“Many children avoid school toilets because they are dirty”

New figures have shown that bedwetting costs families an extra £716 per year. For a lot of families, an extra £700 could buy a holiday or two months’ worth of food shopping.

But just a quick look at the message boards on the Education and Resources for Improving Childhood continence (ERIC) website will tell you it isn’t just the financial strain of bedwetting that can affect a family. For parents it’s the broken nights, tiredness, extra washing, lack of understanding from others and the helpless feeling that you want to improve things for your child but don’t know how. And for children, it’s the feeling of being different, not being able to go on sleepovers, worry of being found out and teased, and low self-esteem.

While bedwetting may be viewed as a problem for the family, teachers are also dealing with continence problems during the day among school-aged children. Recent research by ERIC and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers found 62% of teachers in the last five years have seen more children starting school with continence problems. Yet 71% of teachers were unsure how to deal with the situation and were not aware of any school continence policies.

School children also face the added problem of lack of access to clean and socially acceptable toilets. ERIC’s Bog Standard campaign has been working hard for better school toilet regulations. Disappointingly, there are still no laws making it mandatory that state schools must ensure pupils’ toilets have toilet paper, soap, and hand-drying facilities or ensure regular cleaning and maintenance. We know thousands of children avoid school toilets because they are too disgusting to use.

Avoiding toilets can have a big impact on health. A survey of schools and school nurses conducted by ERIC in 2010 found 79% of respondents recognised the link between poor toilets and poor health, and 84% felt toilet-related health issues have a negative effect on children’s learning.

For children to stay healthy, they need to drink water regularly and use the toilet as and when they need to. Pupils may not drink enough because they don’t want to have to go to the toilet or because they are not allowed to go. The resulting dehydration can cause bladder and bowel problems as well as tiredness, headaches, and difficulty concentrating. Health effects caused by bad toilet habits also include bladder infections, constipation and soiling.

In response to the challenges of meeting childhood continence needs, we will soon have the first-ever ERIC nurse. Thanks to funding from the Department of Health, an ERIC specialist continence nurse will be based in the community providing support to children and families in the South West. The ERIC nurse will coordinate and work with children’s centres, schools and early years settings with the aim of ensuring they have the correct access to continence provision and information. The ERIC nurse will also inform how ERIC operates at a national level, engaging with families, statutory continence services and health professionals. They will work to help families overcome continence problems. It’s a step in the right direction.

Jenny Perez is director of ERIC.