Neurodiversity

Family Toolkit

Understanding, celebrating and supporting your neurodivergent child — with local help for families in Barking & Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

Family Services | **Rooted in the community** | **Every family is different**

Welcome

A toolkit made for families, by people who work alongside families

Every child's brain is wired in its own way. If your child is autistic, has ADHD, dyslexia or another neurodivergent condition, or you are wondering whether they might, this toolkit is for you. You do not need a diagnosis to use it.

Inside you will find plain-English explanations of the words you will hear, ideas to try at home and when you are out and about, ways to look after yourself, and tips for working with schools, the council and health services. At the back there are local sections for **Redbridge**, **Barking & Dagenham** and **Havering**, with links you can click.

How to use this toolkit

Dip in and out. Start with the section that feels most useful today.

Try one idea at a time. What works for one child may not work for another, and that is fine.

Write in it. The detective log, strengths page and meeting checklist are there for you to fill in.

Not sure what some of the abbreviations mean? check out our Acronyms booklet on our website.

What's inside

1	**Understanding the words** Neurodiverse, neurodivergent, neurotypical and neuro-affirming
2	**Common neurodivergent conditions** What they are and the strengths that often come with them
3	**Celebrating differences** Spotting strengths and building pride
4	**Strategies for home** Routines, communication, sensory needs, sleep and more
5	**Strategies for outside the home** Shops, outings, appointments and travel
6	**Family self-care** Looking after you, your partner and siblings
7	**Be a detective** Finding out what works for your child and family
8	**Working with education, the local authority and health** SEN support, EHC plans, assessments and meetings
9	**Useful UK links** National charities and helplines

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Local support

Redbridge, Barking & Dagenham and Havering

1 Understanding the words

Four words you will hear a lot, and how they fit together

These words are often mixed up. A simple way to remember them is to think of a garden: every flower is different, some grow in ways people do not expect, and all of them grow best with the right care.

Neurodiverse

Describes a **group** of people whose brains work in different ways: a family, a class, a workplace or the whole world.

Neurodiversity is the idea that these differences are a natural part of being human.

Tip: one person is not "neurodiverse". A group is.

Neurodivergent

Describes **one person** whose brain works differently from what society usually expects.

This includes people who are autistic or have ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, DLD, Tourette's and others.

Many neurodivergent people have more than one of these.

Neurotypical

Describes a person whose brain works in the way that most schools, workplaces and public spaces are designed for.

It is not "normal" or "better". It is just the most common way of processing the world.

Neuro-affirming

An **approach** to support. It accepts neurodivergence as a difference, not something to fix.

It changes the environment and expectations to fit the child, respects how they communicate, stim and rest, and listens to neurodivergent voices.

The goal is a happy, confident child, not one who "looks typical".

Putting it together

"Our family is **neurodiverse**. My son is **neurodivergent**: he is autistic and has ADHD. My daughter and I are **neurotypical**. At home and at school we use a **neuro-affirming** approach, so he can be himself and get the support he needs."

A note on language: many autistic people prefer identity-first language ("autistic child"); others prefer person-first ("child with autism"). There is no single right answer, so follow your child's lead as they grow.

2 Common neurodivergent conditions

Every child is unique. These are starting points, not boxes.

Below are some of the neurodivergent conditions families come across most often. Many children have more than one, and no two children with the same diagnosis are alike. This page is not a checklist for diagnosis. If you have concerns, talk to your GP, health visitor or your child's school SENCo.

	What it can look like	Strengths often seen ★
	Autism A different way of experiencing and communicating with the world. Autistic children may find social situations, change and busy sensory environments hard, and often have deep, focused interests. Girls and quieter children may **mask** (hide) their differences, especially at school.	Honesty, loyalty, deep knowledge, attention to detail, pattern spotting, strong sense of justice.
	ADHD Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder affects how the brain manages attention, energy, impulses and emotions. It can look **inattentive** (daydreamy, forgetful), **hyperactive-impulsive**, or **combined**. Children often find it hard to focus on things that do not interest them.	Creativity, energy, curiosity, humour, quick thinking, "hyperfocus" on things they love.
	PDA profile Pathological Demand Avoidance (many families prefer "persistent drive for autonomy") is widely understood as a **profile of autism**. Anxiety leads to a strong need to avoid everyday demands and stay in control. Traditional reward-and-consequence approaches often make things harder.	Imagination, creativity, determination, strong sense of fairness, often very sociable on their own terms.
b d p q	**Dyslexia** A learning difference that mainly affects reading and spelling. It can also affect working memory, processing speed and organisation. It is not linked to intelligence.	Big-picture thinking, creativity, problem solving, strong spoken language and reasoning.
	Dyspraxia (DCD) Developmental Coordination Disorder affects movement and coordination: handwriting, dressing, using cutlery, sport and sometimes planning and organising.	Determination, empathy, creative and strategic thinking, persistence.

	What it can look like	Strengths often seen ★
	Dyscalculia A persistent difficulty understanding numbers and learning maths facts, such as telling the time, handling money and mental arithmetic.	Often strong verbal, creative and practical skills; good strategic thinkers.
	Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) A lifelong difference in understanding and/or using spoken language. It is common, affecting around two children in every class of thirty, but often goes unnoticed or is mistaken for poor behaviour or not listening.	Visual and practical learning, creativity, kindness and resilience.
	Tourette's and tic disorders Tics are sudden movements or sounds a child does not choose to make. Tourette's is diagnosed when there are both motor and vocal tics lasting over a year. Tics often increase with stress, excitement or tiredness.	Quick thinking, creativity, empathy, resilience.
	Sensory processing differences Being over- or under-sensitive to sound, touch, light, smells, tastes, movement or body signals like hunger and needing the toilet. Very common alongside autism and ADHD. An occupational therapist (OT) can help.	Heightened awareness, noticing details others miss, deep enjoyment of sensory experiences.

Good to know

You do not need a diagnosis for your child to get help at school. Support should be based on **need**.

Anxiety, sleep difficulties and differences in eating are common alongside neurodivergence. Mention them to your GP.

Some children also have a learning disability. This is different from a learning difficulty such as dyslexia.

3 Celebrating differences

Different, not less

Children who hear good things about who they are grow up with stronger self-esteem. Neurodivergent children often hear a lot about what they find hard. Balancing that with what they do well really matters.

Spot the strengths

- Notice and name strengths out loud: "You remembered every detail!"
- Praise effort and creativity, not just results.
- Keep a "wins jar" and add a note for every small success.

Love their interests

- Special interests bring joy, calm and learning. Join in.
- Use interests as a bridge into reading, maths, chatting and friendships.
- Find clubs or groups built around what they love.

Respect how they are

- Stimming (rocking, flapping, humming) helps regulation. It is okay.
- Accept different ways of communicating and playing.
- Avoid asking them to hide who they are to fit in.

Talk about it positively

- Explain their diagnosis in a positive, appropriate way.
- Share books and stories with neurodivergent characters.
- Help them meet other neurodivergent children and adults.

Dates to celebrate together

March

Neurodiversity Celebration Week

March/April

World Autism Acceptance Week

May to June

Tourette's Awareness Month

October

ADHD Awareness Month, Dyslexia Awareness Week, DLD Awareness Day and Dyspraxia Awareness Week

My child's superpowers

Fill this in together. Pin it on the fridge or share it with school.

I am brilliant at…

People like me because…

I love learning about…

I feel happiest when…

4 Strategies for home

Small changes that can make everyday life calmer

Home is where your child can recharge. Pick one or two ideas, try them for a couple of weeks, and keep what helps.

Make the day predictable

- Use a **visual timetable** with pictures or photos of the day.
- Try a **Now and Next** board for tricky tasks.
- Give warnings before changes and use sand timers or countdowns.
- Keep a family calendar so changes are not a surprise.

Communicate clearly

- Use fewer words and say the key word first: "Shoes on."
- Allow **processing time**. Count to 10 before repeating.
- Show as well as tell: point, model, use pictures.
- For PDA or anxious children, try **declarative language**: "I notice the shoes are by the door" instead of an instruction.

Create a sensory-friendly home

- Make a calm corner or den with soft lighting, cushions and a blanket.
- Offer ear defenders, sunglasses, fidgets or chewy tools.
- Build in **movement breaks**: trampolining, swinging, carrying heavy shopping.
- Notice labels, seams, smells and noises that bother your child.

Support big feelings

- A **meltdown** is not a tantrum. It is an overwhelmed nervous system.
- Stay calm, speak less, keep everyone safe and lower demands.
- Some children **shut down** instead: going quiet or still. Give space and time.
- Reconnect afterwards with warmth, not blame.

Sleep

- Keep the same wind-down routine, shown as pictures.
- Dim lights and switch off screens before bed where possible.
- Check the bedroom for light, noise, temperature and bedding textures.
- Keep a sleep diary and share it with your GP if problems continue.

Food and mealtimes

- Many neurodivergent children eat a small range of "safe foods". This is common.
- Keep safe foods on the plate and offer new foods with no pressure.
- Consider sensory needs: noise, smells, sitting still.
- Ask your GP for advice if you are worried about growth or weight.

Siblings matter too

Brothers and sisters may feel worried, left out or protective. Plan small opportunities of one-to-one time, explain differences in simple words, and let them share their feelings. The charity **Sibs** supports siblings of disabled children (see the UK links section).

5 Strategies for outside the home

Making outings, appointments and travel easier

The world outside the home can be loud, bright, busy and unpredictable. A little planning helps your child know what to expect and gives you a plan B if things get too much. **Remember:** leaving early is not failing. It is listening to your child.

Before you go

- Show photos, videos or a short **social story** of where you are going.
- Go at quieter times. Many supermarkets offer quiet hours.
- Agree a signal your child can use when they need a break.
- Plan an exit route and a calm spot.

Pack a grab bag

- Ear defenders or headphones, sunglasses or a cap.
- Favourite snacks, water and a comfort item.
- Fidget toys, an iPad or book for waiting.
- Spare clothes and wipes.

Appointments

- Ask for the first or last appointment of the day to avoid waiting.
- Ask for **reasonable adjustments**, such as a quiet waiting area. Ask your GP to note them on your child's record.
- Take your child's one-page profile to share how they communicate.

Travel and safety

- Use headphones and a visual journey plan for trains and buses.
- If your child may wander, take a photo of them each time you go out, and think about an ID band with your number.
- Practise what to do if they get lost.

Helpful schemes and cards

Sunflower lanyard

A discreet sign that someone has a non-visible disability and may need extra time or help. Widely recognised in shops, airports and stations.

hdsunflower.com

CEA Card

Lets a carer go to the cinema free with the cardholder at participating UK cinemas.

ceacard.co.uk

Blue Badge

People with non-visible disabilities, including some autistic children, may be eligible. Apply through your council.

gov.uk/apply-blue-badge

Also ask about: the Sycamore Trust **autism alert card** (ask our Family Services team), sign posting to **relaxed performances** at theatres and cinemas, and **access passes** at theme parks and attractions.

6 Family self-care

You cannot pour from an empty cup

Caring for a neurodivergent child can be joyful, and it can also be exhausting. Looking after yourself is not selfish. Your child needs you calm and well, and you deserve support too. Many parents also discover their own neurodivergence when their child is assessed. If this is you, be kind to yourself.

Small daily resets

- Five minutes with a hot drink while it is still hot.
- A short walk, music or a phone call with a friend.
- Lower the bar on housework. Good enough is good enough.

Find your people

- Join a parent support group. Other parents truly understand.
- Join your local parent carer forum (see local sections).
- Say yes when people offer help and be specific about what helps.

Share the load

- Take turns with a partner, family or friend so each of you gets a break.
- Ask about **short breaks** through your council's Local Offer.
- Plan couple or friend time, even if it is short.

Know your rights

- You can ask the council for a **Parent Carer Needs Assessment**.
- You may be able to claim **Carer's Allowance** if your child gets certain disability benefits.
- Employees can ask for **flexible working** and take up to one week of unpaid **carer's leave** a year.

Watch for signs of burnout

Feeling exhausted all the time, numb or distant, snapping more than usual or feeling you are not the parent you want to be are signs you need more support, not signs you are failing. Talk to your GP, a friend or a support service.

If you are struggling right now: call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option, call Samaritans free on **116 123**, or text **SHOUT** to **85258**. In an emergency call **999**.

My self-care plan

This week I will…	Someone I can call	Something that recharges me

7 Be a detective

Finding out what works for your child and family

All behaviour is communication. What we see on the surface, like a meltdown, refusal or running off, is often just the tip of the iceberg. Underneath there may be anxiety, sensory overload, tiredness, hunger, pain or a need that cannot be put into words.

You are the expert on your child. By becoming a detective, you can look for clues, spot patterns and find what really helps.

Five steps to solving the case

1	**Observe** Write down what happened **before**, what it **looked like**, and what happened **after**. Stick to facts.
2	**Look for clues** Check the clue list below. Is it the same time of day, the same place, the same kind of demand?
3	**Make a guess** "I think the noise in the dinner hall is overwhelming her."
4	**Try one change** Change one thing at a time, for one to two weeks, so you know what made the difference.
5	**Review and share** Keep what works. Share it with school and others in a one-page profile.

The clue checklist

Sensory
Noise, lights, smells, crowds, clothing, temperature

Body
Hunger, thirst, tiredness, pain, toilet needs, illness

Change
Transitions, surprises, new people, new places

Demands
Too many instructions, hard tasks, being rushed

Feelings
Anxiety, frustration, embarrassment, excitement

Energy
A busy day at school can mean a big release at home

My detective log

Photocopy this page or copy it into a notebook. After a week or two, look back for patterns.

Date and time	What happened before?	What did I see?	What happened after?	Clues and ideas

Share what works: a one-page profile

A one-page profile is a simple summary of your child that you can give to school, clubs and health staff. Include:

- **What people like and admire about me**
- **What is important to me** (people, interests, routines, comfort items)
- **How best to support me** (communication, sensory needs, what helps when I am upset)

8 Working with education, the local authority and health

You are an equal partner in your child's support

Your child may be supported by people from three main areas. You know your child best, and your views should be listened to at every stage. It helps to keep good records and to put important requests in writing.

Education

SEN Support

Every school must have a **SENCo** (Special Educational Needs Coordinator). If you are worried, ask to meet them.

- Schools use a cycle of **Assess, Plan, Do, Review**.
- Your child does **not** need a diagnosis to get SEN support.
- Ask for a copy of any support plan and when it will be reviewed.

EHC needs assessment and plan

If your child needs more help than the school can usually provide, an **Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment** can be requested. **Parents can request it themselves**, in writing, to the council.

- The council must decide within **6 weeks** whether to assess.
- If a plan is issued, the whole process should take no more than **20 weeks** from the request.
- You have the right to appeal decisions.

The local authority (council)

The Local Offer

Every council must publish a **Local Offer**: a directory of SEND services, activities, short breaks and support. Links are in the local sections.

Social care and short breaks

You can ask the council's children's disability service for an assessment of your child's needs and ask about **short breaks** and a **Parent Carer Needs Assessment**.

SENDIASS

Each council funds a free, **impartial and confidential** SEND Information, Advice and Support Service. They can help with letters, meetings and EHC plans.

Health

Where to start

- Your **GP**, **health visitor** (under 5s) or **school nurse**.
- They can refer to children's services, such as paediatrics, speech and language therapy (SLT) or occupational therapy (OT).

Assessments

- Autism and ADHD assessments often have long waits. Ask what support is available **while you wait**.
- In England you may have a **Right to Choose** another NHS-approved provider for an autism or ADHD assessment. Ask your GP.

Mental health

- **CAMHS** (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) support children with anxiety, low mood and other mental health needs.
- Links for each borough are in the local sections.

Top tips for meetings

- Ask for the agenda and any reports **before** the meeting.
- Write down your three most important points and take them with you.
- Take someone with you: a partner, friend, or a SENDIASS adviser.
- Ask “Who will do what, and by when?” before you leave.
- Follow up with a short email summarising what was agreed.

Your SEND folder checklist

Keep everything in one place, with the newest documents at the front:

- Reports and letters from school, health and the council
- Your detective log and your child's one-page profile
- School support plans, EHC plan and review notes
- A contact list and a log of calls and emails with dates

Please note: SEND law and processes in England can change. Your local SENDIASS or the charity IPSEA can tell you about the latest rules.

9 Useful UK links

Trusted national charities, helplines and information

Click on any link to visit the website. Helpline opening times vary, so check the website first.

Information about neurodivergent conditions

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
National Autistic Society	Information and advice about autism for families, including guides on education, behaviour and wellbeing.	autism.org.uk
Autism Central	Free NHS-funded peer education and support for parents and carers of autistic people.	autismcentral.nhs.uk
PDA Society	Information, training and support about the PDA profile of autism.	pdasociety.org.uk
ADHD UK	Information and support about ADHD, run by people with ADHD.	adhduk.co.uk
ADDISS	The national ADHD information and support service.	addiss.co.uk
British Dyslexia Association	Information, helpline and advice about dyslexia and dyscalculia.	bdadyslexia.org.uk
Dyspraxia Foundation	Information and support for families about dyspraxia (DCD).	Dyslexia Foundation
Speech and Language UK	Help for children who find talking and understanding words hard, including a progress checker.	speechandlanguage.org.uk
Tourettes Action	Information and support for people with Tourette's and their families.	tourettes-action.org.uk
NHS: autism and ADHD	Trusted NHS information about signs, assessment and support.	nhs.uk/conditions/autism nhs.uk/conditions/adhd-children-teenagers

SEND rights, money and family support

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
Contact	The charity for families with disabled children: benefits, education, and a free helpline (0808 808 3555).	contact.org.uk

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
IPSEA	Free, legally-based advice on SEN support, EHC plans and appeals.	ipsea.org.uk
GOV.UK: SEND	The official guide to support for children with special educational needs.	gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs
GOV.UK: DLA for children	Disability Living Allowance for children under 16.	gov.uk/disability-living-allowance-children
Family Fund	Grants for low-income families raising a disabled or seriously ill child.	familyfund.org.uk
Cerebra	Help with sleep, legal problems and practical support for families.	cerebra.org.uk
Carers UK	Advice on carers' rights, benefits and looking after yourself.	carersuk.org
Sibs	Support for brothers and sisters of disabled children and adults.	sibs.org.uk
YoungMinds	Mental health support, with a parents' helpline and online guides.	youngminds.org.uk

Redbridge

Local support for families

Sycamore Trust UK in Redbridge

Our Family Services team offers autism parent support groups, and information workshops.

Phone: 020 8517 9317 | Web: Home - Sycamore Trust

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
Redbridge SEND Local Offer	The council's directory of SEND services, activities, short breaks and support for 0 to 25 year olds.	Redbridge Local Offer
RIASS (Redbridge SENDIASS)	Free, impartial information, advice and support about SEND for parents and young people aged 0 to 25.	redbridgeiass.org.uk 020 8708 8939
Empowering Parents Together (EPT)	Redbridge's parent carer forum. Have your say on local services and meet other parents.	EPT on Redbridge FiND 07486 880799
Redbridge Carers Support Service	Information, advice and support for unpaid carers in Redbridge.	rcss.org.uk
Redbridge Young Carers	Support for children and young people who help care for someone at home.	redbridge.gov.uk/young-people/young-carers
Redbridge CAMHS (NELFT)	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for Redbridge.	nelft.nhs.uk/redbridge-camhs
BHR Children's Autism Service (NHS)	NHS autism pathway for children with a GP in Barking & Dagenham, Havering or Redbridge. Referral via GP, health visitor, school or other professionals.	nelft.nhs.uk/bhr-childrens-autism-service

Barking & Dagenham

Local support for families

Sycamore Trust UK in Barking & Dagenham

Our home is in Dagenham. The Family Services team offers a dedicated early years helpline, autism parent support groups, information workshops, early years programmes, and help with benefits.

27–29 Woodward Road, Dagenham RM9 4SJ | 020 8517 9317 | Home - Sycamore Trust

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
Barking & Dagenham SEND Local Offer **Barking & Dagenham Padlet**	The council's directory of SEND services, activities, short breaks, EHC plan information and newsletters.	localoffer.lbbd.gov.uk CHATAProject Information and Resources Padlet
Barking & Dagenham SENDIASS	Free, impartial SEND information, advice and support, provided by Carers of Barking and Dagenham.	carerscentre.org.uk/iassinfo 020 8593 4422
JUST SAY Parent Carer Forum	B&D's parent carer forum, giving parents a voice with the council and health services. Free to join.	justsayforum.online 07936 851199 | justsaybdforum@gmail.com
Carers of Barking and Dagenham	Advice, support and activities for unpaid carers, including parent carers.	carerscentre.org.uk
B&D Family Hubs	Information, advice and activities for families, plus early help.	lbbd.gov.uk – Family Hubs
Barking & Dagenham CAMHS (NELFT)	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for Barking and Dagenham.	nelft.nhs.uk/barking-and-dagenham-camhs
BHR Children's Autism Service (NHS)	NHS autism pathway for children with a GP in Barking & Dagenham, Havering or Redbridge. Referral via GP, health visitor, school or other professionals.	nelft.nhs.uk/bhr-childrens-autism-service

Havering

Local support for families

Sycamore Trust UK in Havering

Our Havering All Age team runs autism parent support groups in Havering, including in Rainham and Harold Hill, as well as information workshops and help with benefits, education advice, 1-1 appointments, autistic adult support and peer groups.

Phone: 020 8517 9317 | Web: Home - Sycamore Trust

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
Havering SEND Local Offer	Part of Havering's Family Services Hub: SEND services, activities and support for 0 to 25 year olds.	Havering Local Offer
Havering SENDIASS	Free, impartial SEND information, advice and support for parents and young people.	haveringsendiass.co.uk 01708 433885 | sendiass@havering.gov.uk
Havering SEND Family Voice	Havering's parent carer forum for families of children and young people with SEND.	Havering SEND Family Voice | info@haveringsendfamilyvoice.org
Havering Carers Hub	Information, advice and support for unpaid carers living in Havering.	Havering Carers Hub - Carer Services Near Me | Carers Trust Local Carer Centres - Carers Trust
Havering CAMHS (NELFT)	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for Havering.	nelft.nhs.uk/havering-camhs
BHR Children's Autism Service (NHS)	NHS autism pathway for children with a GP in Barking & Dagenham, Havering or Redbridge. Referral via GP, health visitor, school or other professionals.	nelft.nhs.uk/bhr-childrens-autism-service

More local groups in Havering

- **RAGS:** autism support group. 01708 564871 Home | RAGS — Romford Autistic Group Support

Thank you for reading

Sycamore Trust UK is a registered charity supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking & Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge.

Call us	Visit us	Find us online
020 8517 9317	27–29 Woodward Road, Dagenham RM9 4SJ	Home - Sycamore Trust

Disclaimer

This toolkit gives **general information only**. It does not replace professional advice from a doctor, health professional, teacher, SENCo, social worker, solicitor or other qualified adviser, and should not be used to diagnose any condition.

Every child and family is different. If you have concerns about your child's health, development or safety, please speak to your GP, health visitor or school. **In an emergency, always call 999.**

Links to external websites and organisations are included to help families find support. Sycamore Trust UK does not control, and is not responsible for, the content, services or availability of external sites or organisations, and including them does not mean we endorse them.

Information, contact details and links were checked in **September 2026** but can change. Please check details directly with each service. While we take care to make sure this toolkit is accurate, Sycamore Trust UK cannot accept responsibility for any loss or harm arising from its use.