

# Helping Your Neurodivergent Child Thrive at Secondary School

*A Guide for Parents and Carers*

If you're reading this, you're probably looking ahead to the move into Year 7 and wondering how to help. The honest answer is: you already are. The fact that you're thinking about it, reading about it, preparing for it, all of that is genuinely useful. Your child has someone in their corner who is paying attention, and that matters more than any single strategy.

This guide is short on theory and high on practical things you can actually do. It's organised roughly in the order things tend to happen, from the spring of Year 6 through the first half of Year 7. You don't have to do all of it. Pick the bits that feel relevant to your child and leave the rest for when you need it.

## 1. The groundwork: spring and summer of Year 6

Most of the genuinely useful preparation happens quietly, in ordinary moments, over months. Not big set-piece conversations or formal sit-downs. Just small, regular nudges towards the things your child will need to know about themselves and how to manage day-to-day at secondary school.

### Help them get to know themselves

Many neurodivergent children arrive at Year 7 knowing what they find hard but not what helps them. That gap matters because at secondary school, the adults will be new and starting from scratch, and your child will need to be able to say what they need.

You can build this in really ordinary ways. After a good day at school, ask what made it good. After a hard one, ask what would have helped. Notice when something works and name it: "You seemed much more settled after that walk, didn't you?" Over weeks and months, this becomes a shared language between you and your child about how they work.

### Practise the words for asking for help

In the moment, asking for help can feel enormous. The words don't come, the moment passes, and the difficulty just gets carried instead. Practising the words in advance, in low-pressure situations, makes them more available when they're actually needed.

#### Words worth practising

These can be rehearsed at home, in conversation or in light role-play, until they feel less unusual to say:

*"I'm not sure I've understood. Could you explain it again?"*

*"I'm finding the noise really hard today. Can I sit somewhere quieter?"*

*"Can I have a minute to think before I answer?"*

*"I need a minute."*

None of these are dramatic. That's the point. They're small, ordinary requests that can make an enormous difference if your child has them ready.

### **Build the evening routine now**

Year 7 is much easier on a child who arrives at school in the morning already prepared. The evening before is the time for that. Checking the timetable for tomorrow, packing the right books and equipment, sorting PE kit or anything else that needs to be ready.

If you can build this into a habit before September, attached to something that already happens (after dinner, before screens), it becomes part of the day rather than another thing to remember. A simple checklist on the bedroom wall is more reliable than memory in the morning rush.

## **2. Talking to the new school**

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Schools want to support your child, but they can only act on the information they actually have. The transition information that gets passed on between primary and secondary is often patchy, and the most useful things are sometimes the things nobody thought to write down.

### **Write the one-page profile with your child**

A short, student-authored document that says "here's what you need to know about me" is one of the most useful things you can give the new school. Not a long history, not a list of diagnoses, just a practical guide.

It can answer five simple questions:

- What helps me?
- What makes things harder?
- What are my early signs that things are building up?
- What should adults do when I seem overwhelmed?
- What should adults never do?

Written with your child rather than for them, even a short paragraph in their own words is more powerful than a polished document written by adults.

### **Ask about the named adult**

Self-advocacy is so much easier when there's a known, trusted adult to advocate to. Find out before September who your child's named contact will be, ideally by name, and ask whether a brief introduction can happen before the first day. Even a five-minute meet-and-greet makes the new building feel less unfamiliar.

### **Things worth asking the new school**

If you have a transition meeting, or even a quick email exchange, here are the questions that consistently turn out to matter:

- Who is the named adult my child can go to?
- Where is the quiet or safe space, and how do they access it?
- How does the lunch system work for new Year 7s?
- What's the homework platform and how do parents access it?
- How does the school prefer to be contacted if something comes up?

### 3. The first weeks of Year 7

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The first half-term is hard. Not because anything has gone wrong, but because everything is new at once. Most children, neurodivergent or not, are running on adrenaline and goodwill for the first few weeks, and the wheels often come off somewhere around the October half-term mark when the novelty wears off and the tiredness catches up.

#### What to expect

- **Afternoon and evening collapse.** Many neurodivergent children will hold themselves together all day at school and fall apart at home. They are not putting it on at home. They are managing more than is sustainable, all day, and home is the only place they can let go. This is exhausting for everyone but it is normal.
- **"I'm fine" might not mean fine.** Children rarely have the words for a hard day in the first weeks. "Fine" might mean "I survived" or "I don't want to talk about it yet." Both are valid.
- **Small things might feel huge.** A wrong room, a forgotten pencil case, a confusing instruction. These can feel catastrophic when everything else is also new. Try not to dismiss the size of the feeling, even if the cause looks small.
- **Sleep, food and mood may be all over the place.** This usually settles. If it doesn't by half-term, that's worth a conversation.

#### Useful questions after school

"How was school?" rarely produces a useful answer. More specific, lower-pressure questions tend to work better, particularly if asked when your child has had time to decompress first:

##### Questions that often get answers

*"What was the best bit of today?"*

*"Was there anything that surprised you?"*

*"Was there a moment that felt hard?"*

*"Did you eat your lunch? Where did you sit?"*

*"Is there anything you'd like to tell me about, even briefly?"*

Some children will need quiet time before they can talk. Others will tell you everything in a rush as soon as they walk in. Both are fine. Follow their lead on timing.

#### When to step in and when to hold back

This is one of the hardest things. The instinct to fix is strong, and sometimes useful, but Year 7 is also the moment children start needing to handle some things themselves. A reasonable rule of thumb: if it's a one-off, watch it. If it's a pattern, gently raise it. If it's affecting sleep, mood, or willingness to go to school, raise it sooner.

## 4. When things feel really hard

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Some difficulty is normal in the first weeks. But there's a difference between settling-in hard and not-sustainable hard, and parents often spot that difference before schools do.

### Signs that something needs more attention

- Refusing or really struggling to go to school after the first fortnight.
- A change in sleep, eating, or mood that isn't shifting.
- Coming home dysregulated most days, not just occasionally.
- Saying things like "nobody likes me" or "I can't do this" repeatedly.
- Physical symptoms (stomach aches, headaches) that show up on school days.
- A loss of interest in things that usually bring them joy.

Any of these on its own can be a wobble. Several together, or one that persists, is worth raising with the school.

### Talking to school constructively

When something isn't working, the most effective approach is usually specific and collaborative rather than general or accusatory. School staff respond best when you arrive with a clear picture of what's happening and an openness to working out what to try.

#### A useful way in

A short email or message that names what you're seeing without leaping to conclusions:

*"I wanted to flag that the last two weeks have been really hard at home after school. I'm seeing X, Y and Z. I don't know what's behind it but I wanted to make you aware. Could we have a quick conversation about what's going on at school and what might help?"*

This sets up a partnership rather than a complaint, which usually leads to better outcomes for everyone, your child included.

### Trust your gut

You know your child. If something feels off, even if you can't quite name it, that instinct is worth listening to. You're not being dramatic, and you're not making a fuss. You're noticing something that the busy school environment may not have spotted yet.

## 5. Looking after yourself

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This bit gets left out of most transition resources, which is unfortunate because it matters. Supporting a neurodivergent child through transition is genuinely hard work, and your own bandwidth is part of the equation.

Your child needs you regulated more than they need you on top of everything. A parent or carer who is running on empty cannot be the calm presence at the end of a hard school day. So whatever helps you, the walk, the friend, the early bedtime, the cup of tea in actual silence, please count that as part of the work, not separate from it.

### **A few things worth remembering**

If your child is struggling, it doesn't mean you've done something wrong. Secondary school is a hard environment for many neurodivergent young people, and difficulty is not failure.

If your child is thriving, that's wonderful, and you're allowed to enjoy it without waiting for the other shoe to drop.

If you're tired, that's fair. This is tiring. Find your people and lean on them. You're not meant to do this alone.

**You're already doing the most important thing.**

*You're paying attention. You're preparing. You're showing up.*

*Your child is lucky to have you in their corner.*

**Pooky x**