

How To Solve A Problem Like School Toilets?

By Ben Newmark

Children and adults care about different things.

In schools, adults often care most about curriculum, teaching, and personal development as they have an eye on children's futures.

Many children care far less about such abstractions. Their lives in the present are more important to them than ideas about what might happen later.

This isn't odd or unhealthy. Most of us are focused on the here-and-now and so devote less attention to the future.

Sensible schools find ways to pay attention to the things children care most about. And [Teacher Tapp](#) and [School Surveys](#) data shows that children care very much about their toilets.

They care about when they're allowed to go and how long they have wait. They care about them being clean and well maintained. Most of all they care they are safe.

What do pupils say about school toilets?

Many students, particularly in secondary schools, don't feel toilets in their school are acceptable. In School Surveys' pupil surveys, only 18% say toilets are acceptable all the time and 32% say they never are.

It isn't just children who feel this. Many teachers feel toilets are not pleasant places for students. 24% of teachers say they don't feel school toilets are safe for kids and 22% say they are not clean and in good working order.

Given how important toilets are to pupils, these figures are really worrying.

What can improve school toilets?

But what should schools do? It isn't straightforward.

How often should children be allowed to go the toilet? When? How long is it acceptable for them to spend there?

Schools that allow children to go to the toilet whenever they want, or turn a blind eye to those doing so even if official rules say otherwise, will find this causes lots of interruptions to lessons.

It's also likely children will go much more – sometimes suspiciously more – than they would if toilet use was restricted. Toilets can quickly become informal spaces during lesson times and it's not unknown for friends in different lessons to co-ordinate visits!

This is why most secondary schools restrict toilet use for most students to break and lunch times, and a minority (11%) go as far as locking the toilets outside these times. (There will be exceptions for medical needs).

While these policies lead to less interruptions, it does cause other problems. Break and lunch become very busy and if there aren't many toilets then there may be queues.

When breaks and lunches are short, then queuing for food and the toilet can leave no time at all for socialising – which may explain why many children like to go to the toilet with their friends.

There's also a more worrying effect.

The lack of supervision in these spaces can mean toilet cubicles attract those looking to engage in illicit activities. The design of school toilets sometimes make this easier: 57% of teachers report working in schools where there is a door between the corridor and student toilets, which means two potential barriers between children and a supervising adult.

For those pupils who follow rules, seeing others break them is distressing, even when they aren't directly affected. If they then become a target of either verbal or physical attack then the space also becomes scary.

It's worth noting the importance of perceptions here, too. Good-natured horseplay or swearing between teens can be terrifying for those who don't know the pupils involved, even if no harm is meant. As anyone who's been at a railway station in the evening after a football game will know, boisterous people can make you really afraid even when they don't notice you.

No Easy Answers

It is often unsettling to think about all this. Toileting is deeply intimate and personal. Many people find it embarrassing. If it's scary, children may hold on when they really should go, and can hardly be blamed for asking their teachers to visit the toilet during lesson times when they may feel safer.

Where children can't avoid going and aren't in control of the spaces they must use, they need to be protected by the adults responsible for them.

So what should schools do? For once I think this is quite straightforward.

Toilets are very important to children and all schools should make them a priority. At the very least, ask children what they think of your toilets and take their answers seriously*.

Then, above all, regardless of how busy you are or how hard it might seem, making toilets clean and safe and thinking of the needs and requirements of the most vulnerable is paramount.

Schools that can should build as many toilets as they can, so big crowds don't build up, and put them in places where there are always adults about. This is an area where intelligent design and architecture can really help.

For most schools, structural changes are unrealistic. Where there are too few toilets in out-of-the-way places, these should have a permanent duty rota so there's always an adult there during the busiest times.

This will be unglamorous and thankless, and it might not be fair to get the same person to be there all year. But someone needs to do it – for the sake of children who must attend school whether they want to or not.

Those schools that do this may well find this has a knock-on positive effect on the number of children asking to go the toilet during lessons too. If toilets are safe, clean and calm at approved times it's likely less will ask to use them when their teachers would prefer they were in lessons working.

But this isn't the main reason to get this right.

The most important thing about schools is in every circumstance they are places of dignity and safety. Children are entitled to proper protection of their fundamental human needs. And a thing that many say makes them feel least safe is toilets.

It's worth changing that.

** If you would like to use our [pre-prepared Pupil Surveys](#) with benchmarkable data to check on toilet safety (and much more) please head to [SchoolSurveys.com](#)

Ben Newmark is a practising history teacher and senior leader. He has been teaching for twenty years.