

PSYCHOLOGY AND THE BLADDER

An information leaflet from the Swedish Enuresis Academy www.svenskaenures.se June 2024

There are many beliefs and misconceptions about the links between incontinence and psychology. The aim of this leaflet is to reduce the confusion and tell you what we *really* know.

Do children wet their beds or clothes for psychological reasons?

It was previously generally believed that incontinent children wet themselves for psychological reasons, due to deficient upbringing, "bad manners", frightening experiences or mental immaturity. We now know that these ideas are false. Incontinent children do not wet "on purpose", they have just as competent parents as other children and there is no clear link between wetting and traumatic experiences. Furthermore, psychotherapy and similar treatments do not help against the incontinence. These misconceptions have actually been quite harmful, since they have made many children – and parents – feel guilty.

On the other hand, to claim that psychological mechanisms have no role at all is to go too far in the other direction. The body and the mind are connected and influence each other in all kinds of medical conditions, including incontinence and other bladder problems. Many families have for instance noticed that children who are periodically incontinent may enter a "wet period" when a sibling is born or something else happens in the family. And children who wet their beds sporadically are usually dry when they sleep away from home.

Bladder problems of children with hyperactivity or concentration problems

Children with neuropsychiatric disturbances, such as ADHD or autism, have bladder or bowel problems more often than other children. The reasons behind this are probably neurological. It is not surprising that children who find it difficult to focus on the world around them may have trouble focusing on their bodily functions as well. This does not affect the treatment: the incontinence of children with neuropsychiatric diagnoses is treated in the same way as in other children.

Psychological consequences of wetting

Incontinence can be a heavy burden on the mind of a growing person. Children who are incontinent during daytime may feel a constant anxiety about the risk of public embarrassment, and bedwetting children may not dare to sleep over or join school camps etc. These children often believe that there is something "wrong" with them, they feel that they are not like other children and may even hear that they are "immature". Many children also believe that they are the only ones suffering from these problems and they do not even dare to tell their closest friends. It is not surprising that this may lead to psychological problems; but it is the incontinence that causes the psychological problems, not the other way around. If the child is severely stressed by the problem it is a good idea to mention this to the child's physician.

How should these problems be handled?

The incontinent child should be treated so that he/she becomes dry. Most of the psychological problems will then disappear and the child's self-esteem will rise tremendously. But much can be done while waiting for dryness: the parents must explain to the child that the wetting is not his or her own fault, that they are not the only ones with these problems and that help is available. If neuropsychiatric problems are suspected then this should be mentioned to the healthcare so that adequate treatment can be offered. Treatment of such issues can often make treatment of the bladder or bowel problems easier to manage.

It is also important to help the child live like other children of the same age: the bladder should not decide what the child can or cannot do!

The Swedish Enuresis Academy through Mai-Britt Giacobini Arnér