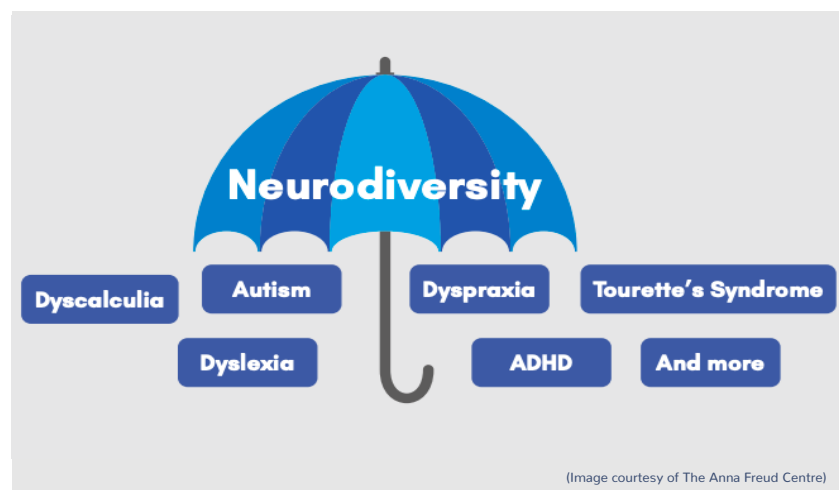


Talking to neurodivergent children and young people

This short guide for adults who spend time with children has been developed by our neurodiversity experts, including Words Matter Advisory Board member Jessica Narowlansky, Julia Avnon, Peter Wharmby, and Fintan O'Regan. It is part of a set of supportive resources we've created with Dr Fiona Pienaar to help talk to children in a way that will build them up, not knock them down.

Understanding neurodiversity

Like all human traits, neurodiversity comes in many shapes and sizes.



Although the experiences of neurodivergent children and young people are very different and varied, there are common threads that can help us to think about why, in moments of challenge, they may need a different approach than their neurotypical peers.

Executive functioning and self-regulation

Executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember, and juggle multiple tasks. As defined by the Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard, executive function and self-regulation skills¹ depend on three types of brain function:

- Working memory governs our ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time.
- Mental flexibility helps us to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or to apply different rules in different settings.
- Self-control enables us to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses.

All of these are highly interrelated, and the successful application of executive function skills requires them to operate in coordination with each other.

1. Executive Function & Self-Regulation, Executive Function 101; Centre on the Developing Child; Harvard University; <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>

Challenges with executive functioning and self-regulation for the neurodivergent

Part of being neurodivergent, whatever the diagnosis may be, is that one or more areas of these important day-to-day life skills will be just that bit harder than adults around a child or young person may expect.

Some neurodivergent young people's attention can also be very intensely drawn to one thing at a time. This can "attract more of our processing resources, making it harder to deal with things outside of... [their] ... current attention tunnel."¹

In short, challenges with executive functioning and self-regulation can make it harder for neurodivergent children and young people to:

- Stop
- Listen
- Manage emotional responses

This is why we have put together five practical tips to help adults to communicate with children and young people with neurodiversity to help build them up, not knock them down.

Talking to neurodivergent children and young people

Five practical tips

1 Role model

As adults, we're role models for children and have a major influence on their development and how they communicate. Encouraging words can build up their confidence, develop their self-esteem and help them feel valued and connected. Abusive, dismissive or belittling words or attitudes are likely to do the opposite.

Talk to children in a calm, kind respectful tone. Keep the language simple, straightforward and direct so it is very clear what you are thinking. Give your child your full attention and try not to interrupt when they are talking.

Instead of open questions like: Try saying what happened or suggesting what you think might have happened. Such as:

'How do you think that makes me feel?' → 'That made me feel angry (sad, hurt, etc.)'

'Why did you do that?' → 'I think you did that because you were angry (sad, hurt, etc.) but that may not be your reason'

'What were you thinking?' → 'I think you were trying to show me you were angry (sad, hurt, etc.)'

Or

'I don't think you realise the consequence of that choice would be ...'

You may have been hurt yourself, but you can break the cycle. If we respect children, they respect themselves and others.

2 Set expectations

Whenever you spend time with children and want them to do something, give them really clear instructions and set specific expectations in language they can understand and that's right for their age and stage of development. Children want to do the best they can. Compassionate and reassuring language – and recognising and appreciating that everyone's different – will help them feel safe and supported, accepted and loved.

Avoid shouting, insults, put-downs or name-calling, and language that will intimidate or belittle a child.

For neurodivergent children and young people, executive functioning challenges often means it can be difficult to:

- Hold a sequence of multiple instructions given at once
- 'Read between the lines' about what you mean
- Switch tasks due to a 'single focus' (also called monotropic) attention style

So, when setting expectations, consider writing things down or asking the child or young person to repeat an instruction so you can be sure that they have heard it in full.

Also, bear in mind that sometimes a neurodivergent young person may find it easier to listen when:

- They are not looking at you
- They are moving or fidgeting

It is also very helpful to allow extra time to process what you are saying. Many neurodivergent children process language differently than neurotypicals, so they might need more time.

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Five practical tips

3 Focus on positives

We all want to know when we have done well, and to understand why. Give children compliments and praise whenever you can, and explain in detail why you're impressed with them. This shows them that you really see them and value what they have achieved.

- Think about praising the effort or the task and not the person.
- Sometimes neurodivergent young people can become quite anxious about succeeding if they are unsure of how and why they managed a situation.
- When giving praise, along with explaining why you are giving it, it can be beneficial to help them think about why they felt able to manage the situation which may help for next time.
- Be sure that your praise is real, not exaggerated or false-sounding.

It is important not to criticise them as a person. When you're addressing a problem, explain that it's the behaviour you don't like, not them as an individual.

4 Stop and think

We all get overloaded and stressed sometimes. Try to pause and think about what you're going to say. If you're feeling angry and agitated, or experiencing challenging emotions yourself, stop, breathe, step away if you need to, and think before you speak.

Be aware of your body language too. For example, avoid standing over your child, as this can intimidate them. Try to speak to them at their level.

- Do not expect your children to make eye contact. Some neurodivergent young people (especially those with autism) focus much better when they don't have to make eye contact. Being forced to look at you can feel extremely uncomfortable for them.
- Some neurodivergent young people misinterpret body language, so bear this in mind if you feel they are not responding to you as you might expect. If they turn away, close/cover their eyes or put their hands over their ears, it may be their way of trying to stay calm in a difficult moment.
- Try to keep your hands down as opposed to up, and try to keep your facial expressions as neutral as possible.

Talking to neurodivergent children and young people

Five practical tips

5 Repair

It's never too late to put things right. When you recognise that you've said something that could be hurtful to your child, take time to have a chat with them and say sorry and let them know you mean it. Encourage them to talk about how they're feeling, and make a fresh start together.

Try not to be too hard on yourself when things go wrong. When we get angry or say something we regret, it's usually because we're under pressure, and there's too much going on.

It can be really difficult when the child/young person in your life processes emotions and situations differently than you do. Allow yourself to acknowledge that this is challenging as a parent or carer, and like your child, you may need a moment to manage your feelings. Other parents and carers may also find it hard to understand that their challenges are different from those who care for neurodivergent children and young people.

Whatever situation you find yourself in, it's important that you have support too, and have ways to take pressure off. It can be helpful to reach out to your local authority to find parent and carer support groups in your area. Feeling that others can understand what you are going through can be a great source of support. This can also have a positive impact on your relationship with the young person in your life. Opposite are some suggestions of where you can find help and support.

In an emergency

If things get too much for you, you may need to get out of your immediate environment and get urgent support. You can use **Shout's free 24/7 crisis text service** for mental health support on **85258** or giveusashout.org, or, if you're worried about a child's safety, contact the **NSPCC** at help@NSPCC.org.uk or on **0808 800 5000**.

If you're a child and need help, you can get confidential support from **Childline** - to find out more go to www.childline.org.uk you can also call free on **0800 1111**.

Helpful free resources and support

Learn more about neurodiversity

[Anna Freud](#)

[VIDEO: Future Minds](#)

[PODCASTS: SENDcast](#)

Specific resources:

ADHD:

[ADHD Foundation](#)

[ADDitude Magazine](#)

Autism:

[The Curly Hair Project](#)

[Anna Freud](#)

Dyscalculia:

[Dyscalculia](#)

[National Numeracy: Getting on with numbers](#)

Dysgraphia:

[What is dysgraphia](#)

[Supporting people with dysgraphia](#)

Dyslexia:

[British Dyslexia Association](#)

[Made By Dyslexia](#)

Dyspraxia/Developmental Coordination Disorder:

[The Dyspraxia Foundation](#)

[Dyspraxia UK](#)

Tourette syndrome

[Tourettes Action](#)

[Kids Health](#)

Understanding and supporting emotional regulation:

[VIDEO: Peter Fonagy - Emotional Regulation in Young Children](#)

[VIDEO: Cookie Monster Practices Self-Regulation](#)

Booklets with information and strategies for Emotional Regulation from NHS Child and Adolescent services:

[Emotional Regulation: A guide to helping you understand why your child may be struggling with regulating their emotions and strategies to help them understand, communicate and regulate their emotions in more appropriate ways](#)

[Emotional Regulation: What is it?](#)