

Autism and Faecal Smearing

It's a subject few parents of autistic children like to talk about, but one that affects many children with Autism, faecal (or poop) smearing. Frequently children with Autism will smear poop on themselves, their toys, furniture and the walls etc. It's a big problem that many parents are embarrassed to talk about with friends, family and often with their paediatrician – it is often seen as a taboo subject. As a parent, you might wonder why your child engages in playing with their faeces and what you can do about it. To help you figure out why your autistic child engages in faecal smearing and how to prevent it, here are one Mum's thoughts on poop smearing and what worked for her (D.C. Fetters).

Why Do Autistic Children Smear Their Faeces?

There are many theories about why children smear their poop. Some say it's because they like the sensory experience of playing with their faeces. Others, that they are doing it for attention or to be manipulative and still others say that it's a stress response or done from boredom. I'm sure that there are children who engage in faecal smearing for any one (or all!) of these reasons, but for my son I found that it was because he would stick his hand in his nappy/diaper after he had defecated, get faeces on his hand and then try to get it off by wiping it on whatever was handy. Unfortunately that turned out to be the wall, the carpet, his toys, himself and once even his little sisters' hair. You can no doubt imagine what a huge mess his efforts to wipe it off turned into.

Can Faecal Smearing Be Prevented?

Having to clean faeces from the wall, carpet and toys can leave a parent in tears. It's not a pleasant job by any means and you never can get the carpet as clean as it once was. The worst part is that after all that time you spent scrubbing and sanitizing it happens again the very next day (or quite probably the SAME day!). Fortunately, there are some steps you can take to lessen the impact and incidents of such smearing.

Five Steps To Prevent Poop Smearing

Stay Alert

One of the biggest steps to prevent faecal smearing in autistic children is to pay attention to when they are getting ready to have a bowel movement and change their soiled nappy/diaper right away. Not doing so will increase the chance that they will reach into their nappy/diaper and smear faeces on your walls etc. Most children indicate when they are going to have a bowel movement by going off in a corner, hiding behind a chair, grimacing or sitting really still so be alert for these signs in your child to help prevent the smearing.

Limit Access

When my son was going through his smearing stage, we used onesies and shirts that snapped between the legs under his clothing to make it more difficult for him to get to his diaper. At night we did the same thing or put him in a one piece zippered pyjama that was put on backwards. If you have a girl you could use a leotard or bathing suit under her clothing to prevent her from playing with her faeces. If you have an older child you could try a one piece wrestling outfit.

Reward Appropriate Behaviour

If your child responds well to rewards, you can try and modify the smearing behaviour by rewarding him or her with a favourite treat when they have a dirty nappy/diaper, but don't stick their hand in it. Not all autistic children respond to rewards, so this may or may not work for you.

Share The Clean Up

Sharing in the clean-up was one of the things that helped stop my son from poop smearing. Whenever he would engage in this behaviour I would make him help clean up. I put a pair of rubber gloves on him, handed him a sponge and hand over hand helped him to clean up the mess he had made. You might be thinking that having him help clean up is unsanitary, but it's not anymore unsanitary than smearing the poop in the first place! He really hated to help clean up and I think that this is one of things that contributed to the end of the smearing.

Provide Similar Sensory Experiences

If your child is playing with their faeces for a purely sensory reason then you might try providing other types of sensory activities to take the place of the smearing. Finger painting, playing with clay or silly putty, and playing in the mud all may help to replace the sensory input that your child is getting from playing with his faeces.

In addition to the above, the UK National Autistic Society suggests:

There can be a sensory motivation to smearing. It may be that the texture is something that your child enjoys. Could your child have something such as play dough in their room that they could be redirected to instead?

It may be that they are bored and does not know what else to do in this time, especially if it is when everyone else is in bed. If it is safe to leave your child in their room alone, could there be activities left in the room that they could be directed to at night? A particular box of activities could be left as activities to do at night.

It is also possible that the reaction your child gets from people when they smear is reinforcing the behaviour? If they get a lot of attention and fuss made of them, they may find this exciting. It would be worth using a behaviour diary to see how people react when they do this. If the child gets a lot of attention, try and react to the behaviour as neutrally as possible, with no eye contact and very little conversation. This can also be coupled with a lot of attention being given when they do something positive.

It may be easier to try and make it harder for your child to be able to smear. There are all-in-one pyjamas and vests that are designed for children of a wide range of ages.

Also, Social Stories may be of benefit to some children.

This is by no means a comprehensive document covering all aspects of smearing, but we hope it might have given you a better insight in to the behaviour?