



Autism
Education
Trust

Schools

Making Sense of Neurodivergence in Schools

Partnerships for Inclusion of
Neurodiversity in Schools

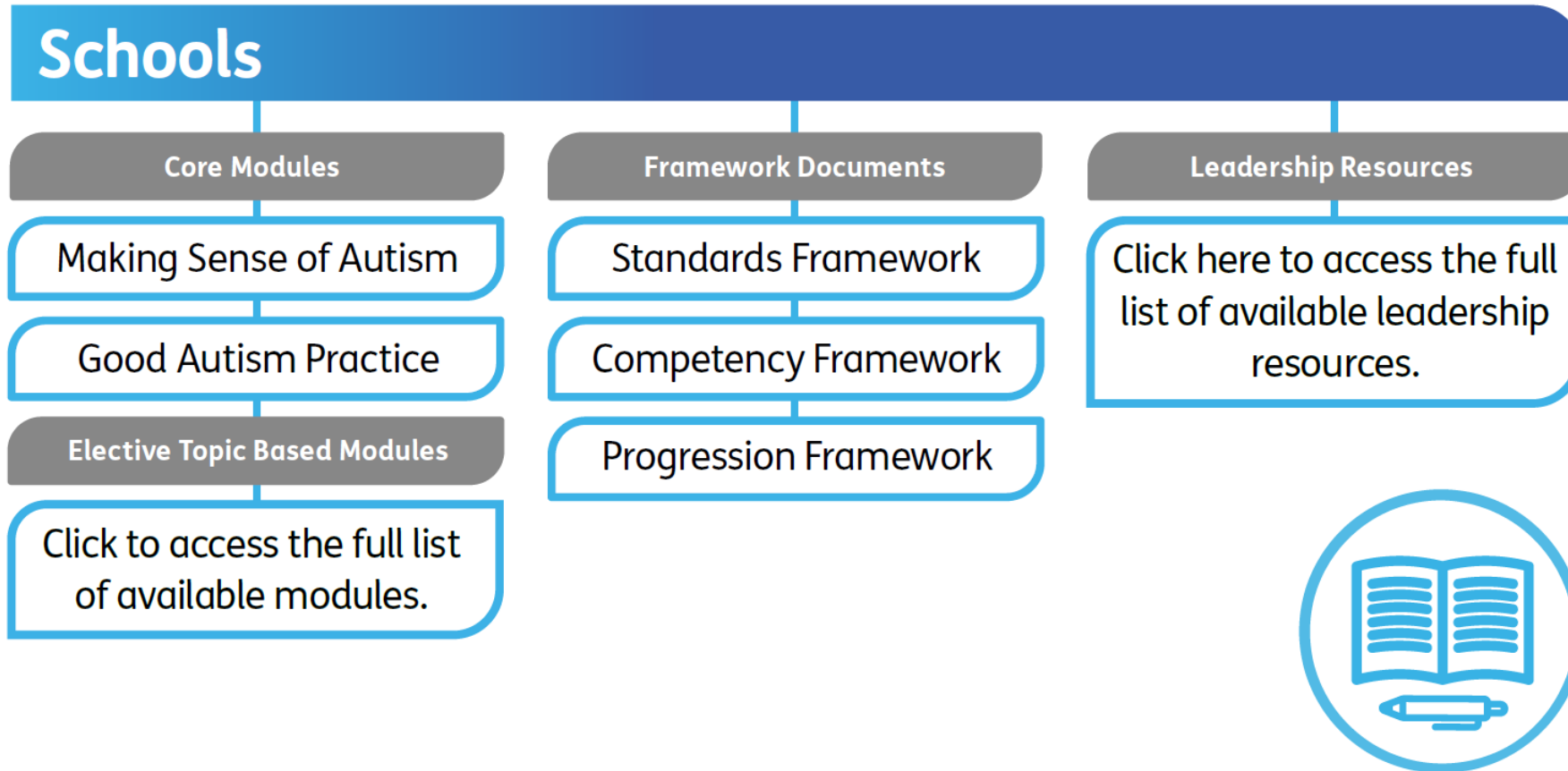


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Schools Professional Development Programme



The AET Schools Framework Documents

The AET Schools Competency Framework enables practitioners to evaluate and reflect upon their own practice when working with neurodivergent (particularly autistic) pupils.

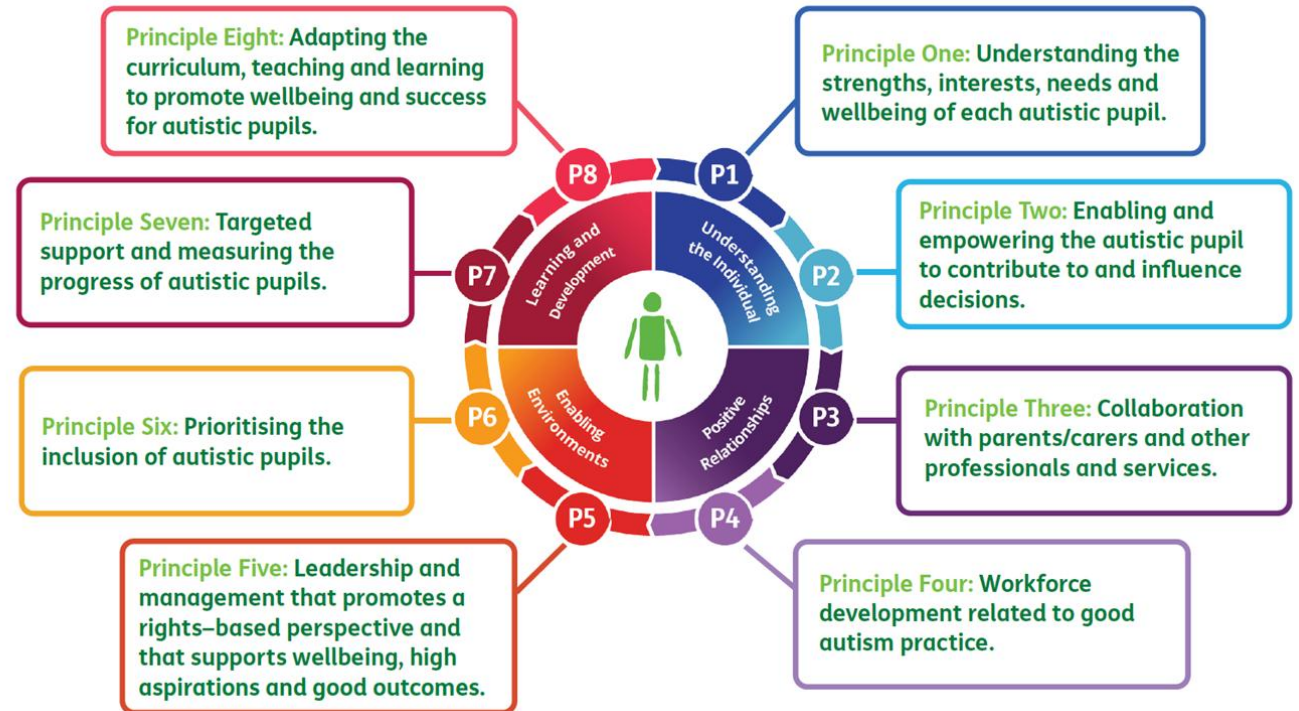
The AET Schools Standards Framework has been created for leaders or leadership groups to enhance and embed inclusive practice in their settings.

The AET Progression Framework is a comprehensive interactive assessment tool that supports practitioners to identify learning priorities, set key learning intentions, and track progress for neurodivergent learners in both mainstream and specialist educational provisions.

The Good Autism Practice Report

‘The AET professional development programme is informed by eight principles of good autism practice. These emerged from an examination of the current evidence from research and practice, as well as key policies and the perspectives and insights of autistic individuals.’

(Guldborg et al., 2019)



The Structure of the Module

Part 1: What is Neurodiversity?

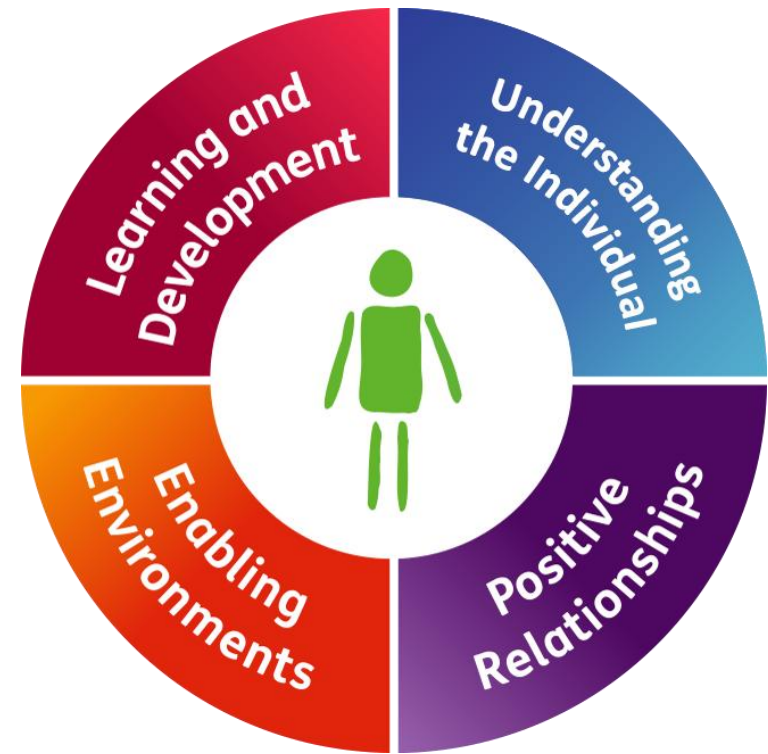
Part 2: Understanding the Individual

Part 3: Positive Relationships

Part 4: Learning and Development

Part 5: Enabling Environments

Part 6: Key Takeaways



The Aims of 'Introduction to Making Sense of Neurodivergence in Schools'

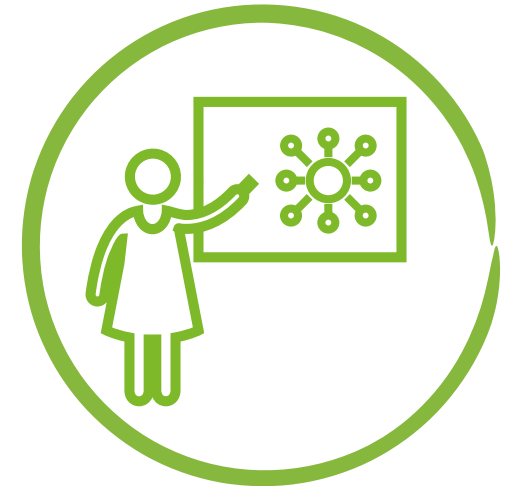
- To extend your understanding of how neurodivergence affects pupils in school.
- To increase your expertise in recognising a pupil's individual strengths and differences.
- To develop your skills in identifying barriers to learning for neurodivergent pupils.
- To develop your understanding of what reasonable adjustments need to be made to support a neurodivergent pupil in your setting.



Learning Objectives

After completing 'Making sense of Neurodivergence in Schools', you will be able to:

- Approach neurodiversity as a **DIFFERENCE** rather than as a deficit.
- Recognise areas of **STRENGTHS** and **DIFFERENCE** for neurodivergent pupils, and how current systems and approaches to teaching and learning can be adapted to create enabling environments for all learners.
- Listen to and learn from the perspectives of neurodivergent pupils and their parents/carers.
- Reflect on your practice and implement reasonable adjustments to support neurodivergent pupils.



Part One

What is Neurodiversity?

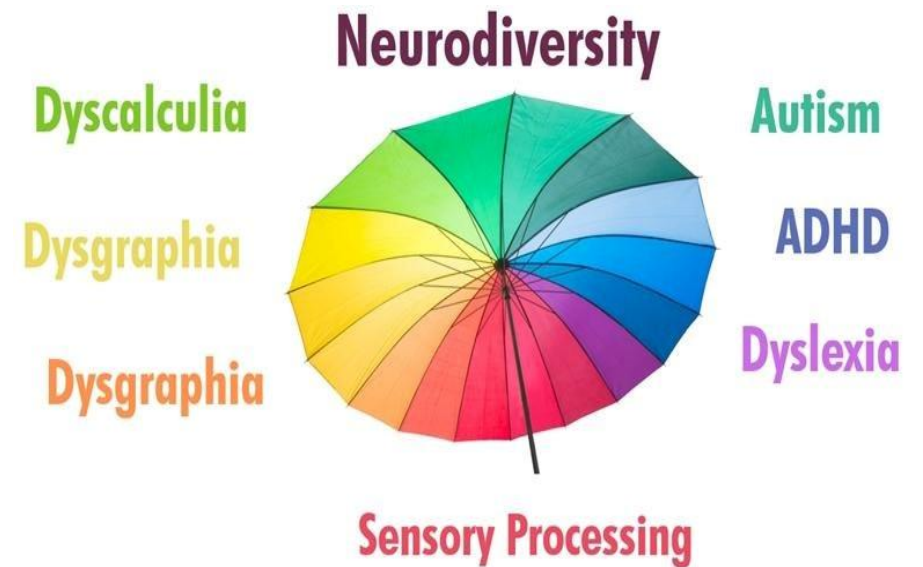


What is Meant by 'Neurodiversity'?

The term 'neurodiversity' describes the natural variation in the way all human brains are structured and work, a biological fact.

'Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.'

Walker (accessed April 2024).



A Difference Rather than a Disorder

The AET approaches autism (as a type of neurodivergence) as a different way of being.

Our Autistic Young Experts make the following point:

'Autism is a difference not a deficit. Differences are to be valued not "fixed". My normal is different from your normal and the aim shouldn't be conformity but wellbeing.'



Did You Know?

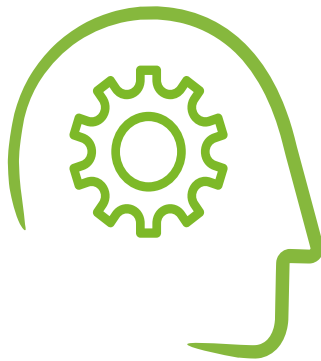
- Estimates vary but suggest that around 20% of the population could be neurodivergent (Honeybourne, 2018).
- All school staff are likely to come into contact with neurodivergent pupils at some stage.
- Not all neurodivergent pupils have a diagnosis (e.g. autism, ADHD), and many are recorded as having Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties.

1 in 5



Strengths and Differences

Neurodivergent pupils will have strengths and differences in areas of development, affecting their experiences in education and the wider world.



We need to consider both the strengths and differences that might arise to understand the impact of these on the pupil's levels of anxiety and sense of wellbeing, which may consequently impact on their learning.

Activity 1: The Areas of Difference

Think about a neurodivergent pupil you have worked with.

Discuss the pupil's presentation and profile of strengths, interests and differences. Focus on the strengths they have, as well as the support needs.

Do all children and young people with the same diagnoses have the exact same strengths, interests and differences as the pupil you have worked with?

Activity

The Child as an Individual

Focusing on strengths and differences, what overlaps can you identify between different types of neurodivergence? Are there also differences?

'[T]he question we need to be asking is not what's wrong with the dyslexic brain, but what is dyslexic cognition for, what are these brains really built to do?'

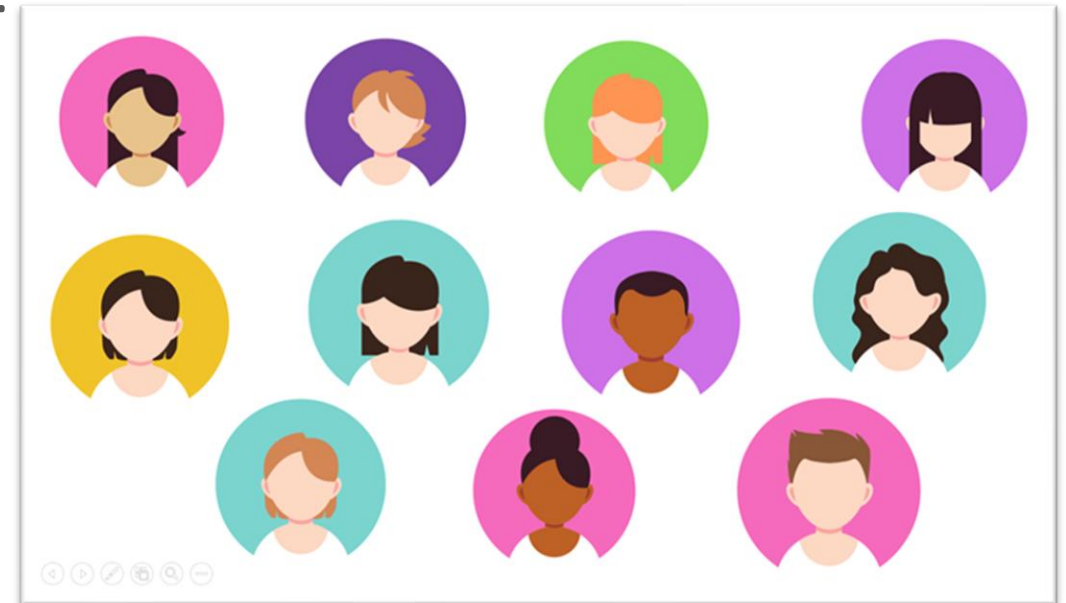
(Eide, B., and Eide, F. (2019))



Co-occurring Conditions and Intersectionality

Intersectionality is any part of a person's identity that might impact how they experience and navigate the world (for example, gender, race or sexual orientation).

How do you think intersectionality could impact the experiences of neurodivergent people?



Co-occurring Conditions and Intersectionality

- **Acquired neurodiversity.**³
- **ADHD** – 1 in 20 children, up to 1 in 25 adults.¹
- **Autism** – 180,000 autistic pupils in England.⁴
- **Dyscalculia** – 1 in 20 people.⁹
- **Dyslexia** – 6.3 million people.⁸
- **Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)/ Dyspraxia** - 3-5% of adults in the UK.²
- **Mental Health** - 18% of children aged 7 to 16; 22.0% of young people aged 17 to 24 years (2022).⁶
- **Tourette's** - 300,000 people in the UK.⁷



This is not an exhaustive list, but shows the potential overlap between co-occurring conditions, and the number of people thought to have these diagnoses.

Activity 2: The Areas of Difference

Resource – Case Studies

Read the Case Study provided. Discuss the child or young person's presentation and profile of strengths and differences.

How might these differences affect their experiences in school?

What support needs do you think the child or young person has? What could you do in school and in lessons to support them?

Activity

Review: The Areas of Difference

Resources – Case Study Review Template



Case Study Review

Read the Case Study provided. Discuss the child or young person's presentation and profile of strengths and differences.

How might these differences affect their experiences in school?

What support needs do you think the child or young person has? What could you do in school and in lessons to support them?

Strengths from the pupil's profile and how these could benefit them:

Differences from the pupil's profile and how they could affect their experiences in school:

How you think you could support them in school or lessons:

 Autism Education Trust

Using your template, you are going to build a bank of strategies and adjustments that you could use to support the pupil from your Case Study, based on their strengths, differences and support needs.

Activity

Part Two

Understanding the Individual



Video: Strengths, Achievements and Ambitions

Autistic young people talking about their interests, their strengths and biggest achievements in [this video](#).



Video

Neurodivergence and Anxiety

Neurodiversity can affect the way that a person communicates, interacts, and experiences the world around them.

Because of this, neurodivergent pupils can experience high levels of anxiety.



'School proved to be a major source of stress, highlighting the need to consider whether the school environment could be adjusted to suit the needs of these adolescents, especially given that stress enhanced the manifestations of their [ADHD] symptoms with increased postponing of schoolwork and emotional dysregulation.'

Öster C, Ramklint M, Meyer J & Isaksson J (2020)

Co-occurring Differences and Conditions

Neurodivergent pupils often have **additional needs** arising from other **conditions and differences**.

Co-occurring conditions:

More than one diagnosis, such as: another neurodivergence, disability, mental health condition.

Co-occurring differences:

For example: anxiety, erratic sleep patterns, eating/sleeping difficulties.



Practitioners' Strategy Suggestions

Consider the effects of potential disturbed and erratic eating and drinking and sleeping on the pupil.

Find out about medical conditions.

Speak to parents/carers about the pupil's strengths, interests and support needs.

Appreciate the potential impact of co-occurring differences on the pupil.

Consider the implications of co-occurring differences for learning.

Understanding the Individual: The One-Page Profile

The first step in meeting the support needs of a neurodivergent pupil is to work with them to get to know them.

All staff who work with the pupil must understand each pupil's support needs to know how to support participation and learning.

One way to do this is to create a One-Page Profile.

ONE PAGE PROFILE		
What you can do to help me:	My name is: I am years old I communicate by:	What is important to me:
What people like and admire about me:	Me Click to add a photo here	My strengths & talents:
My dream is to:	My fears / worries / things I don't like:	My favourite things:

www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk 

Video: One-Page Profile

[This video](#) follows a practitioner and pupil as they complete the One-Page Profile, and the practitioner talking about how it is used in the setting.



Video

One-Page Profile

The One-Page Profile:

- Gives you a framework for working with the pupil, and parents/carers and staff, to gain their perspective on the pupil's strengths, differences and support needs.
- Helps you gain the perspective from the pupil about their likes/dislikes and future aspirations.
- Is a good starting point for understanding the pupil.
- Can let other people know about the pupil's interests, ways of communicating, and areas of support.
- Helps you to share information about the pupil with others.



Activity 3: One-Page Profile

Tool – One-Page Profile Template

Think of a neurodivergent pupil you currently work with.
What might be included on their OPP? What do you think the pupil/
pupil's parents or carers would say in response to the headings?

How is this information sought in your setting/ by whom?
How often are OPPs updated in your setting?

Discussion

Part Three

Positive Relationships



Engaging with Neurodivergent Pupils

Establishing positive relationships with neurodivergent pupils can support their well-being and progress. This can be through:

- Learning about, understanding and respecting their communication preferences.
- Taking the time to understand their support needs and working with them to create a personalised learning experience.
- Actively 'listening' to pupils, taking an interest in their perspectives, and providing opportunities for pupils to share their experiences and challenges are important in providing support within the setting.



Video: Differences in Social Understanding

Young people [share with us](#) their experiences in Social Understanding and Communication



Video

Strengths in Social Understanding and Communication.

Neurodivergent pupils may have the following strengths:

Non-verbal pupils can become very good at communicating support needs by using sounds, pointing, gestures, body language, photos, pictures, and symbols.

When speech has developed, some pupils are very articulate with excellent vocabulary.

Strong and loyal connections to others, particularly family members.

Being very knowledgeable about a particular topic and be able to talk about their special interest at length.

Heightened levels of empathy for others.

A strong sense of equality and fairness.

Differences in Social Understanding and Communication

Neurodivergent pupils may have differences in:

The ability to engage in joint and shared attention with others.

Communicating their own support needs or feelings.

Understanding and using facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice.

Finding it hard to understand the actions and interventions of other pupils.

Understanding and responding to instructions and explanations.

Differences in Social Understanding and Communication

Neurodivergent pupils may have differences in:

Initiating a conversation.

Perceiving, understanding, and interpreting social behaviour, rules, and conventions.

Understanding what other people might be thinking and feeling.

Engaging in everyday interactions like small talk and chatting.

Impulsive behaviour.

Understanding of turn-taking in conversations.

Pupils might experience elevated anxiety due to these differences.

Practitioners' Strategy Suggestions

Develop a positive relationship with the pupil by showing you value them and their interests.

Provide neurodivergent pupils with a safe space to work alone, if this is their preference.

Help all pupils understand and value each other's differences.

Help the pupil to 'see' a task by providing visual cues and examples.

Use objects, pictures, and visual timetables to support understanding and learning and promote independence.

Increase staff and peer awareness and understanding.

Video: The Confusing World of Words

After watching [this video](#), think about everyday examples where we rely on visual cues, rather than verbal, for understanding.



Video

Practitioners' Strategy Suggestions

Only ask one question at a time.

Use the pupil's name when speaking to them to gain attention.

Be clear and simple with your language - give brief instructions and be specific.

Sometimes it can help to give the pupil choice.

Allow the pupil time to process what you are saying and to respond to you.

Say what you mean and avoid using sarcasm or metaphors.

Prepare neurodivergent pupils for any changes in staffing.

Activity 4: Social Communication and Interaction

In pairs, you are going to have a conversation – this can be about any topic you wish.

BUT when talking, you must both cover or close your eyes and use a monotone voice.

Be ready to give feedback on how you found this and how it compares to typical conversations you might have.

Activity

How You Can Support: Working With Parents

Jen, mother to her autistic daughter, Edie, [shares](#) her family's journey into an autistic world.



Video

How You Can Support: Working With Parents

- Be sensitive to the support needs of parents.
- Communicate and share ideas with parents/carers.
- Parents are the experts – listen to what they have to say as they know what works.
- Be aware of 'masking' – the pupil may show distressed behaviour once home, in their safe space.
- Build positive relationships – be sensitive to previous experiences parents and carers may have had with school.
- Where possible, communicate with external professionals.



Review – Positive Relationships

Discuss the strategies and adjustments that have been covered in this part. Which do you think could be used to support the child or young person from your Case Study?

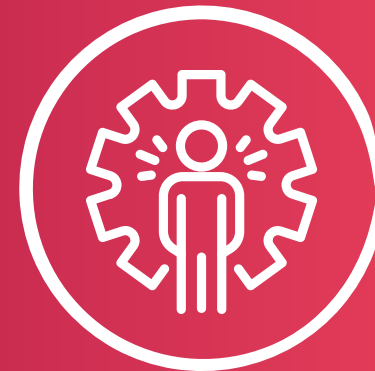
Add the strategies and adjustments to your Case Study Review Template.

Are there any strategies or adjustment from this section of the training that you wouldn't try for your Case Study?
Why not?

Activity

Part Four

Learning and Development



Strengths in Flexibility, Information Processing, and Understanding

Neurodivergent pupils may have the following strengths:

Being highly motivated by their interests.

Hyperfocused when engaged or interested.

Excellent memory for facts and can become an expert in an area of interest.

A good eye for detail.

Seeing the bigger picture.

Processing information differently, leading to creative solutions.

Vivid imagination and creativity.

Increased ability in problem-solving.

Highly logical and skilled at spotting patterns.

Abilities in the areas of art, music, design, architecture and engineering.

Differences in Flexibility, Information Processing and Understanding:

Neurodivergent pupils may have differences in:

Concentration – particularly affected by sensory stimuli.

Understanding what is happening now and next.

Coping with any unexpected or sudden changes to routine.

Managing transitions from one activity or place to the next.

Transferring skills across a range of environments.

Working memory and speed of processing.

Misunderstanding of terms and language.

Difficulties spotting patterns (for example, in numbers for people with dyscalculia).

Organisation and time management.

Practitioners' Strategy Suggestions

Build on the pupil's strengths to support them.

Use pupil's interests/hobbies to engage in learning.

Create regular routines so that pupils know what to expect.

Recognise that any transition between activities or environments, however small, may cause anxiety.

Use simple direct language, pictures, signs, or symbols to support the pupil to understand what is happening next and to prepare them for transitions.

Use visual routines and reminders, including the use of timers to help pupils understand that a transition will happen.

Use consistent graphic organisers or scaffolds to support pupils in organising their ideas.

Practitioners' Strategy Suggestions

Prepare neurodivergent pupils for changes to routine, key staff members and room changes, whenever possible.

Help pupils to learn how to develop a sequence of events in the right order, to support organisation.

Consider adaptations that could be made for homework.

Recognise, and allow for, different ways of doing things.

Apply 'rules and expectations' across settings to support generalisation of routines.

Allow processing time. Avoid calling on pupils to answer questions publicly if this is something they struggle with.

Make resources and equipment such as pencil grips, phonetic dictionaries and helpful software available for all pupils.

Honeybourne, V. (2018)

Video: Reasonable Adjustments

[In this video](#), a Practitioner talks about some of the adjustments they have made to their environment to help reduce anxiety in neurodivergent pupils and prepare them for learning.



Video



Activity 5: Thinking About Communication

Resource – Chunking Instructions Sheet

Working in pairs, work through the chunked instructions example, which shows how a task can be broken down visually for pupils.

Complete the ‘Draw the House’ activity. Using the principles discussed, work in pairs to create chunked instructions for how to draw the simple line drawing of the house. Consider the differences neurodivergent pupils may have in relation to flexibility, information processing and understanding.

Activity

Review – Learning and Development

Discuss the strategies and adjustments that have been covered in this part. Which do you think could be used to support the child or young person from your Case Study?

Add the strategies and adjustments to your Case Study Review Template.

Are there any strategies or adjustment from this section of the training that you wouldn't try for your Case Study? Why not?

Video



Part Five

Enabling Environments



Sensory Processing and Integration

We can observe neurodivergent pupils in a range of environments to inform adjustments to the learning environment. Our sensory processing and integration forms the foundations for our learning and development and how we understand and respond to the world.

It is estimated that 5% to 16.5% of the general population have sensory processing differences (Miller, L. J.; Schoen, S. A.; Mulligan S.; Sullivan, J. (2017)).



Video: The Sensational Thinking Project

This [video](#) introduces the range of sensory input people experience, and the reasons behind and effects of sensory differences.



Video



Strengths in Sensory Processing and Integration

Neurodivergent pupils may have the following strengths:

**Excellent
attention to
detail**

Good hearing

**Able to attend
to unique
sounds**

**Excellent sense
of smell**

**Very attentive
to taste
experiences.**



Differences in Sensory Processing and Integration

Neurodivergent pupils may have differences in:

Being over-sensitive (Hyper)

Being under-sensitive (Hypo)

Having difficulty filtering out irrelevant sensory information.

Taking in and responding to multiple sensory information.

Reduced body awareness.



Sensory Processing and Integration

This is when the brain finds it difficult to integrate all this information coming in at the same time and consequently knowing how to respond.

Neurodivergent people have described this as being like a **traffic jam in your head with conflicting signals coming from all directions**. This can make it difficult to make sense of it all.

This can increase the pupil's level of anxiety.



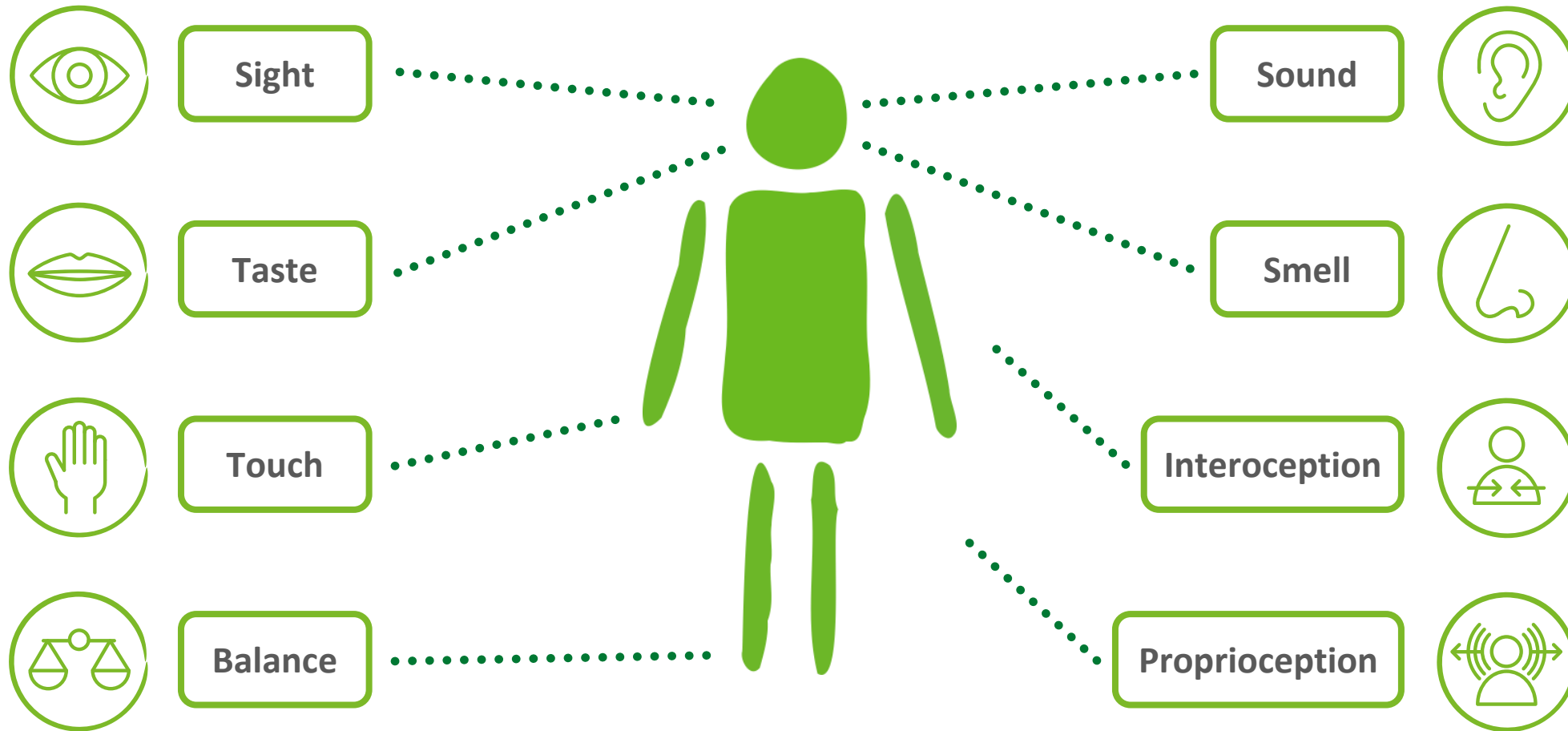
Video: Can You Make it to the End?

This [video](#) shows the build-up of sensory input that a child with sensory processing differences may experience in a busy shopping centre.



Video

The Senses

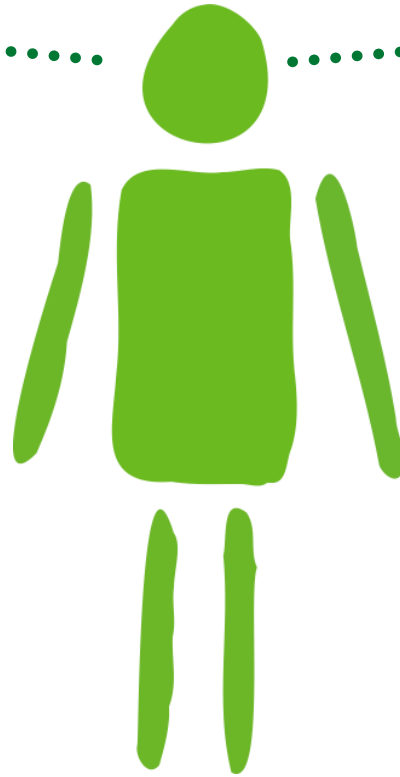


The Senses



Sight

Some pupils may be over-sensitive to particular colours, patterns or light. Others may be under-sensitive and therefore fail to see certain colours or transparent objects.

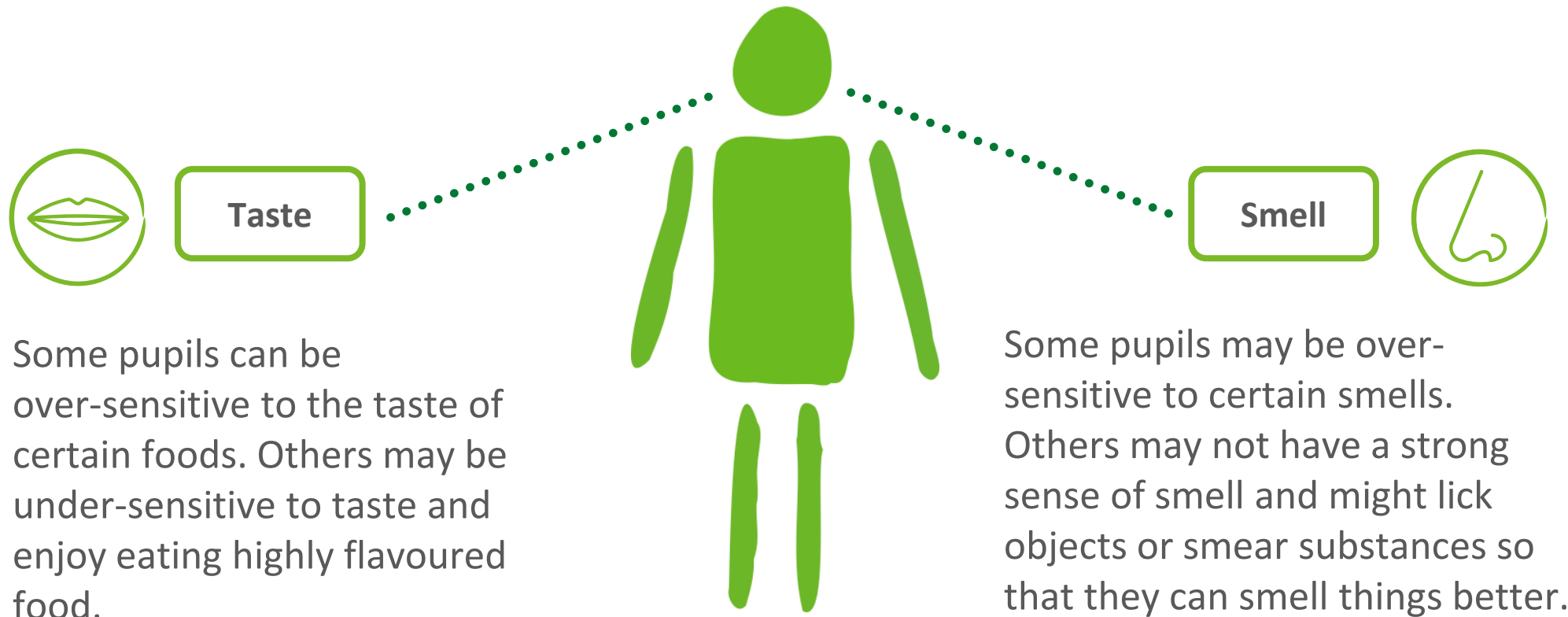


Sound

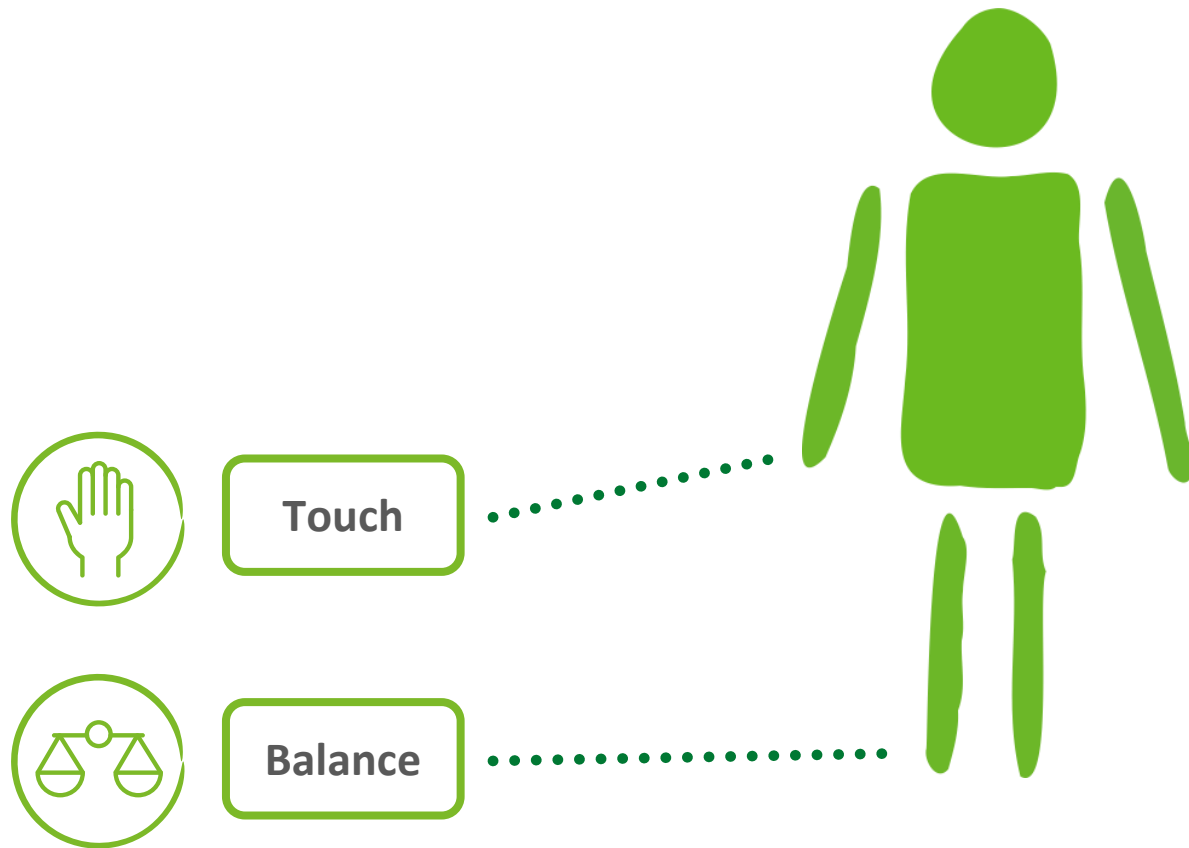


Over-sensitivity can make it difficult to screen out background noise. Other pupils may be under-sensitive to noise and find it difficult to process certain sounds.

The Senses



The Senses

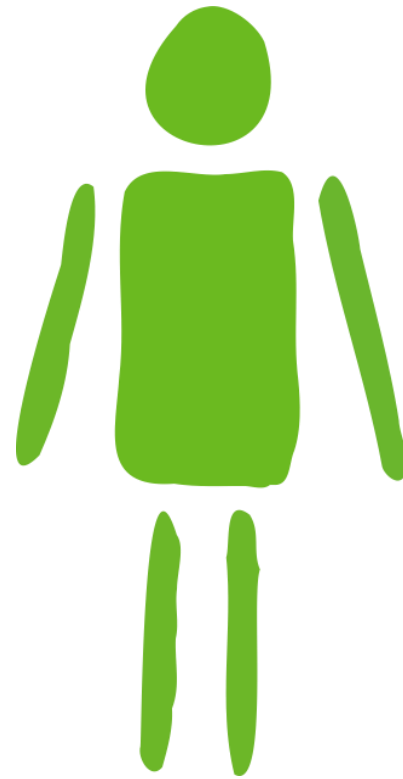


Pupils who are over-sensitive may dislike the touch of others or the feeling of particular clothing. Other pupils might be under-sensitive and have a dangerously high tolerance for pain.

Some pupils might not keep balance easily and can have difficulties in certain environments.

The Senses

Proprioception - many pupils have difficulty sensing where the body is in space and having a sense of where it starts and ends.



Interoception is the ability to detect and attend to internal bodily sensations. It helps a pupil understand what is going on inside of the body.

Interoception



Proprioception



Practitioners' Strategy Suggestions

Observe and talk to the pupil and their parent/carers to identify the pupil's sensory differences.

Take sensory differences into account when planning activities.

Don't insist on eye contact – it can be uncomfortable for neurodivergent people.

Be mindful that twitching, fidgeting, and agitation can all be signs that the pupil is beginning to experience sensory overload.

Allow pupils to leave lessons earlier to avoid crowded corridors.

Practitioners' Strategy Suggestions

Provide breakout rooms or places the neurodivergent pupil can go to where they feel safe.

Having a clutter-free environment free of auditory and visual distractions.

Provide a quiet area outside, away from the noise.

Be mindful that vestibular activities can be very alerting. Some pupils can find it difficult to modulate this input.

Adapt PE lessons to support pupils with differences in fine and gross motor skills.

Part Six

Key Takeaways



Impact of the areas of differences for Neurodivergent Pupils



Practitioners' Strategy Suggestions to Support an Individual Who is Distressed:

Keep calm and use a reassuring voice.

Keep your language simple.

Give the individual personal space.

Reduce or remove demands.

Limit choices.

In school, provide a safe space that children or young people can go to if they need time to decompress.

Allow recovery time.



Summary Activity:

Reflect on your learning:

Use your template to record strategies and adjustments covered in this session that you could try when supporting the neurodivergent child or young person you thought about earlier.

Remember not all strategies/adjustments will be effective as all neurodivergent people are individuals:

It is important to talk to the child or young person, their parents or carers and other professionals to find support that works for them.

Activity

Summary of the Module

Matt, one of the AET Autistic Young Experts:

'The main advice I would give is to provide support and encouragement so that we can achieve our best and find the best ways to help us. These may be in the form of equipment such as special cushions that help with balance and grips to help hold pens. I was also allowed to use fidget toys in class and was awarded 50% extra time in exams. Putting simple things in place can help in the long run.'



Summary of the Module

- Neurodivergent pupils have differences in areas, which may include: social understanding and communication; flexibility; information processing and understanding; and sensory processing, among other things.
- Neurodivergent pupils often have co-occurring differences and conditions.
- Neurodivergent pupils often experience high levels of anxiety.
- It is important to get to know the individual pupil's profile of strengths and differences.

Summary of the Module

- Focus on the reasonable adjustments that you can make and remember that small changes often make a big difference.
- Make changes to the environment to reduce levels of stress and anxiety for the pupil.
- A One-Page Profile is essential to ensure that all staff in the setting know something about the pupil's strengths and support needs.

Publications

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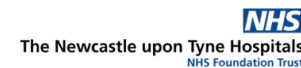
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