

# Supporting Neurodivergent Children with Anxiety: Key Insights from the OxPCF & Oxfordshire CAMHS NDC Webinar

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## Introduction

Anxiety is a significant challenge for many neurodivergent children, including those with autism and ADHD. This webinar, hosted by OxPCF and facilitated Oxfordshire CAMHS NDC, explored the causes of anxiety, the importance of individualised support, and practical strategies to help families and professionals provide effective support.

This document is a summary of the key information shared during the Anxiety Webinar, including insights from CAMHS professionals, practical strategies, and local and national resources recommended by both experts and parent carers.

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## Key Insights from the Webinar

### Anxiety in Neurodivergent Children

- Many autistic children (around 40%) and children with ADHD (around 30%) experience high levels of anxiety.
- Anxiety can look different for every child, affecting how they feel, think, and cope day to day.

### What Can Cause Anxiety?

- Environmental factors – Sensory sensitivities, changes in routine, social pressures, or school expectations can be overwhelming.
- Emotional factors – Worries about friendships, feeling different, struggling with uncertainty, or having repetitive thoughts can all play a part.

### Why a Personalised Approach Matters

- No two children experience anxiety in the same way, so support needs to be tailored to what helps them feel safe and understood.
- Both the child's environment and their emotional needs should be considered when finding ways to support them.

### How Schools Can Help

- Schools have a key role in reducing anxiety and creating a supportive learning environment.
- More understanding and better strategies are needed to help children feel safe, included, and able to learn.

## **The Role of Parents and Carers**

- Parents and carers are often the best advocates for their children, helping others understand what support they need.
- A supportive home environment, where children feel heard and validated, can make a big difference.

## **Ways to Support a Child with Anxiety**

- Support might include therapy, practical changes to their environment, and, in some cases, medication.
- Helping children build coping strategies at their own pace can increase confidence and reduce distress over time.

## **When Anxiety Affects School Attendance**

- Some children struggle to attend school because of anxiety (often called Emotionally Based School Avoidance – EBSA).
- The best support comes from schools, families, and professionals working together to understand and address the root causes.

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## **Q&A Summary – Supporting Neurodivergent Children with Anxiety**

### **1. What are the thresholds for CAMHS referrals, and how are interventions adapted for neurodivergent young people?**

- CAMHS primarily supports anxiety that has a psychological basis.
- When anxiety is linked to environmental factors (e.g., sensory overload, school pressures), the focus is on making changes at home and in school.
- Support is adapted by adjusting communication, physical spaces, and sensory experiences to better meet a child's needs.

### **2. How does the NDC service support young people with anxiety?**

The Neurodevelopmental Conditions (NDC) pathway has two parts:

- Diagnostic – Focuses on assessments for autism and ADHD.
- Treatment – Provides psychological or psychiatric support for those with the most complex needs.
- Most neurodivergent young people receive mental health support from general CAMHS teams rather than the NDC service.

### **3. What can be done about school-related anxiety, especially when schools don't fully understand autism?**

- Collaboration with the school is key. The SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) should be the first point of contact.
- Schools should follow best practice guidance, such as resources from the Autism Education Trust or Communication & Interaction Support Service.
- Parents can advocate for their child's rights and ensure appropriate support is in place.

#### **4. How can parents help with sleep issues and anxiety in neurodivergent children?**

- Sleep: The Cerebra website has useful resources on sleep strategies.
- Anxiety: Creating a personalised “anxiety toolbox” with familiar and calming activities can help (e.g., sensory tools, routines, relaxation techniques).
- Gradual exposure and behavioural strategies can help build confidence over time.

#### **5. What about medication for anxiety?**

- Medication can be part of an overall support plan, but it’s not the only approach.
- It should be used alongside practical strategies and emotional support tailored to the child’s needs.

#### **6. What specific therapies does NDC provide for autistic children?**

- Adapted Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) – Adjusted for different communication styles and thinking patterns.
- Compassion-Focused Therapy – Helps with self-acceptance and managing emotions.
- Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) – Focuses on understanding and meeting a child’s needs to reduce distress.

#### **7. How can parents support children with emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA)?**

- Understanding the root cause is essential – anxiety might be linked to sensory issues, social struggles, or past negative experiences.
- Rebuilding trust between the child and school is often the first step.
- A careful assessment of the child’s specific challenges can help in developing strategies that make school feel safer and more manageable.

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## Key Points from the CAMHS Webinar: Supporting Neurodivergent Children with Anxiety

### Practical Strategies:

✓ **Create an Anxiety Toolbox** – Develop a personalised toolkit that includes:

- Special interests to provide comfort and regulation.
- Sensory preferences (e.g., weighted blankets, fidget tools).
- Relaxation techniques (e.g., breathing exercises, movement breaks).

✓ **Introduce Graduated Exposure** –

- Begin with low-stress situations, slowly increasing exposure over time.
- Encourage small, manageable steps, ensuring the child feels safe and supported.

✓ **Challenge Anxious Thoughts in a Supportive Way** –

- Help children predict possible outcomes in anxiety-provoking situations.
- Use low-pressure discussions to explore and gently challenge unhelpful worries.

## **Advice for Supporting Anxiety:**

- Adapt the environment to reduce sensory overwhelm (e.g., quiet spaces, ear defenders, consistent routines).
- Recognise and support avoidance when needed, rather than forcing distressing situations.
- Encourage self-regulation strategies, such as movement breaks, deep pressure activities, or engaging with interests.
- Minimise changes to routines and rituals, as predictability helps reduce anxiety.
- Explain anxiety in a way that makes sense to your child, validating their feelings and reassuring them that anxiety is manageable.
- Model coping strategies, demonstrating that fears can be approached at their own pace.
- Consider both environmental and emotional factors, ensuring support is tailored to the child's needs.
- Work collaboratively with schools and mental health professionals to put the right support in place.

## **Key Takeaways:**

- Anxiety support must be individualised, addressing both psychological and environmental factors.
- Schools must take active steps to provide adjustments and understanding for neurodivergent students.
- Parents play a critical role in advocacy, ensuring their child's needs are recognised and met.
- A combination of practical strategies, therapy, and (if needed) medical support can help neurodivergent children manage anxiety effectively.

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## Useful Resources

These resources have been recommended by both professionals and parent carers as valuable sources of support, guidance, and information for families raising neurodivergent children. The list includes mental health services, education support, advocacy, sensory regulation, and local organisations that provide free or community-led assistance.

### **Sleep & Sensory Support**

- [Cerebra](#) – Advice on sleep difficulties and sensory processing for neurodivergent children.
- [The Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation](#) – Strategies and resources for supporting sensory regulation.
- [Fledglings](#) – A social enterprise offering sensory-friendly products to help children with regulation and daily living.

### **School & Education**

- [Autism Education Trust](#) – Guidance for parents and schools on supporting autistic children in education settings
- [IPSEA](#) (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice) – Free legal advice on EHCPs, SEND rights, and school support
- [SENDIASS Oxfordshire](#) – Independent, impartial support for families navigating SEND services.
- [Oxfordshire's SEND Local Offer](#) provides a directory of SEND services, including education, health, and social care
- [Contact](#) – A national charity supporting families of disabled children with education rights, benefits, and advocacy.



## **Mental Health & Anxiety Support**

- [Oxfordshire CAMHS](#) – The main mental health service for children and young people in Oxfordshire
- [Living Well with Neurodivergence](#) – A service from Oxford Health CAMHS in partnership with Autism Oxford for those open to Oxfordshire CAMHS offering courses, peer support, and resources for neurodivergent young people and their families.
- [YoungMinds](#) – A leading mental health charity offering support and advice for young people and parents.
- [The Curly Hair Project](#) - an organisation that helps people on the autistic spectrum and the people around them, founded by autistic author Alis Rowe
- [MindEd for Families](#) – Free online mental health training for parents and carers.
- [PDA Society](#) – Resources for understanding Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) and reducing anxiety-driven avoidance.
- [Oxfordshire Mind](#) – Children & Young People’s Services – Support for mental health, emotional wellbeing, and coping strategies for young people.
- [Tellmi](#) – A safe, moderated peer support app for young people struggling with mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression.
- [Supportive Steps](#) – A peer support service run by CAMHS for parents and carers supporting children with mental health challenges.
- [Walking With You \(WWY\) Group](#) – A peer support group for parents and carers in Oxfordshire, offering online sessions via Teams. This group provides a safe space to share experiences and learn strategies for supporting children’s mental health, supported by Oxfordshire CAMHS.

## **Local Oxfordshire Charities and Organisations**

[Oxfordshire SENDIASS](#) (Special Educational Needs & Disability Information, Advice and Support Service) SENDIASS Oxfordshire provides free, impartial advice to help parents and carers understand their child's rights and access the right school support, EHCP guidance, and dispute resolution.

[Autism Family Support Oxfordshire \(AFSO\)](#): AFSO supports autistic children and young adults through:

- Parent workshops and training.
- Social groups and activities for young people.
- Advocacy services for families.

[Oxfordshire Mind – Wellbeing for Children & Young People](#): Oxfordshire Mind offers:

- One-on-one emotional support for young people.
- Workshops and social groups to develop coping skills.
- Resources for parents and professionals.


[Carers Oxfordshire](#): Carers Oxfordshire provides support for unpaid carers, including:


- Advice and guidance on benefits, wellbeing, and legal rights.
- Training and workshops for carers.
- Peer support groups for parents caring for children with additional needs.


## **Recommended Books: Supporting Neurodivergent Children with Anxiety & Depression**


These books have been recommended by professionals and parent carers as helpful resources for understanding and supporting neurodivergent children and young people experiencing anxiety and depression. They focus on sensory-friendly, practical, and strengths-based approaches, rather than traditional CBT-focused methods.


### **Books for Parents & Carers**


 **Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Children: A Guide for Thriving** – Dr. Luke Beardon explains how reducing environmental triggers rather than focusing on behaviour changes can significantly ease anxiety in autistic children.


 **The Parents' Guide to Managing Anxiety in Children with Autism** – A parent-friendly guide focusing on sensory-based strategies, emotional regulation, and reducing overwhelm.


 **Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life** – A non-CBT approach to understanding and managing stress, helping children regulate emotions naturally.


 **Neurodivergent Insights: A Handbook for Autism, ADHD & More** – A strengths-based guide covering anxiety, depression, and emotional regulation from a neurodivergent-affirming perspective.

 **The Big Book of Dysregulated Love** – Explores emotional dysregulation, meltdowns, and burnout, helping parents support children experiencing low mood and anxiety.


 **Can't Not Won't: A Story About a Child Who Couldn't Go to School** – Eliza Fricker shares her lived experience of supporting a child experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), with practical guidance and validation.


 **The Family Experience of PDA: An Illustrated Guide to Pathological Demand Avoidance** – Eliza Fricker combines illustrations and real-life stories to help parents understand PDA-driven anxiety and strategies for supporting children with demand avoidance.


 **Changing Our Minds: How Children Can Take Control of Their Own Learning** – Dr. Naomi Fisher, a clinical psychologist, explores alternative approaches to learning and why traditional education can contribute to anxiety and depression in neurodivergent children.


 **A Different Way to Learn: Neurodiversity and Self-Directed Education** – Naomi Fisher provides insights into how self-directed education can be beneficial for anxious and disengaged neurodivergent children, particularly those experiencing school-based trauma or EBSA.


## **Books for Children & Young People**


 **All Birds Have Anxiety** – Uses simple language and visual storytelling to explain anxiety in a non-clinical and neurodivergent-friendly way.


 **The Panicosaurus: Managing Anxiety in Children Including Those with Autism Spectrum Disorder** – A story-based approach to helping young children understand and manage anxiety.


 **Braver Than You Think: A Child's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety** – Specifically written for neurodivergent children, avoiding CBT-based techniques in favour of sensory-friendly strategies.


 **My Big Emotions: A Book for Autistic Children About Managing Big Feelings** – Helps autistic children recognise and understand their emotions, including low mood and anxiety.

 **The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide: A Practical Handbook for Autistic Teens and Tweens** – Provides self-regulation strategies, sensory-friendly coping mechanisms, and emotional support for autistic young people.

 **The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic** – Includes self-care, emotional regulation, and anxiety management strategies for autistic girls and non-binary teens.

 **How to Be Me** – A fictional story about a neurodivergent child navigating social anxiety, emotional overwhelm, and self-acceptance.

 **Drama Queen: One Autistic Woman and a Life of Unhelpful Labels** – A powerful memoir about anxiety, depression, and emotional regulation from a neurodivergent perspective.

 **The Teenager's Guide to Burnout** – A neurodivergent-friendly guide for teens experiencing burnout, exhaustion, and overwhelm, offering practical strategies to recover and rebuild energy.

## Stay Connected and Share Your Voice with OxPCF


Join OxPCF (Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum) to stay informed, connect with other parent carers, and have your voice heard in shaping services for SEND families.

### Links


 Website: [www.oxpcf.org.uk](http://www.oxpcf.org.uk)

 Email: [info@oxpcf.org.uk](mailto:info@oxpcf.org.uk)

 Join our Mailing List: [eepurl.com/dNVTTE](http://eepurl.com/dNVTTE)

 SEND Connect Newsletter: [tinyurl.com/SENDConnectNewsletters](http://tinyurl.com/SENDConnectNewsletters)


 Events: [oxpcf.org.uk/events](http://oxpcf.org.uk/events)

 Volunteer with Us: [oxpcf.org.uk/volunteer](http://oxpcf.org.uk/volunteer)

 Join our Online Peer Support Group: [facebook.com/groups/oxsendroom/](https://facebook.com/groups/oxsendroom/)

 Join our Community WhatsApp Group: [chat.whatsapp.com/  
BRH9Knm8fuNBIFY1OhrZIE](https://chat.whatsapp.com/BRH9Knm8fuNBIFY1OhrZIE)

### Help Us Build Our Resource Page!

We're putting together a comprehensive resource page to support families of neurodivergent children in Oxfordshire. If you have any useful recommendations—whether it's a local support group, charity, website, book, or practical resource—we'd love to hear from you!  Please email your suggestions to: [info@oxpcf.org.uk](mailto:info@oxpcf.org.uk)