

Neurodivergent Teens and Emotional Regulation

This is a **lived experience study** that provides crucial insights for parents and teachers working with neurodivergent youth. Researchers co-designed questions with youth who had lived experience and directly interviewed **57 neurodivergent young people (ages 11–15)** diagnosed with ADHD, autism, or both to explore what helps or hurts emotional regulation.

Key Findings: What Actually Helps

Connection Over Control

What helped most: connection, flexibility, and autonomy-supportive environments that treated teens as fully human rather than defective.

Three Main Themes

- What helps stop situations from becoming upsetting in the first place
- What helps manage emotions during difficult moments
- How neurodivergent young people already use their own strengths to stay regulated in ways that often go unrecognized

Teens were better regulated when they had autonomy over how they coped, could express distress without shame, and felt genuinely accepted instead of judged.

Understanding the Challenge

Neurodivergent teens face the typical challenges of adolescence, while also being misunderstood and unsupported because of their neurodivergence. Navigating schools and social expectations can make daily life exhausting.

School avoidance, loneliness, anxiety, and depression are common. Yet school-based mental health support rarely accounts for these realities.

Emotion regulation—how we cope with big feelings—is often a struggle for neurodivergent teens. But too often, their responses are misread.

When a teen withdraws, yells, or needs quiet time, it is usually labeled a failure or dysfunction rather than a **valid response to overload**. This study challenges that pathologizing view and centers the voices of neurodivergent youth instead.

Study Design: Centering Youth Voices

Ten neurodivergent young adults (ages 18–25) helped design the study. They were paid for their time, and their insights shaped everything—from the questions asked to how interviews were conducted.

The researchers used an **experience-sensitive approach**, treating youth as collaborators whose needs and insights carried equal weight. This **radically inclusive method** helped reduce the usual power imbalances in academic research.

- ☐ This study met ethical standards, was approved by a health ethics committee, and followed international guidelines that protect young people's rights in research. Researchers obtained both parental consent and the teens' own consent, emphasizing respect and autonomy.



Who Participated

57

Total Participants

Neurodivergent adolescents, ages 11–15, attending mainstream UK schools

24

ADHD Only

Young people diagnosed with ADHD

21

Autism Only

Young people diagnosed with autism

12

Dual Diagnosis

ADHD + autism combined

All participants spoke English and felt comfortable discussing their experiences. Limitations included: Most participants were male (67%) and white (75%), about 16% qualified for free school meals, and the sample lacked full diversity of neurodivergent youth.

What Helps During Emotional Distress

This theme looks at what works **in the middle of an emotional storm**. Teens described three main ways of coping:



Affirmation and Check-ins from Others

For many autistic teens, the most powerful support was **being seen and accepted**. They didn't want fixing. They wanted someone to notice, ask if they were okay, and stay present without judgment.



Self-Directed Regulation (Autonomy)

Teens with ADHD or both ADHD and autism often said the best way to regain control was **doing something on their own terms**. They didn't want to be told what to do. They wanted to choose.



Letting Emotions Out

Sometimes, regulation wasn't about staying calm—it was about **releasing the emotion**. Crying, yelling, stimming, slamming a door, ranting, or stamping a foot all helped emotions move through.

Practical Strategies That Work

Simple Check-ins

- Simple check-ins like *"Are you okay?"* or *"What's going on?"* made a big difference
- These moments of validation helped them feel less alone
- Gentle reminders like: *"You're not what you think you are right now"* gave perspective

Self-Directed Choices

- Moving seats
- Taking a break to play a game
- Watching funny or uplifting videos
- Helping someone else
- Simply being left alone

Together, these three approaches—**connection, autonomy, and release**—show a fuller picture of how neurodivergent teens regulate in distress.

Emotional Release

These expressions were often misunderstood by adults, but for the teens, they were vital ways to make unbearable feelings manageable:

- One described crying as a release valve
- Another found rhythm in stimming
- Others screamed into pillows or stormed off—**not as rebellion, but as communication without words**

Recognizing Hidden Strengths

The final theme showed something often ignored: **neurodivergent teens already use their own strengths to regulate emotions**. These strengths include talents, creativity, humor, reflection, and identity.



Recognizing Strengths and Talents

Many ADHD teens said that doing things they were good at—like sports, building projects, or helping others—boosted their mood and gave them stability. Traits usually framed as "problems," like distractibility, were sometimes strengths.



Learning From the Past

Some teens—especially those with both ADHD and autism—said they had become better over time at handling emotions. They recognized early signs of distress and remembered what had worked before.



Protecting Identity and Confidence

Autistic teens often spoke about protecting themselves from stereotypes. Some reminded themselves: *"That's not who I am."* This was a way to resist shame and hold on to confidence.

What This Means for Parents and Teachers

This study makes one thing clear: **emotional safety comes from relationships, not rules**. Teens said they regulated better when they felt kindness, respect, and flexibility—not when they were punished or corrected.



Challenge Stereotypes

Old theories suggested autistic people don't want connection. This research shows the opposite. What they really wanted was **belonging**—to be included, understood, and connected without being forced to mask.



Support Autonomy

Teens with ADHD described how harmful it felt to be constantly corrected. What helped most wasn't control, but **collaboration**. They wanted space to move, fidget, or take breaks.



Reframe as Strengths

Young people described traits that helped them cope: humor, creativity, sensory awareness, empathy, even distraction. These weren't problems—they were **tools**.

Behaviors like withdrawal or avoidance are often **protective**, not problematic. Teens are doing their best to shield themselves from harm in environments that can feel overwhelming.

Empowering Takeaways for Educators and Parents

Here's what this study tells us, in plain terms for those supporting neurodivergent youth:

Connection regulates.

Kindness, curiosity, and consistent relationships help prevent and soothe overload.

Autonomy matters.

Teens regulate better when they choose how to cope.

Environment shapes expression.

Emotional struggles are often logical responses to stressful or rigid environments.

Validation is powerful.

Words like *"I see you. Your feelings make sense."* can be deeply regulating.

Neurodivergent youth are experts.

When they co-design supports, outcomes improve across school, social life, and wellbeing.

What neurodivergent teens need isn't more rules or one-size-fits-all programs. They need environments that **see them, trust them, and value their insight.**

Pavlopoulou, G., Chandler, S., Lukito, S., Kakoulidou, M., Matejko, M., Jackson, I., Balwani, B., Boyens, T., Poulton, D., Harvey-Nguyen, L., Wilson, A., Ly, E., McCauley, E., Hurry, J., Baker, S., & Sonuga-Barke, E. (inpress). Situating emotion regulation in autism and ADHD through neurodivergent adolescents' perspectives. *Nature Scientific Reports*



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