

When a child smears feces it has an impact on the whole family. Naturally this is hard to deal with, not only because of the washing and disinfecting.

For some parents it can make them anxious, if the child does it away from home which can lead to a parent avoiding social situations.

There are many reasons why a child will smear feces and the reason is dependent on their age and whether or not they have a disability such as autism. It is also common in children who have been abused, so it is a challenge commonly faced by parents who are either fostering children or caring for their own child who has special needs. There are also some young children - under 2, who also show a natural interest in their own feces. Younger children might start to use the feces as an art tool and on seeing parent`s reaction this reinforces the vicious cycle of they smear and parents react which leads to instant attention on them and off their siblings.

There is a theory that for some emotionally damaged children, they smear to exert control over the adults in their life. When a child becomes angry this is a valid option of seeking revenge. In most cases these children do not have adequate learning in how to express their anger, and possibly they might not have had good role models who shown them how to express their anger. By smearing their feces, they are guaranteed instant revenge and instant attention.

The Abused Child

A child who has been sexually abused or has had significant physical abuse such as horrendous beatings on their buttocks can be emotionally cut off from any bodily sensations below their waist. By cutting off from the awful pain, the child loses the ability to recognize body signals to defecate.

There is also another argument that the child almost uses fecal smearing as a defense against being sexually abused, as this is a powerful way of keeping the perpetrator away from them. Fecal smearing can indicate early traumatic experiences that a child cannot put into words. It can be their only way of showing their distress.

For a person caring for a child who is smearing e.g. foster parent, it`s important that they let the child know that they understand how upset the child is and are trying to work with the child to help them look at different ways they can communicate their upset. Its best to avoid asking the child to say why they smear - if they could put those feelings into words then they would not need to resort to smearing. It`s also important to remember that smearing is not a deliberate act of defiance. To the child, smearing can make sense of what happened to them in the past and the behavior is very much a way for them to express their unhappiness in what has happened to them in the past, not as a reaction to them for where they are now.

Autistic Child

A child who has an entrenched sensitivity to texture and/or smell will also be rewarded by fecal smearing.

Vicious Cycle

When a child smears feces it is naturally very upsetting for a parent/caregiver. Immediately the child gets the immediate response -and possibly some verbal interaction. For all children any attention is better than none. Even for a child who has difficulty with communicating, they do learn that when they smear they get an immediate response, lots of attention diverted off other family members and onto them. This in itself rewards the child and encourages the smearing.

How To Treat

For the child who has not experienced abuse/neglect in their early childhood then ideally the child should learn that they get lots and lots of positive attention when they are being appropriate and no attention when they smear. So although the parent might have to clean up the child, this is carried out with minimal interaction. (see cleaning up below). However as soon as the parent can, try and give some praise for anything at all that the child is doing - could be "good sitting at the table", "nice sharing with your brother", "fantastic at playing quietly". By giving attention to these positive behaviors, the aim is that the child will learn that they get more attention when they play appropriately than when they smear. Hard as this can be for a parent who naturally will find smearing so frustrating and emotionally upsetting, by reinforcing and distributing where the attention goes, this will in time help to decrease the incidences of smearing.

Clothing in a younger child is a sensible option - anything that can inhibit access is strongly advisable. All in one suits, putting vest on back to front so the child can't access the poppers is helpful. Also putting pants over the nappy again can reduce access..

Lots and lots of messy play is helpful for all children who smear whether it is due to sensory enhancement or as a way of expressing their trauma. Leaving playdough around, having finger-paints and also an easel in the room where they are more likely to smear is helpful. Sand and water, shaving foam etc. all of these things can be used instead. The messy play provides an alternative texture exploratory opportunity for some children and also can act as a release to a neglected child who has pent up hurt/anger.

Clearing Up

Don't involve the child in the clearing up process as the child will be able to see your reaction and shock and this will have an effect on the child. This will either reinforce the hurt that the child feels and stop them expressing their hurt or will reinforce to the child how powerful and attention seeking their smearing is.

Ideally the parent/caregiver should not comment on the smearing, no eye contact, no verbal communication, try and keep your face neutral as you clean the child and the walls. Don't let the child hear you discussing the fecal smearing in front of them

Just as important though is not to offer inadvertently a reward, such as plonking child in front of TV, games console, give chocolates, etc. while you clear up, as again this can be perceived as a reward for smearing - again reinforcing the behavior.

Behavior Diary

Some parents/caregivers found keeping a diary of what the child was doing before they smeared and again what they were doing after the smearing. This can highlight situations that lead to smearing. This is also a useful tool to show to their pediatrician, psychologist etc.

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