

Parenting Exceptional Children

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

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1

A Note on Language...

“Neurodivergent” or “Neurodiverse” or “Neurodistinct”

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2

Embracing Neurodiversity

- About 20% of all children are neurodivergent (ND).
- The majority do not have a formal diagnosis.
- Great overlap between ND conditions.
- Many ND children meet the criteria for more than one. For example, an estimated 50% to 70% of children with autism also meet the criteria for ADHD.

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3

Embracing Neurodiversity

ND children have higher rates of mental health problems:
 Depression/anxiety (60%), eating disorders (85%).
 Majority of children attending CAMHS are ND
 Higher rates of physical illness: fibromyalgia, Fatigue, GI problems, chronic pain, joint problems...

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4

A Neurodiversity Affirming, Strengths-Based Approach

- A shift away from pathologising autism, adhd and other ND conditions.
- Neurodivergence comes with strengths as well as challenges.
- Many challenges for ND people caused by society and environment.
- Providing appropriate accomodations to ND people to meet their needs.
- Embracing neurodiversity as beneficial for humankind.

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5

The Parent Journey

Raising a neuro-distinct child can feel like a journey with many milestones...

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6



Seeking Professional Help and Diagnosis

7

+ Advantages of Diagnosis

- Can clarify your child's needs.
- Necessary to gain many supports (e.g. SNA) treatments (e.g. medication for ADHD).
- May give you and your child a positive way to understand.
- May increase access to supports.
- Growing positive identity around some diagnoses.

- Disadvantages of Diagnosis

- Long waiting lists and high costs.
- May be a pathological process.
- Mixed professional expertise.
- Some neuro-affirming profiles not recognised (e.g. PDA).
- You and your child may disagree with diagnosis.
- May be more useful to focus on your child's needs rather than their label.
- Child may not have consented to process.

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8

Seeking Professional Help and Diagnosis

- You don't need a diagnosis to gain **self-understanding** and to reach out for **support**.
- Seek diagnosis when your child **needs** it.
- Seek **neuro-affirming** professionals and services.
- Learn from experience of **neurodivergent adults**.
- Focus on getting the right **supports** for you and your child.


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9

Understanding Your Child

As a parent, the most important thing you can do is to understand your child:

- Appreciate their strengths.
- Compassionately understand their needs.




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10

Neurodiversity and the Family

Neuro-distinct children are much more likely to have neuro-distinct parents, siblings or extended family.




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11

Double Empathy Challenge

It is more difficult to understand someone who feels and thinks differently to us.

- Neuro-distinct people can find it hard to understand neurotypical people and vice versa.
- Two neuro-distinct people can also find it hard to understand one another if 'distinctly' different.

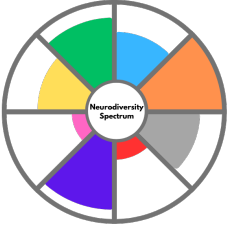


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12

A Spectrum of Needs

Most ND children have a 'spikey profile'



- Communication and Social
- Executive Function
- Attention and Interests
- Impulsivity and Energy
- Sensory Differences
- Repetitions/Tics/Stims
- Emotional Processing
- Health and Physical

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13




Communication and Social

- How does your child **communicate** with you?
- How do they get on with others **socially**?
- How do they respond to **demands** placed on them?

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Executive Function

- How does your child plan and organise themselves?
- How do they start and complete tasks?

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Attention and Interests

- What subjects and activities capture your child's interest?
- What do they find hard to pay attention to?

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Impulsivity and Energy

- Is your child impulsive or reserved?
- How active and full of energy are they?
- How do they manage stress? Do they experience burnout?

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Sensory Differences

- What sensory experiences does your child **like**?
- What sensory experiences do they find **distressing**?

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Repetitions/Tics/Stims

- What repetitive behaviours and habits does your child have?
- What routines do they need?

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Emotional Processing

- How does your child communicate their feelings?
- How do they cope with **rejection** or **disappointment**?
- How do they **regulate** their emotions when upset?

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20



Health and Physical

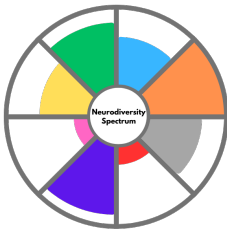
- Does your child have health and physical needs?
- What specific supports might they need for these?

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21

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22

Take a Break...



Think about all the different needs your child might have...

- Which ones do you think they **need some support** with?
- What are your child's **strengths**?

23

Tuning In To Your Child's Sensory World

Much behaviour can be explained by trying to:

- avoid** unpleasant or agitating sensory experiences.
- seek out** energising, relaxing, or enjoyable sensory experiences.

Julie finds tags and seams on clothes intensely irritating.	Peter sleeps better when he uses a heavy blanket and night light .	Joe needs to keep his hands active when studying. Using a fidget spinner or a squeeze ball helps.
Light touches make Aoife flinch. She prefers deeper hugs .	Grace has a strong aversion to the smells in certain food shops and can feel sick.	Going swimming is a nightmare for Dan. He hates being damp and cold in the changing room.

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24

Many Neuro-distinct Strengths Flow From Having a Unique Sensory World...

Robert is attuned to **sounds in nature** and can distinguish various bird calls.

Darragh loves cooking. He can discern **flavours and tastes**. It's a wonderful sensory experience for him.

Painting is Sarah's passion. Her **unique perception of colour** and texture allows her to really express herself.






Roisin enjoys herbal tea. She can distinguish between dozens of different types.

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25

How Many Senses Are There?


There are the five external senses:


There are also three internal senses:



Vestibular (Balance)
This allows us to notice any change in position or movement of the head. It helps us maintain our balance.



Proprioceptive (Movement)
This tells us where our body is in space. It allows us to judge what force and pressure is needed to carry out tasks.



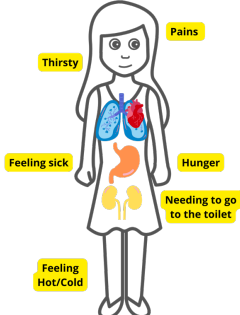
Interceptive (Internal Feelings)
This allows us to feel what is happening inside our bodies (hunger, pain) and to notice our emotional states.

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26

Interoception: The most important sense?

Many neuro-distinct children are hyper- or hypo-sensitive to their **internal body states** e.g. temperature, hunger, pain.




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27


Sensory Regulation

- Relaxing and rebalancing the sensory system, especially when **over-stimulated** or agitated.
- Energising the sensory system when you are **under-responsive** or need to focus.


Sensory regulation is:




Stimming – sensory habits e.g. pacing, hand rubbing, hair twirling.



Rest and relaxation or exercise and movement.



Engaging in **passions and special interests**.




Positive sensory experiences.

- What works for each person is different, find out what works for **your child**.

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28

Reflective Exercise




- What is **your child's** favourite sensory experience that they really enjoy?
- What is **your** favourite sensory experience that you really enjoy?

29

The Importance of Connection

Good parenting is primarily about establishing warm connected relationships and this is no different for neurodivergent children.



You want your child to feel:

- understood, affirmed** and loved by you.
- listened to** and that they can **communicate** with you about anything.
- that you are their **ally**, on their side and there for them no matter what.
- that you are a **safe** person for them.

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30

Blocks to Communication

ND children frequently experience blocks to connected relationships with their parents.

- Sometimes, children are so stressed by sensory overload, school and outside world that this leads to challenging meltdowns at home.
- Sometimes parent feels hurt by child's behaviour or get angry in response.
- Sometimes, child communicates differently or has different passions to their parent.
- Sometimes, parents feel their role is to correct their child's different behaviours which sets you up as a critical parent.

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31

Daily Moments

- What do you **enjoy doing most** with your children?
- When do you have the **best chats**?
- When do you **connect most** to your child?

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32

Creating a Connected Relationship

- Making sure you have **daily connecting times** when you enjoy each other's company.
- Learning to **pause** and reduce the times you communicate negatively to your children.
- Make it your priority to **connect**.
- Adjust your expectations. Let go of pressures and prioritise your **relationship**.



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33

Building Unique Connections



- **Join in an activity that your child really enjoys** - playing games, shopping, penalties, craft.
- **Take an interest in one of your child's passions** - video games, music, films, craft, sport.
- **Let your child teach you** - video games, a craft, dance, hairstyle.
- **Teach them something they want to learn** - cooking, magic trick, make-up, grow food, skim stones.
- **Learn something new together** - attend a course, watch videos, read books together or in parallel.
- **Go somewhere together** - visit a friend, relative, go for a meal, sporting event on a walk together.
- **Build rituals** - daily crosswords, bedtime reading, daily cycle.
- **Plan family projects that interest them** - design/repair/build/decorate together.
- **Go on a day-long adventure** - camp out, hike, fishing.

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34

Homework

- Prioritise the times you **already enjoy** with your child. Be more available at these times.
- Try to identify **one new way to connect** with your child.
- Build a **'map' of your child's needs**. You can use the worksheet in the handout.

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35