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Gina M. Vincent
Independent consultant
704-408-3620
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Ask the Therapist

By Leslie Petruk, MA, LPC, NCC

Q: My 6-year-old daughter has just started wetting her bed again and having some accidents throughout the day. I am frustrated and don't know what to do ... help!

A: Bed-wetting is one of those issues that carries both social and emotional ramifications. Surprisingly, it is a fairly common condition. Many parents have very strong feelings and emotions around this issue that include fear, embarrassment, frustration or shame. If you as a parent are experiencing these strong feelings, imagine what your child is feeling! It is important to understand the biological piece of bed-wetting (also called enuresis) and to try to discern when it is a sign of a bigger emotional issue.

If children feel shame or embarrassment around the bed-wetting, they may begin exhibiting some behavioral problems. The best way to respond as a parent is with encouragement and empathy. Punishing her for bed-wetting will *not* resolve the problem and it is important to understand that your child cannot control the bed-wetting. It is not a result of disobedience, laziness, or even an attempt to control you.

There are two types of enuresis. Primary enuresis is when your child has never, or only occasionally, stayed dry through the night. Primary enuresis is considered to be related to an immature bladder or an extremely deep sleep pattern in which the connection between the brain and bladder aren't such that they wake the child during the night to go to the bathroom. Secondary enuresis is when bed-wetting starts after an extended period (six months or more) of staying dry through the night. If your child's bed-wetting has started after an extended period of six months or longer without any bed-wetting, it would be worth having her seen by a doctor to rule out any medical issues.



Bed-wetting that starts after a significant period of time of staying dry can be a sign of anxiety surrounding other life issues or significant changes in a child's life, including the death of a parent, parental divorce, moving to a new home, or starting a new school. If, however, bed-wetting is only one of a cluster of other symptoms, it could be a sign of a deeper emotional issue. If your child starts exhibiting extreme behaviors such as unusual tantrums, extreme defiance, significant crying, or if they seem "checked out" or even appear depressed – this is indicative of more severe emotional distress. Children who lose a parent or experience any type of trauma will often exhibit regressive behaviors, including bed-wetting.

If you are not aware of any traumatic or upsetting event that your child has experienced and see a significant change in behavior, sleeping patterns, or your child behaves in ways that are uncharacteristic, along with bed-wetting, it may be helpful to have your child see a therapist. For children under the age of 10, play therapy is recommended. Play therapy is a therapeutic model that allows the child to express himself in his language – through play. It is non-threatening to children and they usually enjoy going to their sessions. The play therapist will consult with you and then meet with your child in individual sessions that can help reveal any underlying emotional issues.

If your child has been dry at night and suddenly starts bed-wetting again, it is typically due to some type of stress in their life. Major changes as discussed above or physical or sexual abuse is also related to enuresis and regressive behaviors. Typically, there will be additional signs if abuse is the cause.

Children typically outgrow bed-wetting as their muscles become stronger and as they mature. Your child may want to avoid overnights or summer camps due to feelings of embarrassment, which is understandable. It is imperative that you reassure your child that his bed-wetting is not his fault. Don't allow siblings to tease your child for the bed-wetting and explain to them that he can't help it. It is also important that you don't make a big deal about it when your child does wet the bed. If it becomes too much of a focus, it will begin to heighten your child's feelings of shame and embarrassment.

While problems with bladder control and bed-wetting are relatively common among children and eventually tend to go away, the problem can lead to longer lasting effects on the ways children view themselves and their relationships with others. It is for this reason that you, as their parent, should handle the matter in a respectful, understanding and empathetic manner. ●



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