



Neurodiversity Profiling Tool

Tables for Primary school aged children – Key Stage 1 (5-7 years)

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Speech and Language

Date (and number) of version: July 2025 – Cornwall V4	Contributors to the version: CFT Children’s Speech & Language Team (Ref: Speech & Language UK Ages and stages)
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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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follows and remember a short story. • Understands that one word can have two meanings e.g. ‘skip’ the action and ‘skip’ the rubbish bin. • Understands describing words. • Understands language to problem solve. Can understand ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses longer sentences with the correct word endings. • Uses joining words to link sentences together e.g. so, if, because. 	<p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finds understanding word meanings and the connections between these challenging. • Finds it hard to understand language relating to events in the past or in the future. • Only understands part of an instruction. • Not understanding ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions. <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can show difficulty in finding the words they want to say. May use the incorrect word for the meaning. • Only using short sentences.

Age	Typical development	Signs of difficulty
	<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"> - 'th' being produced as 'f' - 'r' being produced as 'w' - Missing off sounds that are next to each other in a word e.g. 'star' becoming 'tar'. • At 5, your child should be understood approximately 75% of the time when talking to unfamiliar people. • At 7, your child should be understood approximately 90% of the time when talking to unfamiliar people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Words may not be used in the right order. <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. • Decrease in overall wellbeing when not understood. • Persisting phonological patterns beyond the age of expected elimination (determined by SaLT assessment).

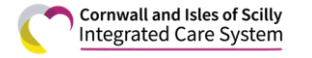
Energy Levels

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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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typical sleep expectation: 9-12 hours • Enjoys a mixture of both physical play (running, climbing, swinging, ball games, riding a bike/scooter) and calmer activities (Lego, reading, crafts, small world play). Can generally play as part of a group of children. • Able to sit and engage with activities for 15-20 minutes. May be fidgeting and fiddling at times but can engage. • Can join in with active activities such as PE and breaktimes and can transition to calmer activities afterwards with minimal direction. • Seeking lots of movement – running, climbing etc. – is a typical developmental stage. However there are also calmer moments throughout the day. • Engaging in around 60 minutes of moderate-vigorous physical activity most days. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average sleep is considerably more than typically expected for the age (see left). May still nap regularly e.g. after school. • Mostly seeking/engaging with calmer activities. Less interest/engagement with active, physical play. • Limited interest in exploring the environment. • May present as passive. • May seem tired – yawning, lying on desk, daydreaming. • May prefer activities alongside adults – calmer, less movement needed / expected. May choose to stand with / talk to an adult during playtimes. • Reduced interest in movement-based activities and PE, 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. Often out of their chair, rocking, fidgeting, fiddling during structured activities. May change posture frequently e.g. sitting with feet up, upside down on chair. • Movements may be quicker and more exaggerated. • Difficulty engaging with motivating non-active activities – not yet able to do this for 10 minutes. • May seek out highly stimulating activities e.g. fast-moving games, sensory input. • Often thrive in active environments e.g. gymnastics, swimming, sports. However may struggle with things like turn-taking and waiting to listen to instructions. • Difficulty settling, e.g. returning to a calmer activity after physical activity. • May be more talkative than others. • Always on the go. • Struggles to meet classroom expectations, e.g.



Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower energy levels	Signs of difference: higher energy levels
			around sitting still.

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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused attention on motivating, meaningful activities for 2-3 minutes per year of age. • Can listen whilst also completing another activity such as playing or working. • Can usually focus on a single aspect of a complex situation. • Can shut out unwanted and unrelated information to concentrate on the key features, especially during motivating / 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. With some prompting, children can usually 	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very sensitive to distractions in the environment – visual, auditory etc. • Need adult guidance to help them focus attention, including on preferred activities. • Flitting between tasks. • Difficulty remembering and following regular routines, e.g. brushing teeth – seem to struggle to build habits that would be expected of a child their age. • Independent concentration is typically less than 2 minutes per year of age, including for preferred activities. 	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be showing a ‘monotropic’ style of attention – focusing very intently on one particular activity or topic, often for long periods of time. This may feel very positive, often described as a ‘flow state’. • Moving from one activity to another can be very tricky, especially moving on from a preferred activity. • Often a focus on smaller details rather than the bigger picture. <p><u>Impulse Control:</u></p>

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>do this in line with routines and expectations e.g. running around at playtime or in movement breaks.</p> <p><u>Impulse Control:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can usually follow group routines and expectations e.g. around safety (school / classroom rules, using age-appropriate equipment safely after being shown). • Aware of hazards in the environment e.g. roads, hot/sharp objects, unknown dogs (but still needs adult supervision and reminders). • Able to negotiate, compromise, share, take turns and wait during interactions with other children, usually without adult support, <u>when well regulated</u> (remember that very few children this age will be able to do this all the time). 	<p><u>Impulse Control:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of awareness of dangers in the environment; or aware but not able to act on this knowledge in the moment. • Not thinking through the consequences of their actions, e.g. jumping off a high climbing frame without checking what's underneath. • May be socially vulnerable – suggestible, easily led. Lack of awareness of social dangers e.g. 'stranger danger'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less likely to get 'swept up' in excitement e.g. around a change or novel activity. • Spontaneity can be tricky – unexpected events can feel threatening more than exciting. • May expect others to have the same high level of impulse control and get frustrated if they don't, e.g. if another child isn't sharing or waiting or taking turns to their level during play. May seek out interaction with older children or adults as a result, or with children who are happy to be directed.

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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<u>Recognising and labelling emotions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing their emotional vocabulary – able to name a range of emotions and link them to situations (some mismatch here is typical, as people will react differently to the same situation, and 	<u>Recognising and labelling emotions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May struggle with recognising facial expressions, gestures or body language – this may lead to them being wrongly considered ‘rude’. • Limited understanding of emotion words / signs / symbols, e.g. not

Age	Expected development of emotional recognition and regulation skills	Signs of difficulty with emotional recognition or regulation
	<p>this isn't necessarily a problem).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasingly able to recognise the emotions of others through facial expressions, body language and gestures. Starting to take others' emotions into consideration e.g. seeing a friend hurt themselves and cry may lead to them consoling that friend out of empathy. As their language skills develop, they become better at using the words, signs or symbols they know to communicate how they are feeling instead of using behaviours to express themselves. Beginning to differentiate between fantasy and reality. <p><u>Emotional regulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tantrums and physical behaviours linked to emotions decrease as emotional literacy increases and they are better able to communicate how they are feeling. Impulse control is developing, meaning children this age are increasingly able to stop and think before reacting (although there may be infrequent 'blips'). Increasingly able to use some self-regulation techniques, e.g. walking away from a situation or finding a distraction. They still need guidance, prompts and co-regulation at times. Although they may be able to express how they are feeling more clearly, they will still need the support of a trusted adult when feeling big feelings, especially developing patience when they are waiting for their needs to be met. It is developmentally typical to disagree with others e.g. parents, siblings, friends. Frustration can be difficult to manage, especially as children this age do not yet have well-developed social problem-solving skills. They may shout, storm off, get upset, or say unkind things. Co-regulation will help to process these situations. Increasingly able to manage feelings associated with guilt, shame 	<p>yet able to name three or four basic emotions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not able to link emotion vocabulary to situations (e.g. he's sad because he fell over, she's cross because he pushed her, he's excited because it's his birthday). Avoid judging this based purely on language skills, consider non-verbal and picture-based ways of showing this skill as well. <p><u>Emotional regulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited responses to different people or situations – appearing passive and withdrawn. May seem 'difficult to read'. Unusual responses to situations, e.g. if injured, may either be inconsolably upset or not react at all (also consider sensory processing, especially interoception). 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.

Age	Expected development of emotional recognition and regulation skills	Signs of difficulty with emotional recognition or regulation
	and jealousy – e.g. apologising for mistakes and praising someone who beats them at a game. Likely to need some prompting with this.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May be very reactive to others' emotions, e.g. sobbing if another child is crying.

Motor Skills

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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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<p>Gross Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Runs, hops, skips, and jumps with improved coordination and rhythm • Balances on one foot for up to 15 seconds • Walks along a straight line or balance beam • Throws, bounces, and catches a ball with increasing accuracy • Performs a running kick • Begins to coordinate movements in team games (e.g. football, tag) • Climbs and uses playground equipment confidently • Rides a bike (with or without stabilisers) • Turns a skipping rope (usually by age 6–7) <p>Fine Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds a pencil in a tripod grasp • Demonstrates clear hand dominance • Cuts along lines and around simple shapes with scissors • Folds paper with some accuracy • Draws recognisable shapes, people, and objects • Writes letters and numbers with increasing control • Threads small beads and manipulates small construction toys (e.g. Lego) • Can touch each fingertip to thumb in turn • Begins to tie shoelaces or a bow (if practised; full mastery may come later) <p>Self-Care and Functional Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dresses and undresses independently, including fastenings like buttons and zips • Uses a knife and fork with growing skill • Brushes teeth and washes hands/face without reminders • Manages toileting independently • Packs and unpacks school bag with minimal help • Understands left and right, though consistent identification may not be expected until around age 8 	<p>Gross Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty running, jumping, or skipping with coordination and rhythm • Struggles with balance (e.g. unable to stand on one foot for more than a few seconds) • Frequently trips, falls, or bumps into objects more than peers • Avoids or is anxious about physical activities (e.g. PE, playground games) • Difficulty catching, throwing, or kicking a ball with control • Trouble learning to ride a bike or use playground equipment • Appears clumsy or uncoordinated compared to peers <p>Fine Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty holding a pencil with a functional grip (e.g. not using a tripod grasp by age 6) • Handwriting is slow, poorly formed, or hard to read despite practice • Struggles to cut along lines or around shapes with scissors • Avoids drawing, colouring, or writing tasks • Difficulty with hand dominance (e.g. switching hands frequently beyond age 6) • Trouble with tasks requiring hand-eye coordination (e.g. puzzles, threading, using cutlery) <p>Self-Care and Functional Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty dressing independently (e.g. managing buttons, zips, or putting on shoes) • Struggles with using cutlery appropriately • Avoids or becomes frustrated with self-care tasks • Still needs frequent help with toileting or hygiene beyond what is typical for age

Sensory Processing

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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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<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. May have a fairly small range of food preferences, but eating a reasonably balanced diet, growing, gaining weight, and willing to try new foods. May struggle with the increased expectation to sit in the classroom – it's developmentally typical to be seeking a lot of movement at this age. Daydreaming and lapses of attention are developmentally typical, especially during less-preferred or adult-directed activities. Attention can normally be refocused e.g. by saying their name. (If these lapses happen frequently, during preferred activities, and the child's attention cannot easily be refocused with prompting, you may want to explore this in more detail and potentially seek medical advice.) Children's presentation will vary depending on factors like what / whether they've eaten, how well they've slept, changes in the environment, health and wellbeing, and emotions e.g. excitement. Occasional sensory-seeking behaviours (e.g. running, climbing, making noises) are not unusual and could be linked to these factors. It's not unusual for children to be sensitive to unexpected loud noises e.g. the fire alarm. Lots of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May struggle to eat in school (or other less familiar environments) despite eating well at home, potentially due to noise, bright lights, smells, etc. in the environment. 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 consistently be very distressed (and inconsolable) by certain aspects of personal care routines, e.g. brushing teeth, bath time, cutting nails, brushing hair, dressing, haircuts. Persistent difficulty developing independence with toileting, despite developmentally appropriate support and attempts to teach these skills. If independent with toileting, may still have frequent accidents due to not recognising the need to go. Difficulty recognising body sensations and indicating them to a trusted adult, e.g. recognising hunger, thirst, tiredness, pain, needing the toilet. Persistent difficulty sitting on a chair, even to engage with preferred activities (may be slouching, falling off, leaning on the table or against furniture/people). 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 show consistent and persistent signs of seeking lots of sensory input, e.g. running, climbing, lying on different surfaces, touching resources / people / certain textures, possibly making lots of noises, very fidgety if expected to sit. May have difficulty acquiring developmentally expected fine and gross motor skills e.g. using cutlery, despite ongoing opportunities to learn and practice these skills. May seek contact with others which can look like being unaware of personal space e.g. touching other people frequently, stroking their hair, leaning or lying on people. May be very sensitive to and distressed by 'light touch' e.g. people brushing past them or standing near them in a queue. May use too much or too little force during play or other activities, e.g. too rough in rough play, not pushing hard enough to make a mark with a pencil (or too hard and making holes in the paper), generally not seeming aware of own strength. Significant dislike of familiar environmental noises. May show this by covering ears, refusing to go into certain environments, wanting to wear headphones. May appear disorientated by visual input, e.g. struggling to walk on highly patterned carpets or uneven surfaces.

Age	Developmentally typical sensory-related behaviours	Signs of high sensory need / sensory processing differences
	children this age dislike noises such as hand dryers.	

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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<p><u>Flexibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving and experimenting with different ways to do things, e.g. testing out the properties of objects, finding different ways to do things. • Exploring the 'rules' of social engagement – e.g. allocating roles in role play, giving and following instructions, managing negotiation and compromise in group activities. • Role play and imaginative play – e.g. dressing up, acting out different roles, small world play. • Recognising and talking about similarities and differences, e.g. between their own preferences and another child's. • Seeing things from another person's 	<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 and potentially seeming unaware of things outside of their 'attention tunnel'. This may become more apparent as a difference from peers with different attention styles as the child gets older. • May find sensory input 'all consuming' e.g. noise, light, feel of clothing, temperature and be unable to focus on anything else. • May have a self-restricted diet linked to the need for predictability and sameness e.g. only accepting one brand of crisps, one colour of food, only drinking out of one cup. • Difficulty switching between different tasks/activities, especially if they don't feel the first has been finished – even when moving to a preferred task/activity. • Children may have one or a few highly specific interests and show little interest in other toys or activities. These may be typical age-related interests e.g. characters/TV 	<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 appear unaware of expected boundaries, e.g. wandering off to explore something new and exciting. • May be easily led by others, including into potentially risky behaviours, without necessarily thinking through the potential consequences of actions. • May find it hard to focus on one thing as may be very aware of and distracted by new/changing aspects of the environment. • May be less aware of typical boundaries e.g. social boundaries – may hug a stranger or sit on their lap.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>perspective, and recognising / talking about thoughts and feelings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making up imaginary stories / imaginary friends, 'lying'/confabulation, exaggerating e.g. 'my dad is as tall as a house'. <p><u>Adaptability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage and adapt to familiar changes and transitions e.g. moving between different areas of the school; may dislike change but will settle with attuned support. Can adapt to change within the context of a safe, familiar environment and/or attuned adult support, e.g. a sports day or non-uniform day, a supply teacher, going to a different supermarket to normal, going on a family holiday. Can understand and talk about changes and why things may need to change. Can cope with the rules of a game shifting (and may introduce rule-changes) when playing in a group of children. Beginning to negotiate and problem-solve with peers. It is still developmentally appropriate at this age to get upset, frustrated or 'sulk' about changes they don't like or not getting their own way, e.g. not being able to go to the park or not 	<p>shows, or less typical interests such as household appliances or streetlights.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> May get very distressed or frustrated if others touch/move things they feel are 'theirs'. This could make things like tidying up trickier than expected at this age. May struggle to understand that other people might not share their hobbies or interests and may have different preferences. This may impact on social interaction and developing friendships. May interpret things very literally, e.g. 'in a minute'. May find jokes/word play, abstract concepts and less literal language (e.g. idioms, sarcasm) more confusing than same-age peers. <p><u>Adaptability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upset by changes to routine, environment or people; difficult to settle despite attuned support. May be very aware of routines and expect things to 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. Difficulty transitioning between different environments/activities, e.g. between home and school, moving between different areas of the school, or bigger transitions such as moving between different classes. Difficulty with out of routine events e.g. days out, medical appointments, or sports days / non uniform days, 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. Difficulty with negotiation and problem-solving when 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 environments, people and activities; no particular distress shown with e.g. transition to school, supply teachers, or visits to new places. May enjoy exploring new environments and activities and actively seek them out. Not obviously unsettled by changes in routine or new activities, e.g. medical appointments, non-uniform days. Adapt easily to others changing the rules of games whilst playing. May 'go with the flow' at the expense of recognising / advocating for their own needs and preferences. May see people-pleasing / fawning behaviours. May appear oblivious to or disinterested in changes and the reasons for them, and fairly unaware of other people's responses to / feelings about change.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>winning a game. They will usually settle quickly with attuned support. They may be able to draw on past experiences e.g. how they coped in a previous similar situation.</p>	<p>playing with other children.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • May want things to be the same every day, e.g. sitting in the same seat, following the same route to school, standing in the same place in the queue for lunch, using the same coloured plate. • Being exposed to / expected to tolerate lots of change can lead to distress / emotional dysregulation, including anxiety or emotional outbursts. 	

Social Interaction

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Contributors to the version:

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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

Age	Typical social development (across neurotypes)	Signs of social difficulties that might need support or a different approach
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferred friendships developing. May also have certain peers they choose to stay away from. • Knows how to start an interaction with someone else (confidence may vary) and advocate for their opinions and preferences (e.g. saying no or moving away if they don't want to play a certain game). • Beginning to manage some social problem-solving without becoming dysregulated, e.g. managing disagreements or differences in opinion. At this age this might involve seeking adult support. • Flexible in play and able to play with a range of peers. • Turn-taking skills developing – but may still struggle especially in a board game situation or with siblings. • Some separation anxiety at start of school/after holidays is typical. • Initiating interactions without adult support, when in a familiar environment and with preferred people. • Engaging in small world and/or imaginative play with some variety and flexibility. • Seeks to share interests and excitement with others. • After-school emotional dysregulation is fairly typical and common at this age, often due to tiredness. • Child may play in different ways to what you might consider 'typical' – but look for play that's meaningful, enjoyable and purposeful to them. • It's normal for children to have different sized 'social batteries' (reflecting their interest in, and tolerance of, social interaction). This may vary widely even between family members. Some children find social interactions energising, others find them tiring and need time on their own to 'recharge'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reluctance to engage with any peers – withdrawing or avoiding. • Overly dominating and controlling with peers – e.g. not wanting peers to play with anybody else, being very prescriptive about how their peers play or join in with a game. • Wants to interact with others but doesn't know how to initiate this, despite modelling/scaffolding and support being given over time. • Very reluctant to advocate for their opinions and preferences (e.g. telling someone if they don't want to play a certain game). • Significant difficulty managing conflicts or disagreements – may become very dysregulated or shut down. • Unable to turn-take without significant adult support (children with limited experience of being with other children may find this trickier and simply need more time and opportunity to develop this skill). • Significant separation anxiety in a range of contexts – e.g. following primary caregiver from room to room, to the toilet, etc. • Not responding to or acknowledging familiar peers or adults when seen out of context (also consider prosopagnosia / face-blindness, which is more common in the neurodivergent population). • Play is rigid and lacks spontaneity or flexibility – however be careful not to dismiss a child's play if it just isn't how you'd expect play to look. • Does not share interests and pleasure/excitement, stays self-contained (be mindful of life experiences here – have they had interested and available adults around them?). • Extended periods of dysregulated behaviour, inconsolable for long periods of time, especially after being in groups of people where interaction is expected – may indicate 'social fatigue'.

Cognitive Ability

Date (and number) of version: November 2024 – Cornwall V4	Contributors to the version: Alex Clark, Lucy Yeomans
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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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 1 (5-7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognises letters and numbers. Developing reading ability including sounding out words and recognising sight words. Good ‘book awareness’ e.g. turning pages, direction of text, understanding the flow of a story. Can solve simple maths problems e.g. addition, subtraction, times tables, simple word problems. Recognises patterns and relationships e.g. rhyming words, sequences of numbers (times tables, odd/even). Can write legible, consistent letters and numbers and draw recognisable pictures with several features (if motor skills allow). Writes or types 2-3 sentences e.g. simple notes, postcards, stories. Can sort objects using multiple categories (e.g. find all the big, yellow animals). Engages in sustained play that is meaningful to them, even if it is not immediately meaningful to others. Can join in with and organise other people in play, e.g. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty recognising symbols (letters, numbers, other familiar symbols in the environment). Difficulty recognising patterns (e.g. alphabet, days of the week, number patterns). May be showing early signs of specific learning difficulties e.g. dyslexia, dyscalculia – although this would mainly be for adults to monitor and put in targeted support at this age. Difficulty with understanding concepts e.g. size, time, order. Difficulty with sorting and categorising. Limited number awareness e.g. not 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be reading fluently and independently, with understanding of what they have read. May be particularly skilled at recognising and memorising patterns and be able to apply this knowledge, e.g. times tables, maths functions, word problems. Uses skills flexibly across a range of tasks and contexts, e.g. using something learnt in maths to solve a problem in the playground. May get frustrated with

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>understanding and following rules and recognising why this is important when playing as a group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can keep track of scores, turns etc. when playing a game. Can remember the rules of a range of motivating games. • Starts to plan an approach to a new, unfamiliar task, using prior knowledge and experience. Uses tools/objects flexibly to support and to solve problems. • Generates multiple solutions to a problem and chooses the best one, individually or as part of a group. • Can retell familiar stories, explain a sequence of events, and give simple instructions. • Interested in the world around them. Shows curiosity about how things work and 'why'. Motivated to learn more about topics of interest to them, e.g. independently researching Pokemon characters or watching videos of new Lego sets. • Recognises symbols and their meanings in a range of contexts. Can generalise e.g. knowing that any style picture of a toilet might mean toilets. • Knows the days of the week and months of the year, in order. Can say the day and month of their birthday. • Recognises and knows the value of coins. Can put simple combinations of coins together. Understands that money is used to buy things. 	<p>recognising bigger/smaller quantities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs lots of repetition and individual instruction to pick up new skills – not learning through group-based demonstrations or watching others. • Difficulty joining in with social play, potentially due to not understanding the rules and expectations or struggling to keep them in mind while playing. • Difficulty with executive skills e.g. planning, organising, problem-solving, shifting attention between different demands (these skills are still developing at this age, so compare to same-age children). • Difficulty generalising skills between different tasks and contexts, e.g. may be able to do something at home but not school or vice versa. • (Disclaimer: please ensure other potential contributing factors have been explored e.g. motor skills, hearing, eyesight, language.) 	<p>peers (and potentially adults) if they are not feeling challenged or if others are not processing things in the same way as them. E.g. in play, other children may not process complex rules as quickly or remember what to do next.</p>