



The Trials of Toilet Training: Training the Older Child

By Maureen Bennie

Parents and professionals in the autism community will all agree: there are three things you cannot make your spectrum child do – eat, sleep, and use the bathroom. My husband Ron and I have tried for the past three years to train our nine-year-old autistic son, Marc, with no success. Toilet training an older child with autism who has limited language skills and/or severe developmental delays makes this process sometimes feel like climbing Everest in flip-flops. Slips and slides in every direction with little forward motion. Add in years of a child used to diapers and the training effort can seem downright impossible. Last summer, Ron and I set a goal for ourselves - to make toilet training a success for Marc.

One of the difficulties in training an older child is the lack of materials that illustrate toileting an older person. Traditional children's books all use the potty chair to teach toilet training. Animated characters on videos do not explain the elimination process or show exactly what to do. Other challenges include sensory issues, gastrointestinal concerns, anxiety, resistance to change and often no social motivation to please parents. Not all children will work for praise or rewards. Some children stand up to have a bowel movement or bend over a piece of furniture, like the arm of a couch. A change in the elimination position can cause both anxiety and physical difficulty. Others cannot feel they are about to have a bowel movement.

With our son, I looked for signs of readiness before beginning the toileting process. Marc had been urinating in the toilet for the past three years so he was familiar with it. He only wore a pull-up at night. If Marc needed to have a bowel movement during the day, he would get a pull-up independently then ask to be changed when he was done. He could hold his bowel movements until we were home and never had accidents, demonstrating physical control. He seemed ready to start bowel training with all of these skills in place.

Ron and I had tried various methods unsuccessfully over several years, most involving visual strategies. We used picture symbols on a Velcro strip to break down the process of toileting. We kept a bowel movement chart for three weeks so we could see when Marc tended to have his bowel movement and sat him on the toilet at those times. We created a social story for toileting complete with photos of Marc and our bathroom. When none of those methods worked, we used a behavioral contingency plan with photos of Marc sitting on the toilet, a photo of broken pieces of Oh Henry bar in the toilet (to represent poop), and a photo of his reward – ripple chips. If he didn't poop in the toilet (shown with

a red line through the photo), there would be no chips. None of these methods worked. Marc had such high anxiety about sitting on the toilet, he would not relax; just entering the bathroom to try became a source of stress.

Our attempt this time had to be different. We had to start capitalizing on Marc's strength, which was reading. We first tried using Power Cards, which use the child's special interest as motivation. The Power Card is a recipe-sized card with rules you want the child to follow as told to them by some character who interests them. In Marc's case, that is Queen Elizabeth, so we gave it a go.

Instead of putting all of the toileting steps on one card, we wrote out one step per card and avoided the use of all pronouns since Marc does not understand or use them. We kept the text as simple as possible. Everything was stated in the present tense using Marc's name – "Marc sits on the toilet. Poo comes out." His reward was a scrapbook to collect photos of the Royal Yacht Britannia. He was to get one photo of the yacht to paste in the scrapbook each time he made an attempt on the toilet.

We quickly discovered the Power Cards were anxiety provoking. I realized there was much more to transitioning from diapers to the toilet than I was considering, despite the vast knowledge of autism I had gained over the years. I had to discover the root cause of Marc's anxiety. This is difficult to do when a child has very limited language skills. Was the problem having to sit down on the toilet rather than stand? Was there a fear of having something fall away from the body - did he think he was losing a part of himself? Was he in physical pain sitting down trying to release a bowel movement? Did he not know how to push once he was sitting down?

I tried draping a towel across the toilet bowl so Marc would not have the feeling that something was falling away from him – that didn't work. In the past we had tried cutting a hole in the back of the Pull-Up and making it bigger each time he sat down, suspecting maybe Marc needed to feel the pressure around his stomach to release a bowel movement. That bombed too. This time we changed the emphasis, to sitting on the toilet with no release of a bowel movement. Marc had to simply sit on the toilet and was rewarded with two chips if he did. We offered him books to distract him. Because Marc loved to rewind videos, we moved a small TV into the bathroom to let him engage in that preferred activity and thought maybe inadvertently a bowel movement might slip out. If he could have success just one time, we knew the new routine would stick.

During the toileting process, Marc started smearing his feces all over the house because he was withholding his bowel movement. He would pick out just enough stool to relieve the bowel pressure and then smear it to get it off his hands. Initially, Marc withheld his bowel movement for seven days. His anxiety levels were high and he was physically uncomfortable. Ron or I had to be in the same room with him to keep an eye on his picking and smearing. Some days I did ten loads of laundry when Marc wiped his hands down a stack of linens in the closet.

Our first breakthrough occurred after the first week - Marc went on the bathroom floor. We felt this was progress. Even though he wasn't on the toilet, he was in the right area - a first - so we rewarded him with ripple chips. He then held his bowel movements for only three days at a time. It took five weeks for Marc to stop smearing, but we noticed it decreasing weekly as Marc continued to have his bowel movements first on the bathroom floor, then in his underwear. It was time to up the ante.

We told Marc no chips unless the poop was in the toilet. He had watched Ron and I empty bowel movements out of his underwear into the toilet so this became his next step. He emptied his bowel movement from his underwear into the toilet with almost no mess and we rewarded him. Marc was also independently washing his hands with no prompting.

Marc had his first bowel movement in the toilet while over at his Grandma's house during the sixth week of toilet training. She was sitting him on the toilet with his favorite Thomas the Tank Engine book at regular intervals throughout the day for ten minute periods. He finally did it! The question was would he repeat this at our house. Children with autism have a difficult time generalizing so maybe he would only use the toilet at Grandma's house. But luckily success came two days later. Marc used the toilet at home without any prompts from us. He didn't flush the toilet and came and got us. He said, "Poo in the toilet. I want chips." It was a celebration!

Not everyone agreed with our decision to reward Marc along the way, when he pooped on the bathroom floor rather than in the toilet. Parents know their child best

Tips for Toilet Training

- Use simple, concrete language.
- Be consistent with the teaching method and use the same one everyday. If it isn't working after a few weeks, try another method but then be consistent with it.
- Get the child's team and family members onboard with the toileting plan so everyone uses it consistently. Toileting occurs across many settings.
- Use visual supports throughout the toileting process to reinforce the steps. Children with ASD need visual supports to help process information.
- Take the "autism view" when toileting. Break steps down into a logical order so the child understands them.
- Use rewards that are truly motivating for the child and then only use them for the toileting process. Make sure they are meaningful to the child and not what a parent thinks is meaningful.
- Reward mini-steps along the way to keep motivation high.
- If a child does not know how to physically release a bowel movement, try having him blow bubbles or use a blowing-type toy (pop bottle whistle with a string that moves when you blow into it) while on the toilet to mimic the feeling of releasing a bowel movement.
- Never punish a child for accidents or slip-ups. These will occur along the way.
- Toileting is a complex process – have patience. It may take many weeks to break years of using diapers.

and whether or not providing a reward solely for the end result is the right and motivating thing to do. With Marc, these incremental rewards encouraged him to keep going. However, we continued to emphasize and remind him of the ultimate goal.

Marc is the type of learner who doesn't seem to understand a task, then one day, all of the steps "click" and he demonstrates mastery. It's called "gestalt" learning. Gestalt learners can be frustrating to work with because parents don't see incremental, noticeable progress and often give up on pursuing mastery of the task. We gave up on Marc the two previous summers because he was never showing us any progress towards having a bowel movement in the toilet. In hindsight, he may have been processing all of the steps we were teaching him, but not demonstrating them, and was only a few weeks away from piecing it all together. Without his demonstration of the in-between steps, Ron and I were convinced he wasn't "getting it."

What I have learned from this process is the need for incredible patience and perseverance. I wanted to give up when the fecal smearing wasn't abating. I was discouraged when many of the methods we tried, like the Power Cards, didn't work. I combed the internet for some words of parental or medical wisdom and found nothing. The key for us was going in stages and rewarding each stage, then raising the bar as those goals were achieved. Any habit can take weeks to break. I was kidding myself thinking toileting would not take several weeks or months after wearing diapers for nine years. It was also important to take the emphasis off having a bowel movement in the toilet. Getting into the bathroom to release a bowel movement was the first thing that needed to happen. We had jumped too many steps, not realizing how hard this transition was going to be for Marc.

Even though toilet training Marc last summer was a challenge, it was worth it. He now has a new level of independence and self-esteem. We can leave the house confidently knowing Marc will use a bathroom if needed anywhere we go. Marc is so proud of himself. As his parents, we are too.

Suggested Reading

- Gagnon, E. *Power Cards: Using Special Interests to Motivate Children and Youth with Asperger Syndrome and Autism*, 2001, Autism Aspergers Publishing Co, Shawnee Mission, KS.
- Notbohm, E. and Zysk, V. *1001 Great Ideas for Teaching and Raising Children with Autism & Asperger's, 2nd Edition*, 2010. Future Horizons, Arlington, TX.
- Wheeler, M. *Toilet Training for Individuals with Autism and Other Developmental Issues, Vol. 2*, 2007, Future Horizons, Arlington, TX.

BIO

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