

Incontinence in children with an autism spectrum disorder: A literature review

Liat Zivan Becher BPT¹, Leonid Kalichman BPT, PhD², Lea Tene BPT, MA³

- ¹ Physical therapist, Association for Children at Risk
² Associate Professor, Physical Therapy Department, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
³ Lecturer, Physical Therapy Department, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Abstract

Introduction: Toilet training is an important milestone for children and their families. Toilet training includes several stages that require various skills, i.e., motor, cognitive, communication, and emotional strength. Acquiring these skills will eventually enable proper defecation. Children with typical development achieve daytime continence at the age of three to four years and nighttime continence by the age of five. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) includes a range of symptoms that can be characterized by difficulties in social behavior, communication, and language, as well as constant behavioral patterns. Children with ASD often demonstrate difficulties in adaptive behaviors. One significant difficulty is incontinence and mastering the toilet training process. Lack of independence in bowel and bladder control may have medical and social implications; it can also impact the child's mental health. It is a main challenge not only for the child but for the family as a whole.

Aims: To study the prevalence of incontinence in children with ASD, and to better understand its root cause. In addition, this review will present accepted and recommended treatments.

Methods: PubMed and Google Scholar databases were searched for a combination of the following keywords:

“Incontinence” OR “Enuresis”: OR “Encopresis” AND “Autism”. Only randomized-controlled trials, prospective studies and retrospective analyses were included.

Results: A search in PubMed and Google Scholar databases produced 28 relevant articles. Most of them had studied the prevalence of incontinence in children with ASD; only a few dealt with treatment options. In all the studies the prevalence of incontinence in children with ASD was found to be higher than in typically developed children. The main approach to treatment was found to be the behavioral approach.

Conclusions: Children with autism are at a greater risk of developing incontinence than their peers without autism. Behavioral therapy and a consistent intervention approach based on the principle of conditioning and reinforcement can lead to positive outcomes and significantly improve the quality of life of children and their families.

Keywords: Autism, Continence, Nocturnal Enuresis, Encopresis, Toileting