end of each chapter I have included a Q&A section that highlights some of the most common questions that parents ask me. I hope you find this helpful and feel less alone knowing that so many are seeking the same answers as you.

IMPORTANT REMINDER

If reading any part of this book makes you feel like you *have* been doing it all wrong, or makes you feel like a shitty parent, just know we are all human and we've all been there. We all make mistakes, but it is never too late to learn and change.

My hope is that this book answers your burning questions and brings us one step closer to creating a world where everyone feels accepted and heard. I want to give us *all* permission to be our authentic, sparkly selves.

Settling in

Before you start actually reading this book, I would like to introduce you to a concept you possibly hear thrown about a fair bit but don't actually practise as much as you should (and yes, I am talking to myself here, too): this little thing called 'self-care'. An absolute must for *all* parents, even if most of the time it's a 'do as I say, not as I do' kind of thing!

Let me share a couple of common techniques I use with my own clients when they are feeling overwhelmed. They are great ones to teach your kids, too. You don't need any tools, and you can do them anywhere, even when you are driving, in a crowd or at work.

CALMING TECHNIQUES

- Five senses grounding technique: use your senses to identify five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. Doing this helps shift your focus, immediately grounding you, and calms the mind, alleviating anxiety in minutes.
- Five-five-five exercise: simply breathe in deeply for five seconds, hold your breath for five seconds, then breathe out for five seconds.

Right now, I just want you to take a big, deep breath and relax. Hopefully your little munchkins are in bed sound asleep (lol, one can only dream – we know our neurosparkly kids do not sleep!). Or, even better, you are lying on a sun lounge in the Bahamas with the warmth of the sun on your back and the sound of the waves crashing in the background (even bigger lol).

Wherever you are, grab a cuppa, a wine, or even a giant margarita – there will be absolutely no judgement from me; I would join you if I could – settle in, get comfy and read on.

If you are feeling anxious about this journey, I hope you can feel me here with you as you take each step. If I could reach out through the pages of this book and give you one of my famously big and tight mama-bear hugs, I would (only if you like hugs, that is).

Otherwise, just know that I get it. I have been where you are, and you've got this. You are the exact parent your child needs, and the reason I know that is because you have this book in your hands right now. You want to know how to do the best for your little bear cub, and that is enough.

Chapter 1

Parenting the neurosparkly way

I've written this book to help you support your child to unlock their full potential and, most importantly, live a happy life in which they feel loved and accepted. Together, we're going to embrace the fact that a diagnosis is not the end, but rather the beginning of a beautiful parenting journey. Let's start with a few basics.

What's with all these *neuro* words?

The word *neurodiversity* recognises and embraces the natural variations between all human brains and the ways they function. For much of the twentieth century, people whose brains worked differently from what was seen as 'normal' were institutionalised and often given horrific treatments in an effort to 'fix' them.

In the 1990s, autistic people, in particular, built an online movement to advocate for the idea that their different ways of seeing the world weren't 'wrong' or in need of a cure.

Neurodivergence, then, refers to these ways of being that have historically been treated as different from 'normal', or *neurotypical*. Neurodivergence is an umbrella term that includes the following ways of being:

- **ADHD**, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, shows up mostly as differences in the parts of the brain that we use to plan, focus on and carry out tasks.
- **Autism** describes differences in how a person socialises and communicates, thinks and processes information, moves and senses the world around them.
- **Bipolar disorder** can been seen as intense shifts in mood, energy levels and behaviour.
- **Down syndrome**, where a person is born with an extra chromosome, can result in distinctive physical features and differences with how a person walks, speaks, learns and plays.
- **Dyscalculia** looks like using atypical methods or having challenges in understanding number-based concepts.
- **Dyslexia** involves difficulties with decoding and composing written text.
- **Dyspraxia** refers to a brain's inability to plan muscle movements and carry them out.
- **OCD**, or obsessive compulsive disorder, may involve frequent unwanted thoughts that result in repetitive behaviours.
- **Tourette syndrome** is characterised by involuntary sounds and movements, or tics.

These neurodivergent identities also commonly occur together, due to the shared genetic, neurological and developmental pathways that underlie many of them. Some statistics suggest a more than 50 per cent co-occurrence of Tourette syndrome and

ADHD, while 50–70 per cent of autistic people also have ADHD. The problem is that due to the rigidity of single-diagnosis pathways (not to mention the enormous expense and time it takes to receive that single diagnosis), many people may not even be aware they have multiple neurodivergencies.

THE FOCUS OF THIS BOOK

While the neurodivergent umbrella is a broad one, in this book I focus on autism and ADHD, because I have the most personal and professional experience with those identities. I still think any parent on the journey towards discovering their child's neurodivergence will find the information in this book useful, but you can also find resources for other specific types of neurodivergence at the end of this book.

Different, not less

Because neurodivergent people are in the minority in our current world, this means that many of us will *mask* or camouflage our traits in an effort to fit into a society made for neurotypical brains. While neurotypical people may modify their behaviour to be more socially successful, the neurodivergent form of masking is mostly done to avoid negative consequences. This can cause extreme stress and lead to exhaustion, identity loss, anxiety and burnout.

I'm a huge believer in making your child's world as *neuro-affirming* as possible. This means you understand that every human in the world naturally has differences in their abilities and strengths. So rather than viewing neurodivergence as deficits or disorders, we understand and appreciate the unique talents and abilities of everyone without trying to fix them. In other words, we love and accept our kids just as they are.

Neuro-damaging (did I just make that term up? Hello, Urban Dictionary!) would be the opposite of neuro-affirming. This means thinking that neurodivergence is a problem that needs fixing. Or promoting the idea that neurotypical is the gold standard and trying to make our kids conform to whatever you think 'normal' is. (Even the word 'normal' sounds so bland and boooooring . . . neuro*sparkly* sounds so much more fun!)

Years ago, Chloé started using the phrase 'different, not less', and it has become our household mantra. Just because Chloé cannot read a clock or recite times tables, it does not mean she is *less*, she is just *different*. The things she is *amazing* at far outweigh the things she struggles with. Wouldn't you much prefer to be incredible at singing, or photography, or drawing, or know more about the giant squid or the black-eyed tree frog than you know about your seven times tables?

Now this part is really, *really* important – if you only take one thing away from this book, then this should be it. I want you to do everything in your power to encourage every neurodivergent child you know (whether or not they have an official diagnosis) to be brave, be bold and be *proud*. They are what makes the world unique. They are what makes the world different and special and amazing. They are perfect just as they are. They don't need to change. They *are* the change.

A note on language

As awareness and acceptance of neurodivergence increase, the language around it is constantly evolving. I've done my best to use the terms and ideas that are broadly accepted at the time of writing.

While I have occasionally distinguished between some experiences of girls and boys, especially when it comes to the history of diagnosis and physical changes that occur during puberty, these mentions should be read to include anyone who has been assigned a particular gender at birth. Neurodivergent people are more likely than neurotypical people to identify as gender-diverse, so it's important that we allow everyone the space to find themselves under this umbrella.

When discussing neurodivergence, we must always aim to use language that is respectful, accurate and empowering. Instead of using terms like 'suffering from' or 'afflicted by', which imply negativity or pity, most people prefer identity-first language – such as 'autistic person' – which reflects pride in one's neurodivergent identity. This is why I use 'autism' rather than ASD, which, being short for 'autism spectrum disorder', keeps the focus on neurodivergence as a problem. Sadly, we don't yet have a term for ADHD that doesn't include the 'D' for disorder, but I'm sure we'll get there.

It's also crucial to avoid the outdated or stigmatising terms 'high functioning' or 'low functioning', which oversimplify the nuanced experiences of neurodivergent individuals. Instead, focus on describing specific strengths and support needs. By choosing words thoughtfully, we can foster an inclusive and positive world for our kids to grow up in. It is equally important to understand that the needs and abilities of neurodivergent kids can vary greatly from one day to the next. A child might appear to be 'high functioning' one day – where they are managing social interactions, schoolwork and daily tasks with ease – while the next day they may struggle significantly and appear to be 'low functioning'. This variability is completely normal and depends on a multitude of factors such as sensory

Parenting Different

How to raise your neurodivergent kids to be their authentic, awesome selves

SARAH HAYDEN

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To my beautiful family – thank you for sharing this neurosparkly life with me. Without you I am nothing.

And to all the neurosparkly people I have the honour of working with every day – thank you for trusting me on your journey of courage, resilience, love and acceptance.

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sensitivities, emotional state, sleep quality or even changes in routine. Labelling a child as high or low functioning can be misleading as it doesn't capture the fluidity or full spectrum of their experience and abilities. Recognising this variability (which can change from one minute to the next) allows parents, and others in the child's community, to be more responsive and adaptable, providing the right support based on the child's needs at any given moment, without fixing them in place with labels.

Another word I've stopped using altogether is 'Asperger's' to refer to a specific type of autistic child, because it comes from Hans Asperger, believed to be complicit in the Nazi program that euthanised disabled children. So yeah, I don't want his name near my kids.

Of course, it's important to flag that the neurodivergent community is not a monolith, so some neurodivergent people may not agree with the views on language I've expressed above – and I will always support anyone's right to identify exactly how feels best for them.

Finally, I have changed the names of the gorgeous neurodivergent kids I work with whose stories I share in these pages, to protect their privacy.

How might neurodivergent traits show up?

Let's look at a few examples of how neurodivergent traits can be expressed. It's important to note at the outset that neurodivergent people all have unique presentations, so don't worry if your child doesn't fit neatly into the below descriptions – they are simply a rough starting point.

With autism, a growing number of researchers, including renowned autistic anthropologist and primatologist Dawn Prince-Hughes, argue that many (if not most) autistic people show certain human advantages, such as an unusual ability to pay attention to visual and auditory information, which may give them musical talents or a laser-like attention to detail. Autistic people are also often very direct with a strong moral compass. Neuropsychologist Isabelle Soulières says, 'It is true and scientifically proven that subgroups of autistic individuals have [certain] abilities that are better than non-autistic individuals.' Kate Cooper, a research fellow and clinical psychologist, adds that 'we now know that the *average* autistic person with even *average* characteristics of autism' – so not just the stereotypical *Rain Man*-like 'savants' – 'have strengths that set them apart from non-autistic people'.

Autistic people may struggle with socialising and maintaining eye contact, but their many incredible gifts can include:

- honesty, loyalty and reliability (such valuable traits for maintaining friendships and other relationships)
- absorbing and retaining facts (as anyone whose kid has a particular hyperfixation knows all too well)
- a methodical approach, making them fantastic at spotting patterns and analysing data (it's no surprise that many coders are autistic).

Some of the outstanding people who have either been diagnosed with or thought to have autism include Greta Thunberg, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, QuestLove, Darryl Hannah, Grace Tame, Steve Jobs, Hannah Gadsby, Michelangelo, Josh Thomas and Mozart.

While those with ADHD may have difficulty staying focused on tasks, their many strengths can include:

- hyperfocusing on one task for hours on end (what an *incredible* attribute for employees)
- being highly creative and able to see things from a different perspective
- having high levels of energy, which can be advantageous (except perhaps at 2 am).

Famous people with ADHD include Emma Watson, Justin Timberlake, Solange Knowles, Bill Gates, Clementine Ford and Jamie Oliver.

Superstars who are both autistic and have ADHD include Em Rusciano and our very own Chloé Hayden!

Dyslexic people are most commonly known to have trouble with reading and writing, but their advantages include:

- brilliant spatial reasoning (many dyslexic people excel in graphic design, engineering and architecture)
- incredible imaginations (many artists, actors and authors are dyslexic)
- exceptional problem-solving skills (many top entrepreneurs are dyslexic – including Richard Branson).

Other high-profile dyslexic people include Leonardo da Vinci, Jessica Watson, Danny Glover, Jackie French, Steven Spielberg, Jennifer Aniston, Mohammed Ali, Dick Smith and Anthony Hopkins.

An OCD person, such as singer Kelly Clarkson, may have brilliant organisational skills and attention to detail, while

Down syndrome people (such as model Ellie Goldstein) are often very strong in visual awareness and learning. Bipolar folk – let's hear it for the iconic Carrie Fisher – are usually highly creative and empathetic.

From Chloé

Something I admire about my mum and dad is that, even before I was diagnosed, they have always focused on my *cans* instead of my *can'ts*. My family is very strengths based. We speak a lot about the positives of our diagnoses and our disabilities. This is so massively important.

That said, we're not immune to the struggles of being disabled. We discuss those openly in our house, too. I see autism and ADHD as my superpowers, but I have my own kryptonite that comes along with them, and that's okay. That's part of human existence.

All of these strengths reinforce my strong belief that despite the stigma that has previously attached to those in the neurodivergent club, we now know these people are simply *wired* differently, not *weird*, and we can start supporting them to be the best versions of themselves, whatever that may be.

So how can we parent our neurosparkly kids differently, wonderfully and more effectively? Let's start with a deep breath and a big-picture view.

Sarah and Belle's seven parenting don'ts

This list was written with Belle, an incredible young autistic woman I work with. Belle is absolutely slaying at life now but reports having a miserable childhood, due to her parents not understanding autism. With Belle's permission, I am sharing her heartbreakingly insightful reflections on how *not* to parent a neurodivergent child. These are the voices we need to listen to, and I am writing this book for amazing people like Belle and, of course, her parents, who I am sure did the best they could with the resources available at the time.

REMINDER

If reading this section makes you feel like you *have* been doing it all wrong with parenting your neurodivergent child, please be kind to yourself. Remember that no one has ever shown us how to do this. The journey is all about being open to growing and changing, so that we can support our kids in the way they need. When we know better, we do better.

1. Don't shit on your kid's special interests.

If your child is a Swiftie, do not try to make them love opera. Belle remembers becoming so excited and overwhelmed while watching a livestream concert of Taylor Swift, she started sobbing, shaking, screaming, flapping and yelling. Pure autistic joy! She had never been happier and could feel it right through her body . . . until her parents burst into her room, yelled at her for being ridiculous and immature, and told her to 'just stop'.

Wow. Way to burst a bubble and ruin a beautiful moment, Mum and Dad.

When Chloé was a young adult, her *obsession* with One Direction continued to gather steam long after every other teenager had grown out of it. She wanted all the merch, no matter how 'babyish' it was. The day One D announced their breakup, Chloé was utterly distraught. So that very day I drove around to every single Aldi supermarket, which had a big One D merch sale on, and I bought her all the pins, stationary, bedlinen and posters. I couldn't stand all the tacky merch in my home – it did not go with my decor whatsoever! But if One D were going to break Chloé's little heart by breaking up, the least I could do was buy her all of their merch.

Wait, that makes perfect sense, doesn't it? In a moment of what for her felt like genuine heartbreak, this was a small gesture I could make to show her I was listening and I cared. I didn't have to personally understand the devastation she felt, all I had to do was see *she* was feeling real pain and support her through it.

2. Don't hide your kid's diagnoses – or tell them to.

I am frequently asked by parents, 'When should I tell my child they are neurodivergent?' This just blows my mind. Secrecy around your child's diagnosis encourages a sense of shame. Kids will always pick up that something is going on, even if they don't know what it is. So when do you tell your child they're neurodivergent? As soon as you know. It can obviously be done in an age-appropriate way, and I will talk more about this in the next chapter. Just as we would never hide if our child had diabetes or wore glasses or had a hearing aid, we should never be ashamed of their neurodivergence.

Similarly, telling your child they won't be hired in a job or have friends or get a boyfriend if they reveal their neurodivergence can be so damaging. As Belle says, 'I already hated myself as it was. To have my own dad tell me to hide a huge part of myself confirmed to me that I was right to hate myself and be ashamed of who I was.'

My mission in life is to encourage people to be loud and proud of their neurodivergence rather than ashamed or embarrassed. I truly see it as something to be celebrated. If a child's own parents can't be positive and encourage acceptance of who they are, what is that telling them to expect from the rest of the world? And if their friends or boyfriend or employer do reject them for disclosing their neurodivergence, then they were simply not worthy of your child's awesomeness in the first place.

3. Don't be negative about your kid's neurodivergence.

Belle remembers that her father would refer to her autism as a 'condition', as if she was infectious. He would tell her that she was disabled and would be so for the rest of her life, so should learn to 'deal with it'. Because of how her parents and family treated her, she didn't find her home to be a safe haven, which is essential for neurodivergent kids. Belle felt the early sting of discrimination when she saw her parents treating her differently from her neurotypical siblings.

4. Don't play the victim or be an 'autism mum'.

Autism mums (or 'moms' in the United States) – ugh – what a bad reputation they have. The online Urban Dictionary describes an 'autism mom' as: 'A mother of an autistic child. Often considers herself a superhero for raising an autistic child, victimizes

herself, and expresses negativity or grief about her child's condition. Likely supports Autism Speaks and the puzzle piece (both offensive to autistic people). Autism moms always know what's best for their children.' An autism mum sees her child as 'trapped' by autism, and she builds her identity around becoming her kid's saviour.

Now let me start by saying that you may simply identify as an 'autism mum' in the way that you can be a 'soccer mum' or a 'dance mum' . . . you may be just trying to find your tribe. It's absolutely priceless to have parents you can spend time with, empowering and supporting each other, or even just someone to sit and have a glass of prosecco with by the fire. But autism is more than an extracurricular activity, and, sadly, autism mums are notorious for wallowing in self-pity, loudly declaring how hard they have it because they have autistic kids.

Belle remembers that her parents constantly brought up in arguments with her how hard *their* life was because she was autistic – as if she was doing it to annoy them. They mocked her unregulated emotions and even told her she was to blame for their marital problems.

Don't play the victim card. Don't blame your kids for their diagnosis or your struggles. Don't label yourself an autism mum (unless you yourself are autistic, then go right ahead!). Life can be hard enough for our kids, so the least we can do is take responsibility for our own challenges.

5. Don't trivialise your child's mental wellbeing.

Neurodivergent people are at high risk of struggling with mental wellbeing (more on this in chapter 6). Given this landscape, we must do all we can to radiate positivity and acceptance for our children, supporting them in the ways they need.

When Belle was struggling with an eating disorder, however, her parents blamed her for wasting their food and their money. 'They said I was a stupid and selfish little brat and just doing this for attention,' she recalls. There are many ways to deal with an eating disorder. This is not one of them. Most people are not starving themselves intentionally, and making it about you is not going to help anyone.

Please, if you suspect a loved one may have an eating disorder or is starting to get a dysfunctional relationship with food, seek professional advice and support immediately. The same goes for any other mental health concern your child may experience.

6. Don't misinform your kids about their neurodivergence.

Belle remembers that her parents often told her she had no empathy because she was autistic. It was only when she became an adult that she realised, like many autistic people, she actually felt things *more* deeply than neurotypical people. But her parents making her feel like she was a heartless monster had already done untold damage.

Telling your child they have no empathy is a sure sign you lack empathy yourself. What an awful thing to say to someone. Autistic people may not show empathy in the same way as others do, but it is a misconception that they do not demonstrate or show empathy. In fact, some research suggests many autistic people may feel the emotions of others – especially their negative ones – more intensely than neurotypical people do. I know this is certainly true in our house. Chloé has always felt things so much more deeply than others and for others, particularly for animals. When you watch an autistic girl rescue the snails in the rain so no one stands on them, or chew up food in their mouth to spit

into the mouth of the baby bird they just rescued, you begin to understand the very definition of pure empathy.

7. Don't be ignorant. Educate yourself!

One of the most important things we can do as parents – and humans – is to educate ourselves on things that matter and are relevant to those we love. If our child is diagnosed as neurodivergent, we owe it to them, and ourselves, to understand the potential challenges they may face. We know that quite a number of neurodivergent people struggle with executive dysfunction, meaning that they may have difficulties with managing time, completing tasks, planning, organising and prioritising.

Belle remembers that her parents had no understanding of her challenges and called her lazy whenever she couldn't do something. She grew up thinking there was something wrong with her until she was old enough to learn about the relationship between her autism and executive dysfunction. 'If I could learn about it,' she said, 'surely they could, too.' You don't have to have all the answers, but being willing to join your child on this journey is so important and will have such a positive impact on your relationship with them.

Sarah's seven parenting dos

Here are my top tips on how we can parent like a pro to help our neurosparkly children thrive.

1. Love what they love (or at least fake an interest in it).

Showing you are interested in your child's current hyperfixation is a sure-fire way to connect with them. If your child loves

nothing more than dressing up as Spider-Man and heading to Comic Con, then get your Batman suit out ready for an awesome weekend experienced through the eyes of your child. I guarantee you will be their instant superhero. And, hey, your child's obsession with One Direction may even lead to your very own special interest (did I mention I was in the top 0.01 per cent of Spotify Top Fans for Harry Styles in 2024?).

One of the girls I work with, Andie, is the biggest Swiftie I've ever met. I mean, every Swiftie is very passionate, but this girl is *next level*. Her mum told me Andie's new stepfather was having trouble connecting with her, as he was not only new to parenting but also new to autism and the obsessive special interests that can accompany it. Andie wanted to attend the Taylor Swift concert more than anything in the world . . . (like *anything*) but she had missed out on tickets and Mum couldn't stand going to concerts due to her own sensory sensitivities. So we hatched a plan – her stepfather became a diehard Swiftie, listening to her music every time he was in the car with his stepdaughter and even sharing facts he had been learning about her. Andie was sceptical at first, but when her stepfather surprised her with tickets to Swift's concert in another city, she was convinced. I still laugh at the thought of him enduring an eight-hour road trip wearing sparkles, friendship bracelets and listening to Taylor on repeat . . . my actual definition of a nightmare, and probably his, too (sorry, Swifties, but I will take Harry over Tay Tay any day of the week!). But his willingness to jump on board with Andie's special interest has done wonders for their relationship.

It's also good to remember that it is often your child's special interests that help them connect with peers. All of Chloé's friends have come from her special-interest groups. And, in

fact, her career began because she was blogging about her special-interest groups, so you never know where these brilliant obsessions may lead.

2. Accept your child, quirks and all.

Our biggest job as parents is to accept and validate our child's unique personality, however it's expressed. We can often have unrealistic expectations of our children, and when they don't meet these, it can lead to stress, anxiety, disappointment and even anger on both sides. Instead of fighting against their quirks, we need to learn to love, encourage and accept them. After all, 'normal' is just a setting on a washing machine.

One set of parents I worked with were a bit concerned about their daughter, Norah, whose fascinating quirk was her intense passion for the weather. She would spend hours watching weather forecasts, memorising cloud types and tracking storm patterns across different regions. Norah would excitedly point out a cumulus or nimbostratus cloud while I nodded along, agreeing that they did look like different pretty bits of cotton wool.

Initially her parents were worried their daughter's fixation might limit her social interactions or academic growth, and that she was missing out on 'normal' childhood experiences, including friendships with others who weren't quite so 'focused'. However, after learning more about the importance of embracing neurodivergent interests, Norah's parents decided to shift their perspective. Instead of constantly trying to divert her attention to other 'more normal or acceptable' activities, we discussed what it would mean to encourage her special interests. They began buying Norah books on meteorology, setting up a weather station in the backyard and encouraging her to

learn all she could. They excitedly searched weather maps together and scrolled social media pages of other nephophiles (see, there are so many others just like her that they have a name!). By accepting and supporting their daughter's unique interest, Norah's parents not only helped her thrive academically but also, more importantly, found new ways to connect with her, ensuring she felt loved and accepted. I am sure Norah will be a very cool meteorologist one day!

3. Create a safe home where their needs are met, and they know they are loved and supported.

The world can be big and scary for kids, especially neurodivergent ones, and home is the one place where everyone should feel safe, loved and supported. By ensuring your child has the freedom to be themselves and their own space to do so, we can encourage them to remove their masks and recharge their batteries. I always say, 'You're only neurodivergent when you step outside your home.' This might look like setting up a quiet sensory-friendly corner in the house where they can retreat when feeling overwhelmed, or it could mean allowing them time alone in their room to decompress after a long day. Giving your child this space isn't about isolating them, it's about acknowledging their need for solitude to recharge and self-regulate. By providing these safe, private areas, you're showing your child that their needs are valid, and that it's okay to take a break when they need one.

4. Prioritise your kid's comfort and wellbeing over the opinions of others.

Opinions are like arseholes – everyone has one. At some stage you have to get to the point of not caring what others think of

you or your children. Remember, what other people think is none of your business. If your child needs to sit in church wrapped in a weighted blanket with their ear defenders on, then that's what you encourage them to do. If Mrs Busybody tut-tuts about their awful manners, you kindly tell her to mind her own business. As long as your child is not disrupting the service or causing harm to others, let them be and ask others to do the same.

One of the families I work with is Indian, and they place a huge importance on food in their weekly family gatherings, including everyone, young and old, eating extremely spicy curries. Unfortunately, their son, Nishant, prefers nuggets and chips to rogan josh and beef vindaloo, much to his grandparents' horror. The grandparents saw this as a rejection of their culture. I discussed with Nishant's parents how this was more than just a preference, and that he had a strong sensory aversion to spicy foods that quite literally made him sick. I explained that they needed to listen to their son's needs and help their family understand that he was on a special diet and needed to eat these foods (it's not entirely a lie, the special diet for autism *is* often nuggets and chips!) and to just take those foods for him when they attended shared family meals.

5. Put their mental health above everything else – *every single thing.*

Pay attention to this one: it saves lives. The *only* thing that matters when it comes to our kids is maintaining their mental (and physical) health. The most important thing you can do is actively listen to your child, validate their feelings and create an environment where they feel safe expressing themselves.

Establish consistent routines and provide predictability to help reduce anxiety and build a sense of security. Encourage and support their unique interests and needs, even if it means deviating from societal norms or expectations. Be prepared to advocate for their mental health needs with schools and other institutions, ensuring that the right accommodations and support systems are in place.

One of the teenage girls I work with, Olive, hated Monday mornings at school so much she would make herself physically sick all Sunday in anticipation. She had reached the stage where she couldn't sleep on Sunday nights. Every other day was fine . . . it was just Monday mornings. I was able to discover from talking to Olive that she absolutely hated the all-school assembly, which was only held first thing Monday – the noise of 500 kids crammed into the tiny school hall, the bright lights, the squeaking feedback from the microphones, the smells of the gym toilets right next to where she was allocated to sit . . . it was a sensory nightmare that was clearly having an enormous impact on her mental health. Was it worth it? *Absolutely* not! Was the solution so easy it was a no-brainer? *Absolutely* yes! As soon as we made the decision that Olive's Mondays would now start at 10 am – straight after school assembly – the Sunday night sickies disappeared.

6. Understand their particular sensory sensitivities and executive dysfunction.

Your child will teach you everything you need to know about them. It is up to you to listen and learn. If your child tells you their school tights feel like stinging nettles, validate this, even if they feel like velvet to you. This can be difficult to accept if your child absolutely hates hugs and you love them, but

you have to understand it is not personal. Allowing them to give or deny consent to physical touch with you is also amazing practice for handling trickier social situations as they grow up.

One of my incredible clients, Meg, is the most creative little girl who absolutely hates hugs – in fact, all touch is strictly out of bounds. She has sweetly found alternative ways to express her affection to the rest of her family (who are, ironically, all very big huggers). Meg absolutely loves carefully crafting handmade cards with beautiful words and pictures, which she presents with great pride and often for no reason at all. These personalised expressions of affection allow her to connect with her family in a way that is comfortable and meaningful for her – without a hug in sight. I had to wipe away a little tear when I was presented with an exquisite home-made card during one of my sessions with her. It felt *just* as good as a hug – or maybe even better, since I knew how much thought had gone into it.

7. Stand your ground with 'experts'.

In this era of online parenting books, family bloggers and endless therapeutic professionals, it can be easy for parents to feel overwhelmed by 'experts', but I am here to remind you that *no one* knows your child like you do, no matter how many fancy bits of paper hang in their office. Listen to your gut and your intuition, and learn to trust yourself, while continuing to learn everything you can about your child. If you do decide to seek guidance, it doesn't remove or diminish your authority as a parent or caregiver – it actually reinforces and enhances it.

You've got this!

If you worry after reading this chapter that you may not have got it all right so far, or you are worrying about the mistakes you may have made along the way, please remember that most of us parents are just muddling our way along pretending to know what we are doing, attempting to adult and looking for an *adultier adult* because we don't feel very adult ourselves. (Or is that just me?!)

Our kids deserve to know and understand their brains and their bodies, their needs, their strengths and their struggles. And everyone needs someone in their corner to celebrate, support and advocate for them. An amazing adult (or, even better, a whole tribe of amazing adults) who doesn't give up, who will fight for them and commit to learning all they can, even if it means unlearning or relearning what they thought they knew, or going against the grain. Sometimes that means doing things differently, because sometimes different is amazing and beautiful and exactly what you – and your kids – need.



Q: MY CHILD HAS JUST RECEIVED A DIAGNOSIS. IS IT WRONG THAT I'M SCARED FOR THEIR FUTURE?

A: It is completely natural to feel scared when your child receives a new diagnosis, and I would be lying if I said I didn't feel a little bit the same. It's a big moment that can bring up so many concerns for their future, especially when you don't know much about it or have heard horror stories. Remember, a diagnosis is not a limit or an end, it is a starting point for understanding your child's unique strengths and challenges.

It is also helpful to think of it not as something 'new', but simply a name for how your child has always been. Every single

child is capable of achieving great things, and with the right support, they can thrive in ways that are meaningful to them. Embrace this diagnosis – or discovery – as a tool that can help you advocate for and tailor support to your child's individual needs. Focus on their abilities, celebrate their progress and remember that many neurodivergent people go on to live incredibly fulfilling and successful lives.

You are not alone on this journey – in fact, you have just joined the most awesome, supportive, beautiful community of people you could ever hope to meet. Congratulations! And *welcome*. I just know you're going to love it here.

Q: I FEEL SO MUCH GUILT AND SHAME ABOUT HOW I HAVE PARENTED MY NEURODIVERGENT CHILD SO FAR. I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THEIR NEEDS, AND I FEEL LIKE I'VE FAILED THEM. HOW CAN I MOVE FORWARD?

A: First of all, it's important to acknowledge that you're not alone in feeling this way. Many parents of neurodivergent children experience guilt or regret about past actions, especially when they learn more about their child's unique needs. Actually, let's face it, I think every parent feels guilt at some point. What's important now is the commitment you're showing to grow, learn and do better.

Parenting is a journey, and we don't always have a clear map. You were doing the best you could with the knowledge and resources you had at the time. Recognising that you could have approached things differently is a sign of growth, not failure. It's never too late to build a more understanding and supportive relationship with your child. Every step you take towards understanding them better is a step in the right direction. You are doing the hard and courageous work of learning, adapting and loving them for who they are.