

♥ What No One Explained: The Neurodiverse Mom Glossary

Faith-filled. Research-backed. Written for your real life. ♥

📖 A Peek Inside the Guide:

Raising a neurodiverse child is both a privilege and a challenge. From managing diagnoses and navigating systems to facing misunderstood behaviors and emotional exhaustion, you're carrying more than most people realize. This guide is here to help you slow down, feel seen, and understand what's really happening beneath the surface, both in your child's brain and in your own heart.

What you'll find inside:

Clear, mom-friendly definitions (no medical jargon) • Research-backed explanations • Reflective journal affirmations • Encouraging Bible verses to speak life and hope over your family

🧠 Neurodiversity

What it is: A reminder that every brain is different, not broken. Neurodiversity means that differences like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia are natural and normal ways of thinking—not flaws.

What research says: Neurodivergence is a natural variation in how the brain is wired (Singer, 1999). Approximately 1 in 6 children in the U.S. have a developmental disability, including autism, ADHD, and learning differences, according to the CDC (2023). Neurodivergent individuals often experience differences in executive functioning. Executive Functioning is set of mental skills that help with planning, organizing, remembering, managing time, focusing attention, and regulating emotions. These brain-based differences are well-documented across conditions like ADHD, autism, and learning disabilities (Barkley, 1997; CDC, 2023). When executive function is challenged, everyday tasks can feel overwhelming, and children may need more support, structure, and flexibility at home and in school.

Mom takeaway: Your child doesn't need to be "fixed." They need to be understood and celebrated.

📖 **Journal Affirmation:** "I can love my child exactly as they are and guide them with grace."

📖 **Scripture:** "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us." Romans 12:6

✨ ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)

What it is:

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects attention, impulse control, and activity levels. Children with ADHD may struggle with focus, task completion, organization, and emotional regulation. These challenges aren't due to defiance or laziness—they reflect a brain that's wired for stimulation, novelty, and movement. Many kids with ADHD are also highly creative, intuitive, and emotionally perceptive.

What research says:

What research says: ADHD is associated with structural and functional differences in the brain's executive functioning system, responsible for skills like planning, organizing, managing time, and regulating behavior (Barkley, 1997; CDC, 2023). Brain imaging studies have shown reduced activity in areas like the prefrontal cortex, which explains why structured environments may be more difficult for children with ADHD.

Mom takeaway:

Your child isn't lazy or disrespectful. They're working with a brain that's constantly trying to keep up and often shining in ways you don't expect..



Journal Affirmation: “I’m not here to control the chaos—I’m here to understand it and help my child thrive.”



Scripture: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” — Colossians 3:23



✨ Autism (Autism Spectrum Disorder)

What it is:

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how a child processes information, communicates, and experiences the world. It often presents with differences in social interaction, sensory processing, language development, and behavior. Autism is not a disease. This diagnosis reflects neurological diversity. Children on the spectrum may have unique strengths, like intense focus or creative thinking, alongside challenges in interpreting social cues or regulating sensory input. Because autism is a spectrum, no two individuals experience it the same way.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5), autism is classified into three levels based on the amount of support a person requires in daily functioning:


Levels of Support:


- **Level 1:** Requires support. Children may struggle with social cues or organization but can often function independently with some accommodations.
- **Level 2:** Requires substantial support. These children may have more noticeable difficulties with communication, behavior, or flexibility and often need structured supports in daily routines.
- **Level 3:** Requires very substantial support. Children at this level often face significant communication challenges, may be minimally verbal or nonverbal, and may need intensive support for most activities.

What Research says:

Autism is associated with atypical brain development, particularly in areas responsible for social cognition, sensory integration, and communication. Neuroimaging studies show differences in brain volume, connectivity, and activity in areas like the amygdala, temporal lobes, and prefrontal cortex (NIMH, 2023; Courchesne et al., 2007). These differences help explain difficulties with interpreting facial expressions, managing sensory overload, or adapting to unexpected changes in routine.

Mom takeaway: Your child doesn't need to "act typical" to be deeply worthy. Their differences don't make them less—they make them beautifully and purposefully unique.

 **Journal Affirmation:** "I can stop trying to change who my child is and start seeing who they're becoming."

 **Scripture:** "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." — Psalm 139:14

Sensory Processing Differences (SPD)

What it is:

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) is a neurological condition where the brain has difficulty receiving, organizing, and responding appropriately to sensory input. Children with SPD may be hypersensitive (over-responsive) or hyposensitive (under-responsive) to sound, touch, movement, light, taste, or other stimuli. Some may avoid certain sensations (like tags or loud noises), while others may seek intense input (like spinning, crashing, or chewing). These behaviors reflect how their nervous system interprets the world. This behavior is not willful defiance or overreaction; it is just how their brain is processing the inputs.

What research says:

Brain imaging studies show that children with SPD have measurable differences in white matter connectivity, especially in pathways responsible for integrating sensory input and coordinating responses (Owen et al., 2013; Chang et al., 2014). These neurological differences impact motor planning, emotional regulation, and behavioral responses. SPD is not currently recognized as a standalone diagnosis in the DSM-5 but is widely acknowledged in occupational therapy and neuroscience fields (Miller et al., 2007).

Mom takeaway:

That meltdown over the way a certain material feels or a noisy room isn't dramatic; it is your child's nervous system asking for safety and support. Your child may shut down or zone out in overstimulating situations, but it is important to remember that this is their way of coping. As your child matures, they often develop tools to help them manage these feelings. They may avoid loud spaces/events, use noise-canceling headphones, retreat to a quiet room after social events, choose to wear comfortable fabrics, or find and use fidgets to help them regulate when they feel sensory overload.

**Journal Affirmation:**

"I can offer calm even when things feel chaotic."

**Scripture:**

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace... Take heart! I have overcome the world." — John 16:33

**OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder)**

What it is: OCD is a brain-based condition where kids experience unwanted, distressing thoughts (called obsessions) and feel the need to do something repeatedly (called compulsions) to feel better or prevent something bad from happening. These can include repeated checking, needing things to be 'just right,' or seeking reassurance. It's not about being neat or fussy—it's the brain trying to find relief from fear.

What research says: OCD is linked to differences in how the brain detects danger and decides how to respond. Areas of the brain responsible for fear and problem-solving become overactive, sending out constant 'false alarms' even when nothing is wrong (Leckman et al., 2010). This creates a strong urge to perform rituals or behaviors to feel safe. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, along with other modalities and medications, has been shown to help reduce symptoms by calming these brain patterns.

Mom takeaway: Your child isn't being difficult. They're trying to quiet a brain that's sounding a false alarm. Meet it with truth, patience, and tenderness.



Journal Affirmation: "Together, we can face fear with truth and tenderness. I will lead with love, not fear."



Scripture: "When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, your comfort brings me joy." — Psalm 94:19

Anxiety

What it is:


Anxiety is the brain's alarm system working overtime. It may show up as avoidance, irritability, constant worry, or physical symptoms like stomachaches. It often coexists with ADHD, autism, OCD, or sensory processing challenges—and it's not just nervousness. It's a brain-based reaction to perceived threats or uncertainty.


What research says:

Anxiety is linked to increased activity in the amygdala—the brain's fear center—which can cause strong reactions even when no real danger is present (NIMH, 2023). These heightened responses are more likely in children with other neurodevelopmental diagnoses because the brain systems that handle emotion, attention, and regulation are all interconnected (Cisler & Koster, 2010).


Mom takeaway:

We've all experienced anxiety, it's part of being human. But for your child, those anxious feelings can be louder and harder to turn off. When they are overwhelmed, they surface and become louder in their brain. They need your calm, your compassion, and your unconditional love.

 **Journal Affirmation:** “When my child feels afraid, I can be the steady they borrow strength from.”

 **Scripture:** “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” — 1 Peter 5:7

Executive Function

 **Executive Function What it is:** This is the brain's self-management system—skills like planning, focusing, regulating emotions, remembering, and finishing tasks. When these skills lag, it's not laziness—it's a developmental delay in how the brain organizes and acts on information. This can show up as procrastination, big emotional reactions, forgetfulness, or difficulty with transitions.

What research says: Executive function challenges are common in children with ADHD, autism, anxiety, and other neurodevelopmental conditions. These difficulties are linked to the prefrontal cortex and related brain networks, which manage organization, flexibility, impulse control, and emotional regulation (Diamond, 2013). Stress, lack of sleep, and overstimulation can further reduce a child's ability to access these skills.

Mom takeaway: That meltdown over getting dressed or homework isn't a character flaw. It's a brain asking for scaffolding, not scolding. Your support becomes their structure. Here are some helpful tips for supporting executive function:

- Use visual checklists or schedules.
- Break tasks into small steps.
- Set a predictable routine.
- Offer one instruction at a time.
- Celebrate effort over perfection.



Journal Affirmation:

“I can meet my child’s needs with grace and structure, not pressure.”



Scripture:

“Let all that you do be done in love.” — 1 Corinthians 16:14



Emotional Regulation

What it is:

Emotional regulation is the brain’s ability to manage intense emotions in response to daily experiences. Neurodivergent children may experience emotional dysregulation, which can look like sudden crying, yelling, freezing, or shutting down. This is not bad behavior—it is a sign that their nervous system is in a state of overwhelm.

What research says:

Emotional regulation difficulties are linked to how the brain processes and responds to stress. Specifically, areas like the limbic system (which controls emotions) and the prefrontal cortex (which helps with decision-making and self-control) often function differently in children with ADHD, autism, and sensory processing disorder. These differences can make it harder for a child to calm down, express their feelings appropriately, or recover from frustration. External factors—like changes in routine, loud environments, or a lack of supportive adult presence—can further heighten these difficulties. Co-regulation, where a calm caregiver helps the child navigate their emotions, is often key to progress (Shaw et al., 2014; Thompson, 2011).

As children grow and become more socially and physically aware—understanding where their body is in space and how their behavior impacts others—their emotional regulation skills often improve. With time, support, and consistent co-regulation, many children develop greater resilience and self-awareness.

Mom takeaway:

You don’t have to fix the feeling. Just be present inside it. Your calm presence becomes the emotional anchor your child needs.



Journal Affirmation:

“In the chaos, I can find moments of joy. I don’t need to control the storm—I can simply stand in it with love.”

Scripture:

“For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” — 2 Timothy 1:7

Cognitive Flexibility

What it is:

Cognitive flexibility is the brain’s ability to shift thoughts, adapt to change, and consider new perspectives. Children who struggle with this skill may become upset with unexpected changes or insist on doing things a certain way, not because they’re being difficult, but because their brains rely on predictability to feel safe.

What research says:

Cognitive flexibility is part of executive functioning and is often impacted in children with autism, ADHD, and anxiety. These differences are linked to the prefrontal cortex, which supports mental adaptability and emotional control (Diamond, 2013). Rigidity is often a coping tool used to manage uncertainty or overstimulation.

Mom takeaway:

That meltdown over a change in plans isn’t manipulation by your child, it is them expressing to you they feel dysregulated. Flexibility can be taught gently, through repeated exposure, predictability, and co-regulation. Communication is key.

Journal Affirmation:

“I can help my child feel safe even when things don’t go as planned.”

Scripture:

“Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.” — Proverbs 19:21

Social Communication Differences

What it is:

Social communication refers to how we use verbal and nonverbal cues like facial expressions, tone of voice, eye contact, body language, and conversational timing to connect with others. Neurodivergent children often may interpret or express these signals differently. They may speak in a more literal way, miss social cues, or find it hard to read emotions in others.

What research says:

Social communication differences are especially common in autism, though they can also overlap with ADHD and anxiety. Research has shown differences in brain regions responsible for interpreting social signals, such as the superior temporal sulcus and amygdala (Tager-

Flusberg et al., 2005). These neurological differences may make back-and-forth conversation, perspective-taking, or interpreting sarcasm more challenging.

As children mature and receive support—like speech therapy, social skills coaching, or peer modeling—their communication often improves. They begin to better recognize social patterns, respond more flexibly, and gain confidence in interactions.

Mom takeaway:

Just because your child doesn't connect like others doesn't mean they don't care. They're learning to communicate in a way that feels safe and authentic to them.



Journal Affirmation:

“My child communicates in ways that are real, even if they look different from what I expected.”



Scripture:

“Let your conversation be always full of grace.” — Colossians 4:6



Quick Reference: Neurodiversity Glossary

- **Scaffolding:** Scaffolding means giving just the right amount of help so your child can succeed, but not so much that they stop trying. You might offer reminders, visual aids, or step-by-step instructions. Over time, as your child grows more confident, you slowly pull back the support and let them take the lead
- **Weighted Vests and Blankets:** These are sensory tools designed to provide deep pressure input, which can have a calming and organizing effect on the nervous system. Weighted items help some children feel more secure and grounded, especially during transitions, stressful moments, or bedtime. While not a solution for every child, they can be helpful in reducing anxiety and improving focus or sleep.
- **Stimming:** Short for self-stimulatory behavior, stimming includes repetitive movements or sounds like hand-flapping, rocking, or vocalizing. It often happens automatically and without conscious awareness. Stimming helps regulate sensory input, relieve anxiety, or express excitement. While it does not need to be stopped unless it's causing harm or interfering with safety, some children may stim less over time as they become more self-aware. Fidgets and other sensory tools can offer safe, more discreet ways to meet those same regulation needs.
- **Joint Attention:** The ability to share a moment or focus on the same object or event with another person. It's a foundational skill for connection and communication. Many children with autism or other neurodevelopmental differences may struggle with joint attention, making it harder to connect socially or learn through observation. Tools like fidgets can actually support joint attention by giving a child a shared object to explore with another person—helping to build that connection in a safe, engaging way.. It's an early social communication skill that can be challenging for children with neurodivergence, affecting connection and language development.

- **Masking:** The act of hiding or suppressing neurodivergent traits to appear “typical” in social situations. While it can help someone navigate certain environments, masking is often exhausting and can lead to anxiety, identity confusion, and burnout over time.
- **Theory of Mind:** The inability to naturally understand that others have different thoughts, feelings, and perspectives—often a core challenge in autism that affects social connection.
- **CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy):** A structured, evidence-based talk therapy that helps kids identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts, manage anxiety, and build more flexible thinking patterns. Often effective for anxiety, OCD, and emotional regulation.
- **ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis):** A behavioral therapy focused on teaching specific skills and reducing challenging behaviors through positive reinforcement. Some families find it helpful, while others prefer more relationship-based approaches.
- **OT (Occupational Therapy):** Helps children develop the skills needed for daily activities like handwriting, getting dressed, or managing sensory input.
- **PT (Physical Therapy):** Improves motor skills, coordination, posture, and strength, especially for kids with developmental delays or hypotonia.
- **SLP (Speech-Language Pathologist):** Supports speech, language development, social communication, and feeding issues.
- **IEP (Individualized Education Plan):** A customized learning plan for public school students who qualify for special education services under the IDEA law.
- **504 Plan:** A formal plan in public schools that provides accommodation (like extended time or sensory breaks) for students with disabilities who don’t qualify for special education.
- **ISP (Individualized Service Plan):** A similar plan for private school students who qualify for special education, typically supported by public school funding and developed through the local education agency.

💛 A Final Word from One Mom to Another Your child was made on purpose. You were chosen on purpose. There’s no manual, but there’s grace—so much grace.

Printable Calming Checklist

Calming Checklist for Overwhelmed Moms When your day feels like too much, use this list to ground yourself:

🧘 Grace Reset:

1. **Try box breathing.** Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4—repeat for calm.

2. **Do something kind for yourself.** Make tea, stretch, or give yourself five quiet minutes to just be.
3. **Look up.** Find one beautiful thing around you—a patch of sky, a plant, a photo that makes you smile.
4. **Name what's true.** Whisper a truth over yourself: “This is hard, but I am not alone.”
5. **Anchor in scripture.** Speak your favorite verse out loud—or use this: “*When I am weak, He is strong.*”
6. **Smile on purpose.** Even a forced smile can shift your nervous system.
7. **Get dressed up.** Choose an outfit that makes you feel confident and put-together—even if you're staying home.
8. **Go for a walk.** Even five minutes outdoors can clear your mind and reset your body.
9. **Light or scent.** Light a candle or use essential oil—lavender, citrus, frankincense.
10. **Bless your now.** Lay your hand over your heart and say, “God is here in this moment with me.”

Tape this inside your planner, or screenshot it for your phone. You don't have to do it all. Start with one. Grace meets you right where you are.