hcrg Care Group

Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Services

Unique learning & thinking styles –
supporting neurodivergent children & young people

Developed for the Essex Partnership for Neurodiversity in Schools Project

Training approved October 2025

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Unique learning & thinking styles

Supporting neurodivergent children & young people

Essex Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools - Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Services

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Understanding Neurodiversity

This workshop was developed for the Essex Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools Project 2024-25 by the Psychology In Schools Team at Norfolk & Suffolk Foundation Trust

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Unique learning & thinking styles

- Brain house – control tower & alarm system
- Differences in executive function (the control tower).
- Supporting executive function skills.
- Memory.
- Planning & organising.
- Working together.

How would you rate your current confidence in supporting your child with planning, organising or remembering things?

Low (1) **High (10)**

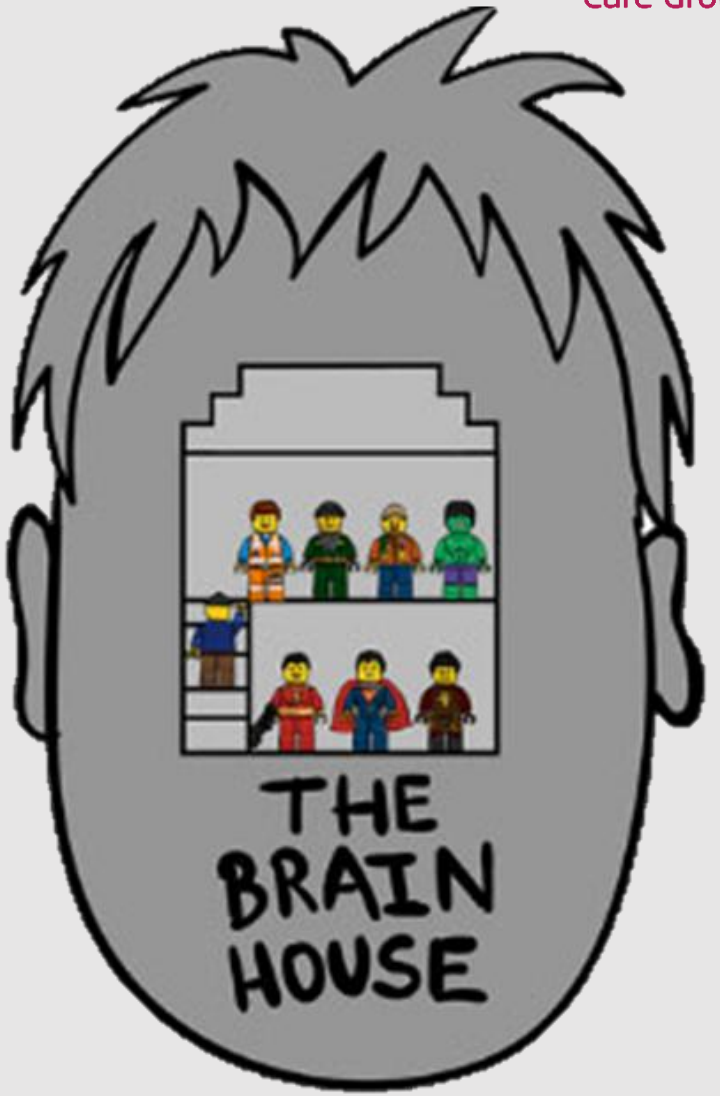
The Brain House

Upstairs brain

- The control tower – "executive function"

Downstairs brain

- The alarm system – fight, flight, freeze, collapse response



Illustrated by Dr Hazel Harrison

Dr Dan Siegel

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What is executive function?

INHIBITION

ATTENTION

EMOTIONAL CONTROL

INITIATION

WORKING MEMORY

PLANNING

Executive functioning is difficult!

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Executive function differences

Inhibition	Attention	Emotional control
• Poor impulse control. • Difficulty waiting their turn. • Speaking/acting before thinking. • Interrupting in conversation. • Risky behaviour.	• Difficulty focusing. • Easily distracted. • Seeming forgetful. • Unable to remain on task. • Struggle to follow instructions. • Making seemingly careless mistakes.	• Easily overwhelmed and upset. • Swinging between high and low moods. • Emotions felt very intensely. • Struggle to cope with emotions. • Big emotional reactions.

Executive function differences

Initiation	Working memory	Planning
• Difficulty starting activities. • Seeming unmotivated/ unengaged. • Unable to start tasks without help. • Not asking for help.	• Forgetful. • Incomplete recall. • Failing to follow instructions. • Losing track of place. • Abandoning the task.	• Disorganised. • Untidy/ messy. • Struggle to complete tasks to the end. • Difficulty planning ahead. • Difficulty making big decisions.

What challenges with these skills do you notice in your children?

How does this impact them at home and school?

Neurodivergence and Executive Function

- Both ADHD and autism are associated with similar executive function difficulties:
  - Attention
  - Flexibility
  - Working memory
  - Processing speed
  - Response inhibition

- *e.g. Townes et al. (2023), Demetriou et al. (2017), Willcutt et al. (2005), Sonuga-Barke (2003)*

Brain house in neurodivergent children

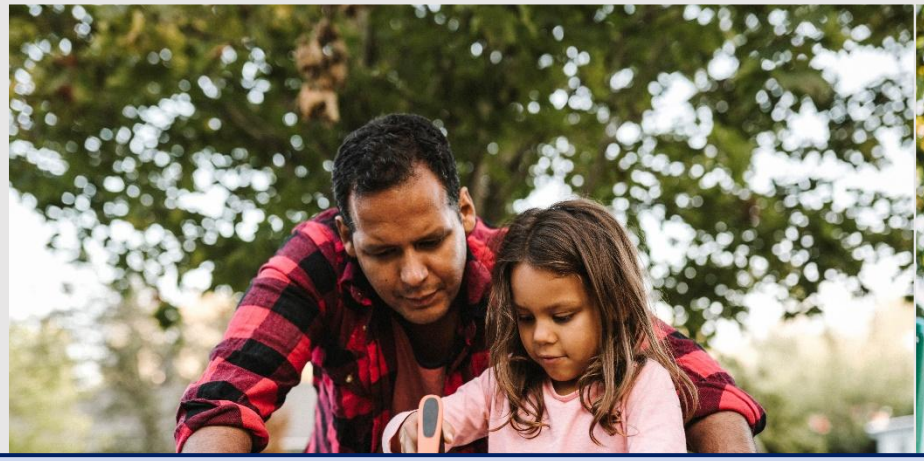
More sensitive to some stimuli

Impulsivity

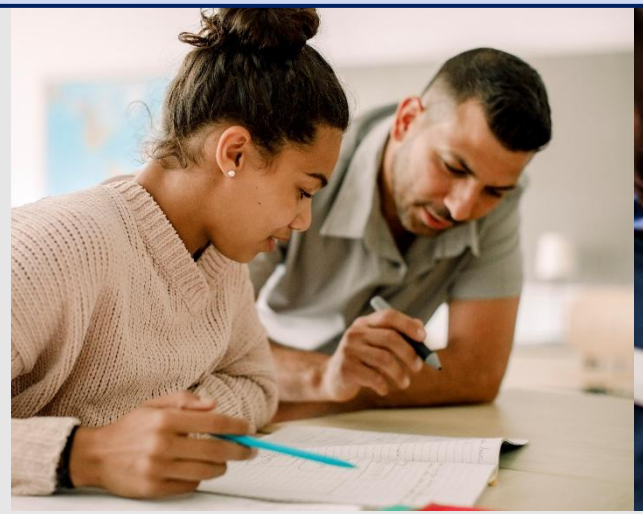
Innate difficulty with emotion regulation

Difficulty understanding big feelings

More frequent negative experiences



Supporting your child and students with executive functioning



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What skills do you need to play Monopoly?

Memory

Inhibition (patience)

Reading

Planning

Emotional Control

Attention

Number skills

Motor coordination

The power of games!

- Playing games is an effective and fun way of helping your child develop executive function skills
- Games for younger children help practise basic skills like waiting your turn, emotional control and remembering rules
- Games for older children help practise high-level skills like planning and organisation

What helps your children with planning, organising and remembering?

What strategies do you use and are they working?

Supporting memory

- Reduce the amount of information to be remembered
- Break things down into small steps
- Re-present information if needed

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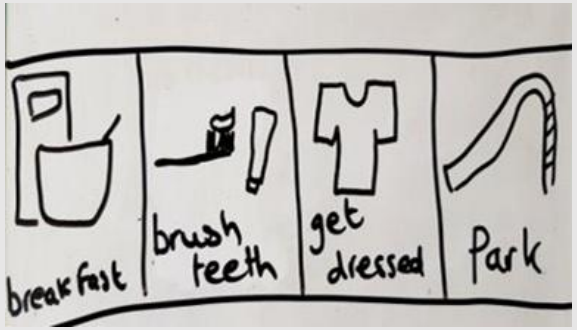
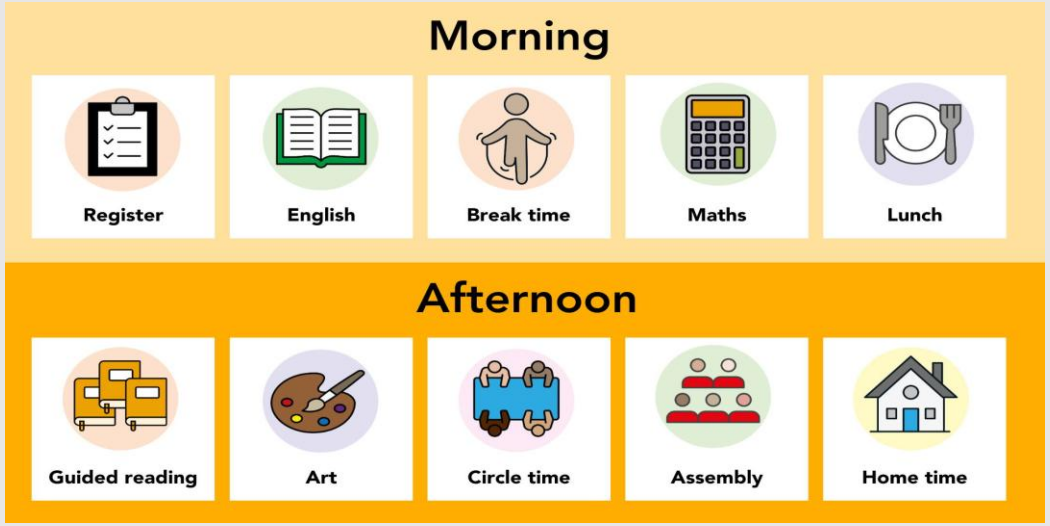
Supporting memory

- Using memory aids/visuals
  - Visual timetable
  - Wall charts for regular tasks
  - Voice recordings for instructions
  - Setting timers and reminders





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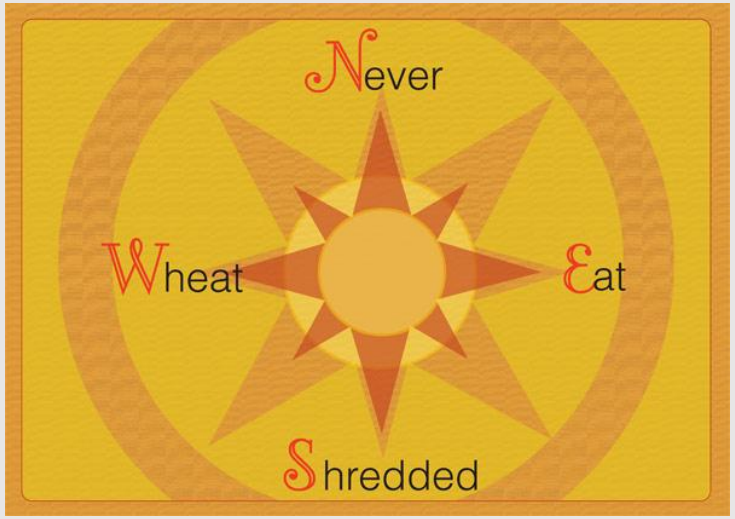
Supporting memory

- Other memory strategies:
  - Rehearsal – practice makes perfect.
  - Creating stories from the to-be-remembered information.
  - Using rhymes or mnemonics.
- Working memory training is available, but research shows this doesn't seem to improve 'real-life' memory.



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Supporting planning and organising

- Routines.
- Making plans when feeling calm.
- Using a checklist to simplify a task.
- Using a calendar and/or planner.
- Setting reminders.

Task initiation

- Start with the smallest, easiest step.
- Start ‘doing’, then shift momentum to the avoided task.
- Turn the task into a game.
- Create the illusion of urgency but do allow for extra time.
- Make space for sensation seeking.

Prioritising

- Set a timer and support the child to describe what needs to be done for a task.
- Write down the steps needed to complete the task.
- Cut out each step and physically order the tasks in front of you.

Scaffolding

- Model how to do it.
- Ask open questions.
- Encourage thinking out loud.
- Give hints and praise.
- Offering a range of possible answers.
- Break it down into steps.
- Pitch a task just above current ability.

What is Scaffolding? - YouTube

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Learned helplessness

- Repeated failures will impact on confidence and self-esteem.
- Learned helplessness makes it difficult to engage in new tasks.
- Create opportunities for success and scaffold to support this.
- Focus on strengths and special interests.

Working together

- Share difficulties in executive functioning you are noticing both at home and school.
- Discuss and formulate ways to support your children across both environments – Don't forget to share what already works!
- Have ongoing communication to evaluate strategies put in place.
- Support should be needs-led.

'Supporting Your Neurodivergent Child' Neurodiversity | Essex Family Forum - Pages 178-182 are relevant and include practical tips and ideas.

What can you do differently to support children in this area?

- What can you do more of ?
- What can you do less of?
- Will this change anything that you are already doing?
- How can school and home work more closely together?

What other parents have said

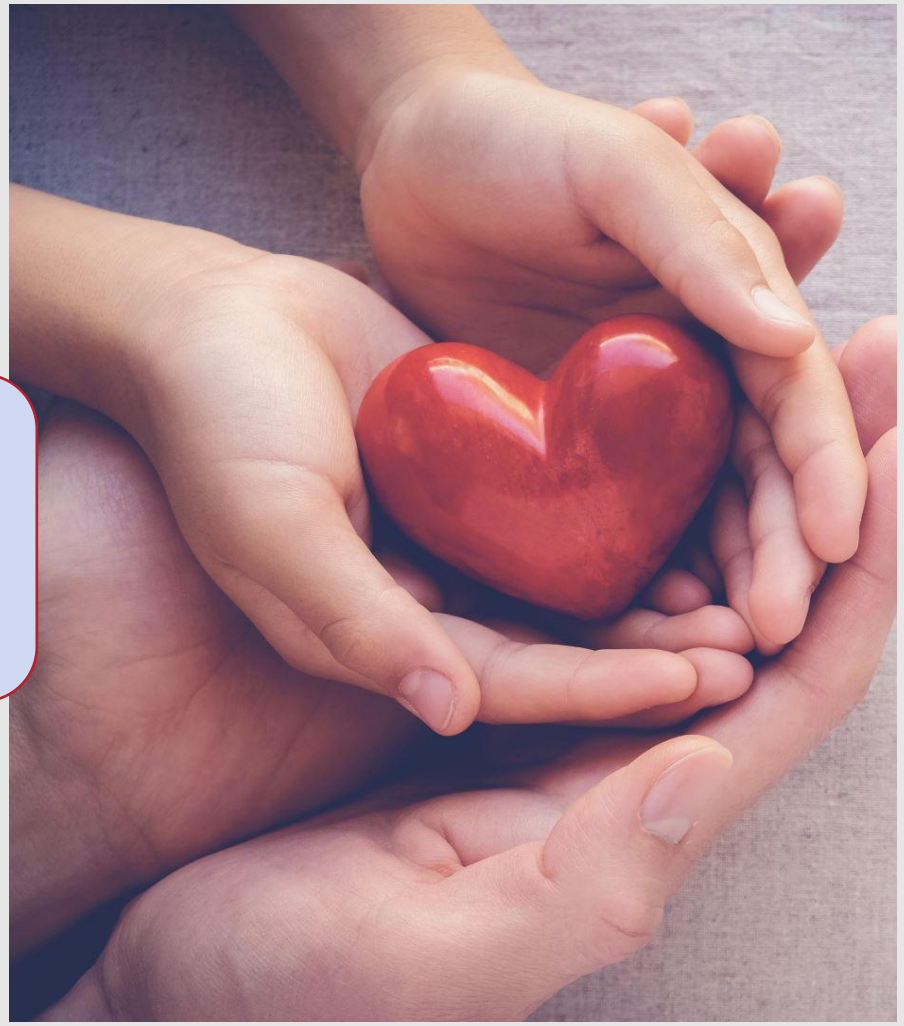
"Understand your neurodiverse child's brain is wired different so don't expect them to respond or change to your ways. It's NOT a disorder it's just a different order to you."

"Have a good structure but allow flexibility and communicate to your school regularly"

"Every child is different. You've just got to find what works"

"Ask for support. Do not try to do things alone"

"Give clear simple instructions. One instruction at a time. If they get overwhelmed take a step back, wait for them to calm and then approach them explaining the situation."



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Useful Resources

Further resources

- Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children by the Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University
- How You Can Manage Your Executive Dysfunction · ADHD/ Autism (youtube.com) Irene, The Thought Spot
- What is Scaffolding? – YouTube
- Managing Impulsive and Risky Behaviour – Episode 6 'ADHD, A Young Person's Guide' – ACAMH
- Organising and prioritising - a guide for all audiences (autism.org.uk)
- Childhood Neurodiversity: How the Brain Develops (youtube.com)

For schools

- The EPIC Strategy Booklet: a guide for teachers (adhdfoundation.org.uk)
- Working Memory: A Practical Guide for Teachers

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Key sources of support and resources in Essex

- Supporting Your Neurodivergent Child Neurodiversity | Essex Family Forum
- Essex Family Forum Home | Essex Family Forum
- Multi Schools Council Home - Multi Schools Council
- Essex Local Offer Roadshows Essex Local Offer Roadshows | Essex Local Offer
- Ordinarily Available Targeted Support Framework What good support in school looks like | Essex Local Offer
- EXTRA Extra Support for Families | Welcome to Extra Support for Families
- MAZE The MAZE Group | SEND Parenting Support Group in Essex
- SNAP SNAP Charity - Registered Charity No.1077787
- Families in Focus Essex Home - Families InFocus Essex
- SPACE Home | Support for Parents And Carers in Essex
- Autism Central Autism Central - England's Peer Education Programme | Autism Central
- Essex Short Breaks What are Essex Short Breaks?
- Essex SEND IASS Essex SEND - Information, Advice and Support Service
- STRM Support STRM Support – Send the Right Message
- PACT Autism Support | PACT For Autism | England

Psychology in Schools' Team Free Workshops

From the childhood neurodiversity series…

- What You Need to Know as a Parent/Carer
- Understanding and Supporting Sleep Difficulties
- Understanding and Supporting Eating Difficulties
- Understanding and Managing Behaviour
- How the Brain Develops
- The Impact of Early Life Stress
- Supporting Social Relationships
- Supporting Language and Communication
- Understanding and Supporting Sensory Needs
- The Benefits and Problems with Using Technology

From the mental health series…

- Understanding the adolescent brain - Supporting our teenagers with emotions
- Building Understanding and Supporting Your Child with Tourette's Syndrome/Tics

Upcoming live parent/carer workshops:

www.nsft.uk/workshops

Eventbrite page

Parent workshops | Norfolk and Suffolk NHS

NHS
Norfolk and Suffolk
NHS Foundation Trust

What will you take away from this session?

How would you rate your current confidence in supporting your child with planning, organising or remembering things?

Low (1) **High (10)**

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