it works: One position for everything is simpler, and makes poop more likely to follow.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Look at the mess you made!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Aim at the target. Then we wipe the seat."

Why it works: A target makes it a game. Cleaning up is just the next step.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect good aim without practice.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Float a piece of cereal or put a sticker target in the bowl.

Why it works: Something to aim at focuses attention.

More things to say

“Sit to pee. Point it down.”

“Stand close. Toes at the line.”

“Good aim! You hit it.”

Do this in the moment

-  When sitting, teach boys to point the penis down.
-  When standing, mark a line or footprints on the floor.
-  Use a step stool if the bowl is high.
-  Teach him to lift the seat, and to wipe drips.

Avoid

-  Switching back and forth while he's still learning.
-  Scolding sprays.
-  Teaching standing before pooping on the toilet is solid.

Set up for next time

-  Let him watch Dad or a brother, if your family is comfortable with that.
-  Practice outdoors or in the shower first.
-  Teach urinals later, as a separate skill.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child strains, dribbles or has a weak stream or pain, see the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

There is no rush to stand. Plenty of boys sit until they're five or six, and learning one way first makes everything else easier.

part four

Out in the World

Other bathrooms, school, setbacks and nights. How to take a new skill out of your house and keep it going.

19 Will Only Go at Home

21 Toileting at School

23 Staying Dry at Night

20 Public Restrooms

22 Setbacks After Illness, Change or Stress

24 Asking to Go

19

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Will Only Go at Home

What it looks like

Your child uses the toilet perfectly at home and holds it for hours everywhere else, or has accidents as soon as you leave the house.

What's really going on

Children with autism often learn a skill in one exact place. A different toilet looks, sounds and smells different, so to them it's a different skill.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Expect the skill to transfer automatically.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Practice in new bathrooms on purpose, starting with easy ones.

Why it works: Each new place needs its own practice.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Avoid outings so there are no accidents.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Take short trips with a planned toilet visit.

Why it works: Avoiding it keeps the skill stuck at home.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just a toilet. It's the same as ours."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"This is a new toilet. Same steps as home."

Why it works: You agree it's different, and point to what stays the same.

More things to say

“New toilet, same steps.”

“I brought your seat.”

“First toilet, then the swings.”

Do this in the moment

-  Bring familiar items: a travel seat, wipes, the same picture strip.
-  Start with a relative's quiet bathroom before public ones.
-  Go in together just to look, wash hands and leave.
-  Give the same reward as at home.

Avoid

-  Long trips without a plan.
-  Scolding accidents when out.
-  Going back to pull-ups for every outing.

Set up for next time

-  Make a list of bathrooms your child has used and add one each week.
-  Use a second bathroom at home, if you have one.
-  Pack a change of clothes and a wet bag without comment.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child holds urine or stool for many hours when away from home, tell the doctor. Holding can cause infections and constipation.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A folding travel seat and the same picture strip make any bathroom look a little like home.

20

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Public Restrooms

What it looks like

Hand dryers roar, toilets flush on their own, doors bang and strangers come and go. Your child refuses to enter or melts down inside.

What's really going on

Public restrooms are the loudest, least predictable rooms your child will ever visit. Fear here is reasonable.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**DO** INSTEAD OF

~~Use the busy main restroom.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Look for a family or single restroom.

Why it works: One room with one toilet means fewer sounds and surprises.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let the automatic toilet flush under your child.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Cover the sensor with a sticky note or your hand.

Why it works: You control the flush, so your child can relax enough to go.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Hurry up. There's a line."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Headphones on. I'm right here. Take your time."

Why it works: Feeling safe and unhurried is what makes going possible.

More things to say

“No dryer. We use paper towels.”

“I’ll tell you before I flush.”

“Quick stop. Then back to the fun.”

Do this in the moment

-  Carry headphones, sticky notes, wipes and a travel seat.
-  Take a toilet break before your child is desperate.
-  Stand between your child and the dryers.
-  Use sanitizer outside if the sinks are too much.

Avoid

-  Forcing hand dryers.
-  Waiting until the last minute.
-  Showing embarrassment.

Set up for next time

-  Visit a quiet public restroom just to look around.
-  Find the family restroom locations in places you go often.
-  Show photos of the restroom before a trip.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child cannot use any public restroom, ask an OT for a step-by-step plan, and ask the doctor about holding.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Make a small “bathroom bag” and keep it by the door: headphones, sticky notes, wipes, spare clothes. Then you never have to think about it.

21

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Toileting at School

What it looks like

Your child is trained at home but has accidents at school, won't use the school bathroom or holds all day and rushes in at pick-up.

What's really going on

School bathrooms are busy, loud and not private. Your child may not know how to ask, may not want to leave an activity, or the staff may use different words.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Assume school will follow your plan.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Share your written plan: words, schedule, rewards and steps.

Why it works: The same routine in both places is what makes the skill stick.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Rely on your child to ask.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Request scheduled toilet trips at quiet times.

Why it works: A schedule doesn't depend on a signal your child may not feel or say.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Did you have an accident again today?"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Did you use the school toilet today? Tell me about it."

Why it works: Asking about success keeps shame out of it.

More things to say

“At school, you show your toilet card.”

“Ms. Lee will take you after snack.”

“Dry at school! That's big.”

Do this in the moment

-  Send spare clothes and a wet bag, labeled, with no fuss.
-  Ask which bathroom is quietest and whether your child can go when it's empty.
-  Give your child a card or sign to ask for the toilet.
-  Ask for a short daily note on how it went.

Avoid

-  Punishment or lost privileges for accidents, at home or school.
-  Pull-ups at school if your child wears underwear at home, unless agreed.
-  Blaming the teacher or your child.

Set up for next time

-  Visit the school bathroom with your child after hours.
-  Ask that toileting goals be written into your child's school plan.
-  Use the same picture strip at school and at home.



GET MORE HELP IF

If the school and home plans don't match, ask for a team meeting with the teacher and your OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Teachers want this to work as much as you do. One page with your words, schedule and rewards is the most helpful thing you can give them.

22

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Setbacks After Illness, Change or Stress

What it looks like

Your child was doing well. Then came a stomach bug, a new sibling, a move or a new school, and the accidents are back.

What's really going on

New skills are fragile. Illness, constipation, travel and stress use up the energy your child needs for toileting. Setbacks are common and usually short.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You know how to do this! Why are you going backward?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Your body is having a hard time. We'll practice again."

Why it works: Your child isn't choosing this. Support gets you back faster than pressure.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wait and hope it passes.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Go back to scheduled sits and rewards for a couple of weeks.

Why it works: The same steps that taught the skill will rebuild it.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Assume it's just behavior.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Check with the doctor for infection or constipation.

Why it works: A medical cause is common when a trained child starts having accidents.

More things to say

“We're using the timer again for a while.”

“Accidents are okay. We know what to do.”

“You did it before. You'll do it again.”

Do this in the moment

-  Restart the schedule from waking to bedtime.
-  Bring back the reward that worked.
-  Keep cleanups calm and quick.
-  Keep the rest of the routine as steady as you can.

Avoid

-  Punishment or showing disappointment.
-  Going back to full-time diapers unless the doctor advises it.
-  Starting other big changes at the same time.

Set up for next time

-  Note what changed just before the setback.
-  Prepare your child for upcoming changes with pictures and stories.
-  Fade the extra help slowly once things are steady.



GET MORE HELP IF

See the doctor if accidents come with pain, fever, great thirst or frequent peeing, or if the setback lasts more than two weeks.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A setback is a pause, not a reset. Children nearly always relearn faster than they learned the first time.

23

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Staying Dry at Night

What it looks like

Your child is dry all day but wakes up wet every morning. Sheets are washed daily, and you wonder if you should be doing more.

What's really going on

Night dryness depends on the body: a hormone that lowers urine at night, bladder size and waking to the signal. It often comes years after daytime dryness.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You're dry all day. Why can't you do it at night?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Nights are different. Your body is still learning."

Why it works: It's true, and it takes away the blame.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wake your child several times a night to pee.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use a pull-up or a waterproof pad, and protect everyone's sleep.

Why it works: Good sleep matters more than dry sheets right now.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Stop all drinks after dinner.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give plenty to drink in the daytime, less in the last hour, and a toilet trip before bed.

Why it works: A well-hydrated bladder in the daytime works better at night.

More things to say

“Toilet, then bed. Every night.”

“Wet or dry, I love you.”

“Dry night! Your body is growing.”

Do this in the moment

-  Layer the bed: waterproof pad, sheet, pad, sheet.
-  Keep dry pajamas next to the bed.
-  Have your child help put wet things in the hamper, without shame.
-  Put the toilet trip on the bedtime picture chart.

Avoid

-  Punishing or rewarding nights; your child can't control it.
-  Comparing with siblings.
-  Ending pull-ups before there are many dry mornings.

Set up for next time

-  Try nights without a pull-up after a couple of weeks of dry mornings.
-  Use a night light on the path to the bathroom.
-  Treat constipation; a full bowel presses on the bladder.



GET MORE HELP IF

See the doctor if your child is still wet at night after age seven, starts wetting after months of dry nights, snores heavily or is very thirsty.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Daytime training and night dryness are two separate things. Finish the first, and give the second time.

24

PART FOUR · OUT IN THE WORLD

Asking to Go

What it looks like

Your child goes when you take them, but never tells you they need to. Without your reminders, there are accidents.

What's really going on

Asking takes several skills at once: feeling the signal, knowing what it means, stopping what they're doing and communicating. This is often the last piece to come.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"You have to tell me when you need to go!"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"When your tummy feels full, show me the toilet card."

Why it works: You give your child a way to tell you that doesn't depend on speech.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Keep taking your child on your schedule forever.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Before each trip, prompt them to hand you the card or say the word.

Why it works: Your child practices asking every time, with your help.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Remind every twenty minutes.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Stretch the time between reminders bit by bit.

Why it works: A little waiting gives your child the chance to notice and ask.

More things to say

“What do you need? Show me.”

“You told me! Let's go fast!”

“Listen to your body. Is it toilet time?”

Do this in the moment

-  Put a toilet picture card where your child can always reach it.
-  Reward asking even more than going.
-  Name your child's signs: “You're wiggling. That means pee.”
-  Respond right away every time they ask.

Avoid

-  Ignoring a request because they “just went.”
-  Asking “Do you need to go?” all day.
-  Expecting asking in new places right away.

Set up for next time

-  Teach the word, sign, card or device button your child will use at school.
-  Put toilet cards in several rooms and in your bag.
-  Slowly move from your reminders to a timer, then to no reminder.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child shows no sign of noticing the need after several months of success on a schedule, ask an OT about body awareness.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Schedule-trained is still trained. Some children need reminders for a long time. Independence in asking can keep growing for years.

TOOLS

A bathroom that feels safe

Before you work on your child, work on the room. Sit on the toilet at your child's height and notice what they see, hear, feel and smell.

Seat

A child-size insert that doesn't wobble, or a potty chair on the floor. Padded or warm if cold bothers your child.

Feet

A sturdy stool so feet are flat and knees are a little higher than hips.

Sound

Fan off. A rug or towels to soften the echo. Flush after your child leaves. Headphones if needed.

Light

Soft, steady light. Replace flickering bulbs. A night light for evening trips.

Smell and touch

Unscented soap and cleaners. Soft paper or wipes. A towel your child likes.

Pictures

A step strip at eye level by the toilet and another by the sink.

How to make it work

- ✓ Change one thing at a time so you can see what helps.
- ✓ Let your child help choose the seat, stool and soap.
- ✓ Keep special toilet toys or books in a basket by the toilet.
- ✓ Use the same setup in every bathroom you can.

DR. VERA'S TIP

If you buy only one thing, buy a solid footstool. Stability is what makes a child feel safe enough to let go.

TOOLS

Rewards that really work

For many children with autism, praise alone isn't enough to make a hard new skill worth it. A good reward is small, quick and saved only for the toilet.

Right away

Give it within seconds of success, while your child is still in the bathroom.

Small

One piece of a favorite snack, a sticker, bubbles, a minute of a favorite song or video.

Only for the toilet

If your child can get it at other times, it loses its power. Keep it special.

Chosen by your child

What you think is exciting doesn't matter. Watch what your child works for.

For steps, then for going

Reward sitting at first. Later, reward only pee or poop in the toilet.

Faded slowly

When the skill is steady, reward every second time, then now and then, then praise only.

Words to use

"You peed in the toilet! Here's your sticker!"

"First toilet, then bubbles."

"You did it all by yourself."

DR. VERA'S TIP

If a reward stops working, it's not that your child stopped caring. The reward got old. Change it.

PRINTABLE

My toilet steps

Draw or paste a picture in each box, or take photos of your own bathroom. Hang the strip at your child's eye level next to the toilet.

My toilet steps

1 Pants down	2 Sit	3 Pee or poop	4 Wipe
5 Pants up	6 Flush	7 Wash hands	8 Dry hands

DR. VERA'S TIP

Point to each picture instead of giving spoken reminders. Pictures are easier to fade than your voice.

PRINTABLE · SHARE WITH SCHOOL, FAMILY AND SITTERS

My Toilet Plan

Fill this in and give a copy to everyone who cares for your child. Toilet learning goes fastest when every adult uses the same words and steps.

My name is:

The words or signs I use for toilet, pee and poop:

My toilet times (schedule):

What I need in the bathroom (seat, stool, headphones):

The help I need (clothes, wiping, washing):

My reward for success:

If I have an accident, please:

Please don't:

PRINTABLE

Toilet diary

For one week, check your child every hour and write down what you find. The pattern tells you the best times to sit.

DAY / TIME	PANTS WERE: DRY, WET, POOP	SAT ON TOILET? HOW LONG?	RESULT: PEE, POOP, NOTHING	DRINKS AND MEALS	NOTES

My child's most likely times:

IMPORTANT

When to get more help

CALL 911 RIGHT AWAY IF

- ✗ Severe belly pain with vomiting or a hard, swollen belly
- ✗ Your child can't pee at all and is in pain
- ✗ You feel you or your child are not safe

Call your child's doctor soon if

- ✓ Fewer than three stools a week, or hard, large or painful stools
- ✓ Blood in the stool or urine, or pain or burning when peeing
- ✓ Leaking liquid stool in the underwear
- ✓ Accidents that return after months of being trained
- ✓ Peeing very often, great thirst, or a weak or dribbling stream
- ✓ Smearing stool more than once or twice, or holding for more than three days

Who can help

PROFESSIONAL	HOW THEY HELP
Pediatrician	Treats constipation and infections and rules out medical causes
Occupational therapist (OT)	Sensory plan, bathroom setup, seating, dressing and wiping skills
Psychologist or behavioral specialist	Step-by-step training plans, fears, holding and reward systems
Speech-language pathologist	A word, sign, card or device button your child can use to ask

Never give laxatives, enemas or suppositories without your doctor's advice, and never punish a child for accidents.

FOR YOU

Taking care of you

Toilet training a child with autism can take months of patience, laundry and cleaning that nobody else sees. It is tiring, and at times discouraging. It says nothing about your skill as a parent.

In the moment

- ✓ Take one slow breath before you clean up
- ✓ Keep your face and voice neutral
- ✓ Say to yourself: "This is learning. It's not about me."

Every day

- ✓ Count the successes, not the accidents
- ✓ Keep cleaning supplies and spare clothes ready
- ✓ Do one thing that has nothing to do with toilets

Every week

- ✓ Share the sits with a partner or family member
- ✓ Look at the diary: is there even a little progress?
- ✓ Talk to one person who gets it

Find your people

- ✓ Local autism parent groups
- ✓ Your child's school or therapy team
- ✓ Online groups with kind moderation

DR. VERA'S TIP

If you're worn out, it's fine to pause for two weeks and start again. A rested parent with a calm plan gets further than an exhausted one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Fernando Vera, OT

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Dr. Vera helps families turn hard daily moments into calmer, more connected routines. His approach is practical and respectful: understand what the nervous system needs, lower the load, and give parents words and tools they can use the same day.

He is also the author of Dr. Vera's Dementia Action Manuals, including *Stop the Chaos!*

More Calm & Connected Guides

Stop the Meltdown!

What to say and do when your child with autism is overwhelmed.

Stop the Sensory Overload!

Clothes, noise, haircuts, stores and a home calming kit.

Stop the Bedtime Battles!

A step-by-step bedtime plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Food Fights!

Sensory-friendly eating without the battle.

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An OT's guide to helping your child with autism build real friendships.

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