

# Experiences and support needs of neurodivergent MOTHERS



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A practical guide for  
professionals  
supporting mothers  
with autism or  
intellectual disability



# Neurodivergence and Motherhood

Research shows that mothers with autism or intellectual disability have historically faced a society that has questioned their parenting capabilities (11). Mothers often feel misunderstood, disconnected from their communities, and that their parenting experiences are invalidated.

Research has found that neurodivergence has a fundamental impact on motherhood (3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12). Whilst neurodivergent women have positive experiences of motherhood (4, 6, 7, 10, 12), there are also challenges that they face (3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12).

## What does research tell us about the experiences of neurodivergent mothers?

### PARENTING IS IMPACTED BY NEURODIVERGENCE

Neurodivergent mothers enjoy learning about parenting (10), and value the role of mother (12), but feel guilty about parenting differently to neurotypical mothers (10).

They struggle with domestic responsibilities (7, 12) and worry about losing their support systems (12).

Neurodivergent mothers connect strongly with, and enjoy being with, their children (4, 6, 7). However, the emotional connection may not be immediate but may develop over time (10).

### MOTHERS ARE IMPACTED BY INTERACTIONS WITH OTHERS

Neurodivergent mothers notice negative attitudes towards them (4, 6, 7, 9, 12) and feel their parenting is judged poorly (6, 9).

They value help (10) but have difficulty asking for and receiving help (4, 7, 10). The help available and provided is often not what they want or need (5, 8, 9, 10). Mothers like support that is adaptable (10).

Mothers value social support but can feel isolated socially and emotionally (7, 8).

Connecting with other neurodivergent mothers helps develop personal identity as a mother (10).

### MOTHERS ARE IMPACTED PERSONALLY

Neurodivergent mothers face stress, anxiety, and depression due to lack of coping strategies (10) and time alone (10), uncertainty about interactions (3, 6, 9) and feeling watched by professionals (6).

Mothers feel misunderstood and unheard (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10), and struggle to understand information and intentions of others (3). They like it when people listen (4) and provide information in writing (5).

They face heightened auditory and tactile sensory challenges (10), and changes to body awareness (9, 10).

Mothers feel good making decisions (5) but can feel controlled (6, 12) or overruled by those who support them (9).

Mothers benefit from familiarity, reassurance, shared expectations, and knowing what is happening around them (5, 10).



# What does research tell us about the PERSONAL support needs of neurodivergent mothers?



What are the implications? How can you HELP as a professional?



## Autonomy and decision making

### MOTHERS NEED

- Professionals to value their autonomy (8).



### PROFESSIONALS CAN HELP BY

Encouraging and supporting mothers to make their own choices and decisions (5)

- Offer visual information to support choice making.
- Support self-advocacy.
- Support skill building in decision making.

## Communication

### MOTHERS NEED

- Time to process information before responding (3).
- Communication in small amounts or over time (3).
- Information explained clearly, often more than once (3).



### PROFESSIONALS CAN HELP BY

Offering flexible and accessible options for communication

- Email or text as alternatives to phone calls (1).
- Quiet space and time for processing information (3).
- Visual information, with follow up to clarify or answer questions (3, 8).
- Taking time to listen and providing clear explanations (3, 8).

## Sensory

### MOTHERS NEED

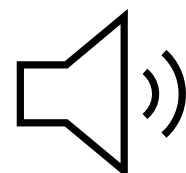
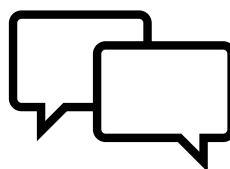
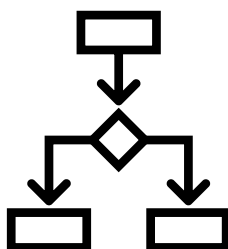
- Strategies to self-manage sensory challenges (10).
- Access to alone time (10).



### PROFESSIONALS CAN HELP BY

Assisting mothers to find self-management strategies and to make environmental adjustments

- Help mothers access sensory support tools and create sensory friendly home environments - such as reducing lighting (10).
- Help mothers establish a calming space for alone or withdrawal time (10).



## Peer Support

Neurodivergent mothers need strategies for self-acceptance and self-care (4)

Assist the mothers you support to connect with other neurodivergent mothers, to share experiences (8), and to help build their self-acceptance, self-belief, and personal identity as a mother (4, 10).

Encourage peer support to help with identification and development of self-care strategies (4, 10).



# Interaction and Social Needs of Neurodivergent Mothers

## How can professionals HELP?

### Attitudes

**Mothers need:** Professionals they interact with to have positive attitudes about their parenting (8).

**How professionals can help:** Consider the impact of your attitude and beliefs on neurodivergent mothers, and always presume competence (8, 9).



### Accessing Help

**Mothers need:**

- Parenting support to be accessible, and to be able to identify their own support and accessibility needs (8).

**How professionals can help:**

- Adjust your interaction style, and environment, to provide predictability, sensory, and communication support (1).
- Be consistent with support (12) and offer one to one support options (5, 8).
- Ask mothers about their own accessibility needs (8).
- Enable mothers to choose their own support people and when they want support (8).
- Assist mothers to establish a network of community-based support (12) and domestic assistance (10) based on their individual needs.
- Allow time for mothers to develop trust (3, 5, 9).

### Support Groups

**Mothers need:**

- Local support groups for neurodivergent mothers (10).

**How professionals can help:**

- Seek opportunities to connect neurodivergent mothers in person (4, 10).

### Training

**FOR PROFESSIONALS**

**Mothers need:**

- Professionals to improve their awareness of mothers' experiences and support needs (4, 10).

**How professionals can help:**

- Undertake training to better understand mothers' strengths and challenges. (3, 6).
- Collaborate with mothers to learn about neurodivergence (2, 7).

**FOR MOTHERS**

**Mothers need:**

- Opportunities to learn parenting skills, with modelling as a teaching tool (5).

**How professionals can help:**

- Seek mothers' perspectives when planning for, and implementing, support for their learning (1, 5, 8).

### What about the research gaps?

Neurodivergent mothers with older children moving through life stages

We need to find out more about these experiences. We know that transitions are difficult for neurodivergent people (9) therefore support may be required by mothers as they adjust to new ways of parenting their children.

### Mothers with ADHD

There is little research relating to the experiences and support needs of mothers with ADHD. We need to know more, but as a professional you can assist mothers with ADHD by asking them about their own perspectives and support needs.



## What steps can you take next to improve the experiences of neurodivergent mothers?



### Conduct a self-audit

How well am I currently meeting the needs of neurodivergent mothers based on the personal perspectives of these mothers?

	Needs well met	Could improve
Autonomy and decision making		
Communication		
Sensory		
Peer Support		
Attitudes		
Accessing help		
Training		

What more can I implement into my own professional practice?

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What do I need to learn more about, to effectively support mothers?

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### Links to further information and resources

Autism CRC – Improving Health and Wellbeing for Autistic Adults

<https://www.autismcrc.com.au/our-programs/adulthood/improving-health-and-wellbeing-autistic-adults>

Council for Intellectual Disability – Inclusion

<https://cid.org.au/resource-category/inclusion/>

*\* CID is led by people with intellectual disability*

Raising Children Network – Parenting with an intellectual disability

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/family-diversity/parents-like-me/parenting-with-intellectual-disability>

DARU – Building Community Networks – Circles of Support

<http://www.daru.org.au/resource/building-community-networks-circles-of-support>



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