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Setting the standard for  
Scotland's school toilets

**School  
toilets and  
the experiences of  
children and young  
people with a disability**

**the views  
of parents  
and carers**

June 2015



# School toilets and the experiences of children and young people with a disability – the views of parents and carers

## 1

### Overview

In early 2014, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People commissioned Ipsos MORI Scotland to survey parents of children and young people with a disability and/or long-term health condition about their experiences of school toilets.<sup>1</sup> Children in Scotland in partnership with fSDC (For Scotland's Disabled Children) as part of the Parent Participation Project carried out a survey around the same time which covered similar issues.<sup>2</sup> Both surveys had open questions where parents could talk about their child's experiences in more detail.

This report written by David Myers, Ipsos MORI, looks at the range of issues parents raised when answering these questions. These included concerns about:

- support from staff
- rules and permissions
- facilities
- the impact on children

Parents also suggested ways to improve the experience of using school toilets.

## 2

### Types of Support

Many parents said their child needed help to go to the toilet in school. The types of support provided varied, and included:

- an adult or buddy pupil to accompany the child to the toilet
- help with changing nappies or pads
- help with wiping and cleaning
- help with clothing
- help to get on and off the toilet

1 Survey of Parents and Carers: Summary Report for Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People. Ipsos MORI Scotland, March 2014.

2 <http://www.fsdco.org.uk/parent-participation-project/>

## 2.1 The importance of staff support

Parents described how support staff would try to make their child feel more comfortable while they were providing assistance.

***“The staff are very good and sing to him while being hoisted.”***

(Parent of boy aged 7-9)

However, sometimes parents felt that members of staff were not supportive. Some voiced concerns over whether teachers took their child’s toileting needs seriously. They linked this to a lack of understanding of learning and behavioural disabilities (and the autism spectrum in particular). Some felt strongly that the care given to their child was inadequate.

***“No proper care at school.”*** (Parent of girl aged 7-9)

Others said there was a lack of communication among staff (and with supply teachers in particular). This could result in staff questioning a child’s need to use the toilet in front of their classmates.

## 3 Rules and Permissions

There were times when school rules caused difficulties. For example, disabled toilets were not always made available to the children who needed them.

***“My son informs me that he doesn’t get to use the disabled toilet as this is ‘the teachers’ toilet!’”*** (Parent of boy aged 4-6)

The parent of a 13-15 year old felt that it was *“degrading”* that their child had to show a ‘yellow card’ to indicate that they had additional support needs and needed to go to the toilet during class time. However, another parent thought that a non-verbal way of asking for permission to go to the toilet would be of benefit to their child.

## 4 Toilet Facilities

Some children with a disability and/or long-term health condition needed specialist toilet provision, while others used the main school toilets. Concerns were raised about both types of facility.

## 4.1 Specialist provision

Equipment such as crickets and specialised lifting gear were used to transfer some children on to toilets. Some parents said that their child was toileted in a special room, kitted out with a range of specialist equipment such as an adjustable toilet, changing bed, shower and adjustable sink.

***"It was designed with my daughter in mind."*** (Parent of girl aged 16-18)

However, other parents voiced concerns over inadequate special provision. These issues included:

- screened-off areas rather than a proper toilet
- a lack of changing mats
- inconsistent provision of specialist equipment

***"Newly built secondary school toilets either have bench and no hoist or the other toilet has hoist and no bench!"*** (Parent of girl aged 16-18)

There were concerns that disabled toilets were too small, that the sinks were too close to the toilet to carry out transfers, and that they were used for storage.

***"The last time I was in the toilet there was a lot of boxes ... so I felt like I was using the toilet in a storage room."*** (Parent of girl aged 10-12)

Another parent commented on the lack of mirrors in disabled toilets:

***"[Just] because they are disabled does not mean they don't need mirrors to sort their hair like able bodied children."*** (Parent of girl aged 16-18)

## 4.2 Main school toilets

Some parents said that their child's school toilets had been newly painted, and that they were always clean and stocked with essentials such as toilet paper and soap.

However, others had concerns about the atmosphere, construction, and provision of toilet paper and hand washing facilities in these toilets.

### ***Atmosphere***

There was a perception that school toilets were unwelcoming. They were described as *"cold", "dark", "dirty", "enclosed", "scary" and "smelly"*.

Toilets were also described as noisy places. This was a problem for children with autism. Sudden, unexpected noises such as those made by hand dryers, metal doors and gushing water were particular issues for those children with autism who experience hypersensitivity.

***“Terrified of hand dryers and very reluctant to use toilets that are not known in case there is a dryer.”*** (Parent of boy, fSDC survey)

Other parents said that there were children ‘hanging around’ the toilets. There was a perception that these children were involved in vandalising the toilets or bullying other pupils there.

### ***Construction of toilets***

Parents reported a number of problems with the construction of toilets:

- heavy cubicle doors
- doors that did not lock properly
- cubicles that did not feel very private
- toilets that had no seats
- no handrails within the cubicles
- problems with the height of the sinks

### ***Toilet paper and hand washing***

Only around a third of parents said that there was *always* hot water, toilet roll, soap and hand towels in plentiful supply. Specific problems included:

- no wet wiping facilities
- no toilet paper
- poor quality toilet paper
- no soap
- no hot water
- hand dryers not working
- lack of paper towels as an alternative to hand dryers

# 5

## The impact on children and young people

Parents described the ways in which their children were affected by the various issues around toileting at school.

Schools' rules about toilet use caused some children problems.

***"My son will not use the school toilets as you have to ask for a pass and the toilets are locked - you can't just pick a toilet. So he waits till he gets home, which is not good for him as he has medical problems."*** (Parent of boy aged 13-15)

One parent talked about their son's need to urinate frequently due to chronic constipation. He felt *"humiliated"* at having to ask to go to the toilet when there was a teacher covering the class who was not made aware of his condition.

***"He should not have to defend his need to urinate whenever there is a supply teacher."*** (Parent of boy aged 4-6)

A lack of toilet paper or wet wiping facilities in the toilets meant that some children were not cleaning themselves (and coming home dirty and irritated). Others became upset because they did not know what to do when there was no paper, and waited where they were until they were missed by their teacher or found by other children. There were times where children found the toilet dirty or blocked, so went round the school looking for a clean toilet.

***"He had other pupils searching for him once as he was going around all the toilets to find paper - he has run away from school before so this caused problems as they didn't know where he was and were worried he had ran off."*** (Parent of boy, fSDC survey)

Some parents said that their child would hold on as long as possible because they felt the toilets were dirty or that there was a lack of privacy. This made some children physically uncomfortable. Others ended up soiling themselves and being taunted by other children.

***"He is prone to teasing for a problem that is totally not his fault all because there are inadequate facilities."*** (Parent of boy aged 4-6)

# 6

## Parents' suggestions for improvements

Parents proposed a number of ways in which schools could improve their toilet facilities and better meet their children's needs. It was suggested that:

***“head teachers have to be told to tell their staff to allow children out of class if required and not to question/humiliate their need to go”*** (Parent of boy aged 7-9).

Another parent thought that children should be told by the school that they will be allowed to go to the toilet when they need to. While another felt that teachers

***“should not need ... proof and should know the pupils well enough or have a class list with discreet information [about a child's condition]”*** (Parent of child aged 13-15).

Others thought that their child should be provided with a key in schools which lock their toilets during class times, or that their child should be able to use the teachers' toilet.

Suggestions were put forward for ways of making school toilets more appealing places:

- providing more modern facilities using Changing Places<sup>3</sup> design principles
- involving children in making their toilets nicer places
- making them brighter
- having lights on a sensor so that they come on when someone enters the toilet
- making them feel more private so that children feel more secure
- using fast flush devices or Clos-O-Mat toilets to give children more dignity

***“Maybe introduce a disabled toilet within the normal toilet cubicle/area, as one thing my son keeps on saying is he wants to be the same as everyone else and not be made to feel different.”*** (Parent of boy aged 4-6)

They made further suggestions, including:

- having more adult supervision to ensure that there is no bullying or vandalism
- regular checks to make sure they are clean, in working order and well stocked with toilet paper and soap
- telling children who to speak to if they find that there is no toilet paper

## 7

### Summing up

While some parents were positive about their child's experience of using their school toilets and gave examples of good practice, it was clear that there was also a wide range of problems around the use of school toilets for children and young people with a disability and/or long-term health condition. Parents suggested improvements which could be made to the toilets themselves, and ways in which the culture within schools could be changed.

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For more information on the Commissioner's Flushed With Success campaign, please visit <http://www.sccyp.org.uk/education/flushed>



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