



# Support with Toileting

## A Neuroaffirmative Guide for Parents & Educators

Written by Sorcha Rice, Clinical Manager and Senior OT at Neurodiversity Ireland and AuDHD PDA'er

### Understanding Fluctuating Capacity

All children, including neurodivergent children, experience fluctuating capacity. This means their ability to meet any expectation rises and falls depending on their nervous system state.

**When a child feels regulated,** they may find it easier to follow routines, notice their body signals, cope with sensory input and manage motor tasks.

**When a child feels dysregulated,** even familiar tasks such as toileting can feel overwhelming. This experience is not a refusal. It reflects a temporary loss of capacity that is directly linked to stress, sensory overload, uncertainty, transitions or loss of autonomy.



**For Example:** a child who is regulated during the summer time as they're always outside may have fewer accidents compared to November/December time.

**For example:** a child in school may be so overwhelmed by the sensory environment or the pressure of the day that they do not notice their body signals at all, leading them to hold their bladder or bowel until they return home where they feel safer and more regulated.



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## Common Toileting Differences in Neurodivergent Children

**Interoception Differences:** Some children do not notice bladder or bowel signals. Others only notice them when it is almost too late. Some feel these signals very intensely which can create urgency or panic.

**Sensory Processing Differences:** Bathrooms can feel too cold, too bright, too echoey, or too smelly. The sound of flushing or hand dryers can feel unsafe. Wiping can feel uncomfortable or unpredictable. Clothing textures may be difficult to tolerate.

**Motor Coordination Challenges:** Children may find it hard to balance on the toilet, wipe effectively, or manage buttons, tights, belts, or zips. Sequencing the steps of the toileting routine can also be difficult.

**Transitions and Toileting :** A gentle approach is to support toileting during natural transitions rather than creating a separate expectation. **This can look like doing a simple body check while already passing a toilet.** For example, moving from the yard into the classroom, walking from the living room to the kitchen, or heading upstairs for play or rest. The adult models a body check 'hmm I wonder if my bladder is full' or "I am going to check what my body needs."

**This creates safety without placing a demand on the child.** The child is invited to tune into their own body at a time when it feels natural and predictable. Toileting then becomes part of a regulation routine rather than something pressured or separate.

**None of these difficulties reflect laziness.** They reflect the child's sensory, motor, emotional, and interoceptive experience.



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### Knowing When a Child Is Ready for Toilet Learning

A neuroaffirmative approach understands readiness as a state of felt safety, predictability, and emotional capacity, **not a set of skills a child must achieve.**

Toilet learning tends to go more smoothly when a child feels regulated and supported. A child may be ready to explore toileting when they:

- seem comfortable in the bathroom space, show curiosity in their own way
- or are simply open to shared routines without distress
- some children express readiness through words or actions
- others show it through quiet acceptance or a growing sense of trust.

**It is also neuroaffirmative to pause toilet learning during times of overwhelm.** If a child feels stressed, burnt out from school, overloaded by sensory demands, or is experiencing constipation or painful toileting, their body may not have the capacity to learn a new self-care skill. Waiting until the child feels grounded again protects their nervous system and preserves their confidence.

Readiness does not mean sitting for a set amount of time, noticing body signals consistently, or completing steps independently. Those are long-term outcomes, not starting points. **A child is ready when their body and nervous system feel safe enough to engage with toileting at a gentle pace that honours their autonomy.**

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### Sensory Supports for Toileting

#### Environment

- Sensory light, bubble tube or nightlight is available
- The same toilet is used whenever possible for predictability
- A footstool is in place for grounding support
- A portable option such as a Whizzy is available (seen to the right) when out and about
- An iPad or screen is available for safety



#### Sensory Regulation

- A weighted teddy such as a hug-a-lumps (seen to the right. found on amazon, TKMaxx, Smyths, ALDI) is available for deep pressure
- Warm or unscented wipes available
- A bidet spray is available as an alternative to wiping
- To relax the nervous system on the toilet practice: blowing bubbles or sucking a lollipop or water bottle







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### Why We Do Not Use Rewards for Toilet Learning

Many parents tell us that when their children attend **our sensory groups**, their toileting improves. This is because sensory regulation supports interoception and helps the body feel safe enough to notice and respond to signals.

We recommend attending a Neurodiversity Ireland sensory group when possible. If that is not available, families can look for **community sensory groups**, try activities such as swimming, or create simple regulation opportunities at home through movement, deep pressure play or quiet sensory spaces. **Local libraries often have sensory catalogues where equipment can be borrowed.**

The focus is always on supporting the child's overall nervous system regulation. When the body feels regulated and safe, toileting becomes more accessible.

### References

Mahler, Kelly. Interoception The Eighth Sensory System. A neurodiversity-affirming framework for understanding body signals without judgement or behavioural pressure.

Porges, Stephen. Polyvagal Theory. Explains how safety, connection, and regulation influence capacity for self-care skills such as toileting.

Autistic Self Advocacy Network. Nothing About Us Without Us. Foundational neurodiversity-affirming principles that centre autonomy, agency, and lived experience.

Autism Level UP. Regulation Resources. Developed collaboratively by autistic and non autistic professionals to support co regulation, autonomy, and energy-based understanding of capacity.