

# Parenting Exceptional Children

## A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, ADHD and other neurodivergent children (SESSION 2)

Because neurodivergent children experience the world differently, frequently their needs and preferences differ from society's expectations in a neurotypical world. As a result, many childhood expectations, such as doing homework, attending sports, wearing uniforms, going out socially and even home routines, can become contentious issues.

Many parents find themselves getting caught into unnecessary battles with their children trying to get them to do things or to fit into certain norms and standards.

Coupled with this, many children have a profile called pathological demand avoidance or PDA (which can be more empathetically framed as a persistent drive for autonomy). Being PDA means children can experience demands, requests and even questions as stressful and anxiety-provoking and respond better when given space to express their own needs and choices.

Sometimes, PDA children are unhelpfully described as being 'oppositional' or 'non-compliant' or 'having behaviour problems' which suggests incorrectly that they are wilfully behaving that way. More accurately, PDA children experience repeated demands as a threat to their autonomy and this invokes a 'fight, flight or freeze reaction'. A fight reaction could be resisting or arguing back, a flight reaction could be refusing or avoiding and a freeze reaction could be shutting down or becoming mute. When the demands become too overwhelming many children experience emotional meltdowns, which are stressful for everyone.

### Collaborative Parenting

Many parents with PDA children find it useful to practise collaborative or 'low-demand' parenting, which aims to reduce your child's agitation by removing as many demands as possible and making the home a safe and relaxing place for them. Low-demand parenting doesn't mean you have no rules and dismiss all expectations of your child, but it does mean you keep your rules to the most important ones (eg safety) and that you promote your child's autonomy in making their own decisions where possible.

Many of the expectations and rules that parents have come from neurotypical norms that don't fit for their children. Often, parents themselves can feel pressure to fit in with what 'society expects' or what 'other parents are doing' and cause unnecessary stress for them and their child. For example, it may not fit for your child to participate in popular team sports or attend sleepovers, and they may be happier doing martial arts or attending a drama group or a small, home-based gathering.

Collaborative parenting means that you work hard to understand your child's needs and that you attune your expectations to match their preferences and to what they can achieve. Once the pressure is removed and children experience acceptance, they often discover their own intrinsic motivation and learn to do things at their own pace and in their own time.

### Tune In to Your Child's Experience

If your child is struggling or refusing to do something, take time to understand what is going for them. Try to step inside their mind and experience the world as they do. For example, if your child is not eating a new food, perhaps they have a sensory aversion to the new texture, taste or smell. Or if they are refusing to go to a family event, perhaps they feel stressed by the pressure of everyone asking them the same social questions or perhaps they hate the noisy, busy place where it is taking place. Or perhaps your child struggles trying out fashion changes, because they only feel comfortable wearing the same 'safe' clothes daily.

You might have to be a good detective to figure things out what underpins your child's behaviour. And often children are unable to describe what is going on for them. Certainly, if they do reveal something, it won't be in the heat of a conflict but rather at another time when they are relaxed such as when you are playing or walking the dog together. This is another reason for prioritising relationship times in your family routines so you can become more connected to your child and better able to understand what is going on for them.

### Use Indirect Language

In guiding children, it can sometimes work better to be indirect. Rather than saying "please get dressed now", which could be experienced as a stressful demand, it might be more effective to casually point out, "I left your favourite clothes on your bed" to give your child space to make their own decision. Or rather than saying "Show your cousin your video games", which might pressure an already socially anxious child, you might say "Look, your cousin has arrived to play", which gives them space to make their own decisions as to what games to play.

Even questions and sometimes praise can be experienced as demands and you can avoid this by changing your language. On greeting, rather than asking lots of questions about the school day you can make a comment (eg “I see the kids were wearing football jerseys today”), and give them space to contribute to conversation if they choose. Or rather than giving “over the top” verbal praise if they tidy up (which can be experienced as a stressful demand to repeat the behaviour), you can be more subtle and give them a thumbs up or a hug they like or say a soft thank you which might feel as more genuine and collaborative.

## Prepare in Advance

Preparing your child for transitions can really help them manage. However, different preparations work for different children. For example, a picture chart describing the steps of the morning routine, might help one child more easily visualise this transition (and also mean you avoid using many verbal demands and reminders). However, other children might experience the chart as another demand constantly in front of them and instead need indirect reminders of what is to be done next – “Your breakfast is on the table” or “Your bag is at the door”.

Think through what works best for your child. For example, when coming up to a stressful social event is it best to tell them a good bit in advance so they can prepare or to simply remind them in the morning? For some, visualising relaxing times after demanding tasks can help – “I know it is hard going out to the shops, but afterwards we can chill back at home watching movies”.

## Adjusting Expectations

Reducing demands and adjusting your expectations based on your child’s needs can reduce unnecessary stress and create a much more harmonious home.

- Rather than battling with his daughter to eat more varied foods, which was causing a stressful standoff, John accepted her more limited diet and gave her a vitamin supplement, so he was less worried about nutrition. He realised that her eating the same favourite foods daily helped her feel safe and contained.
- In the morning routine, Alice decided to dress her son in front of TV where he was more relaxed and less aware of the sensory irritation putting on his clothes on.
- Julie and Dave decided to travel separately to extended family social events so one could leave with their autistic son before he got too agitated and the other could remain with their other children, so they did not miss out.
- Rose’s daughter found the chaos of the schoolyard overwhelming. With the help of the school, it was arranged that if Rosie needed a break some days from the yard, she could go to school library with the special-needs assistant.
- Welcoming a dog into the family made a big difference for Marge’s son. He would play with the dog for hours and they would both take him on an evening walk, when they had the best chats.
- Tom relaxed his rules about video games as he could see this was when his son really relaxed after school. Tom joined in the video games at the weekends and his son loved to teach him how to play them.

## Managing Challenges and Problem-Solving as Issues Arise

Parenting a child with additional needs can bring additional challenges. You might have to advocate to get the right services for your child, as well as adjust your own parenting to meet their individual needs. Many parents describe being on a long journey with ups and down before they find a way to parent and connect with their children that works for them. In this article we describe a three-step model for reflecting about challenges and managing the problems that arise.

### Stage 1: Pausing

When facing into an ongoing problem, it is easy to get caught into reacting the same way. Sometimes, our reactions may be ineffective, or make the problem worse. In resolving problems, the first step is to take a pause so you can step back from how you normally react and to consider in a calm thoughtful way how best to respond.

For example, rather than continuing to pressurise a stressed child back into full days at school, invoking increasing meltdowns, it might be useful to pause to consider other ways to meet their educational needs. Or rather than continuing to expose your child to new team sports or group social activities when this is increasing their anxiety, perhaps it is worth pausing to consider other ways to help them be physically active and connect to others.

## Stage 2: Tuning In

The second stage is to spend time trying to understand what is going on for you and your child. It can be useful to first reflect about your own reactions.

- How stressed are you about what is happening?
- What are your expectations and where do these come from?
- Is there anything triggered from your own past?
- Did you have similar or different experiences when you were your child's age?

It is also important to take time to empathise with your child and to imagine how they are experiencing the situation.

- What is their behaviour communicating to you? What needs does it reveal?
- For example, what is it about going to a family event that is difficult for them?
- Will they find a noisy, busy environment overwhelming?
- Do they feel pressured with small talk?
- Or maybe they have an aversion to the food that is being offered?
- Or perhaps they are avoiding going because they are experiencing burnout or fatigue after a long stressful week at school?

You may have to be a detective to work this out as your child is unlikely to know or be unable to tell you. It is also worth reflecting about when things go well for your child and when they are their happiest. These might provide clues to managing the current challenge.

## Stage 3: Making a Plan

When making a plan to manage a challenge, it is important to first focus on what changes to the environment are possible to help your child. Historically, too much focus has been put on trying to change neurodivergent children so they can "fit in better" (eg, teaching them neurotypical social skills). However, this can communicate to your children that something is "wrong with them" and can set them up for a stressful failure if they can't meet these expectations. Helpful changes to the environment might include:

- Adjusting your expectations to match your child's needs and preferences.
- Building better routines that suit your child.
- Including relaxed sensory spaces in the day so children can relax, unwind and feel safe.
- Seeking neuro-affirming services (e.g. occupational therapy or speech and language therapy) to provide extra support to address your child's specific needs.
- Providing your child with opportunities to follow their passions and meet other neurodivergent children.
- Collaborate with teachers and activity leaders to create the right environment for your child. Share what you know works for your child (e.g. they might need breaks or supportive reminders etc)
- Encouraging others to learn about neurodiversity and to appreciate different communication and learning styles.
- It can also be useful to coach your child in how to manage specific challenges - but this should be done in a neuro-affirming way that appreciates their differences and the way they communicate. Next week we will look at how to conduct these conversations in an empowering affirming way.

## Co-regulation and Your Child

Many neurodivergent children experience high levels of daily stress caused by sensory overload, social anxiety, school pressures and unmet physical needs. Frequently, this can lead to overwhelm, emotional outbursts or meltdowns, which can be challenging to deal with as a parent. Some parents unhelpfully think their child is "misbehaving" or "looking for attention" and others feel guilty and think their child's meltdown is a reflection of their parenting.

In fact, neither is usually true and a meltdown is usually a sign that their child is overwhelmed by the accumulative stresses and demands of the day.

In helping your child, the goal is to respond calmly and empathically so you help them regulate their emotions. This process is called coregulation, whereby you act as a calm balance to your child's upset and dysregulation. Over time, you want to help your child learn to self-soothe and self-regulate. Children need repeated experiences of coregulation from an understanding adult before they can begin to self-regulate. Coregulation involves many different responses and what works varies greatly from person to person. Such responses can include:

- Being a warm and calming presence.
- Being close by or giving space depending on what your child needs.
- Keeping your body language relaxed.
- Communicating your understanding by using a gentle tone of voice and making supportive gestures.
- Touching or physically comforting your child in a way that soothes them (or not touching them if that works better).
- Reducing sensory triggers in the environment (eg, dimming lights, turning off the TV, etc).
- Creating a safe environment that relaxes your child (eg, sitting on bean bags, putting on music, giving them a drink, or a snack, etc).
- Address any underlying issues that might be creating stress for your child in the lead-up to the meltdown.

Often parents “talk too much” during meltdowns. Frequently, they get caught into problem-solving and asking questions such as “what is the matter?” or “what happened at school?” Although problem-solving with your child might be useful later (this will be covered next week), it is usually ineffective when your child is in a high state of arousal. Indeed your questions might be experienced as a demand and make your child more agitated and prolong the meltdown.

Remember, the goal of coregulation is to help child become calm and return to a relaxed state. As a result, make sure to use language that soothes your child and helps them regulate. Some children want to talk during meltdowns and your role might be to simply listen. Others may just need you to be physically there close by to support them. Often it is simply a case of trial and error to find out what works best for your child.

### **Manage your Own Stress as a Parent**

By its very nature, parenting is enormously stressful and triggering. As a result, it is very important to take steps to manage your stress levels as a parent and to prioritise your own relaxation and self-care. This is for your own sake and for the sake of your children. It will be difficult to respond thoughtfully and calmly to your children unless you also look after your own needs.

Good parent self-care usually involves prioritising one or two daily things that relax and recharge you such as ringing a friend for a chat, listening to a podcast you love, walking the dog, cooking a meal you like, spending time in nature, or doing 10 minutes of meditation.

It may also mean seeking counselling, joining a neuro-affirming parenting group and reaching out for understanding, professional support.

Identify what you need and find out what works for you.

This handout is based on the fourth and fifth articles in the Parenting Exceptional Children series published in The Irish Times in March/April 2024. John Sharry is co-founder of the Parents Plus charity, an adjunct professor at the UCD School of Psychology and Irish Times Health Columnist. See [www.solutiontalk.ie](http://www.solutiontalk.ie) and [www.parentsplus.ie](http://www.parentsplus.ie).

## Reflective Exercise 1 - Adjusting your expectations to meet your child's needs

List the expectations or rules you have for your child.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Which expectations are difficult for your child to meet due to their ND needs?

Which expectations can you drop (at least for the short term) to meet their needs?

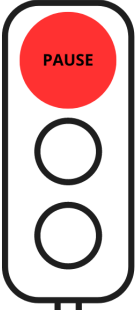

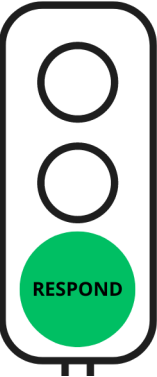
What things can you let your child decide?

Which expectations are hard for you to drop and why?

Which ones are important for you to keep?

## Reflective Exercise 2 – Solving Problems

Identify an ongoing challenge you are dealing with:

	<b>Press the Pause Button</b>
	<p>What way am I <b>reacting</b> to the problem?</p> <p>What <b>pattern</b> am I caught into?</p> <p>What responses are <b>working well</b> already?</p> <p>What responses make things <b>worse</b>?</p>
	<b>Tune In</b>
	<p>What is going on for my <b>child</b>?</p> <p>What needs are my child <b>communicating</b>?</p> <p>What is going on for me as a <b>parent</b>?</p> <p>What are <b>my needs</b>?</p>
	<b>Respond</b>
	<p>What <b>changes</b> can I make in how I approach things to help?</p> <p>What was can I change the <b>environment</b> for my child to help them?</p> <p>How can I support my <b>child</b> to cope and manage?</p> <p>What <b>supports</b> do I need?</p>

