TOILET READINESS THROUGH AN OT LENS

STEPS TO SUCCESS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Occupational therapists support toilet readiness by building the skills a child needs for successful toileting. OT may address body awareness and recognition of toileting cues, sensory tolerance of the bathroom environment, balance and positioning on the toilet, clothing management, fine motor skills for hygiene, and the ability to follow each step of the toileting routine. Through play-based activities, environmental modifications, visual supports, and caregiver education, OT helps promote greater comfort, confidence, and independence with toileting.

SENSORY PROCESSING + INTEROCEPTION

A child may be sensitive to:

- loud flushing or bathroom echoes
- bright lights, smells or cold surfaces
- toilet paper, wipes, soap or wet hands
- the feeling of sitting over an open toilet

Interoception is the ability to notice internal body signals. Toileting depends on recognizing sensations such as bladder fullness, bowel pressure, wetness and the urge to go — then connecting that sensation to an action.

OT GOAL: Help the child feel safe in the bathroom AND learn what their body is telling them.

OTHER FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS FOR TOILETING THAT OT MAY ADDRESS

1. **POSTURAL CONTROL**
   Stable sitting, feet supported, trunk control and balance for reaching/wiping.
2. **MOTOR PLANNING**
   Walk in, turn, transfer, sit, stand and coordinate the sequence of movements.
3. **DRESSING + FINE MOTOR**
   Grasp waistbands, pull clothing up/down, manage fasteners and toilet paper.
4. **EXECUTIVE FUNCTION**
   Shift to the bathroom, follow steps, stay with the routine and finish hygiene.

OT ACTIVITIES TO BUILD TOILETING READINESS

BODY SIGNAL DETECTIVE
After jumping, swinging or drinking water, pause and identify: heart fast/slow, thirsty, belly full, need to pee?
Interoception + body awareness

SENSORY BATHROOM LADDER
Gradually practice entering the bathroom, sitting clothed, touching toilet paper, handwashing and eventually flushing.
Sensory tolerance + regulation

SQUAT • TURN • SIT
Create a mini obstacle course: squat for a beanbag, step to a target, turn and sit on a bench.
Strength + motor planning + transfers

PANTS PRACTICE
Use elastic-waist shorts over clothing, on a doll or therapy ball. Practice thumbs in waistband → pull down → pull up.
Dressing + bilateral coordination

WIPE & REACH
Place removable marks on a therapy ball or tray. Reach around the body and wipe until the surface is clean.
Trunk rotation + reach + hygiene

VISUAL ROUTINE GAME
Mix up picture cards for bathroom steps and have the child put them in order, then act out the sequence.
Sequencing + attention + routine

Every child's toileting journey is unique, and readiness develops at their own pace. Occupational therapy can help identify and strengthen the underlying sensory, motor, cognitive, and self-care skills needed for successful toileting. Through individualized strategies, practice, and caregiver support, OT can help make toileting routines feel more manageable while promoting confidence and independence. Remember—small steps toward toilet readiness are still meaningful progress!

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Practice component skills outside bathroom time
- Use consistent words for body signals
- Keep routines predictable and pressure-free
- Grade sensory demands instead of forcing exposure
- Celebrate participation, not only successful voiding
- Use visual supports when helpful

Video Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLo3mNwNJ2o