

# *THE SCHOOL TOILET* **REPORT**



**EXPOSING THE HIDDEN *PROBLEM* AFFECTING OUR CHILDREN'S *EDUCATION***  
**POWERED BY *DOMESTOS***



# Foreword



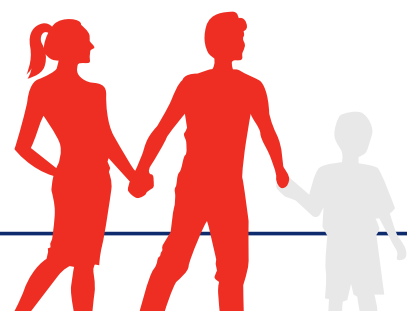
**Professor Kwame Akyeampong**  
Professor of International Education and  
Development, Open University U.K.

**School sanitation and a child's education are inextricably linked. When children are denied access to safe and clean school toilets their ability to learn, and realise their full potential can be severely compromised.**

The School Toilet Report by Domestos provides a comprehensive international evaluation of the state of school toilets and their impact on children's schooling experience. As the report reveals, sanitation in schools is clearly an issue which both impacts children physically and emotionally, disrupting their learning and even leading to irregular school attendance. This is a hidden crisis that, left unaddressed, threatens to undermine the global effort to achieve quality education for all children by 2030.

Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), to improve access to education and learning outcomes, and SDG 6, to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all by 2030, are unlikely to be achieved if the issues raised in this report do not receive global attention. This report speaks clearly and strongly to the imperative to prioritise the provision of good quality toilets for every school child.

The findings of this study must act as a wakeup call for us all – governments, donor agencies, NGOs, teachers, and parents – to redouble the efforts to ensure every school is able to provide clean and usable toilets. No child should feel anxious about attending school because they are nervous to use the school toilets. No child should feel discomfort from 'holding it in'. If every child deserves a quality teacher to maximise their learning, then equally every child deserves access to clean school toilets to ensure schools are safe places for children that encourage learning.



**“ I hope the message from this report stirs action to improve school sanitation for all children in rich and both developing countries. It is the only way to make equitable access to quality education truly meaningful for every child.”**

**Professor Kwame Akyeampong**  
Professor of International Education and Development,  
Open University, U.K.





# Why clean and safe toilets matter

**School toilets are a basic right, not a privilege, no matter what a child's circumstances or where they live. Having well-maintained, clean school toilet facilities demonstrates respect for children and their wellbeing, and also helps support them through their academic life. When children feel comfortable using the school toilet, it is one less thing for them to worry about, meaning they can stay focused and engaged during lessons.**

However, today's school children are facing a mounting sanitation crisis, one that is having a negative impact on their physical and mental wellbeing, and consequently, on their education.

Research shows that school sanitation is getting worse. In 2016, 66% of schools<sup>1</sup> had a basic sanitation service. By 2019, that figure had dropped to 63%<sup>2</sup>. It is not simply that new toilet facilities are not being built, but if they are not maintained properly, they will decay and not serve the purpose.

It is therefore imperative to keep existing toilets clean and in good working order, creating positive habits within schools that lay the foundations for good sanitation for future generations.

The issue is being further compounded by a lack of open discussion about the state of school toilets, creating a hidden problem that has largely gone unseen, unacknowledged, and unappreciated, until now.



<sup>1</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/wash-in-schools/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/progress-on-drinking-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-in-schools-special-focus-on-covid-19/>

## The methodology

To understand the scale and impact of poor school sanitation more clearly, Domestos surveyed over **4000** parents and more than **3800** children across India, Poland, South Africa and the UK and asked them about both perceptions and experiences of today's school toilets.

The online survey - conducted between July and October 2021 - comprised 4,115 parents with children between the ages of 6 and 13 and 3,862 children in the same age group and who attended school in some capacity.



India parents  
**(1,026)**  
India children  
**(928)**



Poland parents  
**(1,040)**  
Poland children  
**(1,002)**



South Africa parents  
**(1,020)**  
South Africa children  
**(951)**



UK parents  
**(1,029)**  
UK children  
**(981)**

The breakdown of parents and children in each of the four markets was as follows:

# Summary of findings



The School Toilet Report found that unclean and neglected school toilets are a reality for many children.

The knock-on effect is that children are reluctant to use toilets at school, leading to **physical discomfort** and **poor concentration** during lessons, and in some cases children even missing school.

However, children are not talking to their parents about school toilets, leaving parents unaware and often assuming that their child's school toilets are clean and well-maintained. While parents rate their child's education as very important, often issues like school sanitation are overlooked as a key part of academic life. **Giving voice** to children's concerns is the vital first step in the solution to the **school sanitation crisis**.

To help parents better understand their child's experience with school toilets, Domestos has partnered with author and parenting podcaster, Clemmie Telford to create **Let's Talk School Toilets**, a guide with advice for parents on how to tackle what can be an embarrassing and awkward conversation on school toilets.





# The findings

## Children have a negative experience of school toilets

**9 in 10 children said they had an issue with their school toilets some or all of the time – ranging from neglected facilities, lack of handwashing facilities, cleanliness, missing and broken items and a lack of privacy and safety.**

On average, children reported nine main issues with school toilets, the most common being around the cleanliness of toilets and overall maintenance. These included toilets that smell bad (68%), wet floors (66%), toilet paper on the floor or on the toilet seat or bowl (63%), or not having any toilet paper at all (61%). 9 in 10 children reported neglected toilets.

**Over half of all children (52%) reported urine or faeces on the floor, toilet seat, or in toilet bowl.**

Children reported they often have to deal with unflushed toilets (59%) and no soap to wash their hands with (54%). They also told of poorly lit toilets (43%) or unsafe facilities (39%), and a lack of privacy with many toilets having no doors or gates (29%).

In particular there were sensitive issues around not having separate toilets for boys and girls (28%), while 18% of children reported no facilities for girls to dispose of sanitary items for when they have their period. At a vulnerable and sensitive time of change in a girl's life, having clean, safe and private toilets at school is imperative.

“The girls toilets at school are not okay. They have an ugly smell. I don't know how to describe it. I don't feel too well when I go in, but I still use it...but sometimes I have to hold my nose!” (Girl -7yrs, Poland)

“The seat is really, really dirty, it's black.” (Girl – 8yrs, India)

## The negative physical and mental impacts

The study found that a lack of clean and safe school toilets is having a negative effect on children's mental and physical wellbeing, and consequently on their education and school experience.

The findings show that dirty, poorly maintained and unsafe toilets make children want to avoid using the toilet at school, leading to discomfort and in some cases, missing school altogether. One of the reasons given for girls missing school was feeling uncomfortable using the school toilets while having periods.

**1 in 3 children (32%) have reported a negative physical response as a consequence of avoiding the school toilets, ranging from skipping meals and not drinking, soiling themselves and finding it hard to concentrate in lessons.**

1 in 10 children (10%) are missing school to avoid using poorly cleaned and maintained school toilets. Children report they deliberately avoid drinking water or eating to ensure they do not need to use the toilets during school hours. In the worst cases, some students report they have wet or soiled themselves because of not wanting to use the school toilets (8%).

## 1 in 10 children say they skip snacks, lunch or a drink to avoid using the toilet at school.

Feelings of anxiety about using school toilets can have a detrimental impact on educational performance and school attendance.

## The parental perception gap

A positive, well-rounded school experience is a priority for parents when it comes to their children. While many aspects of a child's education are scrutinised, such as academic progress and the quality of teaching, the cleanliness and maintenance of school toilets more often than not falls down the consideration list.

**2 in 3 parents (65%) say they are happy with their children's school toilets and 4 in 5 parents (80%) rated the cleanliness of their children's school toilets as “good”.**

The condition of school toilets might not be at the forefront of parents' minds, but when asked, parents say clean school toilets really do matter. Over 90% of parents in all four markets rated clean and private toilets as an important factor at their child's school. In fact, parents rate this is just as important as the quality of teaching their children receive and, in some cases, more important than curriculum.

**Only 1 in 6 (15%) children said they have spoken to an adult (parent, teacher, or cleaner) about how bad the school toilets are.**

“If he came back from school and he said it was dirty today and dirty the next day so I didn't go then I would say something, but he's also embarrassed to talk about it with me. Maybe we should be talking to them about this, or even asking questions about the toilet.” (Mum, 6yr old son, Poland)

“Not too many people know about it. The parents don't know about it, the teachers don't know about it, so we don't do anything. In these meetings if somebody started talking about it then others would also agree it's a problem. Sometimes it feels silly to speak up.” (Mum - 8yr old daughter, Poland)

The study found that bridging the gap between parents' perceptions and children's experiences of school toilets can make a significant difference. Prior to being told of a child's reality at school, 80% of parents globally believe their school toilets to be cleaned to a good standard. When parents are told about the issues their children are having, almost half of those parents (42%) changed their view and suggested that school toilets should be cleaned more often.



# Country snapshots

## India

Of the four markets, children in India reported the most incidences of unclean and unsafe toilets, but only 1 in 5 children (21%) talked to an adult such as a parent, teacher or cleaner about their concerns. When presented with their children's experience of school toilets, Indian parents were the most vocal in expecting their child's school toilets to be cleaned more often.

Parents in India rate the cleanliness of school toilets to be as important as the quality of teaching (96%).

School children in India reported the most number of negative incidences with their school toilets (92%).

79% of children said they had not spoken to an adult (parent, teacher, or cleaner) about the toilets.

When hearing about their child's experience, 49% of parents said they expected their child's school toilets to be cleaned more often.

## Poland

Despite most Polish parents surveyed stating that clean and private toilets are as important as overall school cleanliness, the majority of school children in Poland report something negative about their school toilets, and say it leads to physical discomfort. Of the four markets, Polish children were the least likely to tell an adult about neglected school toilets.

Most Polish parents surveyed believe clean and private toilets are as equally important as overall school cleanliness (94%).

Their children reported neglected toilets (89%) and broken or missing equipment (82%) as the most common issues they experience with their school toilets.

A quarter of children (25%) said they have had a negative physical response as a result of avoiding the toilet.

Only 8% of children said they had told an adult about issues they had experienced with school toilets.

## South Africa

The majority of school children surveyed in South Africa reported that issues with their school toilets happen sometimes or nearly all of the time, with neglected toilets being their biggest issue. This is despite nearly every parent surveyed rating clean toilets as important as teaching standards at their child's school. A fifth of children (20%) said they had reported issues with school toilets to an adult.

99% of parents surveyed in South Africa rated clean school toilets as important as standards of teaching.

92% of children surveyed reported an average of 8 issues with their school toilets, the most common being toilets smelling bad, wet floors, toilet paper on the floor or toilet seat, no toilet paper, toilets not flushed or not enough soap to wash hands with.

1 in 3 children (34%) reported a negative physical response as a result of avoiding the school toilets. Nearly as many as 1 in 10 children (6%) say they miss school to avoid using the toilets at school.

20% of children said they had talked to an adult about their negative experiences with school toilets.

## United Kingdom

Neglected school toilets are a reality for the majority of school children surveyed in the UK some if not all of the time. The most common experiences they have are with wet floors and toilets smelling bad. Only 1 in 10 (12%) said they had talked to an adult about the school toilets. And this is at odds with more than 3 in 4 (78%) of parents perceiving their child's school toilets to be good. When confronted with their child's experience, fewer parents than in the other three markets expected their child's school toilets to be cleaned more often.

Nearly all parents surveyed in the United Kingdom rated clean school toilets as important as teaching quality (93%). They believe their child's school toilets to be clean with 78% rating school toilets as "good".

9 in 10 (87%) of children surveyed reported neglected toilets at school are something they experience some or all of the time.

Over a quarter of children (27%) reported a negative physical response such as missing school, physical discomfort from not using the toilet, and skipping meals or drinks to avoid needing the toilet.

More than 8 in 10 (84%) children reported cleanliness as an issue in school toilets, including unflushed toilets, wee and poo around the toilets and wet floors.





# Let's Talk School Toilets

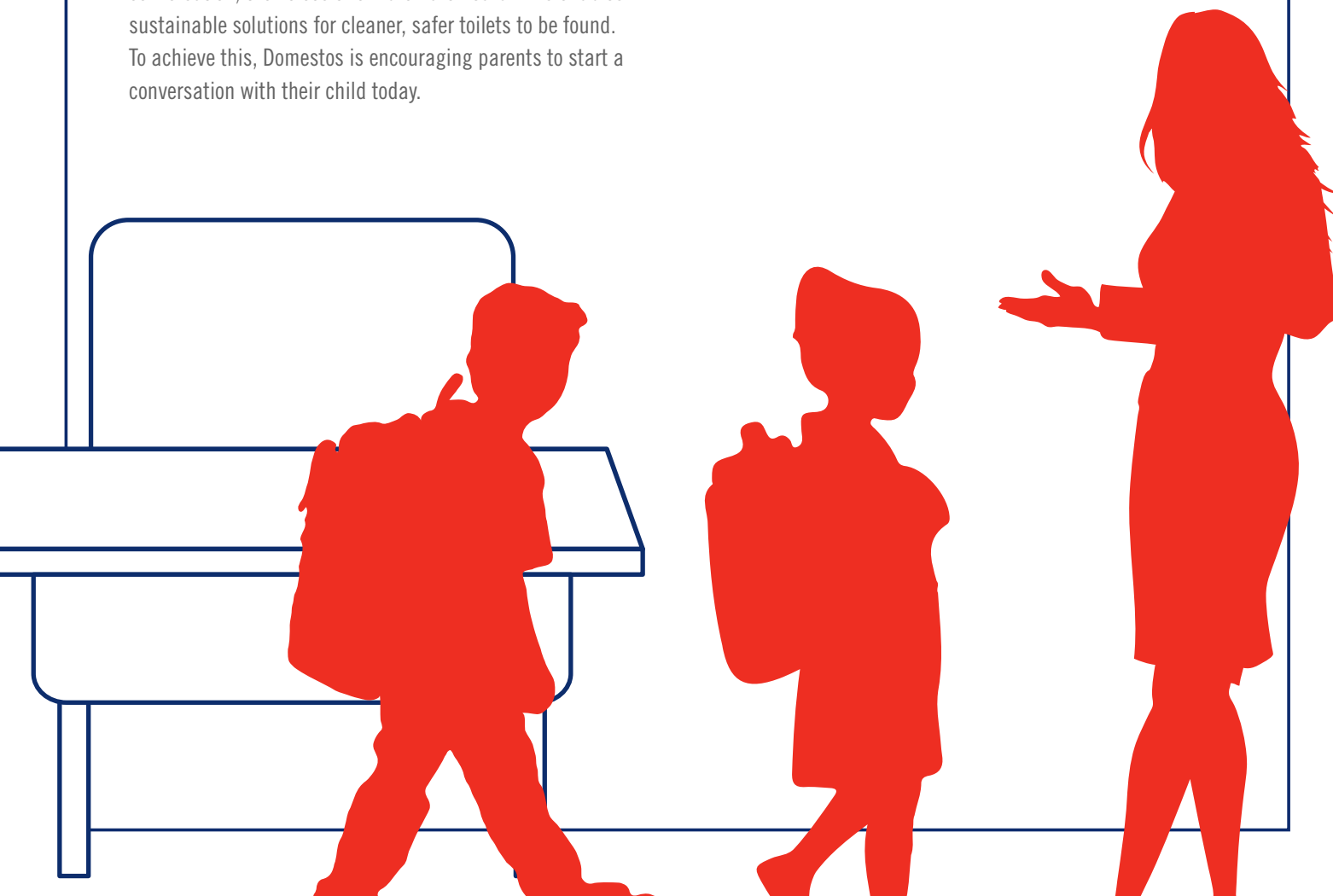
A good education is about more than just the quality of teaching - it is about making children feel safe and respected. The findings of the study show that when children feel comfortable using school toilets, they are supported in achieving their very best at school and beyond. However, the link between good sanitation and education is going unnoticed because parents are not talking to their children about their experience of school toilets.

Domestos believes that part of the solution to improving the state of school toilets is to make the invisible, visible. That means talking openly and frankly about the issue so that solutions can be found. What starts with a simple conversation today can be the foundation for cleaner, safer school toilets for every child for years to come.

Talking with children about school toilets can help parents understand their experience so that it is no longer a hidden and unresolved issue. When school toilets are part of the everyday conversation, the voices of children are heard. This enables sustainable solutions for cleaner, safer toilets to be found. To achieve this, Domestos is encouraging parents to start a conversation with their child today.

To help make things easier and kickstart the conversation, Domestos has partnered with author and parenting podcaster, Clemmie Telford to create **Let's Talk School Toilets**, a unique and practical guide to help parents of 6-13-year olds talk to their children about their experience of school toilets. It includes expert advice on how to get the conversation started, so that children feel more comfortable expressing their feelings about using school toilets, empowering parents to play an important role in this part of their child's education.

**Let's Talk School Toilets** is a powerful starting point to make the issue of school toilets visible – giving a voice to children's own experience - so that poor school sanitation is no longer hidden, unacknowledged or underappreciated.



# Domestos' mission to improve school sanitation

Domestos has helped 29 million people get access to safe toilets since 2012, and by 2030, plans to reach a further 100 million people.

It is not enough to simply provide schools with sanitation facilities. They need to be cleaned and well-maintained too. If not, their condition deteriorates, and they become unfit for use. It is therefore imperative to keep existing toilets clean and in good working order, creating positive habits within schools that lay the foundations for good sanitation for future generations.

The Cleaner Toilets Brighter Futures programme by Domestos aims to improve the use and maintenance of school toilet facilities by empowering janitors, teachers and the entire school to get their toilets clean, and keep them that way. It is currently active in ten countries across the world, with a nationalised roll out in the Philippines, South Africa and Turkey. Domestos is also working with development agencies including GIZ to focus on hygiene in the whole school environment, not just in school toilets.

The time to push for cleaner school toilets is **now**.







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