

# Parenting Exceptional Children

## A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, ADHD and other neurodivergent children

### SESSION 3

Neurodivergent children can experience higher levels of stress growing up in a world that does not appreciate their differences nor accommodate their needs. Unfortunately, many have negative emotional experiences interacting with others when they feel judged or isolated, especially during adolescence.

For example, an ADHD child who is impulsive or “acts the clown” in school may get sidelined in the classroom by peers and the teacher. An autistic child who is anxious in large groups of peers, may not get included in group friendships. A child who experiences a meltdown due to sensory overload in a shopping centre, might get rejected by peers as they don’t understand why she is getting upset.

Some children try to mask or camouflage their differences to fit in, but this usually leads to more stress. For example, a child might try to change how they talk or dress to fit in with peers, or force themselves to like a certain sport or activity to feel included. Hiding their natural interests and communication style can lead to more stress and can, ultimately, damage their sense of self.

Sometimes, well-meaning parents inadvertently stress their children by expecting them to behave in ways that are not within their control. For example, you might think your dyspraxic child is just being lazy when they won’t get dressed when they don’t yet have the physical skill to do their buttons. Or you might get into a battle over homework with your son when he doesn’t have executive function skills to get started and experiences intense frustration as result. Or you might pressurise your teenage daughter to go back to school as you think she is being a “hypochondriac”, when she is actually experiencing autistic burnout and chronic fatigue.

Unfortunately, many neurodivergent children internalise the negative messages they receive growing up and end up thinking that something is “wrong with them”, which can lead to poor self-esteem and mental health.

### Becoming an Affirming Parent

By becoming a sensitive, affirming parent who accepts and understands their child, you minimise the trauma they experience and boost their wellbeing and mental health. You can help your child develop a positive self-identity by talking positively about their unique differences and strengths as well as helping them understand and be compassionate towards their challenges. For example, you might explain to your child:

“your ADHD brain gives you loads of great ideas, though sometimes it makes it difficult to pick the best one”.

or “your autistic brain, means you really focus when you are in your routine, though sometimes it can be stressful when things change unexpectedly”.

or “being highly sensitive means you sometimes become overwhelmed, but also means you are empathetic to others when they are upset”.

### Nurture their Passions

Helping your child discover and nurture their passions and interests is the best way to boost their mental health and wellbeing. Passion and enjoyment are antidotes to stress, anxiety and depression. Neurodivergent children often have intense passions and special interests that are a source of joy, escape and relaxation as well as providing them with learning, and long-term meaning and purpose.

Your child may not be interested in the typical team sports that are dominant in schools and instead be much happier pursuing more niche interests such as singing, drama, martial arts, crafts, role play gaming, chess, horse riding, minding animals, coding, citizen science, gardening and many others.

Notice, nurture and join your children in the passions they love.

### Help them Find their Tribe

Many neurodivergent children experience challenges making friends, particularly in neurotypical peer groups with high pressure to “fit in” with social rules. These challenges can peak in the 10-14 age group when the pressure to tightly conform in peer groups can be at its highest. If your child is struggling with friendships, rather than encouraging them to “fit in” with a “popular group”, a better approach is to help them find other children they connect with. Neurodivergent children are more likely to connect with children

who share their passions and interests, as well as with other neurodivergent children who are more likely accept people being different.

Sometimes, they make better friendships with older or younger children or extended family and adults. Practically, this might mean supporting your daughter to arrange a one-to-one playdate with another girl outside the social group. Or it might mean helping her participate in the activities she is passionate about where she is much more likely to make friends with kindred spirits.

Even solitary activities can be used to make connections with others. Your son might love anime and drawing cartoons, and spend several hours absorbed in these activities. You can join with him in this passion and support him to connect with others online and even take him to a special anime convention.

## Create a Safe Place for Your Children

Dealing with challenges such as anxiety, sensory agitation and school problems, means that your child is likely to find the outside world stressful. As a parent you can help by making the family and home a safe and relaxing place without pressure or demands. When they come home, they know they can relax and be themselves and take a break from the stress of the outside world. They can sink into their special interests and safe routines and they know you are there to support them. Creating this safe place also means building a warm relationship with your child. As discussed in Article 2, it is important to prioritise daily play and connecting times, when you can have fun and relaxing times together.

### Small changes can make a big difference in reducing your child's stress and boosting their well-being.

- Sarah's seven-year-old son has a **sensory corner** in his bedroom that has a small tent with lots of different textured cushions. Her son goes there when he is overwhelmed and needs a break during the day. He sometimes lets Sarah lie down in the tent with him before bed and they have a chat.
- Sam realised his son was overwhelmed in school and beginning to suffer burnout. As a result, he allowed him **time off** to recover. He negotiated with the school to reduce demands during the day and to create an educational plan that better met his needs.
- When Sean got his 10-year-old daughter into her **singing and drama group** it made a huge difference to her life – she loved the performance on the stage and really got on with the other children – she loved going each week and it became a long-term passion.
- Julie supported her daughter's decision not to go the school disco even though she was under a lot of FOMO pressure. She hated the idea of having to dress up, the loud music and the busy social situation. As an alternative, they planned a **boardgame** night at home with her cousin and auntie, which she loved.
- Paul did not make a big deal of it when his eight-year-old son could not tie his shoelaces. He gave him **Velcro runners** to take pressure off. Over the summer he took time to teach him patiently how to do it – it was a big achievement when he finally learned and a big boost to both their self-esteems.
- The structure of the **scouts group** really worked for Alice's daughter. She thrived mixing with children of different ages and having a specific role in her patrol. She particularly got on well with one of the young adult leaders who shared her love of hiking in the mountains.
- John found that bedtime is the best time of the day to **connect** with his eight-year-old son. He loves physical games (being rolled up tight in the duvet is his favourite) before they read a story together, calming him before bed.

## Empowering Your Child

Though there are improvements, we still live in a largely “ableist” society, which means your child’s needs may be invisible and unrecognised. Children can be expected to cope in classrooms that do not fully meet their learning, communication or sensory needs.

For example, your child might be struggling to attend school, yet their underlying burnout or chronic fatigue is not recognised. Or your child’s meltdown might be seen as misbehaviour rather than being understood as sensory overwhelm.

Sometimes, good parents can unwittingly internalise this ableism and end up trying to “correct” or “fix” their children, which can lead to unnecessary battles and long-term emotional damage.

Rather than trying to turn your child into something they are not, a better approach is to be their ally and to advocate for them.

Being a good advocate means:

- Understanding your child and communicating their perspective when they are misunderstood.
- Focusing on changing your child’s world rather than changing your child in the world.
- Explaining your child’s needs to others in a way that creates understanding.
- Collaborating with schools to create a learning environment that meets your child’s needs.
- Anticipating challenges so as to minimise any disadvantage your child experiences.
- Teaching your child how to advocate for themselves and to ask for what they need.

To be a good advocate, it is important to listen to the lived experience of neurodivergent people (via books, social media, joining groups, etc) so you can be better informed about your own child’s needs. Practically, being a good advocate might mean proactively meeting your child’s teacher to explain how he likes to learn, or supporting your child as they communicate at extended family social events, or meeting with a sports coach or scout leader to ask for their help in keeping your child involved. It could also mean joining a group that promotes a better understanding of neurodiversity and which is actively campaigning for positive change.

## Co-problem Solving and Empowering Your Child

While it is important to be an advocate and to take the lead in solving the problems your children face, in the long term you want to empower them to advocate for themselves and to learn how to solve their own problems as much as possible.

Co-problem solving is the process whereby you involve your child (according to their age and ability) in discussing and working through the problems they face. This is a process requiring patience, as many children may not be open to talk about problems and many may not yet have learnt the necessary problem-solving skills.

In addition, neurodivergent children may have needs and differences, meaning you have to adapt how you work through problems. For example, some children might be less verbal and prefer other ways of communicating, while some might have executive function differences making it more difficult to plan and follow through. Others might have Alexithymia and experience and process feelings differently, and some might have interoceptive difficulties, meaning they are out of touch with the level of stress or agitation in their bodies.

Some might have PDA (pathological demand avoidance), meaning they might initially experience co-problem solving as a threat to their autonomy and you have to work hard to ensure you are working on their own goals and preferences. Below are some principles to make co-problem solving work for your children.

## Pick a Good Time and Place

Sometimes, it is best to schedule a time to problem-solve, such as after dinner, when your child is most relaxed. Other children might be stressed by a fixed time and only be open to problem-solving when they raise the subject, or are experiencing some stress and then seek your support. This means you might have to be ready to respond by listening when they come to you with a problem.

Some children might be more open to problem-solving when doing something else such as walking the dog or driving somewhere, when there might be less pressure and less eye contact.

## Listen First

Frequently, the different perspectives and feelings of neurodivergent children are misunderstood and not validated. Many experience and process feelings differently, and this increases the chances of misunderstanding. For example, parents might try to

express empathy by naming their child's feelings, saying something like "you must be anxious", but this label might be inaccurate or mean nothing to your child. They might be experiencing sensory overload or agitation in their body and not name it as anxiety.

As a result, it is usually better to be curious and to invite your child to describe their experiences – "You love wearing that T-shirt, I am wondering what makes it so comfortable."

Use your child's language to describe what is going on. One child I worked with said his "brain went fizzy" to describe a meltdown, and another said they "got muddled" in a stressful social situation. The goal is to understand them and to help them understand themselves.

Another parent described to me how she was puzzled by her child's recent meltdowns on a visit her aunty's house. It was only later when they were playing that her child revealed she had accidentally locked herself in the bathroom during the previous visit there, and this had fuelled her anxiety.

## Explore Your Child's Solutions

Before giving your own ideas, it is important to first encourage children to generate their own solutions. This is the best way to empower them, and they are much more likely to follow their own advice. Some neurodivergent children can answer direct questions, such as "What would you like to happen now?" or "How do you first notice stress building in your body?" For many others, you will have to adapt how you engage in finding solutions to match their needs. You can do this by:

- Being **indirect**, with questions and statements such as, "I wonder how you managed in school?" or "It might be good to figure out how stress builds in the body."
- Using **non-verbal techniques** (which many neurodivergent children prefer) such as visual worksheets, or using text/email (many parents I work with successfully co-problem-solve with their teenagers via text messages).
- Conversations regarding **third-party issues**, such as discussing friendship dilemmas between the characters in a movie or video game as you play together.
- Using **creative approaches** about problem scenarios, such as quizzes, social stories or comic strips.
- Playing **sensory games** to explore sensations in the body and to discuss how feelings are experienced.
- **Role-playing** and acting out scenarios whereby you show different ways of responding.
- **Collaborating/Asking your child for help**: "I need to get some rest today, can you help me?" or "Your brother is a little upset, how can we look after him together?"

Be neuro-affirming as you co-problem-solve with your child. This means you identify solutions that match their communication style and that don't involve masking to fit in with neurotypical norms. Such solutions should be realistic for your child to put into practice, and be a source of pride for them when they do.

## Advocate for Yourself as a Parent

Parenting a neurodivergent child can be a challenging journey, so it is important you advocate for what you need as a parent. Sadly, many families have negative experiences with professional services in that they can be inaccessible, with long waiting lists, and sometimes pathological and disempowering.

Remember, you don't have to have a diagnosis to reach out for support. The best support should ensure you feel heard, and it should build on both your child's strengths and your own as a parent. Link in with the services and online resources that collaborate with neurodivergent parents and adults – these are leading the way in creating neuro-affirming, empowering practices. Remember that becoming a strengths-based, affirming parent, sometimes requires a radical adjustment in how you see yourself and your child.

When you make this shift you can avoid much unnecessary stress and create a new, deeper bond with your child.

*This handout is based on the third and sixth 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 – Your Child's Passions

Take a moment to reflect on your child's passions:

What activities bring **them joy**?

What activities do they get **completely absorbed** in?

What activities do they **learn most from**?

Take a moment to reflect on your own passions too:

What activities bring **you joy**?

What activities do you get **completely absorbed** in?

What activities do you **learn most from**?

Have a look the checklist below, circle the passions that your child has already and put a star beside ones that they might be interested in:

**ACTION:** running, cycling, kickabouts, skateboarding, martial art, team sport, hikes, dance

**LEARNING:** quizzes, competitions, new languages, dog training, politics, documentaries

**PLANNING:** budgets, holidays, special events, family projects, day trips

**CREATIVE:** journaling, crafts, photography, DIY, drawing, choir, cooking, creative writing

**SOCIAL:** scouts/girl guides classes, community groups, helping vulnerable people, mentoring children in sport/homework,

**NATURE:** watching/photographing nature, identifying plants and insects, nature projects, citizen science, raising awareness about an issue they are passionate about

**ENTERTAINMENT:** films, books, following music, sports fan

**DIGITAL:** podcasting, graphic design, video editing, organizing photos

## Reflective Exercise 2 – Finding Your Child's Tribe

Who are the **supportive relationships** and **friends** in your child's life?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

What **groups** is your child part of that give them a **sense of belonging** and **community**?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

If your child needs more supportive relationships, which people are in their network who could be **potential friends and supporters**?

Which groups could they join to give them a **sense of belonging**?

How could you **support these connections**?

\*Remember, to tune into **your child's** needs and preferences.  
Your ideas of what are good relationships may be different to that of your child.

### Reflective Exercise 3 – Co-Problem Solving With My Child

When is the **best time** to co-problem solve with my child?



	In the heat of the moment - though may need to co-regulate first.
	A scheduled time – “let’s talk after dinner or when we go for a walk”.
	When your child comes to you about a problem (and you choose to drop tools and listen).
	Spontaneous opportunity - when a friendship dilemma comes up during a TV show you watch.
	Other, please describe...

How will I ensure my child **feels listened to**?

How will I help my child **come up with solutions**?