

6 February 2012

## **More children starting school before they have been toilet-trained – ATL/ERIC survey**

Sixty-two per cent of primary school staff in the UK have noticed an increase in the number of children wetting or soiling themselves during the school day over the past five years, according to a survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and the Education and Resources for Improving Childhood Continence (ERIC).

This increased to 71 per cent amongst those working specifically with three to five year olds – those in the foundation stage in England and Wales and primary 1 in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

ATL surveyed 848 education staff working in state, independent and academy schools in the UK during October and November 2011. Respondents felt that the main reason for the increase in the number of children wetting themselves at school was due to parents not toilet training their children before they start school.

Over the last ten years the number of children starting school before they have been toilet trained is likely to have been affected by the SEN Disability Act in 2011 and the Disability Discrimination Act in 2005 (now the Equalities Act 2010), which have led some schools to believe they can no longer refuse to take these children.

Just under forty per cent (38%) of respondents stated that their school has no written policy for dealing with childhood continence problems. Furthermore, 35 per cent stated that their school has no written policy for dealing with childhood toileting accidents.

Thirty-eight per cent of schools said they do not provide written information to parents of school starters about ensuring their child is toilet trained before starting school, while 36 per cent said they do.

Dr Mary Bousted, general secretary of ATL, said: "Having to deal with increased numbers of pupils who have not yet been toilet trained puts extra pressure on education staff when they already have enough pressure on them.

"Schools need to give staff clear guidance on how to deal with toileting accidents so that they know what they are allowed to do and who should be dealing with an incident. It is also important that education staff feel that have support from their school nurse or head, and that they know where to obtain guidance should they need it."

Jenny Perez, director of ERIC, said: "Schools should be clear about their expectation that children should be using the toilet independently when they start school. They can support parents to achieve this by providing resources and information (available from ERIC) at the time that the child's place in school is confirmed. Health visitors and school nurses also have a role to play, and ERIC provides expert training on childhood continence problems for health professionals across the UK "

ERIC helps thousands of families every year with guidance on toilet training pre-school children. Our Helpline team provides free support and we have a wealth of publications and resources to guide parents and children. Teachers that want specialist information are also encouraged to contact the Helpline team or visit our website."

A foundation stage teacher and member of senior management said: "Parents do not spend the time training their children - they feel it is the school's job. Changes in legislation meant that we could no longer say to parents that their child could not start nursery if they were still in nappies."

A teacher from a state school in England commented: "Nappies have been designed to absorb large

quantities of liquid. Children do not feel wet or notice any discomfort and this seems to delay their urge to be free of nappies. Pull-ups are similar.”

And a teacher and member of the management group, also in the foundation stage, said: “There is less independence generally; more children need help putting on coats, changing for PE, etc.”

A foundation stage teacher from Wales stated: “We used to not to take children until they were fully toilet trained. Now we accept them anyway as we operate in a deprived area and attendance at nursery is usually deemed to be in the child's best interest.”

A foundation stage teacher and member of the senior management group said: “This is a major problem for us - over 45 per cent of our Nursery children are not toilet trained when coming into nursery when they are 3-years old. We also have children who soil and wet a great deal even in reception. Our parents just have no idea when and how to toilet train their children. We are having to put on a workshop to support them.”

Eighty per cent of respondents stated that their job description specifies that they should not deal with continence problems, with nine-out-of-ten (90%) reporting that the classroom assistant has responsibility for dealing with a child who has a toileting accident.

With teaching assistants in particular having to spend a large amount of time changing pupils, some staff worry about the disruptive impact on other pupils.

A classroom teacher teaching in the foundation stage in England stated: “I currently have three incontinent children in my reception class. Sometimes an adult changes children up to nine times daily. This means that the education of other children suffer. I feel continually frustrated that we are being asked to manage continence issues when we are being presented with so many educational targets, too.”

On a positive note, 79 per cent of respondents believe they are confident in identifying a child with ongoing continence problems, as opposed to occasional accidents. Also, over half (61%) of respondents said they believe they have a good understanding of the reasons, whether medical, physical or psychological, that might cause childhood continence problems.

Just over one-in-five (21%) said they have received information on how to deal with childhood continence problems in school, from their school nurse, followed by 13 per cent who said they received information from their school in general.

A classroom teacher working in the foundation stage in England stated: “Children are only just turning three when they start school so we know that some will not be toilet trained and many will have accidents in the first few weeks. Extra help has been allocated so we have a full time assistant to help deal with this so teaching is not interrupted. There are 120 children in foundation 1.”

ENDS

**Key survey results:**

ATL surveyed 848 education staff working in state, independent and academy schools in the UK during October and November 2011.

Those working with primary school children relates to those working with pupils aged 3-11 years.

For the purpose of this survey, a child is considered to be toilet trained if they can remain clean and dry during the day and can use the toilet fairly independently. This means they know when they want to go and are able to react by using the toilet. A toileting accident occurs if a child has no existing continence problems, knows they need to go to the toilet but does not get there for some reason i.e. the child isn't allowed to leave the classroom. A continence accident could occur if a child has a physical continence

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problem (diagnosed or undiagnosed), is able to leave the classroom to go to the toilet but still doesn't make it.

Within the past 5 years, have respondents noticed an increase in the number of children having wetting or soiling accidents during the school day?	<b>Yes</b> <b>62.3%</b>	No 28.3%	Don't know 9.3%
Does respondent's school provide written information to parents of school starters about ensuring their child is toilet trained before starting school?	Yes 36.2%	<b>No</b> <b>38.2%</b>	Don't know 25.5%
Does respondent's school have a written policy for dealing with childhood continence problems during school?	Yes 28.3%	<b>No</b> <b>38.3%</b>	Don't know 33.3%
Does respondent's school have a written policy for dealing with childhood toileting accidents during school?	<b>Yes</b> <b>35.6%</b>	No 34.6%	Don't know 29.7%
Does either written policy include procedure/s for changing nappies or wet/soiled clothes?	<b>Yes</b> <b>36.5%</b>	No 29.4%	Don't know 33.9%
Does respondent's job description specify that they will deal with continence problems?	Yes 3.8%	<b>No</b> <b>80.3%</b>	Not sure 15.8%
Are respondents confident they could identify a child with ongoing continence problems (as opposed to occasional toileting accidents)?	<b>Yes</b> <b>78.7%</b>	No 12.8%	Don't know 8.3%
Do respondents think they have a good understanding of the reasons (medical, physical, psychological) that might cause childhood continence problems?	<b>Yes</b> <b>60.7%</b>	No 30.6%	Don't know 8.6%
Have respondents ever received information about how to deal with childhood continence problems in school? Ticking all that apply - 1,003 in total <b>No</b> Yes, from your school Yes, from school nurse Yes, from teaching union Yes, from ERIC Yes, researched online independently Yes, from other	<b>51.4%</b> 11.4% 17.4% 0.39% 2% 8.7% 8.7%		
If a child has a toileting accident in class, who is responsible for dealing with it? Ticking all that apply - 1,854 in total Teacher <b>Teaching/classroom assistant</b> Other support staff School Nurse Call the child's parents Don't know Other	27.1% <b>41.3%</b> 14.2% 0.59% 11.7% 0.97% 3.8%		
Can pupils in respondent's school/ class access the school toilets outside of break times?	<b>Yes</b> <b>99%</b>	No 0.58%	Don't know 0.35%
Do you think any pupils avoid using the school toilets because of their poor state? (2 skipped question)	Yes 21.1%	<b>No</b> <b>70.2%</b>	Don't know 8.6%
Who would respondents go to for information about children's toileting issues? Ticking all that apply - 1,867 in total ERIC <b>School nurse</b> Head teacher SENCO Colleague ATL I wouldn't Other	5.4% <b>26.7%</b> 14.8% 25.2% 19.3% 1.07% 0.96% 6.4%		

**Note to editors:**

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1. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, headteachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom.
  2. ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice.
  3. ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.
  4. ERIC (Education and Resources for Improving Childhood Continence) is a national children's health charity dealing with bedwetting, daytime wetting, constipation and soiling in children and young people. ERIC provides information, support and resources to families and health professionals on bladder and bowel problems. Helpline 0845 370 8008 [www.eric.org.uk](http://www.eric.org.uk).

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