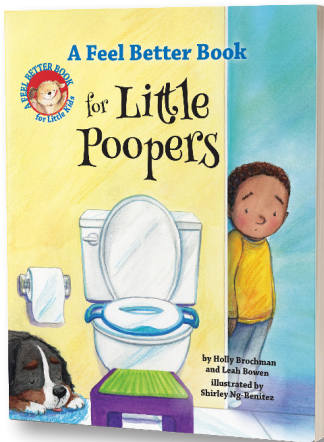




Afraid of the Potty?

Insights and Tips to Help Your Little Pooper



It's a common but vicious cycle. When a child is scared to use the bathroom, they hold their poop in and subsequently become constipated, so it hurts when it finally does come out. The pain creates fear so they hold it again, and the cycle is repeated over and over.

In their Note to Parents and Caregivers, *A Feel Better Book for Little Poopers* authors, Holly Brochmann and Leah Bowen, provide encouragement and tips for children who struggle with bowel movements. Here's an excerpt:

The fear is real

Children of potty-training age have been wearing a diaper since the very moment they were born. The transition to sitting on a cold, hard chair in a position that is often not advantageous for the release of the bowels can be not only scary, but physically difficult. When they do go, it feels strange to them, and it becomes an experience they are not eager to repeat. The fear can be even more intense for older children who have had painful movements in the past.

As a caregiver, it is important to provide comfort, compassion, and patience during this learning process and understand that it might take longer than advertised with potty training. It is also very helpful to acknowledge what they are going through, but provide assurance that it will get better. For example you can say, "You're new at this and it just takes time." Or "I know it hurt last time and you're scared it's going to hurt again, but together we will practice some new things to try that can help."

The situation impacts your child's life and your family's

When your child is afraid of having bowel movements, avoids them by holding it in, and then finally has to have one which ends up being painful, it validates their fears. In between these avoided bowel movements, the child becomes very uncomfortable and grouchy—in some cases they miss out on playtime, family outings, or school activities. But there really isn't a way to force your child to go. This is extremely frustrating for caregivers, and it often leads to putting pressure on your child to go. But pressuring your child or shaming them for feeling scared will only intensify the fear, making matters worse.

Instead, you can reflect their feelings with gentle statements such as, “You’re worried it will hurt, but it doesn’t feel good holding it in either.” Or “Listen to your body, and when you’re ready to give it a try, I’ll be here with you.”

Listening to your body can help

There can be an internal struggle when the child knows they need to go to the bathroom and sit and try, but their fear stops them. This is why it helps to talk to the child about listening to your body’s signals, and how, by paying attention, you can give your body what it needs to work like it should. You can show them a diagram of the intestines, and explain how poop moves through the body and is stored in the colon until it gets full enough to come out.

Try these two strategies:

- **Try learning mindfulness practices like deep breathing.** Like with most things, relaxation can help. Practice taking deep breaths when your child is calm, such as before bedtime or when you are sitting on the couch together. That way, when your child is feeling panicked, they will already know what to do.
- **Try sitting in a different position.** If using an adult-sized toilet, provide a stool so that your child can sit with their feet on the stool, raising up their knees. Research and testimonials have shown that the squatting position can physically help poop come out easier, as it places the body in a more natural position for bowel movement. It also provides an element of the process that your child can choose to do differently and therefore control. Giving them something physical to try is often easier than changing their mindset.

Celebrate positive small steps and don’t pressure your child

Caregivers of a child who holds their poop probably feel almost as much relief as the child when they finally go! Celebrate their bravery! Reflect their feelings with a “You did it!” or “You were scared but you listened to your body!” Be sure to give encouragement even when they don’t quite make it. “You had an accident but you sure did try!”

One of the main things to remember as a parent or caregiver is to stay calm. Putting more pressure on your child *will not help*. This can be difficult to do when frustration levels are high, so much of this process involves mindfulness and preparation practices by the caregiver. Have patience with yourself: you may not always respond the way you wish you would have. Forgive yourself and explain to your child that you are learning, too.

This is a partial excerpt from the Note to Parents and Caregivers in Magination Press Book *A Feel Better Book for Little Poopers* by Holly Brochmann and Leah Bowen.

This Article’s Authors

Holly Brochmann is an advocate for managing common mental health issues through therapy and exercise. She has a degree in journalism and enjoys creative writing both as a hobby and as a primary part of her career in public relations. Holly lives in McKinney, Texas.

Leah Bowen has a Master of Education degree in counseling with a focus in play therapy. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Registered Play Therapist in the state of Texas where she currently practices, and she is committed to helping her child clients work through issues including abuse, depression and anxiety. Leah lives in Frisco, Texas.