autism
wellbeing

How to support someone who smears their faeces…

What is 'smearing'?

Faecal smearing is an activity that involves touching the faeces or poo. It may be that the individual has removed the faeces from the toilet, their nappy, their underwear and has touched it. The person may defecate (poo) in the bath. They may be exploring the faeces in their hands, rolling it or squishing it between their fingers. They may break the faeces up and sometimes hide it. They may smear the faeces over themselves, the walls, furniture, toys etc.

Smearing is not uncommon, if you are caring for someone who smears you are not alone.

There is no doubt caring for an individual who smears can be immensely distressing and can feel overwhelming.

Toileting is still a socially taboo subject. When you are living with or supporting someone who smears their faeces you can feel isolated and unable to talk about it because of fear of shame and judgement. Many parents/carers feel fearful of taking the autistic person who smears their faeces out in public because of the fear that they may smear when out and about in other settings such as school, nursery, shops or at other people's houses.

As there is a lot of stigma around smearing it is hard to talk about or seek help for the person you care for that smears because it can evoke a shock response in others and ourselves as parents/carers, when discussing it or when witnessing it.

We can have a physical gag response when confronted by smeared faeces and when having to clear up the faeces.

With support smearing can be minimised or eliminated. Person centred support needs to be provided for that individual, acknowledging that each person has their own reason for smearing. If you are supporting someone who smears it is recommended that you seek professional help from a GP or Occupational Therapist with knowledge around smearing and autism.

If someone has weak interoception signals they may not know that they need to pass a stool or have done so, smearing can be an exploration of faecal matter that is not connected with the idea of "this is my poo".

Record information about the smearing activity and take this to the GP. It is important that the GP supports you to rule out a medical reason for the smearing. Some smearing behaviour may be attempts at self-evacuation (picking out poo) to alleviate discomfort as a result of chronic constipation or to alleviate itching.