

Parenting Strategies for Wetting and Soiling Behaviors

Repeated wetting and soiling behaviors seen by parents in their children are often difficult to manage and emotionally frustrating, sometimes resulting in the parent becoming angered with their child. Wetting and soiling behaviors can be a sign of developmental issues or a physical condition. If wetting or soiling behaviors continue, physical or developmental issues should be ruled out first. If wetting or soiling behaviors are deemed behaviorally related, the child's behavior may be related to several behavioral factors, which may include the need for more relationship with the parent, need for age-appropriate control, hurt and misunderstood feelings, or feelings of helplessness. Many parents mistakenly believe that wetting and soiling behaviors are their child's way of "getting back at them," somehow revengeful behavior. It is important to note that children's wetting and soiling behaviors are often misguided behavior and children are usually ashamed of their behavior. Parents should be careful never to make a child feel ashamed or naughty for wetting the bed, nor punish or give consequences for wetting or soiling behavior. Punishment almost never works and may actually increase wetting and soiling behavior as the child becomes more upset, nervous, ashamed, and/or resentful toward parents. What is recommended is that parents encourage the child and praise the child when dry and praise them when they use the toilet successfully. The child can participate, if age appropriate, in helping to clean up wet and soiled clothes and bed linens without parental shaming or anger.

Some additional parenting strategy suggestions include:

- Take a look at what you, the parent, might be doing to create the need for the child to seek attention or engage in a power struggle.
- Spend special time with your child. Get them involved with family activities and/or give them a meaningful task to enhance their sense of belonging and contribution to the family.
- Examine stress or change in the family such as other children being placed or being moved, stress between parents in the family, conflict between parents and children, or the birth of a baby. Changes may lead to increased wetting or soiling. Help your child to talk about these changes and plan strategies to handle their feelings.
- Spend time with your child to increase your child's sense of belonging and significance rather than isolating your child and focusing on their negative behavior. Focus on your child's positive behaviors and recognize their small successes. The wetting and soiling behaviors will stop when the child feels secure.
- Decide how to help your child and focus on positive behavior instead of trying to stop negative behaviors.
- Give lots of hugs throughout the day.
- Schedule regular special time: reading a book, playing for five minutes, etc.
- Parents can purposefully plan to ignore behavior that may be annoying or frustrating, but that is not a broken rule.
- Talk with your child about ways to get attention that are good for everyone and notice and verbally recognize when your child is seeking attention with preferred behaviors.

- If your child is seeking negative attention, picture your child really saying, “Notice me. Involve me.” This will automatically find a way to encourage your child without prompting negative behavior.
- The parent should take time to examine any ways you may be creating or contributing to power struggles between yourself and your child, then create ways in which your child can have more healthy age appropriate control and recognize their successes in doing so.
- When parents feel defeated and angry, picture your child really saying, “give me choices, let me succeed” in order to create a win/win situation instead of escalating a power struggle.
- Sometimes children seem to be trying to hurt you or hurting others are actually doing so because they are feeling hurt themselves. Check with the child about how they are feeling. Be accountable for any hurt words or actions you may said or done. Help the child decide together, when they feel hurt, positive ways they can handle their feelings, and acceptable behaviors in which they can engage.
- A child’s hurtful words or behavior are actually requests for relationship with a parent and adult. Rather than hurting back or rejecting the child, you can behave in a way that helps the child to feel belonging and significance in a positive way.
- Keep encouraging your child by making tasks easy enough to ensure success. Keep finding small ways to verbalize and recognize small successes in your child. “I noticed today you had a dry day, way to go, you decided to use the potty every time today.”
- When your child challenges you and you feel like giving up, hear your child saying, “Don’t give up on me. Show me a small step.” This will help build your child’s confidence and instill hope.

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Resources Used:

Nelson, J. Ed. D.; Lott, L. M.A, M.F.C.C.; Glenn, H.S., Ph.D.; 1999 Positive Discipline A-Z: From Teens to Toddlers- 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems.

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