

Talking to children and young people about Autism

Parent / Carers Leaflet

MENTAL **H**EALTH **S**UPPORT **T**EAM

Mental Health Support Teams are services designed to meet the mental health needs of children and young people within education settings. We work collaboratively with children, young people, their families, and schools.

Disclaimer

This resource is not designed to be a complete guide or template on how to talk to your child or young person about Autism.

We believe that each child and young person is unique and that you, as parent or carer, will be the expert on how best to communicate with them.

We hope this leaflet provides some ideas on how to approach conversations with your child and young person about being Autistic. We appreciate that some of these ideas may not fit for you and your family.

Why Talking About Autism Can Be Helpful?

“Giving young people and children the space and time to explore and embrace their Autistic identity, in a way that is positive and empowering, is essential for their sense of self and belonging”.

www.autism.org.uk

It can be helpful to explain that there are likely to be other children in their year group or class who may be Autistic or Neurodivergent.



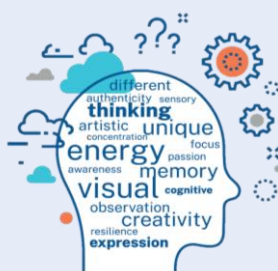
What is Neurodiversity?

“At the heart of neurodiversity is the idea that individual differences are not weaknesses, but that society imposes expectations based on a majority “neurotypical” population. When not met, this can lead to challenges.”

(Royal College of Nursing, May 2022)

Neurodiversity is a term to describe different thinking styles which affect the way people perceive and interact with the world around them. Neurodiversity recognise that each person’s brain is unique, in the same way that our fingerprints are unique to each of us.

Neurodiversity can also be explained using the term ‘Unique Brains’ which may be a more accessible term for younger children.



Royal College of Nursing,
May 2022



Autism

As a human species, we are neurodiverse.
Each of us is unique, yet stronger together.
Autism is one way we can be neurodivergent.

Exploring with your child or young person how they experience the world is an important first step in understanding how their unique brain works.

This can include conversations about:



Our senses



Understanding other people and



Ways of Communicating



How changes affect us

Who can be involved?

It can be helpful to reflect on who else can support conversations with your child about Autism.

These conversations will continue over the course of their childhood and beyond, as they learn more about their own needs and sense of identity.

As such, thinking about key people and services around the child is important.

Parent Carers
/ Carers

Siblings

Grandparents

Extended
Family

School Staff

Community
members

Social
Workers

Mental Health
Support
Workers

Mentors

Preparing for a conversation

Choose the right time and setting: ensure you won't be interrupted and have sufficient time.

Consider concentration and processing time.

Conversations can be informal and can take place in cars or out walking as some children and young people find this more comfortable.

Consider the environment: is it familiar and safe? Think about sensory input (e.g., lights and sounds).

Use visuals to support complex concepts.

Use specialist interests to engage your child/young person in the topics.

Adapted from Helping young people to understand their autistic identity (autism.org.uk)

Make it an Ongoing Conversation

Children and young people learn about being Autistic in a variety of ways. Through daily experiences, children discover their strengths and needs, but may need support in communicating what these are.

Some children and young people with Autism may have co-occurring conditions which will need to be considered when approaching conversations.

Starting the conversation with a gradual introduction of information is important.
A child's understanding of being Autistic will develop over time.

Remember, it is fine to not have all the answers. Being an active listener can often be enough.

Communication Styles

You can use a special interest to explain the concept of neurodiversity to your child.

For example, An Android app won't work on an iPhone - that doesn't mean the iPhone functions less well than the Android. They simply work differently, and they're both good at what they do.

It can be easier for people with Autism to interact with other people with Autism, as they may experience the world in a similar way, and therefore, they could find it easier to identify with them.

The use of visuals aids and communication devices can be invaluable in supporting understanding. Below are some examples:

PECS

Social Stories

Choice Boards

Checklists

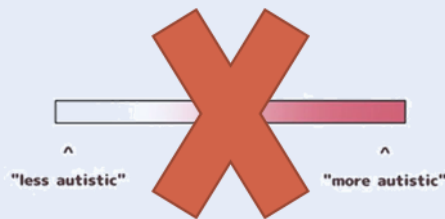
Talking Tablets



Acknowledge differences.

Acknowledge that Autism can lead to additional challenges, but it can also lead to additional strengths in individuals that can enrich their lives.

It can be more helpful to think of the Autism spectrum as a wheel as opposed to a linear model.



One of the ways you can explore this with your child is to talk about how each person is different, and no-one is less valued than anyone else.

You could start by talking about the strengths and challenges faced by a family members or peers. You can then talk about areas your child excels at, and what they may find challenging.

You can also explain that no person with Autism is the same.

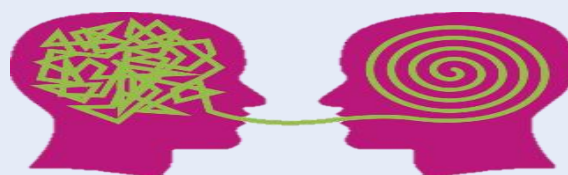
Explore what autism means to your child or young person.

Explore with your child or young person what being Autistic means to them and encourage them to ask questions.

Some children or young people may find it easier to ask questions in different ways; suggest a question box or sending you a text.

Offer your child or young person the opportunity to explore what Autism means to them through their own learning, suggesting books and online resources that are supportive and helpful.

Consider if your child or young person would find joining a peer support group helpful as part of their journey.



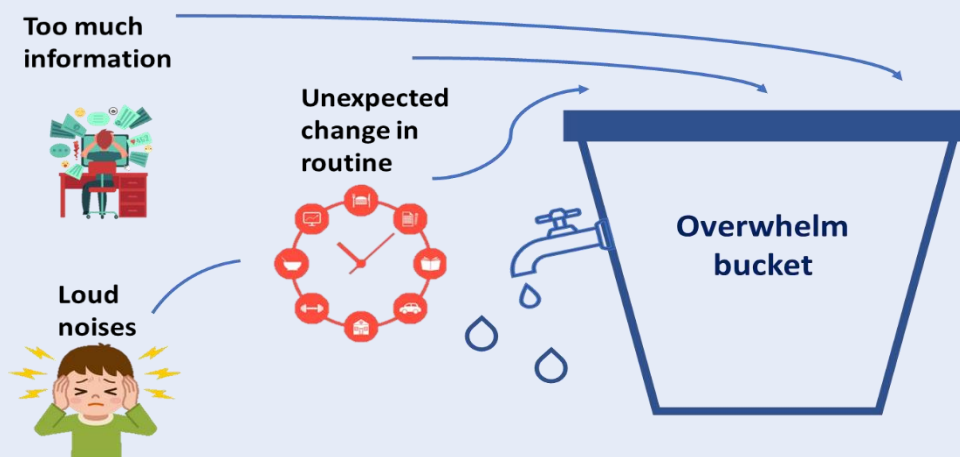
Introduce the overwhelm bucket.

You can talk to your child about how we all have an overwhelm bucket. You can also refer to it as a worry cup.

Lots of small triggers in everyday life can cause stress and 'fill up our bucket'.
When our bucket gets too full, it becomes heavier to 'carry around' and leads to feeling overwhelmed. This makes day to day activities more challenging.

When our bucket becomes full, it runs the risk of overflowing, and this can lead to difficult emotions.

Explore with your child or young person, what triggers might be most helpful for your child to empty their bucket.

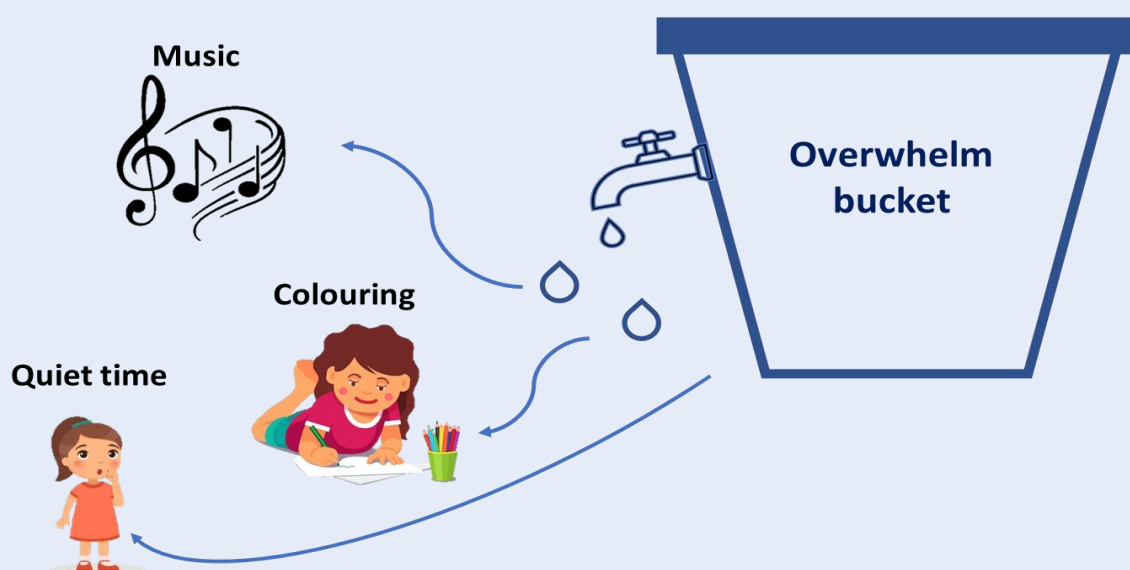


Emptying the Overwhelm Bucket

It is equally important to understand what helps empty the overwhelm bucket before it overflows.

To empty the overwhelm bucket, we must access preferred activities that are calming and support emotional regulation (e.g., mindfulness activity, jumping on a trampoline).

Explore with your child or young person, what activities might be most helpful for your child to empty their bucket.



Sensory Processing

Having a conversation about your child or young person's sensory needs can be helpful.

It's important to understand that everyone has sensory preferences (e.g., wearing sunglasses when it is bright). This may help your child or young person feel more comfortable when considering adaptations to better meet their needs (e.g., ear defenders).

Through having these conversations, it can be useful to discuss with school, what reasonable adjustments may support your child or young person to better access their learning in the classroom.

It can be useful to reinforce that our sensory needs change depending on mood/environment and throughout development.



Notable Figures with Autism

Wentworth Miller, Actor

Diagnosed with autism in 2020, Wentworth Miller is best known for his performances in 'The Flash' and 'Prison Break'.



Melanie Sykes, TV Presenter

Diagnosed with autism in 2020, Melanie Sykes has presented TV and radio shows.



Breanna Clarke, Athlete

Diagnosed with autism when she was 4 years old, Breanna has represented the USA in multiple paralympic games.



Armani Williams, NASCAR Driver

Diagnosed with autism when he was 2 years old, Armani is the first openly diagnosed Nascar Driver.



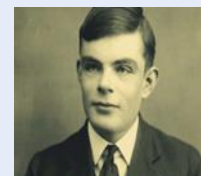
Clay Marzo, Surfer

Diagnosed at 17 years old, Clay has been acclaimed as one of the most creative and innovative surfers in the sport.



Alan Turing, Cryptographer/Mathematician

Although not formally diagnosed, it is widely believed that Alan was autistic. Renowned for his mathematic ability and contributions to cracking German military codes in WW2



The Hertfordshire Local Offer

The Local Offer lets parents and young people know what special educational needs and disabilities services are available in Hertfordshire, and who can access them.

SCAN ME



YouTube

This is a helpful video guide to ADHD and autism support in Hertfordshire on the Local Offer website.



SCAN ME

