



Neurodiversity Profiling Tool

Tables for Secondary school and college-aged young people (11-18 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
Secondary school and college aged children (11-18)	<p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands a set of lengthy instructions containing lots of information. • Understands more complex inferences, jokes, sarcasm and idioms. <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses subject specific vocabulary. • Uses language to talk about language. • Holds conversations on a wide range of topics. • Has discussions, forms arguments and uses language to persuade others. • Gives clear and detailed explanations. 	<p><u>Receptive language (understanding)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in learning more advanced and abstract vocabulary. • Processes language literally. • Finds long and complex instructions challenging to follow. <p><u>Expressive language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in giving specific answers or explanations. • Difficulty in sequencing ideas into the right order.

Age	Typical development	Signs of difficulty
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can break complex sequences down into different steps.	

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
Secondary school and college aged children (11-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typical sleep expectation: 8-10 hours • Enjoys a mixture of both physical activity (running, ball games, sports, riding a bike / scooter / skateboard) and calmer activities (Lego, reading, art and craft activities, listening to music, watching films). 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 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. • Social engagement – initiating / 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average sleep is considerably more than typically expected for the age (see left). May struggle to get out of bed. • Mostly seeking/engaging with calmer activities. Less interest/engagement with active, physical play. • May present as passive, low mood, bored. • Reduced interest in activities or new experiences. • Reduced self-motivation / self-drive. • May seem tired – yawning, lying on desk, daydreaming. • May seek out calmer activities during unstructured times e.g. staying in the classroom, going to the library. • 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, Lego, board games / tabletop games, computer games. • May struggle to regulate energy levels to suit the social or learning activity, e.g. 	<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 also see risky social choices / behaviours e.g. gang involvement, county lines, spending time with much older peers, risky health behaviours e.g. smoking/vaping, drinking, drug use. • 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 activities – not yet able to do this for 20 minutes. • Often good at starting tasks but rarely finishes them / sees them through. • May seek out highly stimulating activities e.g. fast-

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower energy levels	Signs of difference: higher energy levels
	<p>joining in with social activities that suit the young person's interests.</p>	<p>increasing their energy level to join in with more active tasks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May lack the energy and motivation for after-school / extra-curricular activities and social engagement. May present as uninterested in going out or leaving the house / bedroom. • May struggle with age-related expectations for e.g. self-care skills, independent living skills, due to tiredness. 	<p>moving games, sensory input.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. around sitting still, and social expectations, e.g. development of independent living skills.

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
Secondary school and college aged children (11-18)	<p><u>Attention/Concentration:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused attention on adult-directed activities for 2-3 minutes per year of age. • Can usually 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. • Follows familiar routines independently without getting overly distracted, e.g. getting dressed, brushing teeth, eating breakfast. • Follow more complex school routines 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 – seems to struggle to build habits that would be expected of a child their age. • Difficulty managing the increased demands of 	<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 tricky, especially moving on from a preferred activity. Moving between lessons may also be tricky. • May seem completely unaware of other things in the environment when focused or in ‘flow state’. May

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>following a timetable, moving between classrooms, remembering homework and equipment needed for different lessons (see also section on cognitive skills – executive functioning).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can attend to and follow through with multi-step instructions, including those that involve going to a different room / location. • Can shut out unwanted and unrelated information and concentrate on only the necessary features. • Uses strategies to independently redirect and focus their attention, e.g. taking a break, doodling, using fidgets when they know this supports them to focus. Can use these during activities that require longer focus e.g. written exams. • Young people still need opportunities to move between tasks but can usually do this within the structure of the day e.g. running around at breaktime or when transitioning between lessons. <p><u>Impulse Control:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually follows group routines and expectations e.g. around safety (school / classroom rules, using age-appropriate equipment safely after being shown) including when not being supervised – showing internal control / self-regulation. • Understands hazards in the environment e.g. road safety, heights, science and DT 	<p>secondary school e.g. moving between classrooms, time management, remembering equipment.</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. • Difficulty following instructions with more than one step – may forget or get distracted after first step or need prompting/guidance. • Difficulty using strategies to regulate attention independently – may need guidance and prompting. • May struggle to make use of exam arrangements e.g. extra time (may benefit more from supervised rest breaks). <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 independence and 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 and/or increased risk-taking 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 from height without checking 	<p>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. This can be very distracting and impact on the ability to focus on teacher input or expectations. • May find it very tricky to move on from something before they feel it is complete / finished / perfect. <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. This can include ‘standard’ expectations e.g. changes of classroom, supply teachers, different teachers having different rules and expectations. • May expect others to have the same high level of impulse control and get frustrated if they don’t, e.g. if a peer is engaging in risky behaviours they don’t agree with or approve of. May seek out interaction with older or much younger children or adults as a

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>equipment, household chemicals. Usually able to manage these hazards safely with some guidance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of social dangers e.g. peer pressure, e-safety. Usually able to use strategies / support to manage difficult or risky social situations. • Able to negotiate, compromise, share, take turns and wait during interactions with others. • Can wait for something and accept the need to do so (e.g. waiting in a queue to get their lunch at the canteen, 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). • Can delay gratification, e.g. saving money for an occasion or big purchase, able to work towards long term goals. • Can usually think before they act and understand some of the potential consequences of their actions. 	<p>what's underneath. May actively engage in risky behaviour e.g. tombstoning, climbing on roofs of buildings, not using safety equipment for sports/activities, and seem unaware of potential consequences or dangers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be socially vulnerable – suggestible, easily led. Lack of awareness of social dangers e.g. 'stranger danger', online safety, peer pressure. May be vulnerable to exploitation e.g. county lines, gangs, CSE, 'sexting'. • May see some riskier health behaviours (e.g. vaping, underage sexual activity, drug and alcohol use), typically for social acceptance and a sense of belonging with a peer group (linked to social vulnerability and peer pressure as described above). • Difficulty following classroom, home or community expectations, even with good intentions, e.g. shouting out answers to questions, needing to share their views/opinions straight away, reacting to conflict / challenging situations in an unsafe way. 	<p>result, or with peers who are happy to be directed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May disengage socially from neurotypical peers due to others engaging in different social activities or behaviours that don't fit with their interests or ways of engaging. • May feel uncomfortable in situations where there aren't explicit rules, e.g. unstructured social situations, as other people's behaviours are harder to predict (see also section on flexibility and adaptability).

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
Secondary school and College aged children (11-	<u>Recognising and labelling emotions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-developed 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, and this isn't 	<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
18)	<p>necessarily a problem). Increasingly able to articulate subtleties of emotion, intensity of feelings, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually able to use words, signs or symbols to communicate how they are feeling instead of using behaviours to express themselves. May prefer to express emotions creatively e.g. through drawing, song writing, poetry, graffiti, choice of music, etc. • Increasingly able to recognise the emotions of others through facial expressions, body language and gestures. Able to recognise the intensity of others' emotions. • 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. • Able to use logic and reasoning with some support, e.g. to address fears or worries. <p><u>Emotional regulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional responses during adolescence are expected to be heightened at times due to hormones and physical/social changes. Quick and intense changes in mood are expected. At a time of increased stress for secondary school aged children, they are expected to react intensely in both positive and negative situations. • However, during this time they are better equipped to regulate their own emotions or may turn to friends or the internet for help and advice rather than adults. • 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). • Usually able to stop and think before reacting (although there may 	<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. • Difficulty linking 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. • Difficulty picking up on emotional cues may increasingly impact on friendships at this age. • May struggle to explain and understand heightened emotions. <p><u>Emotional regulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional distress may be seen as explosive or 'challenging' behaviour, talking back to teachers, getting into fights. It may also look quieter, e.g. withdrawing, avoiding contact or conversations with others, or extended school non-attendance. • Not seeking comfort or support from others at times of distress or actively resisting this comfort or support. The need for independence at this age may lead to children avoiding contact and conversations with family when struggling, despite still needing the familial support. • 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

Age	Expected development of emotional recognition and regulation skills	Signs of difficulty with emotional recognition or regulation
	<p>be infrequent ‘blips’).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasingly able to use self-regulation techniques, e.g. deliberately stopping and thinking, using breathing exercises, going for a walk, listening to music, or finding a distraction. They may still need guidance, prompts and perhaps co-regulation at times. It is developmentally typical to disagree with others e.g. parents, siblings, friends. This is linked to the development of independence and self-identity. Issues can usually be resolved thanks to increasing social problem-solving skills. 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. Both seek and offer advice, support and comfort to others, especially peers. Relationships may be intense, but each party’s emotions are respected. The relationship is safe and not dominated by either party. 	<p>inconsolably upset or not react at all (also consider sensory processing, especially interoception).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Might present as very clingy and in need of constant support and reassurance, from peers and/or adults. 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 self-harm, skin picking, substance abuse and a lack of self-care. Rapid shifts in emotion – may go from one extreme to the other and back again very quickly and not seem aware of the impact to others. May feel like an ‘emotional rollercoaster’. Intense levels of emotion can lead to very intense relationships developing. These relationships may feature domestic abuse, violence, or controlling / coercive behaviour.

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
Secondary school and college aged children (11-18)	<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 with coordination in sports or PE (e.g. struggles with team games, ball skills, or gym routines) Avoids physical activity or appears anxious about participating in sports Clumsiness or poor balance compared to peers Difficulty learning or refining complex movements (e.g. dance, gymnastics, cycling, swimming) Tires quickly during physical activity or avoids it altogether <p>Fine Motor Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handwriting remains slow, poorly formed, or illegible despite support Difficulty maintaining a mature pencil grip Struggles with typing fluently or accurately (even with practice) Difficulty using scissors, rulers, or other classroom tools with precision Avoids or becomes frustrated with written tasks or fine motor activities Difficulty tying shoelaces, knots, or a school tie Struggles with tasks like shuffling/dealing cards, opening packets, or tying up long hair Inconsistent use of left and right hand for tasks (if not already established) <p>Self-Care and Functional Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty managing fastenings (e.g. buttons, zips, bras) Avoids or struggles with personal grooming tasks (e.g. tying hair, dressing appropriately) Appears disorganised with personal belongings or school materials Reluctance to engage in age-appropriate independent tasks (e.g. preparing snacks, managing hygiene) Motor difficulties begin to impact confidence, participation, or social inclusion

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
Secondary school and college aged children (11-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning to recognise and act on own sensory preferences where relevant (e.g. wearing headphones to block out unwanted noise to help with concentration). • Notices when an injury occurs, seeks treatment as required and carries on activity if minor. • Usually able to engage with personal care activities without distress. • May have a fairly small range of food preferences, but eating a reasonably balanced diet, growing/gaining weight, and willing to try new foods. • Usually happy to explore new activities and environments and try new things. • It's fairly typical for teenagers not to dress in ways adults would expect, e.g. not wanting to wear a coat when it's cold or raining, or wearing a hoody with the hood up on a hot day. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May struggle with school uniform expectations relating to texture, fabric type, fastenings, tightness, etc. • May struggle with noisy and/or busy environments such as school corridors, the canteen, shopping centres. • May seem to seek out sensory extremes e.g. strong flavours, very hot or cold showers, intense physical activity / risk taking. • May be very easily distracted by sensory aspects of the environment, e.g. people moving around in their peripheral vision, ticking clocks, smells from the canteen. • May find certain lessons difficult to tolerate because of sensory aspects, e.g. due to smells associated with cooking / science / PE changing rooms, wearing safety equipment in DT or science, etc. • Personal care may be impacted by sensory aspects, e.g. struggling to tolerate the feel of water on them in the shower, dislike of the smell or feel of deodorant, difficulty managing the sensory aspect of periods and puberty. • Tolerance of sensory input may be impacted by other factors such as stress levels – sensory preferences may seem more noticeable around exams, transitions, etc. • 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 be very sensitive to and distressed by 'light touch' e.g. people brushing past them or standing near them in a queue. May interpret this as deliberate physical aggression from others. • May be more sensitive than others to changes in temperature, e.g. heat having a significant impact on mood and energy levels. • 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
Secondary school and college aged children (11-18)	<p><u>Flexibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving and experimenting with 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 and how these change in different settings and situations. Can take on different roles within social interactions. Increasing confidence in navigating structured and unstructured social situations and environments. • Understanding and adapting to other people's needs and preferences. 	<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, especially with the frequent transitions within secondary school. • May find sensory input 'all consuming' e.g. noise, light, smells, restrictive uniform, crowded corridors, and be unable to focus on anything else. This may impact on school attendance if sensory needs are not recognised and supported as the school environment may feel unbearable. • May have a self-restricted diet linked to the need for predictability and sameness, e.g. having the same thing for lunch every day, or not eating on the school site. • Difficulty switching between different tasks/activities and lessons (frequent changes are incompatible with monotropic attention styles). 	<p><u>Flexibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawn to novelty – new people, places and experiences. This desire may override expected boundaries, rules and laws, e.g. engaging in risky behaviours, 'I wonder what will happen if...'. May appear to think they are invincible. May put others at risk through their actions. • May be easily led by others, including into potentially risky behaviours, without necessarily thinking through the potential consequences of actions. This increases social vulnerability to e.g. county lines and exploitation. • May find it hard to focus on one thing as may be very aware of and

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can see things from another person's perspective and recognise / talk about differing thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs. • Increasing insight into other people's views; able to e.g. write a story from another perspective or advocate on behalf of others. • Making links between current actions and future goals / outcomes, e.g. choosing GCSEs with a particular college course or career in mind, understanding how studying maths now may be useful in adulthood. <p><u>Adaptability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copes well with general demands and expectations of school. Amount of support and guidance needed may vary e.g. in relation to changes associated with puberty, exam pressure, etc. • Usually able to cope with the transitions in secondary school, e.g. moving between classes, different seating arrangements. Can cope with having different teachers who each have different teaching styles, rules and expectations. • Can manage different social groups, settings and expectations, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children may have one or a few highly specific interests and show little interest in other subjects or activities. These may be typical age-related interests e.g. bands or computer games, or less typical interests such as a particular history topic. • May get very distressed or frustrated if others interfere with their belongings or personal space. May be susceptible to being deliberately 'wound up' by peers who know how to 'push their buttons' for a response. • May find it hard to interact with other people who have different communication styles or who do not share their hobbies or interests. This may impact on social interaction and developing friendships. • May interpret things 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, and need longer to process it. <p><u>Adaptability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May seek consistency, predictability and routines and get distressed if these change or are not sustainable. • Difficulty coping with the transitions in secondary school, e.g. moving between classes, different seating arrangements. Struggle with having different teachers who each have different teaching styles, rules and expectations. Difficulty accepting a lack of consistency, e.g. teachers not applying rules consistently. • Same behaviour/actions regardless of audience – acts/speaks in the same way to e.g. friends, family and the Headteacher. • 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 	<p>distracted by new/changing aspects of the environment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • May appear 'chaotic' – drawn in lots of directions at the same time and struggle to prioritise. • May struggle to set realistic goals and make decisions, e.g. choosing GCSEs or college courses. <p><u>Adaptability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not fazed by unfamiliar environments, people and activities; no particular distress shown with e.g. starting secondary school, supply teachers, or visits to new places. Readily accept changes in routine or new activities, e.g. medical appointments, non-uniform days, school residential trips. • 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. This may result in needs not being recognised.

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>e.g. linked to after-school activities such as sports clubs, Army Cadets or Guides/Scouts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning to explore their own identity, values and beliefs. Can advocate for / stand up for their own beliefs and needs rather than just 'going with the flow'. • Can negotiate and problem-solve with peers, e.g. agreeing on where to go or what to do. • Can draw on support from teachers, friends and family to cope with changes and challenges. 	<p>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. • May struggle to adapt to changing expectations with age, e.g. increasing responsibilities and independence. • Being exposed to / expected to tolerate lots of change is likely to lead to distress / emotional dysregulation, including anxiety or emotional outbursts. Likely to become upset, frustrated, confrontational or withdrawn, which may appear out of character (especially compared to behaviour in 'safe' environments). Without appropriate understanding, support and adaptations, this may manifest in reduced attendance, either in school as a whole or specific lessons, or exclusions/isolations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • May struggle to adapt to changing expectations with age, e.g. increasing responsibilities and independence. Often present as 'passive' – attends school/college and 'goes with the flow' but less likely to actively engage with homework and revision.

Social Interaction

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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
Secondary school and college aged children (11-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May prefer to spend time alone, with friends, or away from parents. • Knows how to start an interaction with someone else and advocate for their opinions and preferences (e.g. saying no or leaving the situation if they don't want to do a certain activity). • Confident with 'social problem solving' without adult input, e.g. negotiation, compromise. Knows when to seek further adult support, e.g. if the problem is bigger than they can manage themselves. • Communication with parents may reduce (however they are not completely isolated and will engage on their own terms). Likely to become more private and secretive. • Friendships become more important than family. • Friendships often change at this age as sense of self develops, hobbies and interests change, and they are interacting with more children. • Teenagers typically push against boundaries and resist parental advice. • Social media use should still be monitored, with guidance given around age restrictions and content. Teenagers are likely to push against this – this is typical. • Developing strong sense of self. • May spend prolonged periods of time on-line/gaming unless clear boundaries set and enforced. • 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in dangerous behaviours on-line or face to face without awareness of impact of behaviour/choices. • May seem to mirror or copy close friends and lack sense of self (social masking). • 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 join in with something). • 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. • Significant resistance to transitioning off gaming devices/phone. • Becoming isolated and withdrawn from friendship groups. • Over sharing personal information – e.g. talking about periods loudly with family members, giving out personal information to strangers. • 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). • May get into trouble with police or youth offending team. May seem unaware or not accept that laws apply to them. This may be a particular issue if the child also has strong polarised opinions e.g. around race, sexuality, gender.

Age	Typical social development (across neurotypes)	Signs of social difficulties that might need support or a different approach
	<p>a bad idea.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May seek relationships with others including sexual relationships. With support and guidance, shows understanding of safety and consent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May engage in risky sexual behaviour. May lack understanding of consent (despite support and guidance) – their own understanding of consenting to sexual activity themselves, and also the need to seek genuine consent from others. Beliefs and expectations around sexual activity may be strongly influenced by extreme online content which can increase vulnerability.

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
Secondary school and college aged children (11-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is largely working within age-related expectations across curriculum subjects. Able to give good reasons for thinking/ideas. Can organise themselves (e.g. get to places (navigate), follow a timetable, remember equipment, meet deadlines). Develops strategies for completing tasks and can plan how they will achieve certain goals (e.g. writing an essay, completing a page of maths problems, constructing a wooden box in D.T.). Plans task ahead (e.g. can independently research information for a project). Uses and applies knowledge in real life situations e.g. tells the time and uses money. Identifies patterns and relationships (e.g. examples of a theme in a novel or play). Understands what to do when presented with a task (e.g. can understand what homework tasks require of student without 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty accessing classroom learning in one or more subjects, e.g. due to working significantly below age-related expectations. May have identified learning needs e.g. MLD or specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyscalculia). Persistent difficulty with functional literacy and/or maths skills e.g. reading, writing, telling the time, managing money, despite appropriate targeted intervention. Difficulty with executive skills such as planning, organisation, time management. May struggle to set realistic goals 	<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. Processes information quickly, including large amounts of complex information. May get frustrated with peers (and potentially adults) if they

Age	Typical developmental expectations	Signs of difference: lower levels	Signs of difference: higher levels
	<p>additional explanation).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the world around them (e.g. has some awareness of current issues in the media beyond immediate experience). • Beginning to think critically and evaluate information for themselves online or offline (e.g. Moral problems in R.E. classes or figuring out why they may have had an argument with a friend, or why this football player is better than another). • Can plan and organise interactions and events with peers with increasing independence, e.g. who/where/when, booking tickets if needed, etc. • Plays games with increasingly complex rules, e.g. board games, card games, sports. • Has developed own strategies for reaching goals (e.g. has developed study techniques to revise for exams, can search on the internet and work out how to fix a problem with a piece of technology). • Self-aware of own personal strengths, difficulties and interests. Has strategies to overcome known personal challenges. 	<p>and to come up with manageable action plans to work towards these goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited interest in or awareness of the world around them e.g. current affairs, local/regional/global events. • May take things at face value rather than thinking more critically. Difficulty explaining own thoughts and opinions about a topic – may just go along with views of parents, friends or media. • (Disclaimer: please ensure other potential contributing factors have been explored e.g. motor skills, hearing, eyesight, language.) 	<p>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. May prefer to 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.