

Faecal smearing

Children playing with poo, or smearing it on walls or furniture, can be incredibly difficult for parents and caregivers to cope with – it’s messy, smelly, difficult to clean, and embarrassing to talk about, which can mean that parents aren’t able to find support or help.

This resource will outline some of the common causes behind autistic children smearing or playing with poo, as well as some strategies for parents and caregivers to try.

Sensory discomfort

For some children, the sensation of having poop in their nappy or underwear is distressing, and may become intolerable. (This is especially likely if the smearing behaviour starts up following a change in how the child’s underwear feels – like switching from nappies to underwear, changing nappy brands, or toilet training making the child more aware of sensations in that area.)

If you think this may be happening:

- It can help to emphasise that poop goes in the toilet, using language, visual reminders, or whatever works for your child. Taking poop out of their underwear to put it in the toilet still isn’t ideal, but it is preferable to the alternative of hiding it in furniture or smearing it somewhere.
- Look out for signs that your child has just pooped, or that they are uncomfortable, and take them to the toilet immediately. These signs may be unexpected – for example, your child may flap their hands or bang parts of their body against furniture rather than touching the area that is uncomfortable. It may help to write down your child’s body language, along with a record of when they poo in their nappy/underwear, so that you can match up the body language with ¹ the cause.

- Learning to use the toilet consistently will usually stop the smearing if the problem is the sensation of poo in the child's underwear. Try not to focus on the poo smearing, and instead focus on toilet training (see our Toilet training resource [here](#) for tips around toilet training for autistic children).

Sensory play

Some autistic children enjoy soft, squishy textures, and some are not inherently disgusted by poop – a combination of these can lead to a child playing with poop because they find it fun, and not understanding that others find it disgusting. It's also normal for young children to be fascinated by their own bodies and bodily processes, which can sometimes lead to investigating or playing with their poo.

If you think this may be happening:

- Try replacing poo with alternatives. Kinetic sand, squishy putty, or other sensory toys can fulfil the same need for particular textures; and scented markers, playdough, or other scented sensory toys can fulfil the need for strong smells.
- Remove as many opportunities as possible for your child to play with their poo - supervise them as closely as possible, and immediately take them to the bathroom to clean themselves up whenever they poo.
- Find another bodily process to get your child interested in – food and eating can be a good replacement interest because it also involves smells and textures, and is a fairly simple process to understand.

Asking for attention

Some autistic children struggle to communicate that they want or need attention in a way the adults around them understand. Behaviour that gets immediate attention, like smearing poo, can be a way to get the attention and interaction your child needs (and they may not distinguish between positive and negative interactions).

If you think this may be happening:

- Stay as calm as possible when cleaning up the poo. If your child is looking for a reaction, showing anger, disgust or frustration may just confirm that smearing poo is an effective way to get one. Depending on your child's age and language level, it can help to explain in an age-appropriate way that you need to clean up the mess before you can play with them.
- Find other ways your child may be asking for attention. These may not look like the sort of behaviour you expect - some common ways autistic children may ask for attention include placing themselves in your space or close to you; putting favourite objects on or near you; or making loud noises, whether vocally or using objects (all of which may be done without looking at you or waiting for you to respond).
- Try parallel play with your child – if they don't respond when you try to directly play with them, just being in the same space as them, each doing your own thing, can fulfil their need to bond with you without placing too much social pressure on them.