



Neurodiversity Profiling Tool

Tables for Pre-schoolers (3-5 years)

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Speech and Language

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What do we mean by speech and language?

- This section is based on “typical language development” norms. Please acknowledge that some children may learn language, at least in part, through echolalia e.g. copying words or phrases heard from others, rather than generating word or phrases one word at a time.
- We would also like to acknowledge that language isn't just spoken. It could include manual or sign language, photos and symbols, and/or using alternative communication systems (high and low tech AAC).
- Children and young people who have English as an Additional Language should also be acknowledged. Consider speech and language development across all languages spoken.
- Children develop their speech, language and communication skills at different rates, this is just a rough guide. Many children with a speech and language delay will catch up given time and support.
- For children presenting with other speech and language differences please visit the website <https://www.cornwallft.nhs.uk/childrens-speech-and-language-therapy/>

Age	Typical development	Signs of difficulty
Pre-schoolers (2-5)	<p>2-3 years</p> <p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands simple concepts e.g. big and little. • Understands and responds to simple questions such as ‘who’ ‘what’ and ‘where’. • Follows a short instruction e.g. ‘make dolly sleep’. • Understands more single words (up to 300). <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puts four words together e.g. ‘me want more milk’. • Uses action words such as ‘fall’ and ‘run’. 	<p>2-3 years</p> <p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not showing an interest in communicating with family or familiar people. • Not anticipating familiar events or routines. • Not responding to their name. • Not following when another person points. • Not understanding simple instructions containing familiar words. • Not understanding simple action words at 3 years (e.g. run, sleep etc).

Age	Typical development	Signs of difficulty
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starts using some question words. <p><u>Speech</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is common for children to present with some speech sound error patterns including but not exclusive to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 's' or 'z' produced as 'd' or 't' e.g. 'sun' is produced as 'tun'. 'f' or 'v' produced as 'b' or 'p' e.g. 'fun' is produced as 'bun'. 'k' or 'g' produced as 't' or 'd' e.g. 'cat' is produced as 'tat'. Missing the ends off of words e.g. 'bus' is produced as 'bu'. It is quite typical for your child to not be completely understood by everyone at this age. <p>4-5 years</p> <p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands longer instructions e.g. "find a pencil, draw a picture and put it in the tray'. Understands concepts of position (e.g. above/below) and sequence (e.g. 'first' and 'last'). Understands and answer questions in relation to a story. <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses longer sentences with more detail. May still make some grammatical errors like saying "sheeps" or "ranned". Beginning to talk about things that have already happened or will happen in the future. <p><u>Speech</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is common for children to present with some speech sound error patterns including but not exclusive to: 	<p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not lead an adult to items they want, or use any gestures, reaching or pointing to communicate. Not copying sounds or actions (e.g. waving, clapping). Not babbling or using any spoken words. Only using single words, two-word phrases or learnt phrases at the age of 3 years. Using language that appears to be jargon or jumbled. <p><u>Speech</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not using a range of different sounds e.g. only using vowel sounds. <p>4-5 years</p> <p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not understanding simple questions such as 'who' 'where' and 'what'. Difficulty in understanding basic concept words (e.g. size and position). <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty making longer sentences. Missing out key words. <p><u>Speech</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not using a range of different sounds e.g. only vowel sounds. Consistently not being understood by familiar listeners.

Age	Typical development	Signs of difficulty
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 's' or 'z' produced as 'd' or 't' e.g. 'sun' is produced as 'tun'. - 'f' or 'v' produced as 'b' or 'p' e.g. 'fun' is produced as 'bun'. - 'k' or 'g' produced as 't' or 'd' e.g. 'cat' is produced as 'tat'. - 'l' being produced as 'w' or 'y' e.g. 'like' is 'wike'. - Missing off sounds that are next to each other in a word e.g. 'star' becoming 'tar'. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At 4, your child should be understood approximately 50% of the time when talking to unfamiliar people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in overall wellbeing when not understood.

Energy Levels

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What do we mean by energy levels?

It is the degree of physical activity levels shown by children. Some children are more active than others and some are less active.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower energy levels	Signs of difference: higher energy levels
Pre-schoolers (3-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typical sleep expectation: 10-13 hours, including naps. • Enjoys a mixture of both physical play (climbing, swinging, simple ball games, riding a balance bike, pulling things along) and calmer activities (painting, crafts, playdough, construction, looking at books). • Able to sit and engage with a motivating activity for 5-10 minutes e.g. sharing a story book with an adult. May be fidgeting, fiddling, moving throughout but can engage. • Seeking lots of movement – running, climbing etc. – is a typical developmental stage. However there are also calmer moments throughout the day. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average sleep is considerably more than typically expected for the age (see left). • Mostly seeking/engaging with calmer activities. Less interest/engagement with active, physical play. • Limited interest in exploring the environment. • May present as passive. • May prefer activities alongside adults – calmer, less movement needed / expected. • Reduced interest in movement-based activities, or enjoyment but less stamina for them. • May thrive in less active pastimes e.g. reading, drawing, crafts, construction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average sleep is considerably less than typically expected for the age (see left). May struggle to settle to sleep, wake frequently in the night, wake early (also consider emotional regulation as a factor here). • Mostly seeking/engaging with active, physical play. Less interest/engagement with calmer activities. • Rarely sitting still – frequently wander around, climb, ‘flit’ between activities. • Movements may be quicker and more exaggerated. • Difficulty engaging with motivating activities – not yet able to do this for 5 minutes. • May seek out highly stimulating activities e.g. fast-moving games, sensory input. • Often thrive in active environments e.g. gymnastics, swimming, sports. • Difficulty settling, e.g. returning to a calmer activity after physical activity.

Attention and Impulse Control

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What do we mean by Attention and Impulse Control?

Attention refers to a person's ability to focus and to change what they're focusing on as needed. This includes paying attention and listening to instructions whilst tuning out distractions; holding one or more instruction at a time in their mind and carrying out a task; focusing on details and checking for mistakes. High focus can be linked with a type of attention known as 'monotropism' – highly focused attention on one source of information at a time. High levels of attention can feel very positive and be very productive, but there may be difficulties in adapting to new information, focusing on less preferred topics and activities, and making transitions from one task to another. Low attention can make it easy to switch between tasks but can lead to difficulties with completing tasks, tuning out distractions and following routines.

Impulse Control refers to a person's ability to think before acting. It includes things like waiting for an event or a turn, working towards long term goals, and thinking through potential consequences before acting. Higher impulse control can lead to feelings of discomfort in social interactions as peers may feel impulsive and unpredictable by comparison. Spontaneity and new situations may also feel very uncomfortable. Lower impulse control can lead to reduced awareness of danger (physical and social) and difficulty meeting neurotypical expectations (classroom, home, community) even when intentions are good.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
Pre-schoolers (3-5)	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically need some adult guidance to help them shift attention from one thing to another. Beginning to shift own attention for brief periods (by 5yo) e.g. pausing to listen to an adult and then returning to their activity. Focusing on one activity at a time and giving this activity their full attention (for around 2-3 minutes per year of age on preferred activities). It is completely normal at this age to be moving between activities, running around, seeking sensory input, etc., especially to break up longer focused activities. <p><u>Impulse Control:</u></p>	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not yet able to focus on concrete tasks of their own choosing for 6 minutes. Attention shifts rapidly between different stimuli. Very sensitive to distractions in the environment – visual, auditory etc. <p><u>Impulse Control:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliant on adults around them to put boundaries in place around safety – not showing awareness of routines and expectations in the setting. Need adult support to wait, even for 	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attention is very highly focused on specific aspects of the environment e.g. particular objects or sensory input. May seem unaware of other aspects of the environment. <p><u>Impulse Control:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less likely to get 'swept up' in excitement e.g. around a change or novel activity. May resist unfamiliar activities or anything out of routine.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still need adults to maintain boundaries around safety, but can usually follow familiar routines and expectations, e.g. the routine of the nursery day, and follow simple meaningful rules. • Can take turns without adult support in familiar, structured activities. • Beginning to show negotiation and compromise in play with other children, e.g. negotiating roles in role-play activities and sharing toys. • Delayed gratification is still likely to be hard at this age – may struggle to wait for things or demonstrate patience. 	<p>short periods in routine situations (e.g. waiting for their snack at snack time).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May need adult support for turn-taking, including in familiar situations. 	

Emotion Regulation

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What do we mean by emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation involves being able to identify feelings and manage our responses to these feelings in line with the situation and environment we are in. Regulation is not about being calm – it is about responses matching the context. E.g. a well-regulated child in a trampoline park may be running around, jumping and very excited!

Most emotions create similar physiological responses in the body, and we interpret the emotion from the context. This can make it tricky for people to differentiate between emotions – e.g. excited or scared, excited or angry, sad or worried. A difficulty identifying and labelling emotions is sometimes called alexithymia. People who have alexithymia may have trouble identifying, understanding and describing emotions. They may not display emotional responses that other people might typically expect in a particular situation. For example, they might laugh when being told off.

People respond to emotions in different ways. Some people show emotions strongly through their behaviours on the outside, e.g. ‘fight or flight’ responses. This is called ‘externalising’. Some people tend to keep emotions inside, e.g. worrying or ruminating. This is called ‘internalising’. Both internalising and externalising can cause difficulty, although externalising is often more visible and more easily picked up by others.

As we get older, we develop self-regulation skills. This involves recognising how we are feeling and doing something to help us feel differently if needed, or to control how we react to these feelings. Sometimes we can do this by ourselves, and sometimes we need to seek support from others. Babies and young children, and some older children and adults, need a high level of co-regulation. This is when other people use their own emotional regulation skills to help support someone with less developed skills. This might involve containing big feelings, suggesting and supporting with strategies, physical and verbal reassurance, cuddling, rocking, soothing, and helping children to make sense of their feelings through suggesting emotion names and linking emotions with events.

When thinking about emotional regulation it is important to consider the following:

- Can the child recognise and label their emotions, and those of others?
- Can the child use strategies to regulate big feelings? (through co-regulation – led by others – or through self-regulation)

Age	Expected development of emotional recognition and regulation skills	Signs of difficulty with emotional recognition or regulation
Pre-schoolers (3-5)	<u>Recognising and labelling emotions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young children can usually use some basic emotion words, signs or symbols such as happy, scared and cross. They may begin to link these to events or situations. 	<u>Recognising and labelling emotions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little to no understanding of emotion words, signs or symbols. • Not recognising basic emotions in others, e.g. not

Age	Expected development of emotional recognition and regulation skills	Signs of difficulty with emotional recognition or regulation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young children will develop an increasing awareness of emotion language. They might recognise some basic emotions in characters in books or TV shows and be able to discuss this with an adult (e.g. I think he's happy because liked his birthday present). <p><u>Emotional regulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When distressed, young children can usually be soothed by an attuned, familiar adult. They are likely to seek out comfort and support from particular people. Tantrums are very normal at this age as children are not yet able to express big feelings in other ways. Young children are still very reliant on co-regulation with attuned adults. Young children will use some strategies to manage feelings, even those they cannot yet name. For example, they may walk away from a situation or confrontation that makes them feel worried or uncomfortable, such as another child crying or people arguing. With adult support, young children may use some pre-taught and modelled strategies to manage feelings, e.g. counting, taking deep breaths, blowing bubbles, etc. They are unlikely to do this without support and prompting. Young children may not yet be able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. They may be very afraid of imaginary things. Young children often feel and respond to emotions very strongly, e.g. laughing hysterically if something funny happens or crying at a minor upset. This is typical development. Young children have little impulse control and do not yet understand delayed gratification. They are likely to hit, bite, push, grab and snatch at times. This is because they have not yet learnt more skilled social problem-solving strategies. 	<p>recognising that someone who is crying might be sad.</p> <p><u>Emotional regulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited responses to different people or situations – appearing passive and withdrawn. Not differentiating between key caregivers and strangers when seeking emotional support. Not seeking comfort or support from others at times of distress or actively resisting this comfort or support. Not able to engage in co-regulation or soothing activities, even with trusted familiar adults. Might present as very clingy and in need of constant adult support and reassurance. Frequently overwhelmed by emotions and inconsolable, even with support from preferred and trusted people. Overwhelm may lead to frequent and/or severe injury to self or others, damage to property, etc. Internalising behaviours (e.g. linked to anxiety) are often quiet and subtle. These could include chewing clothes or fingers, skin picking, pulling their hair. These behaviours are common but could indicate a difficulty and should be explored further. Rapid shifts in emotion – may go from one extreme to the other and back again very quickly and not seem aware of the impact to others. May be very reactive to others' emotions, e.g. sobbing if another child is crying.

Motor Skills

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Contributors to the version:

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What do we mean by motor skills?

Motor skills are essential for children to interact with and explore their environment. These skills are typically divided into two categories:

- **Gross motor skills** – involving large muscle groups used for activities such as walking, running, jumping, climbing, and balance.
- **Fine motor skills** – involving smaller muscle movements, particularly in the hands and fingers, used for tasks such as drawing, writing, using cutlery, and manipulating small objects.

As adults, we often take for granted the ability to plan and carry out movements efficiently. However, for children, especially those with motor coordination difficulties, these tasks can be challenging and may require specific support and guidance.

This section is not a formal motor assessment or diagnostic tool. Its purpose is to help identify whether a child's presentation and behaviours may be linked to motor coordination or planning difficulties. If this section highlights high motor needs, you may wish to seek further individual support from an occupational therapist or physiotherapist.

Motor skill challenges can present in various ways, including:

- Difficulty with balance and coordination
- Fatigue during physical activities
- Avoidance of fine motor tasks like handwriting or using scissors
- Challenges with self-care tasks such as dressing or using cutlery
- Clumsiness or frequent tripping/falling

It's important to note that motor skill development varies widely among children and can be influenced by many factors, including physical health, sensory processing, attention, and emotional wellbeing. The impact of motor difficulties may also fluctuate depending on the environment, expectations, and the child's level of motivation or fatigue.

Supporting children with motor needs often involves:

- Breaking tasks into smaller, manageable steps
- Providing opportunities for repetition and practice
- Using visual supports or demonstrations
- Encouraging movement-based play to build strength and coordination
- Creating a supportive and patient environment that fosters confidence

Age	Expected development	Signs of difficulty or causes for concern
Pre-schoolers (3-5)	<p>Gross Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walks, runs, and stands on tiptoes • Stands on one leg for 3–5 seconds • Hops on preferred foot • Walks on heels when shown • Walk up and down stairs, alternating feet. • Climbs ladders and playground equipment confidently • Throws a ball overhand and catches with increasing skill • Kicks a ball forcefully and with control • Begins to use a bat • Can multitask during physical play (e.g. football, gymnastics, swimming) <p>Fine Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threads medium-sized beads • Supports paper while drawing or colouring • Shows a clear hand preference • Holds scissors correctly and can cut a piece of paper in half • Demonstrates skilled hand movements compared to peers <p>Self-Care and Functional Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a fork and spoon together • Drinks from an open cup • Stabs food with a fork and scoops with a spoon • Washes and dries hands and face independently • Unbuttons large buttons • Gets on and off the toilet unaided • Puts on garments like a t-shirt with some help • Puts on shoes (may be on the wrong feet) • Pulls up trousers independently 	<p>Gross Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not able to run, jump, or climb with confidence by age 4 • Difficulty walking up and down stairs using alternating feet • Still frequently tripping or falling beyond what is typical for age • Fearful or avoidant of physical play, such as climbing, jumping, or using playground equipment • Poor coordination in activities like catching, throwing, or kicking a ball • Difficulty with balance, e.g. unable to stand on one foot briefly by age 5 <p>Fine Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty holding a pencil or crayon with control by age 4 • Not beginning to draw basic shapes (e.g. circle, cross) by age 4 • Struggles to use scissors or manipulate small objects like beads or buttons • Not showing hand preference by age 5 • Avoids or becomes frustrated with tasks that require hand-eye coordination (e.g. puzzles, drawing, threading) <p>Self-Care and Functional Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not showing awareness of being wet/soiled • Little progress with toileting • Not feeding self independently (finger foods or motivating foods on a spoon) • Not yet able to remove simple items of clothing without fastenings (e.g. pulling off loose jogging bottoms)

Sensory Processing

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Contributors to the version:

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What do we mean by sensory processing?

Everybody has sensory preferences and needs. As adults we can often adapt our own environment to meet our own preferences. This is typically harder for children e.g. because of limitations and expectations within the school environment. Children also need specific guidance to identify their own sensory preferences and find strategies and adaptations.

This section is not a sensory profile or an individual sensory assessment tool. The purpose is to identify whether a child's presentation and behaviours may be linked to sensory processing differences. If this section shows high sensory needs, you may wish to seek further individual support.

High sensory needs can be a result of both sensory-seeking and sensory-avoiding preferences. High needs might relate to any of the sensory domains. It may be that differences in only one or two domains are having a very high functional impact for a child. For other children, they may have sensory processing differences in a number of domains but these are well managed in their familiar environments and daily life, and therefore have less of a functional impact. The impact of sensory processing differences often fluctuates depending on other factors e.g. change, stress, health and wellbeing.

We all take sensory information from our environment and from our bodies and use this information to understand the world, adjust what we do and how we respond. Children and young people may respond to sensations (sensory information) in different ways. As children and young people's nervous systems are less mature than adults, their responses to sensations are often more extreme than adults. This is why children tend to run around and like playground activities that many adults find very challenging, for example roundabouts.

Information is registered through the different senses: -

- Sight
- Hearing
- Touch
- Taste
- Smell
- Proprioception (senses of body awareness and position / muscle and joint movement)
- Vestibular (awareness of movement, balance, coordination and head movement)
- Interoception (our internal sensory system that tells us what is happening inside our body, for example, hunger, needing the toilet, fatigue, emotions etc.)

Age

Developmentally typical sensory-related behaviours

Signs of high sensory need / sensory processing differences

Age	Developmentally typical sensory-related behaviours	Signs of high sensory need / sensory processing differences
Pre-schoolers (3-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children this age are typically exploring different aspects of play, including messy play. It is typical for children to show preferences and to have likes and dislikes, e.g. disliking some textures or activities. They are developing their understanding of their own sensory preferences and starting to communicate this, e.g. saying if they don't like something. Children of this age usually move a lot and are often unaware of safety expectations, e.g. they may climb without showing awareness of dangers. They will explore different physical activities and physical sensations. Learning to use the toilet looks very different for different children but usually takes place at around this age (although night-time dryness can come later as it is hormonal). Children will grasp these concepts at different rates and will often regress at times e.g. having accidents after a period of being dry or struggling after a big change such as the birth of a sibling. Young children can usually tolerate being in a range of different environments when with familiar and trusted caregivers, e.g. supermarkets, the park, toddler groups, childcare settings. They may dislike certain things e.g. car journeys and be vocal about this! Young children show an increasing awareness of personal care routines and are likely to be playing an increasingly active role. They may not like them – this is fairly normal! It is normal for young children to be startled and maybe scared by loud or unfamiliar noises, e.g. a fire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not yet showing indications of a hand preference by 5yo. Not showing awareness of nappy being wet or soiled. Difficulty recognising body sensations and indicating them to a trusted adult, e.g. recognising hunger, thirst, tiredness, pain, needing the toilet. Noticing very small details in the environment and being very distracted by them, e.g. noticing tiny objects or very quiet noises. May not have moved on from the 'neophobic' stage with food and have a limited range of tolerated foods – despite being offered and exposed to a wide range of foods on an ongoing basis [contact Health Visitor or GP if concerned]. May have a very limited diet, to the extent that it impacts on growth and weight gain. This may be associated with taste, texture, looks, smell, etc. May show difficulty with physical movement or coordination. May be fearful of movement, especially movement out of their control, e.g. head being tipped back for hair washing, escalators, playground equipment, being lifted and swung in play. May seek out certain types of movement repeatedly and for long periods of time, e.g. swinging, spinning, rocking, climbing. May not notice other input in the world around them if distracted by other sensory input, e.g. may not notice name being called repeatedly (this is typical from time to time at this age but may be a difficulty if persistent). May consistently be very distressed (and inconsolable) by certain aspects of personal care routines, e.g. brushing teeth, bath time, cutting nails, brushing hair, dressing. May show particular stims / repetitive movements e.g. spinning, jumping, flapping hands. May show very high focus on specific sensory input e.g. watching one particular thing very intently for long periods. May prefer to be naked, struggle with clothing, take clothes off consistently and in socially unexpected places. May want to be barefoot all the time, or the opposite and hate the feel of textures on their feet (sand, grass, etc.). May consistently seek out and eat non-food items, especially strong-tasting or certain textures (more than just exploring them orally) [check this medically – may be linked to low iron levels]. May not want to be cuddled, even by key adults, or may seek out lots of tight hugs.

Age	Developmentally typical sensory-related behaviours	Signs of high sensory need / sensory processing differences
	<p>alarm going off or a dog barking. They will usually settle fairly quickly with reassurance from a trusted adult.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May appear disorientated by visual input, e.g. struggling to walk on highly patterned carpets or uneven surfaces.

Flexibility and Adaptability

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What do we mean by flexibility and adaptability?

Flexibility includes the following skills:

- Coming up with different approaches / solutions to problems if the first approach isn't successful.
- Moving between different options and approaches.
- Being able to think about situations in different ways, e.g. seeing things from different perspectives.

Adaptability includes the following skills:

- Adjusting to changes in routines, environments, activities, interactions etc.
- Managing change 'in the moment' (with limited prior warning) e.g. having to change plans because the car has broken down, or finding a different route because of roadworks.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
Pre-schoolers (3-5)	<p><u>Flexibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving, e.g. trying different ways to get to a toy that's out of reach. • Role play and imaginative play – using objects for different purposes e.g. a banana as a phone, a box as a house. • Starting to understand that other people may like/dislike different things to them and have different favourite foods/activities etc. <p><u>Adaptability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notice changes to routine and environment (place/person); may become upset by change but will settle reasonably soon with attuned support. • Can usually adapt to change within the context of a safe, familiar environment 	<p><u>Flexibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May see a monotropic attention style – focusing strongly on one thing at a time. Children may focus strongly on one particular property of a toy/object rather than exploring it. • Children may have one or a few highly specific interests and show little interest in other toys or activities. These may or may not be 'typical' age-related interests, e.g. a child may be really interested in household appliances or streetlights rather than toys. • May get very distressed if others touch/move things they feel are 'theirs'. This could make things like tidying up trickier than expected at this age. <p><u>Adaptability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very upset by changes to routine, environment or people; difficult to settle despite attuned support. • May be very aware of routines and expect things to 	<p><u>Flexibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very interested in exploring their environment. Drawn to new people, places and experiences. • May be less aware of typical boundaries e.g. social boundaries – may hug a stranger or sit on their lap. • Curious about change – seeking to explore novelty but without signs of distress. • Might see 'out of the box' imaginative play and problem solving – using objects in unusual and innovative ways. <p><u>Adaptability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content with/potentially seemingly unaware of new and unfamiliar

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>and attuned adult support, e.g. a sports day at nursery, going to a different supermarket to normal, going on a family holiday.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting to understand changes and why things may need to change. Can cope with the rules of a game shifting when playing in a group of children. It is still developmentally appropriate at this age to get upset about changes they don't like, e.g. not being able to go to the park or not having an ice cream at bedtime. They will usually settle within 5-10 minutes with attuned support. 	<p>happen in exactly the same way every time, e.g. the same people saying exactly the same words. If something happens in a certain way once they may then expect it to happen the same way every time. They may get distressed if this changes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty transitioning between different environments/activities, e.g. between home and nursery, inside and outside play, or bigger transitions such as moving between different classes or key workers. Difficulty with out of routine events e.g. days out, even if these feel positive and linked to the child's interests. May get upset if another child tries to change the rules of a game or something doesn't go the way they expect in play. May seek a lot of control over situations, e.g. telling other people what to do/say in play, and get distressed if this is not followed. 	<p>environments, people and activities; no particular distress shown with e.g. transition to nursery/other childcare or being looked after by a friend or relative. May enjoy exploring new environments and activities and actively seek them out.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not obviously unsettled by changes in routine or new activities. Adapt easily to others changing the rules of games whilst playing.

Social Interaction

Date (and number) of version: July 2025 – Cornwall V4	Contributors to the version: Lucy Yeomans, Lizzie Miller
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What do we mean by social interaction?

People have different preferences when it comes to social interaction. Some people seek a lot of social contact and enjoy being with other people. Other people prefer to spend more time by themselves, or with a small number of preferred people. Sometimes the terms ‘introvert’ and ‘extrovert’ might be used. One way to think of it is that everyone has a ‘social battery’. Everyone’s battery is a different size (reflecting their interest in, and tolerance of, social interaction). Some people’s battery recharges when they spend time by themselves. Other people’s battery recharges when they spend time with others. There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ when it comes to social interaction preferences. Not everyone wants to interact with lots of people all the time – this is fine.

A child’s social preferences might be different to those of their family members. This might make it seem like a problem, when really it is just an individual difference.

Many things seen as ‘social difficulties’ are actually a mismatch between the child’s social preferences and the environment. We can often improve these difficulties by making changes to the environment. For example, a child may prefer to interact with one or two peers in a calm, structured activity, rather than running around in a busy playground – we could introduce lunchtime clubs or quiet spaces to meet this social preference.

Other difficulties can be caused by a skill gap, or gaps in lived experience. For example, if a child wants to interact with their peers but doesn’t know how to start that interaction, we can teach the skill through modelling and scaffolding.

Many neurodivergent people prefer to interact and socialise in different ways to their neurotypical peers. This isn’t necessarily a problem. Autistic social skills are just as valid as non-autistic social skills, even if they look different.

Is it very important to consider social vulnerability. Some neurodivergent people find it hard to pick up on unwritten social ‘rules’ and expectations, and on other people’s motivations and intentions. This can leave them vulnerable to bullying or abuse as they may not recognise if someone is doing or saying something that may cause them harm. Some neurodivergent people also mask a lot of the time, and they may copy or join in with things that don’t match their underlying values or beliefs in order to try to fit in and gain social approval.

Age	Typical social development (across neurotypes)	Signs of social difficulties that might need support or a different approach
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Age	Typical social development (across neurotypes)	Signs of social difficulties that might need support or a different approach
Pre-schoolers (3-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At this age it is still developmentally typical to find turn-taking difficult and to get upset by expectations to share. • Showing preferences for certain adults and certain children over others, e.g. in a childcare setting or group. • Imitative play (copying adults or peers) e.g. playing in the home corner, using tools, 'helping' with housework tasks. • Seeking to involve others in at least some of their play activities, whether adults or children. • Beginnings of imaginative and small-world play. For neurodivergent children in particular this may present as scripted or repetitive, e.g. acting out set scenarios. • Starting to be aware of some body language and facial expressions in others, e.g. if somebody looks sad or excited. • Starting to pick up on some routine social cues and what the expected response is likely to be, e.g. 'snack time' means there's an expectation to wash hands and come to the table, or putting coats on means it's time to go outside. • Children at this age are egocentric. They have little awareness of what other people might be thinking or feeling, e.g. whether somebody else is waiting for a turn on the swing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indifferent towards peers – no obvious preferences for who they share space with. Not showing awareness of peers in other contexts (also consider prosopagnosia / face-blindness, which is more common in the neurodivergent population). • Might be very distressed if other children are nearby/in a shared space with them, even if there is no direct interaction. • Might show no awareness of or interest in other children (e.g. not looking towards them), even if nearby or attempting to interact. • Not seeking to include others in play and/or being very resistant to others attempting to join their play. • Distressed if someone tries to 'change the script' in imaginative play. • May be highly directive towards others in play, e.g. telling them exactly what they have to do/say and getting distressed if they deviate from this. • Limited awareness of what other people are doing in the immediate environment, e.g. not noticing everyone else in the room is getting their coat on and going outside.

Cognitive Ability

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What do we mean by cognitive ability?

Cognitive skills are a range of skills that enable us to process information and use it to solve problems. It is not necessarily the same as educational achievement. A child may be meeting expectations at school but be struggling with particular underlying skills. Another may have excellent cognitive skills but other barriers to applying them in the classroom environment. You may have heard the terms ‘global developmental delay’, ‘specific learning difficulties’, ‘moderate learning difficulties’, ‘learning disability’, ‘profound and multiple learning disability (PMLD)’. These terms refer to difficulties with learning and wider development, which may be very specific or more general.

Many people, especially those who are neurodivergent, have what is often referred to as a ‘spiky profile’. This means they have different skill levels in different areas. For example, a child may struggle to remember the names of family members but be able to name dozens of different dinosaurs, or be able to read and write when they start school but need more support with self-care skills. It is important to understand a child’s individual profile and offer support as needed, rather than making assumptions based on areas of strength. Also be mindful of fluctuating ability – just because someone can do something one day, this doesn’t mean they will be able to do it consistently.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
Pre-schoolers (3-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting to recognise and name shapes, colours and preferred objects (e.g. animals, vehicles). Imitates more complex actions and sequences, e.g. pretending to cook dinner or sweep the floor. Orders things by simple categories e.g. stacking rings from biggest to smallest. Sorts objects into groups, e.g. sorting by colour or finding all the animals in a collection of toys. Shows increasing curiosity about the world around them, e.g. asking lots of ‘why’ questions or taking things apart to find out how they work. Learns new things by watching and copying others who are more skilled / experienced. Increasingly independent problem-solving, e.g. climbing on furniture to reach a toy or the biscuit tin. Beginning to recognise meaningful letters and words, e.g. own 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not recognising familiar routines and patterns (e.g. a daily activity might seem like a surprise every time). Limited understanding of cause and effect. Limited interest in / engagement with their immediate environment, caregivers and familiar objects and routines. Not joining in with familiar songs, actions or play routines. Limited understanding of early concepts e.g. bigger/smaller, up/down, go/stop. May present as passive. Not attempting to solve problems (e.g. if unable to reach a preferred toy). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be recognising letters and words and beginning to read. May be hyperlexic (good word-reading ability with potentially less skilled comprehension). May have good understanding of number concepts and patterns e.g. times tables, shapes, time. Picks things up quickly e.g. from one demonstration or overheard conversation. Can solve problems in more sophisticated ways, e.g. using tools and considering

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>name.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draws some recognisable pictures and shapes, either copying or independently. • Enjoys looking at books, socially or independently. May be able to complete or join in with familiar stories or make up own stories about pictures. • Shows basic understanding of number e.g. counting to 10, matching small quantities of objects to numbers. • Explains a simple sequence of events. • Engages in sustained play that is meaningful to them, even if it is not immediately meaningful to others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with or lack of interest in recognising, sorting, categorising preferred/familiar objects. • Needs lots of repetition and individual instruction to pick up new skills – not learning through group-based demonstrations or watching others. • (Disclaimer: please ensure other potential contributing factors have been explored e.g. motor skills, hearing, eyesight, language.) 	<p>various solutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Particularly curious about the world around them – asking lots of questions and exploring.