



Please can I go to the toilet?

Eliminating barriers to toilet access

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Restricted toilet access in schools is a problem for many pupils, especially if you are menstruating or have a disability. Not being able to go when you need to can:

- distract from learning
- have serious health implications (e.g. bowel and bladder complications)
- erode home-school relations.

It is common practice for UK schools to ban toilet visits during lessons unless there is a medical exception. Some schools go as far as locking toilets during lessons.

Our research highlights three further structural issues:

1. Limited number of breaks and toilets, and cleanliness of facilities.
2. Breaks are too short to allow adequate access to toilets outside of lessons.
3. Sanitary bins are often missing or full, creating further difficulties.

Also, three problematic patterns of pupil experience were identified: avoidance of toilets, limited drinking and embarrassment around seeking permission.

78% of school pupils have avoided using toilets in school.

52% restrict fluid intake to avoid needing the toilet

Toilet Talk

This ground breaking project supported school pupils to research and improve school toilets. We gave voice to pupils while learning from each other, empowering them to explore issues surrounding school toilets by talking, negotiating and working collaboratively with staff and governors to drive change.

Two national surveys were run, one for parents and one for teachers about school toilets. Findings from Toilet Talk, combined with insights gained from reviewing international research, show students want change and that decisive action is warranted.

Recommendations

Action with education partners

- As the next stage of Toilet Talk, the research team will develop a Tool Kit to support schools in addressing the multi-faceted problem of toilets. It will include audits that can be carried out by pupils of toilet facilities and break times.

Education Legislation

- Issue Statutory Guidance on toilet access in schools. This should include prohibiting schools from implementing blanket toilet restrictions including locking toilets during lesson time.

Action in all schools

- Place rubbish bins in the general toilet area so general waste is not blocking sanitary bins in the toilet cubicles.
- Ensure there is time and facilities for every pupil to visit the toilet every two to three hours during the day. This might mean extending breaks or changing timetables.
- Empower your student body to make local changes to improve the toilets in their school via participatory research – complete a Toilet Talk project.
- When renovating schools (including building new schools) give special attention to toilet provision. Ensure there are enough toilets in the right locations, to allow easy and efficient access.

Action in primary schools

Provide sanitary bins across Key Stage 2 in more toilets. Do not just target upper Key Stage 2, girls start their periods at a younger age. Pupils are afraid of using the one toilet with a bin in case they are seen using the “period toilet”.



Help flush this problem away

- Discuss and share this brief with your colleagues and those interested in education. Consider how you can help make these recommendations happen.
- Empower your student body to tackle your school toilets.
- Read more about [Toilet Talk](#) and our latest research.
- Read *When Nature Calls* brief to learn about the health implications of barriers to school toilets.

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