

Faecal Smearing

Behaviour is often communication, so it is important to address the underlying cause of any inappropriate behaviours to determine the needs and to help your child.

The causes of smearing could be due to:

- Medical (constipation)
- Sensory (tactile, smell, visual, auditory)
- Emotional (avoidance, attention, anger)

Medical cause

If your child has a limited diet, low in fibre and/or has limited drinking, this can lead to constipation. As a result, your child may be feeling an increase in pressure around the anus area, or itching, and may resort to poking/ picking the anus area in an attempt to relieve the symptoms. It may also be a response to pain in their stomach.

Seek medical help for relief of symptoms.

Sensory cause

Smearing may be an attempt to seek out Tactile, Visual, Smell or even Auditory input.

If your child is over sensitive to tactile input the toilet paper may cause extreme discomfort.

Your child may smear to seek out tactile input or strong smells if they have difficulty registering this type of input.

Interoception – this is the sense that detects our inner body feelings. Your child may be struggling to understand their internal body signals and may not know when they need to go to the toilet. This may then lead to your child smearing as a way of checking if they need to have a bowel movement

Emotional Cause

May be an attempt to gain attention, or delay/avoidance of an event.

How to help stop smearing

1/ Rule out any medical causes or treat any underlying medical conditions, for example, constipation

2/ If sensory behaviour is suspected, it can be very challenging to stop because the behaviour is automatically reinforcing for your child. Since we can't take away the reinforcement we need to replace it with something that works better at meeting their sensory needs.

Substitutions should be offered throughout the day and consistently until they become routine. Have them accessible where your child usually smears.

Tactile over sensitivities – try changing the toilet paper or use flushable toilet wipes.

If your child is seeking tactile input - try to replace the tactile sensation with warm play dough, pudding, toothpaste, shower gel, sand and water mixture. Try not to avoid or restrict messy play or your child will turn to other options to meet their seeking needs.

Other sensory considerations:

- Seeking strong smell – try vinegar, marmite, spices, scented lotions or essential oils (mandarin, peppermint, vetiver)
- Visual seeking – try finger painting, shaving foam, clay, bread dough
- Auditory seeking – the texture will tell you the noise the material will make when squeezed.
- Smearing can often happen at nap/bedtime and can be due to their room being under stimulating, therefore they may engage in sensory seeking behaviours. Try making their room more stimulating, for example,
- Star projector (calming, visual stimuli)
- Essential oil diffuser (to stimulate smell receptors, eg, peppermint, mandarin, vetiver)
- Large squishy toy (added tactile input)
- White noise (provides auditory input to prevent under stimulation, or reduce any unwanted background noises)
- Picky eater – if your child has difficulty knowing when they need the toilet, ensure they are drinking enough water and getting enough fibre. This helps to bulk up their stools, making it easier for them to feel when they need to go. An alternative would be to use a fibre supplement
- Visual cues and social stories. Visual reminders about appropriate and hygienic bathroom use, alongside social stories to help reduce inappropriate behaviours.

3/ **Emotional** – Make sure you are not unintentionally reinforcing the behaviour. For example, raising your voice then keeping a close eye on them for the rest of the day, may be reinforcing the behaviour if smearing is an attempt to get your attention.

Is the behaviour for avoidance (school, shops)?

An expression of anger?

Is the behaviour for what follows, for example, the reward of a warm bath afterwards?

A behavioural diary is useful for tracking behaviour as the cause is not always what it appears to be.

Note when the behaviour happens, when and where it happened and write down the events that happened before and after the smearing occurred.

Make sure to acknowledge your child with positive reinforcement for doing the right thing. This includes if they play or sleep in their room without engaging in smearing

Following a smearing incident:

- Use low arousal responses, being as emotionally neutral as possible, such as, calm, steady breaths, clean up with few or no words.
- Go somewhere if you need to vent your frustration – not in front of your child.
- Clean up when your child is not there so they cannot see/hear your responses to the cleaning.
- Cleaning your child – do so with few words as possible / silence. Keep calm so your emotions do not come through in your actions (for example, brisk scrubbing).

Restrictive clothing is available to prevent the behaviour from happening but it does not get to the bottom of what your child's needs are.

Adapted from Raising an extraordinary person