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# Children's and Young People's Attention Toolkit



## Talking about neurodiversity (being different)

Some people experience things and learn differently. This is called "neurodiversity."

As many as **1 in 7 of us are neurodiverse.**

Being neurodiverse can make things that seem easy for most, hard. Some examples are paying attention in school, going shopping, understanding what people mean. It can also **give us unique strengths and skills.**

## Why talk about neurodiversity?

Many children & young people say they **feel different from their friends.** Talking about it can help us understand why some things are hard and work out what helps.

We can start to accept things rather than trying to hide them. **Hiding or "masking" can be exhausting and make it difficult to concentrate.** e.g. movements like tics or stimming.

We can **celebrate the good things about being different,** which can help stop wanting to be "normal."

There are many ways of being different. Formal terms used often overlap, and using these doesn't always tell you about someone's strengths and difficulties. For example, someone with autism might also have aspects of dyspraxia, tics, OCD, ADHD, which may or may not meet medical criteria for being called a "disorder."

**The most accurate way of describing is using "neurodiversity" and then describing exactly how it is for each person, in their words.**

*"I have tics, and a fast-working brain, which makes it really hard to concentrate. I'm great at making decisions but have to remind myself to other peoples' ideas."*

## When is the best time to talk about neurodiversity?

**Be led by your young person.** When they start talking about feeling different or finding things harder, or when you notice things they do particularly well because they are different.

Choose a **time you are both relaxed** and maybe doing a quiet activity together so you can listen.

## What are the best words to use?

Use the words that your young person (or your family) use to describe how they are feeling, for example:

*"I sometimes feel like a fizzy bottle of coke. Every time I get distracted it shakes the bottle and then after school the bottle explodes. Sometimes feeling fizzy is really fun and sometimes it's too much."*

Negative language is still often used to describe differences but is becoming outdated. **Using positive words will help inspire your young person about their strengths.** For example, "special interests" is better than "obsessions" or "full of energy" rather than "hyperactive."

Use **specific terms** if these make sense for your child. For example, if they have similarities to someone in the family with autism or ADHD, talk about how they are similar and different. If your child is interested, you can research together.

**For every difficulty, remember there is a way of responding and helping your young person.** Talking about this will help give them confidence in the future to be their own voice and learn to manage.



There are some helpful websites about this topic on the next page



## Helpful websites

[www.neurodiversityweek.com](http://www.neurodiversityweek.com)



Download all three volumes of "The Umbrella Gang," a comic book about empowerment and acceptance of neurodiversity.

[www.parentclub.scot](http://www.parentclub.scot)

Everyone thinks, learns and processes information differently. Neurodiversity is all about recognising this and understanding that people's brains all work in different ways, and we all experience the world in a different way. In some cases, for example, if you are autistic or have ADHD or dyslexia, these differences can be more pronounced. It's a good idea to talk to your child about these differences, to help them be more accepting and understanding of people who are different from them.

**Parent Club**



## Recipe for supporting children and young people with neurodiversity

### Routine

- Predictable, healthy daily routine
- Movement breaks engaging large muscles
- Preparation for transition times
- Consistent rules, boundaries and consequences

### Environment

- Calm, quiet space close to teacher
- Structured working spaces (start and finish)
- Safe space for sensory breaks

### Communication

- Short, literal instructions
- Check-ins for understanding and staying on task
- Signals for time out / asking for help
- Support with social interaction – THRIVE, TA support/ structured breaks, social stories

### Information

- Visual timetables
- Simple layout

### People

- Able to name and understand needs
- Trusted person to talk to
- Positive relationships

### Emotions

- Safe space to express strong emotions
- Support with recognising and talking about emotions



## Sensory Processing



Our lives are full of sensory experiences, and we all respond to **sensory information**.

We touch, move, see, hear, taste, and smell.

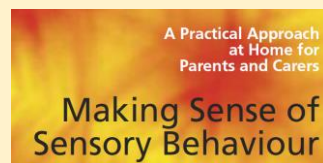
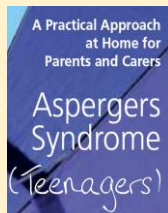
**When we have difficulty processing sensory information, this impacts on how we feel, how we think and how we behave and respond.**

We have to constantly respond to sensory input within our bodies (internal) and from our environment.

**Some people are under responsive/ (low sensitivity) to some things and can also be highly responsive (highly sensitive) to others** (e.g., enjoys loud noises but is overwhelmed and distracted by lots of visual information).

The following websites have comprehensive booklets that have a wide range of ideas and advice that you may find helpful:

### **Teenagers - ASD**



**Making Sense of Sensory Behaviour**



## There are a number of things you can try to help you in cope with situations you find stressful or overwhelming, or where you are struggling to concentrate

### Coping strategies:

- **Wear a heavy backpack** with books in to provide proprioceptive feedback to allow the person to calm/ alert to enable concentration.
- **Chewing crunchy food items** – this can be used to damp down noises making louder environments more bearable, and it also provides proprioceptive. It can be used to help the person concentrate and/ or calm.
- **Ear defenders** - to block out noise entirely to help the person calm or concentrate on their work
- **Headphones with music** – this can be used to block out environmental auditory distractions to allow the person to calm or concentrate.
- **Sunglasses or a peaked cap** – this can be used when the person finds visual stimuli overwhelming. This will enable them to block out some of the visual stimulation and calm/ concentrate.
- **Chewing mints** – the noise of chewing can be used to dampen out sound and the strong flavour and proprioceptive feedback from can be calming and alerting to allow for better concentration.
- **Working/ sleeping in a room with clear walls and desk** to allow for limited visual distractions
- **Being in a space that is close and dark** (silent or with music playing/ low and relaxing lighting or fibre optic bright lights) to allow for calming.
- **Avoid strong smelling cleaning, laundry and self-care products** if the person is sensitive to smells.
- **Adapt clothing** as needed if the person is sensitive to touch – remove labels, wear undergarments if seams are not tolerated.



## Calming strategies

- Sit under a big, heavy blanket
- Hands on head and press down
- Tuck legs up and squeeze
- Deep pressure massage
- Slow rocking (rocking chair)
- Give yourself or have someone give you a bear hug
- Use lavender scents
- Squeeze a fidget toy
- Squeeze and relax face and hands
- Suck a sweet
- Suck yogurt or milkshakes through a straw
- Eat chewy food like cheese, gummy sweets, bagels



## Alerting strategies

- Up/ down movements
- Jogging/ running
- Fast movements over a short period of time
- Jumping/ jumping jacks
- Clapping activities
- Making faces .e.g. open mouth wide
- Stamping on spot
- Sucking a sour sweet
- Eating crunchy food – apples, crisps, popcorn, nuts, crackers, carrots, ice, chewing gum, frozen fruit and veg
- Drinking cold drinks
- Eat spicy food – hot salsa, cinnamon cereal, curries, Mexican food



## Longer lasting calming strategies

- Walk home from school with a backpack
- Do regular press ups and chair press ups through the day
- Allow chill out time (prior to homework) - put on a heavy coat or blanket over the shoulders as part of chill out time
- Help with moving furniture (hoovering, moving sofa, moving plant pots)
- Swimming
- Squeeze or rock against a gym ball



## Longer lasting alerting strategies

- Regular routine of jumping/ chair push ups
- Timetable the above alerting strategies into a regular routine (use them immediately before a period of concentration on a task)
- Keep a small pencil case / make up bag with items that may help. Examples include ear buds, chewing gum, piece of blue tac, fiddle ring, small scarf with favourite scent etc



## Concentrating in class with neurodiversity

There are some things we often see as part of neurodiversity, such as the need to get things perfect, which affect attention.

Here are some of the things young people have told us:

- You might slow yourself down deliberately before answering, to get your thoughts in order.
- You might take longer to process information if given lots of messages at the same time, because of needing to focus on the first message and be sure you have got it right.
- You might notice small details that others miss (sounds, smells, sights, mistakes) that distract you from the main point of the lesson or conversation.
- You might find some things e.g. background chatter can make it impossible for you to listen to what is being said.
- You might have lots of ideas springing to mind after the first thing someone says, which makes it hard to concentrate on the next.
- You might be really anxious about getting something exactly right, and feel unsure about what the teacher means, or the point of what they are asking.
- You might be embarrassed about asking them for clarification because you don't want to stand out.
- You might be someone who needs to move/fidget constantly to help yourself think and keep calm. This is ok, if teachers know that this is what you are doing to help you concentrate.



## Describe what happens for you?

Use this space to describe what happens for you in class:



## Sit down with someone and talk it through

If you find it hard to concentrate, it is worth sitting down with your teacher or parent and having a think about specific examples. This might give you clues as to techniques you could use that may help you concentrate better on your work.

Here's an example:

*Teacher: "what happened in that exam paper? You know the work but couldn't answer all the questions. Tell me what went through your mind"*

*Student: "I feel overwhelmed by all the questions and panicky about being able to answer them all in the time set. I started on question 1 and spent ages getting it right. Then I went to the next question and realised I'd given the wrong answer for question 1 so had to go back..."*

***Teacher: "How about taking 5 minutes to read through all the questions first? Then note roughly how much time you need to allow for each question. Put a star by any you want to come back to, and move onto the next"***

*Student: "I couldn't concentrate either because my friend was rocking their chair and the hall was really echoing with all the noises so I couldn't hear the instructions"*

*Teacher: "Would it be easier next time for you to **sit at the front/wear earplugs/listen to music?** We can give you some **written instructions**. If there's a question you don't understand, give me a sign (e.g. put your pencil sharpener on the table) and I'll come and explain."*

## Do you find it hard to focus on what the teacher is saying?

- Try these ways of using visual notes:
- Doug Neill has produced some great YouTube videos on "sketchnoting" and using "cornell notes" and "mindmaps".

## Do you find it hard to concentrate for long?

The **Pomodoro technique** is a good way of working when you are at home - set a timer for 20 minutes (or however long you are able to concentrate). When the timer buzzes, have a movement break.

### **The Pomodoro Technique: What is it?**

The Pomodoro Technique is a time management strategy created by Francesco Cirillo. It's called the Pomodoro Technique because "pomodoro" means "tomato" in Italian, and Cirillo was using a tomato-shaped kitchen timer when he originally started using this method.

The original Pomodoro Technique Cirillo used is described below:

1. Decide what task you need to do.
2. Set a timer for 25 minutes.
3. Start working on the task.
4. Stop working when the timer for 25 minutes goes off. (Completing steps 1-4 is considered completing one "pomodoro".)
5. At the completion of "pomodoros" 1-3, take a short break for 5-10 minutes. At the completion of the 4th "pomodoro", take a long break for 20-30 minutes.

"Pomodoro means 'tomato' in Italian, and Cirillo was using a tomato-shaped kitchen timer when he originally started using this method."

What's important to realize about the Pomodoro Technique is that it can and often should be modified! We always want to start with small, achievable goals to set our students up for success. For many students with attention and learning challenges, 100 minutes of work will be far too long. For some students, it may be a challenge to focus for even five minutes. That's OK! We can't improve unless we start where we are.

Work intervals, break intervals and number of pomodoros (or rounds of work) can be modified for your individual student and changed over time!