

Children with Neurodevelopmental needs Strategy Sheet

Introduction

Neurodevelopmental conditions refer to a group of difficulties that a child may have where they are processing information in a different way to the general population. This may include how young people communicate and interact with the world. They may move, interact, sense and process differently, struggle with attention, impulse control or may be hyperactive, compared to those who are neurotypical.

In all schools there are children with Neurodevelopmental needs (ASD and ADHD), both diagnosed and undiagnosed. Many of these children will thrive in school and are likely to not come to the attention of staff and not require additional support. Some do and may require additional reasonable adjustments to help them.

Having a neurodevelopmental condition often means that the young person will have anxiety that accompanies this. This is something which can be supported and reduced within the child's environment; reasonable adjustments can help them better manage and cope with these anxieties.

Research carried out for the Oliver McGowan training recently showed that most people with both ASD and ADHD feel that a diagnosis is secondary to their need for schools and communities to make reasonable adjustments to support them. Within the users by experience group set up for this research, many emphasized that what they had needed was not a label (although this can bring understanding to some) but that they needed the people and services around them to **Ask, Listen and Do**. This can be accomplished by everyone **Asking** what they need or would like to be different, **Listening** to what they say as they are the ones with lived experience of difficulties and then **Doing**; making reasonable adjustments to help them thrive and achieve like anyone else.

The below strategies can be put in place to help support these children to thrive in all settings. Often these reasonable adjustments can change a child's life and help them achieve in all areas, meaning that their difficulties and anxieties reduce and enable them to move forward successfully.

How to use

ASK: Ask the young person first what they find difficult/feel needs to change to help them. Ask them and their families which areas in their school lives could be improved or make them feel less anxious and more able to participate and get the most out of their learning.

LISTEN: Let the child and families choose with you. Let them see what the options are and let them explain why they feel certain things would work best for them if possible. We would recommend that the young person is involved in choosing 3-5 strategies (total – even if using more than one area of need, as too many can be overwhelming). These are to be used at home and school to support what they are finding difficult. It is key that the school work with the young person and the adults around them so they can be part of choosing their own plans and that everyone is on board to implement these in **all areas** of the child's life.

DO: These strategies should then be consistently implemented at home and at school (where possible) for at least 10 weeks, so that they become embedded. They should not necessarily be stopped after 10 weeks. If they are helping, they can continue as a way of life.

Where strategies are clearly not helping, then in discussion with the young person they can be stopped, and something else chosen.

If there has been no evidence of change in any presentation following these strategies and support being implemented over this length of time, then at that point careful consideration can be given to progressing to completing an assessment of need form with the families and child's agreement and consent.

If you have any questions about using this document, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you,

The Primary mental health team and the School Based Needs Service.

Strategies:

Attention & Impulse Control

The following are some differences you might see:

Attention: Levels of distraction (internal and external), processing instructions, length of focus, hyper-focus on certain tasks

Impulse Control: Turn taking, decision making, acting on a whim, focused on here and now.

- **Call the young person by name:** Before you start speaking to them in order that they are ready to listen, know that what you are saying is relevant to them and don't miss the first part of the instruction.
- **Keep instructions short and in sequential order:** Allow at least 10 seconds processing time before you repeat or rephrase an instruction.
- **Allow the young person to take regular movement breaks:** Within school planned movement breaks are most effective so that all children can receive movement to their sensory system to maintain levels of alertness. However, some children may need movement breaks more frequently throughout lessons to maintain attention. They could also be given an errand (e.g., handing out books) or a specific activity (e.g., 10 wall presses). The young person should be encouraged to request further movement breaks by putting their hand up or holding up a 'movement break' card.
- **Identify distractors:** Environmental distractions can make it difficult to concentrate on a task. Talk to the young person about what might be distracting them so that they can get used to identifying things themselves (is it something they can see or hear? Is it the feeling of needing to move their body – internal or external distractions). Getting up and moving around, taking a sensory break or using a fidget tool can all be helpful solutions.
- **Consider seating and positioning in the classroom:** Discuss preferences with the young person and where best they can maintain their focus and attention. Although the front of the classroom can be helpful some young people describe feeling uncomfortable not being able to see what is going on behind them.
- **Supporting memory:** Break down instructions step by step for the young person to follow. Allow them to complete the first step before giving the next one. Write down each task on paper or mini whiteboard. Encourage the young person to record what they need to remember using mini whiteboard fridge magnets, chalk board or sticky notes.

Balancing Emotions

The following are some differences you might see:

Identifying emotions, rapid change in emotions, anxiety, strong sense of justice and recognising and responding to physical body signals and external triggers.

- **Identifying feelings and emotions:** Create regular opportunities throughout the day for the young person to identify how they're feeling. Provide the young person with a visual prompt to help them to identify how they are feeling and communicate this to others without needing to rely on words. Below are some useful links to resources:
 - Zones of Regulation website: Look in the resources section for free downloadable handouts that display a range of emotions.
 - Twinkl has many visuals under the feelings and emotions section e.g. feelings thermometer.
 - Autism Level UP! Website: Look in the tools section for examples of energy meters
- **Build in regular breaks:** Support the young person to notice when they need to take a break and help them to request this by talking to them about how they would prefer to do so (e.g., break card, verbal request, hand up). Ensure that the young person knows where they can go to take a movement break if they would prefer to be out of the classroom for this.
- **Provide a safe space** for the young person to access when required (e.g., a quiet area to eat lunch, a supervised place to go to during unstructured times of the day or when they need a break from the classroom).
- **Self soothe / Hope box:** Encourage the young person to make a box that contains items that help them to feel grounded and aids relaxation. Encourage them to create this when they are feeling calm. They may like to decorate the outside of the box too. Items that stimulate the senses can be included (e.g. touch (theraputty, stress balls), sight (photo of a favourite place),

sound (playlist of songs, audio book)). Motivational quotes or lines from favourite films can also be included. The young person can access their self sooth box at times of heightened anxiety and stress.

<https://www.mindworks-surrey.org/advice-information-and-resources/hope-box>

- **Teach grounding techniques:** Provides self-soothing by encouraging the young person to notice the following senses: 5 things they can see, 4 things they can hear, 3 things they can touch, 2 things they can smell, 1 thing they can taste.
- **Giving time:** When observing behaviour that challenges pause to reflect on your own body language and tone of voice. Try to emphasise with the feeling, not the behaviour (e.g., I can see you're angry). Reassure them that you are there for them when they are ready. Remember to positively welcome them back to the activity at hand when they are ready to join you.

Communication

The following are some differences you might see:

Communication skills may vary depending on the situation e.g., communication with family vs unfamiliar teachers, processing spoken language and making sense of what others say, making requests e.g. asking for help, joining in class discussions and recognising and labelling emotions.

- **Talk about communication:** Provide time for the young person to talk with a member of staff about their communication needs. Ensure they have a way to get their needs met in the classroom (e.g., hand up, using picture prompt cards, using sticky notes). Check in with the young person during the lesson by asking if they need any support from you.
- **Support understanding of non-literal and abstract language:** Keep language clear and direct by saying what you mean. This is a helpful way to ensure that there are no misunderstandings or breakdowns due to differing communication styles. E.g. Instead of:
 - Can you close the door? Use close the door please
 - Did you get out of bed on the wrong side this morning? Use are you feeling okay?
 - Pull your socks up. Use keep trying/do you need help?
- **Use visual supports:** Words disappear. Use visual supports as much as possible to aid the young person's processing of language (e.g. pictures/symbols/written word/line drawings).
- **Use Social Stories:** In order to provide a short description of a particular situation, event or activity. This should include specific information about what will happen and when. For further information on social stories see the National Autistic Society: www.autism.org.uk (see advice and guidance>communication>communication tools)
- **For young people in secondary school - Use Comic Strip Conversations:** As a tool for reflecting with a young person on a social situation. The young person should lead on drawing out the conversation, cartoon style, using stick people. As they talk about the situation speech bubbles can be added to show what was said. Thought bubbles can then be used to reflect on what the young person was thinking at the time. Thought bubbles can also be used to discuss what other people may have been thinking. The young person can be supported to think about possible solutions or alternatives to managing the situation. For further information about comic strip conversations see the National Autistic Society: www.autism.org.uk (see advice and guidance>communication>communication tools)

Decision Making & Change

The following are some differences you might see:

Evaluating and making decisions, overwhelmed by sudden change, influenced by peers and preference for set routines.

- **Prepare for transitions:** In a timely manner, providing as much visual information as possible and supervise well. For example:
 - Daily transitions within the classroom: visual timetable or planner, now / next / then board, opportunities to arrive a few minutes early before peers.
 - New activities / school trips / non uniform day: social story, PowerPoint with photos (e.g. school trip Science museum).

- Changing classes / school: photos of key people and locations, opportunity to visit in advance without peers present.
- Week to view calendar to show activities/appointments outside of the school routine.
- Preparation prior to visiting new places (e.g. photos and locations).
- **Structure and routine:** Can reduce anxiety and provide predictability that is reassuring to the young person. Examples include:
 - After school and bedtime routines.
 - Weekly week to view calendar showing events/activities that are happening outside of the home.
 - Preparing school uniform and equipment the night before.
 - Use of sand timer or timer to show how much longer is left before the activity needs to end (e.g. computer game, fun activity in class).
- **Pre-empt changes to the routine:** Support the young person to manage situations and events that occur outside of the usual routine. Provide advance warning of non-uniform days or special events. Do not insist on participation but discuss with the young person the ways that they may feel comfortable to participate. Social stories can be helpful for these events.
- **Reduce demands by offering choices:** Give two choices, either of which would be acceptable to you —"Do you want to wear trainers or boots?" "Do you want to try to do your home-work now or in half an hour."
- **Choice boards:** A visual way to present choices/options to a young person. They help the young person to understand and process what the options are and provide a means of communicating their preference. Examples include: activities available during unstructured times of the day, places to go during half term.
- **Support unstructured time:** It is the unstructured times that can often feel chaotic and unpredictable. For example:
 - Break/lunch times: Provide a safe, quiet place for the young person to go at break and lunch times where they can either engage in an independent activity or be supported by staff to join in more structured activities (e.g., lunch time clubs or games).
 - Transitions in-between activities: Consider introducing a transition object (e.g., a fidget cube or similar). This can be provided as a focus during times of transition (e.g., travelling to and from school).
 - Social interactions with peers: Support your child to manage having a friend over after school (if they are keen for this to happen) by providing a structure and offering supervision e.g., snack – parent led lego/making slime- tea- computer time.

Empathising and Systemising

The following are some differences you might see:

Understand and sharing someone else's feelings; a focus on facts, patterns, ordering and rules; interpreting body language and maintaining friendships

- **Support perspective taking:** After watching a video clip or listening to a passage from a book encourage the young person to describe possible motives that a character has for certain actions. Ask the young person whether or not they would have made the same decision in the situation and if not, what they would have done and why.
- **Talk about emotions:**
 - Role model talking about your feelings with your child: e.g. 'I'm feeling excited today'; 'I have lots of energy'; 'I'm tired'; my body feels heavy.
 - Support your child to identify physical sensations that might be associated with an emotion: e.g., 'how does your body feel when you are excited?' 'I know I'm nervous/excited/afraid because I can feel my heart beating fast.'
 - Take the opportunity to talk about the emotions shown by characters in stories and films.
- **Check-in time:** Provide the young person with a regular check-in time with a teacher / teaching assistant so that they can share any concerns that they have. The young person can be supported to evaluate the size of the problem (small, medium or large) and how it can be managed including strategies to be able to let it go. The Zones of Regulation approach provides resources to think about the 'size of the problem.'
- **Worry box/Jar:** Help the young person in finding a physical way of getting rid of their worries so they don't need to carry them around, and so they learn that they are possible to let go of.

Agree a time to use the box/jar (e.g., bi-weekly) and ask the child to write down their worries on strips of paper before sharing them with you. Then leave them in the box/jar and close the lid. Decide on a safe place to leave the box (e.g., under the bed or in a cupboard). Remember to spend some moments talking/thinking about something positive before moving on. There is a guide from young minds about implementing the worry box with your child on the Young Minds website (www.youngminds.org.uk)

- **Agreeing non-negotiable boundaries:** Providing clear reasons for specific boundaries and agreeing together as a family can help young people to adhere to them. These will vary for each family but may include self-care and health and safety requirements.

Energy Levels

The following are some behaviours and traits you might expect to see from a someone who struggles in these areas:

Hyper-focusing; fidgeting; constantly moving; moving particularly slowly; poor attention to detail; difficulty following instruction; reserved; quiet; poor sleep routine; disengaged; chatty.

- **Planned movement breaks:**
 - Allow opportunities for the young person to move around the room, such as choosing them to be the one who writes key words or ideas on the board, get up and sharpen pencils, hand out papers or any other classroom jobs that can help release energy and can contribute feelings of self-worth.
 - Incorporate movement breaks into lessons so that all the young people stand up and stretch, run on the spot, or do an exercise or movement activity at regular intervals.
 - Ensure that the young person is not asked to miss break and lunchtimes, as this opportunity to move is very important and missing it can have a knock-on effect to later lessons.
 - In addition, the young person should be encouraged to request further movement breaks when required. Talk to the young person about how they would prefer to request these e.g., by putting their hand up or holding up a 'movement break' card. They can then be given an errand to do or a specific activity (e.g. 10 wall presses).
- **Seating for learning tasks:** Be flexible with class-based seating positions. Allow the young person to stand up or kneel on their chair if it helps them to complete their work.
- **Bedtime routines:** Establish a consistent bedtime routine. A visual timetable could be used at home to show your child the sequence of events (e.g., dinner, bath, clean teeth, story, bed). Ideally avoid screens an hour before bed as the artificial blue light from the screens disrupts the natural sleep-wake cycle by inhibiting the brain's natural production of melatonin. This causes us to feel less sleepy than we should at bedtime.
- **Structure the lesson:** Support the young person to know what to expect for each lesson (e.g. 10-minute starter activity, teaching time with movement breaks half way through, 10 minutes at the end reflection or reward time). Explain this structure and offer the reward time following their participation.

Movement & Co-ordination

The following are some differences you might expect to see from someone in these areas.

Not maintaining posture; unusual gait; difficulty throwing, kicking, or catching a ball; difficulty with handwriting; unable to fasten buttons; difficulty following sequencing; avoidant of physical tasks

- **Resources:** A comprehensive guide to supporting Movement and coordination skills for both primary and secondary can be found on [www.childrenhealthsurrey.nhs.uk-for families-occupational therapy](http://www.childrenhealthsurrey.nhs.uk-for-families-occupational-therapy) [Schools and nurseries :: Children and Family Health Surrey \(childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk\)](http://Schools and nurseries :: Children and Family Health Surrey (childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk))
 - **Advice Sheet - 'Using my hands - scissors':** Please see associated advice sheet. https://childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk/application/files/7815/2153/8492/Using_my_Hands_-_Scissors.pdf
 - **Advice Sheet - 'Handwriting':** Please see associated advice sheet. <https://childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk/application/files/5315/2153/8492/Handwriting.pdf>
 - **Advice Sheet - 'Pre-handwriting':** Please see associated advice sheet. https://childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk/application/files/8415/2153/8493/Pre_Writing.pdf

- **Advice Sheet - 'Gross Motor Skills':** Please see associated advice sheet. https://childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk/application/files/5615/2153/8493/Promotion_of_Gross_Motor_Skills.pdf
- **Advice Sheet - 'Ball Skills':** Please see associated advice sheet. https://childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk/application/files/3615/2153/8492/Ball_Skills.pdf
- **Advice Sheet - 'Using my hands':** Please see associated advice sheet. https://childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk/application/files/9215/2153/8491/Using_my_hands.pdf
- **Advice Sheet - 'Using my senses - body awareness':** https://childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk/application/files/5115/2153/8492/Using_my_Senses_-_Body-Awareness.pdf
- **Yoga:** is a fantastic way for young people to not only work on strength and stability, but also bring mindfulness and provide lots of sensory feedback to their body.
- **Teaching touch typing:** A useful skill and some young people are able to type faster than they write and may meet the criteria for exam access arrangements. For example: BBC Bitesize <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zf2f9j6/articles/z3c6tfr>

Sensory

The following are some differences you might see:

Covers ears; distressed by everyday noises; greater awareness of smells; preference for specific items of clothing; avoiding or seeking textures; limited diet; sensitive to bright lights; difficulty recognising internal body signals e.g., thirst, temperature.

- **Encourage regular access to movement (input to muscles and joints):** This is known to be calming, organising and provides feedback to the body. Incorporate this regularly throughout the day, for example, through 'heavy play' activities which provide high resistive muscle work (e.g. push / pull games, carrying a rucksack on their back, climbing). Make these movement activities functional e.g. asking a young person to help handing out books, moving tables to set up a lesson.
- **Support awareness of internal body feelings and sensations (interoception):** Encourage the young person to notice how various body parts feel during daily activities (e.g. how do your hands feel when you are holding ice/can you put your hand on your chest and feel your heart rate after exercise). Practice naming internal sensation through the day (e.g. when washing dishes, stroking a pet).
- **Prepare the young person for changes in noise levels:** Where possible provide a verbal or visual warning before loud sounds occur. Prepare for noisy situations using a social story (e.g. what happens when the fire alarm goes off). Have access to ear defenders or noise cancelling headphones during times of increased noise levels e.g. fire alarm at school.
- **Fidgets and sensory tools:** Fidget tools can be used to help aid attention and focus for learning. Fidget tools should be encouraged to be used. Young people need free access to fidget and sensory tools so that they can learn to independently self-regulate.
- **Allow reasonable adjustments:** To take into account sensory needs. For example, allow the young person to wear tracksuit trousers instead of school trousers or a polo shirt instead of a shirt. Ensure that the young person is allowed to take their blazer/jumper off in school if they feel too hot. Allow flavoured juice if they have a preference for strong flavours to encourage fluid intake.
- **Food textures:** Some food textures can be preferable to others due to difference in temperature, texture and flavour. Your child may have their own food preferences, and this is okay if their overall food intake meets their nutritional needs. If you are concerned that your child's nutritional needs are not being met seek advice from your GP to discuss a referral to a dietician within Childrens Health Surrey <https://childrenshealthsurrey.nhs.uk/services/dietetics>

Thinking & Processing

The following are some differences you might see:

Retaining information, recounting information, identifying patterns or sequences and organisation.

- **Task management board/graphic organisers:** This is a useful tool to support the young person to independently check that they have completed a piece of work before they hand it

in. Numbers can be used to break the task down into steps (e.g., 1) Today's date 2) Title 3) 5 sentences about your weekend).

- **Provide clear expectations:** Discuss rules/expectations within classroom / home environment and agree on them together. Display them visually.
 - **Support the young person to prioritise their 'to do' list and discuss together which tasks are most important:** In the home environment this can be a helpful way of supporting your child to work out where to start with homework or self-care tasks. Use line drawings/words so that your child can tick off when each task is complete – e.g., 1) Maths homework. 2) 5 minutes reading.
 - **Support processing time:**
 - Longer response times are likely to be needed for the young person to make decisions, answer questions and complete schoolwork.
 - Avoid asking the young person to copy information off the board.
 - Instead give out printed copies of the information they need or allow them to take a photo.
 - Enlarge the font and spacing on worksheets and reduce the amount of text to support the young person to complete the task.
 - **Teach memory techniques:** Teach young people to actively remember by developing their awareness of what skills they need and what strategies they can use (e.g., post-it notes, drawing pictures, mind maps, write lists...).
- Make up a rhyme, song, or mnemonic to help remember a specific segment of information.
 - Support visual memory by encouraging the following: use of pictures, charts or drawings to illustrate information; use of highlighters or pens in different colours to group related ideas; creation of drawings or cartoons to help to explain information.