

Making a Safety Plan for Bathroom Accidents

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Recently, one mother wrote us about a traumatic experience that thankfully turned out well. *"While having a birthday party for my son at a local recreation center, our 4-year-old daughter disappeared for a good 10 minutes. My husband was watching the kids while I left to check on the pizza. They all said she was there one minute, gone the next.*

"When I walked back in the building, it was sheer panic. Everyone was looking for her. It turned out our little girl had had a potty accident. She'd been so excited that she peed in her pants and was then terribly embarrassed. She was unfamiliar with the building and went to hide in a dressing room in a part the store that no one was in. I cried when I found her. I was so terrified and so thankful she was safe!"

At times, life can seem very difficult for children who are struggling to master social skills and also to be in charge of their bodies.

Doing something seen as babyish and socially unacceptable like peeing in their pants can feel like a very upsetting emergency.

Kids and even adults might have bathroom accidents for a variety of reasons – sleeping very soundly; getting too caught up in play and forgetting to go; not feeling safe about the bathrooms available and waiting too long; having clothes that they can't get undone quickly; having a physical problem; or being startled in a way that causes them to lose control. Dealing with the embarrassment of having a bathroom accident can make people miserable and even cause them to take actions that might put them into danger.

Here are six steps to building a safety plan for bathroom accidents.

1. Make sure your children know what you want them to do. As soon as they can understand, children need to be told very clearly, "Once in a while, kids and even grown-ups have a bathroom accident and pee or even poop in their clothes. They might feel very embarrassed. If this happens, you might feel like hiding or running away, but that's not safe. Remember that your safety is more important than your embarrassment. Your job is to get help from the adult in charge and NOT to leave without checking first. Having a bathroom accident does not mean that you are bad or that you are a baby – it just means that you had an accident. The adult in charge will help you get cleaned up and get new clothes."

Concern about bathroom accidents looms large for younger children. I once asked a group of seven-year-olds where they would wait if they were lost in a huge store. They all said that they would wait by the bathrooms, which were in the isolated back of the store. When I asked them why, they explained with perfect seven-year-old logic, "Because then, if you needed to GO, you'd be right there!"

2. Make it safe to go to the toilet in unfamiliar places. Many young children are very conservative about where they feel comfortable using the toilet. Without some help, they might try to avoid going until it's too late. Every time you go to a new place with younger children, discuss where the bathroom is and what to do if they need to go. Remind them that, although you'd like to make sure they get to the toilet on time, you will not be upset if they have an accident, as long as they tell you so that you can help them.

One kindergarten teacher had an interesting challenge because their school was under construction and the children were going to have to use portable chemical toilets for a few months. She did a bathroom drill to show her students how the toilet worked and what to do and not do. Everyone got to practice "flushing" the strange toilets until the strange became more familiar. This teacher also sent her students to go to the toilet in pairs. That way, the other child could stand outside the door (instead of using the complicated lock) and go for help if necessary.

One little boy was terrified about using an outhouse while camping until his parents told him that this was Smokey the Bear's toilet. After that, he couldn't wait to go!

3. Make sure that the adults your children are with will be supportive. You need to know that the adults in charge of your children will be matter-of-fact, calm, kind, and protective if your child has a bathroom accident – and that your child will never be shamed or teased about this happening. Teasing from children about bathroom accidents needs to be stopped with the same commitment as you would stop other bullying. The message we want children to have is that they do not need to be ashamed of their bodies or of themselves, even if they accidentally do something that is socially unacceptable.

4. Help children remember to go. Children tend to live more in the moment and be less able to plan ahead than adults. Even if a child says that she doesn't need to go, pay attention to her body language. If she is squeezing her legs together or holding herself, she might be so focused on the action that she has forgotten to pay attention to what her body is trying to tell her. You can gently insist, saying something like, "I need to go, so let's go try together!"

5. Make a plan for bedwetting and other potential problems. Some children sleep so soundly that they might not be able get through the night without peeing in the bed until they are in their late teens. This is NOT something they can control and it is something almost everybody will eventually grow out of. There is no correlation between bedwetting and success in life.

Children who are different from their peers for any reason need tools and language to deal with it. Nighttime diapers can save a lot of discomfort and laundry. Older children can gain a sense of power by learning how to use the washer and dryer themselves if need be.

You can normalize this problem instead of making it a source of shame with a simple explanation, such as, "You are a very sound sleeper and your body doesn't wake up in time to go. This is something that happens to lots of kids and you will grow out of it when your body is ready."

If you are away from home, carrying an extra pair of clothing just in case a child gets wet or dirty can prevent a lot of trouble.

6. Help your children understand that being embarrassed is something that happens to everybody. Feeling alone and ashamed is destructive to a child's well-being and joy in life. Give children room to talk about their feelings, but don't be surprised if they don't want to. For younger children, you might act stories about bathroom accidents out with their toys.

Children of any age love hearing stories about their parents being kids. It's reassuring to hear that their parents or other important adults once peed in their pants, threw up all over someone, or got a thorn in their bottoms - and were very embarrassed, but were still able to feel good about themselves.

If you think a child might be feeling embarrassed and unable to talk about it, tell stories of times when you were embarrassed. If need be, make up happy endings that give your children the message that we don't have to be perfect to be great.