



Neurodiversity Profiling Tool

Tables for Primary school aged children – Key Stage 2 (7-11 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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 2 (7-11)	<p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands long instructions containing lots of information. • Understands simple inferences, e.g. if someone says “we are all waiting for you” it actually means “hurry up”. <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses complex sentences with very few errors. • Joins several sentences together to tell a story including all of the main points. <p><u>Speech</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is common for children to present with some speech sound 	<p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in understanding information that is not clearly stated. • Not yet able to make a prediction about what might happen next. <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in making up stories. • Conversation may be muddled and difficult to follow. • Difficulty in using the correct word endings / use of grammar. <p><u>Speech</u></p>

Age	Typical development	Signs of difficulty
	<p>error patterns including but not exclusive to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'th' being produced as 'f' - 'r' being produced as 'w' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At 7, your child should be understood approximately 90% of the time when talking to unfamiliar people. 	<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 2 (8-11)	<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. • Can regulate energy levels to meet social / learning environments and activities. • Willingness to try / engage with new things. • Able to sit and engage with activities for 20-30 minutes. May be fidgeting and fiddling at times but can engage. • Can join in with active activities such as PE and breaktimes and can usually transition to calmer activities afterwards without specific support or direction. • 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). • Mostly seeking/engaging with calmer activities. Less interest/engagement with active, physical play. • 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. • May struggle to regulate energy levels to suit the social or learning activity, e.g. increasing their energy level to join in with more active play. • May lack the energy for after-school / extra-curricular activities. 	<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. • May engage in risky behaviours e.g. balancing on back legs of chair, unsafe climbing. • May present as restless and have difficulty with relaxing. • Movements may be quicker and more exaggerated. May appear clumsy as less thought given to actions. • 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

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower energy levels	Signs of difference: higher energy levels
			<p>after physical activity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• May be more talkative than others.• Always on the go.• Struggles to meet classroom expectations, e.g. 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 2 (8-11)	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused attention on child-led and adult-directed activities for 2-3 minutes per year of age. • Can listen whilst also completing another activity such as playing or working. Can shift attention independently between different aspects of a task and distractions in the environment, e.g. collecting equipment, managing an interruption, listening to teacher input, answering written questions, having a drink, returning to the task. • Typically follows familiar routines independently in a reasonable timeframe, e.g. 	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very sensitive to distractions in the environment – visual, auditory, other people moving around, etc. • Need adult guidance to help them focus attention, including on preferred activities. • Flitting between tasks. Needing frequent breaks between and within tasks or activities to manage and sustain attention (may overlap with sensory differences and energy levels – see these sections). • Difficulty remembering and following regular routines, e.g. brushing teeth – seem to struggle to build habits that would be expected of a child 	<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. May feel very positive, often described as a 'flow state'. • Moving from one activity to another can be tricky, especially moving on from a preferred activity. • May seem completely unaware of other things in the environment when focused or in 'flow state'.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>getting dressed, brushing teeth, eating breakfast.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can 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 seated / focused activities. Children can usually do this in line with routines and expectations e.g. running around at playtime or in movement breaks. <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) including when not being supervised – developing internal control / self-regulation. • Understands hazards in the environment e.g. roads, hot/sharp objects, unknown dogs and increasingly able to manage these independently. • Able to negotiate, compromise, share, take turns and wait during interactions with other children, usually without adult support, most of the time. • Can wait for something and accept the need to 	<p>their age.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent concentration is typically less than 2 minutes per year of age. • Difficulty shifting between different aspects of a task, e.g. answering a teacher’s question whilst writing. • Difficulty returning to a task after a distraction, e.g. returning to a writing task after having a drink. <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. • Lack of danger awareness impacts on development of independent living skills e.g. being able to travel to school on their own, play out with peers without adult supervision, or walk to the local shop or park with friends or siblings. This can lead to conflict as the child wants to be independent and parents/carers need to keep them safe. • Not thinking through the consequences of their actions, e.g. jumping off a high climbing frame without checking what’s underneath. May actively engage in risky behaviour and seem unaware of potential consequences or dangers. • May be socially vulnerable – suggestible, easily led. Lack of awareness of social dangers e.g. ‘stranger danger’, peer pressure. • May engage in some risky health behaviours e.g. vaping, typically for social acceptance and a sense 	<p>May lose track of time and ‘forget’ to do things like eat, drink, sleep, go to the toilet (may overlap with differences in interoception – see sensory section).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often a focus on smaller details rather than the bigger picture. • May find it very tricky to move on from something before they feel it is complete / finished. <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. • 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 or much younger children or adults as a result, or with children who are happy to be directed. • May feel uncomfortable in situations where there aren’t explicit rules, e.g. unstructured social situations, as other people’s

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>do so (e.g. waiting for a sunny day to visit the beach, waiting until the end of the week for a family trip, waiting until everyone in the family has finished eating their dinner to start watching a film).</p>	<p>of belonging with a peer group (linked to social vulnerability and peer pressure as described above).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty following classroom expectations, even with good intentions, e.g. shouting out answers to questions, needing to share their views/opinions straight away. 	<p>behaviours are harder to predict (see also section on flexibility and adaptability).</p>

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 2 (8-11)	<u>Recognising and labelling emotions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to develop their emotional vocabulary – able to name a wide range of emotions and link them to situations (some mismatch here is typical, as people will react differently to the same situation, 	<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’.

Age	Expected development of emotional recognition and regulation skills	Signs of difficulty with emotional recognition or regulation
	<p>and 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. Increasing displays of empathy. Routinely taking others' emotions into consideration e.g. seeing a friend hurt themselves and cry may lead to them consoling that friend. Empathy may present in a range of ways, e.g. some people show empathy by talking about similar things they have experienced themselves in an attempt to make a connection with the other person. Look for signs of tuning in to another's emotions and getting alongside them in whatever way. Usually able to use words, signs or symbols to communicate how they are feeling instead of using behaviours to express themselves. Secure differentiation between fantasy and reality. Able to use logic and reasoning with some support, e.g. to address fears or worries. May become increasingly self-critical at this age – this is fairly typical. <p><u>Emotional regulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical behaviours linked to emotions are rare and usually in response to very difficult situations or when there is underlying context (e.g. illness, family issues). 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 self-regulation techniques, e.g. deliberately stopping and thinking, using breathing exercises, going for a walk, or finding a distraction. They still need guidance, prompts and perhaps co-regulation at times. 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited understanding of emotion words / signs / symbols, e.g. not yet able to name a range of emotions. May label all emotions similarly, e.g. any negative situation is labelled as anger, even if sad, frustrated, disappointed, etc. 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. Reliant on others to recognise signs of emotions and name them. May be very sensitive to perceived negative emotions, e.g. crying if they are corrected or if they think someone might be cross with them. Difficulty recognising how others might be feeling and why, and the potential intensity of these feelings. <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 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.

Age	Expected development of emotional recognition and regulation skills	Signs of difficulty with emotional recognition or regulation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasingly able to manage feelings associated with guilt, shame and jealousy – e.g. apologising for mistakes and praising someone who beats them at a game. Likely to need some prompting with this. Hormonal changes are likely to start having an impact in this age range. May see mood swings, increased outbursts, etc. but also periods of being calm and regulated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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.

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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 2 (8-11)	<p>Gross Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-developed coordination, balance, and strength Runs, jumps, hops, and skips with speed and control Participates confidently in team sports and physical activities (e.g. football, netball, swimming, gymnastics) Throws and catches balls with accuracy while moving Performs complex movements such as dance routines, obstacle courses, or multi-step sports drills Rides a two-wheeled bike independently and safely Demonstrates endurance during sustained physical activity (e.g. PE lessons, outdoor play) <p>Fine Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writes fluently with improved speed, legibility, and control Cuts out complex shapes with scissors accurately Draws detailed pictures and geometric shapes Uses tools such as rulers, compasses, and scissors with precision Ties shoelaces and bows independently Builds intricate models using small construction toys (e.g. Lego, craft kits) Uses keyboard and mouse with increasing efficiency <p>Self-Care and Functional Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independently manages dressing, grooming, and hygiene routines Packs and organises school materials and personal belongings Prepares simple snacks or meals with supervision Demonstrates growing independence in daily routines and responsibilities Understands and consistently identifies left and right 	<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) 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) 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 2 (7-11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 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 have sensory preferences and sensory dislikes, but can generally engage with day-to-day activities such as personal care, wearing clothes, eating/drinking, and managing different environments. Engages in a range of types of play – e.g. confident on trim trails / climbing frames, swings, roundabouts, physical play, and calmer play such as construction and arts or crafts. Notices when an injury occurs, seeks treatment as required and carries on activity if minor. Explores different textures – e.g. clay, paint, sand – although will have preferences. 	<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, baths, cutting nails, brushing hair, dressing, haircuts. 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 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 show significant dislike of certain everyday activities and types of play, e.g. lifts / escalators, swings, spinning, motion in general (e.g. car sickness). May seek out strong flavours or specific textures to eat, chew or hold in their mouth. This could include putting non-food items in their mouth regularly, chewing clothing and equipment, etc. 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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 2 (8-11)	<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. Trying different approaches if the first approach doesn't get the desired result. • Exploring and experimenting with the 'rules' of social engagement. Can take on different roles within social interactions. • Recognising, talking about and exploring similarities and differences, e.g. between their own and others' preferences and interests. • Seeing things from another 	<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 shows, or 	<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, or struggle to comply with, 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. This increases social vulnerability as the child gets older. • May find it hard to focus on one thing as may be very aware of and distracted by new/changing aspects of the environment.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>person's perspective and recognising / talking about thoughts and feelings. Discussing different views. Putting yourself in another person's shoes e.g. writing a story from another perspective.</p> <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. • Change is usually readily accepted, e.g. a sports day or non-uniform day, a supply teacher, going to a different supermarket to normal, going on a family holiday, going to a party. • 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. • Can manage different social groups, settings and expectations, e.g. linked to after-school activities such as sports clubs or Cubs/Brownies. • May get upset, frustrated or 'sulk' 	<p>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"> • May be very aware of routines and expect things to happen in exactly the same way every time. 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 playing with other children. • 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be less aware of typical boundaries e.g. social boundaries – may hug a stranger, sit on their lap or seem unaware of personal space. • Might see 'out of the box' problem solving – using objects in unusual and innovative ways. May be very curious e.g. taking things apart to see how they work. <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. moving to a new classroom, preparing for secondary school, supply teachers, or visits to new places. May enjoy exploring new environments and activities and actively seek them out. • Readily accept changes in routine or new activities, e.g. medical appointments, non-uniform days, school residential trips. • 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 an increase in people-pleasing / fawning behaviours as the child gets older. • May appear oblivious to or disinterested in changes and the

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>about changes they don't like or not getting their own way, but will usually settle quickly. They may be able to draw on past experiences e.g. how they coped in a previous similar situation.</p>	<p>not followed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 is likely to lead to distress / emotional dysregulation, including anxiety or emotional outbursts. • Often becomes upset, frustrated or 'sulks' about changes they don't like or not getting their own way. These feelings may last for a long time and they may need a high level of attuned support to process these feelings and move on. 	<p>reasons for them, and fairly unaware of other people's responses to / feelings about change.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can manage different social groups, settings and expectations, e.g. linked to after-school activities such as sports clubs or Cubs/Brownies.

Social Interaction

Date (and number) of version:

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Contributors to the version:

Lucy Yeomans, Lizzie Miller

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 2 (8-11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferred friendships strengthen and showing specific friendship groups. May seek to spend time together outside of school or other organised activities. • 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 'social problem solving' without adult input, e.g. negotiation, compromise. • Becoming more independent from parents within safe boundaries – e.g. able to have playdates without direct adult scaffolding/support. • Able to adjust behaviour to social context. • Awareness of social cues and social expectations, e.g. not commenting loudly on others' appearance. • Developing own interests and hobbies away from parents. • Children may need 'unwritten rules' to be explained to them and made explicit. They may not automatically pick up on what is expected. • Children at this age often get very fixated on specific games, toys, collections, subjects etc. This is typical and may change frequently or be longer-lasting. • 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'. • It is typical at this age to copy or join in with things their peers are doing even if they don't necessarily agree with them. They may be able to reflect on this afterwards, or acknowledge it was a bad idea. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendships may not be maintained, with regular fallings out or indifference to peers. Difficulty solving social problems or reaching agreements when opinions differ. • Needing significant adult support for successful interactions with others e.g. playdates/attending parties. • 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 change behaviour according to the social context, including when this has been explicitly explained to them. • Lack of awareness of expected social behaviour, e.g. may make comments others perceive as 'rude' even if this was not their intention. May struggle to understand why this might be an issue for others, even when explained. • Interests may be very different to those of their peers. If they don't have opportunities to be with others who share these interests, this can impact on social engagement and social enjoyment (this can be more of an issue in very small schools). • Significant separation anxiety in a range of contexts – e.g. following primary caregiver from room to room, to the toilet, etc. • 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'. • May be easily led by peers despite limited understanding of what they are being asked to do or why, e.g. sharing inappropriate photos on social media, engaging in dangerous activities due to being 'egged on' by others. May not recognise the risks associated with this or why it might be a problem. May go along with anything to 'fit in' with peers. • May be drawn to polarised views and opinions, including increasingly extremist views and beliefs, that could increase vulnerability (be mindful of lived experience e.g. unsupervised internet access, social media).

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
Primary School aged children: Key Stage 2 (8-11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing reading fluency and comprehension skills. Accesses books for enjoyment. Can pull out and recall key information when listening to or reading stories. Fluent and automatic recall of basic number facts e.g. number bonds, times tables. Can use these number facts in different problems and activities. Can transfer and apply learning to different contexts – home/school, different lessons, indoors/outdoors. Infers relationships and makes predictions based on these patterns e.g. mammals give birth to live young, a lion is a mammal, therefore a lion gives birth to live young. Understands what to do when presented with a task and chooses the right equipment to complete it e.g. the task is to measure angles and the child knows to get a protractor. Selects what is important or unimportant (e.g. can explain the plot of a story or can organise where information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty recognising symbols (letters, numbers, other familiar symbols in the environment). Not yet able to read familiar words (phonics and/or sight words). Difficulty understanding what they have read, even if able to read the text. Difficulty using texts to find specific information. Difficulty recognising and remembering patterns and sequences (e.g. alphabet, days of the week, number patterns). May be showing signs of specific learning difficulties e.g. dyslexia, dyscalculia. Difficulty with understanding concepts e.g. size, time, order, money, and with recognising patterns and relationships. Difficulty with sorting and categorising. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working significantly above age-related expectations in one or more subject areas (bear in mind spiky profiles – don’t assume the same ability in all areas). 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 peers (and potentially adults) if they are not feeling challenged or if others are not processing things in the

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>should go on a piece of paper when making a poster.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produces written work for a variety of purposes and audiences. • Joins in with motivating, increasingly complex play. Play may include managing/organising other people, remembering and following rules, being flexible (e.g. 'today these trees are the goalposts'), extended turn-taking requiring patience, forward planning, and coming up with and applying strategies. • Generates multiple solutions to a problem and chooses the best one, individually or as part of a group. • 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. • Remembers and applies sequences such as the alphabet, days of the week and months of the year and can use these to find information. • Uses knowledge and understanding of money to make transactions, work out change, etc. Understands comparative values of things. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty recalling number facts fluently and automatically – may be very effortful. • 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. • Limited interest in and awareness of the world around them e.g. not aware of current events. • (Disclaimer: please ensure other potential contributing factors have been explored e.g. motor skills, hearing, eyesight, language.) 	<p>same way as them. E.g. in play, other children may not process complex rules as quickly or remember what to do next. May prefer to play/interact with adults or older children, e.g. clubs linked to particular hobbies and interests.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May show exceptionally good knowledge and understanding of key interests. May independently research these interests to a very high level and be able to tell others about them.