

Attachment and Neurodiversity

A Parent Guide

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In collaboration with families and professionals across Gibraltar.



HM Government
of Gibraltar

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Together, your voices have helped build a resource rooted in compassion, respect, and lived experience.

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Attachment and Neurodiversity

A Parent Guide

Introduction

Building Strong Family Connections Through Understanding Attachment

When we think about what works to support children and improve their outcomes, one thing is clear: there isn't a 'one-size-fits-all' solution. This is especially true for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), who may face unique challenges and barriers in having their emotional and developmental needs fully recognised and met.

As a parent or carer, you already play one of the most powerful roles in your child's development. But parenting a neurodivergent child, whether they are autistic, have ADHD, a learning disability, or a physical difference, can come with extra layers of complexity. This guide has been created to help you navigate one of the most important (and sometimes overlooked) areas of child development: attachment.

This guide is here to support you. Dip in and out as needed, whether you're looking for guidance in a difficult moment or ideas to help strengthen your whole family.

“
I used to think I had to have all the answers. Now I know that just being there, trying my best, and staying connected is what matters most.
”



What Is Attachment and Why Does It Matter?

Attachment is the emotional bond that forms between a child and their primary caregivers. It's built through everyday experiences of comfort, trust, and reassurance. These connections lay the foundation for how a child understands relationships, handles stress, and explores the world around them.

Children with neurological differences or disabilities may express or seek connection in ways that differ from what some professionals or parents might expect. They might:

- Avoid eye contact or physical closeness
- Communicate non-verbally or through repetitive behaviours
- Seem distant, overly dependent, or easily overwhelmed
- Need consistent routines or sensory support to feel safe

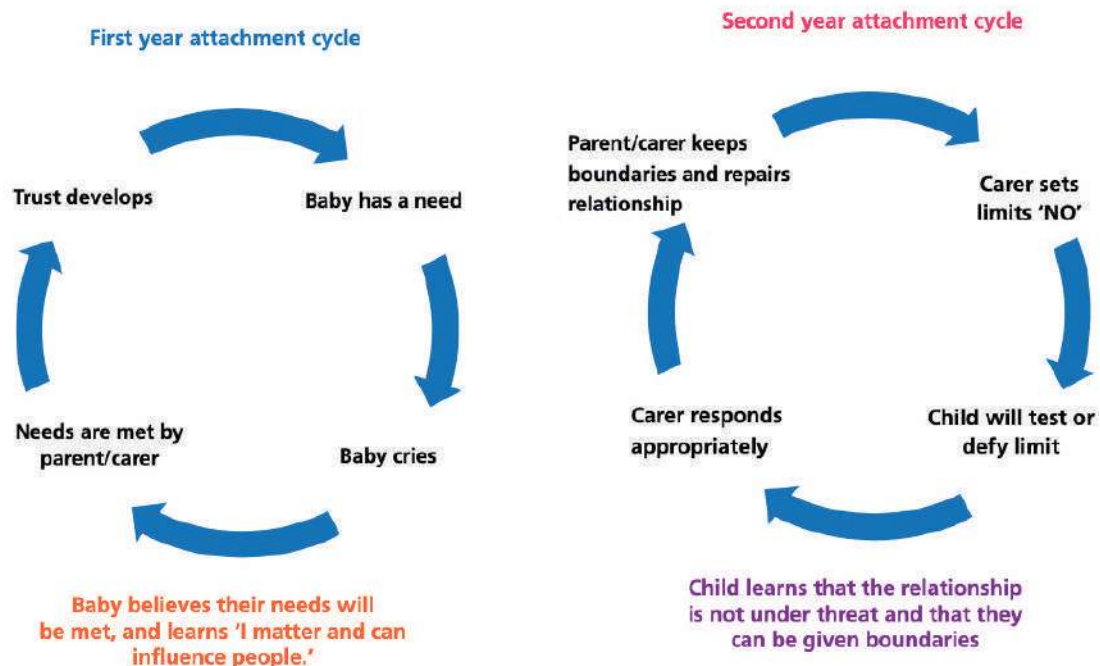
These differences don't mean your child can't form strong and secure attachments. It simply means the pathways to connection may look different, and may need to be built with extra awareness, patience, and flexibility.



Understanding the Attachment Cycle

Attachment theory tells us that infants are biologically wired to form bonds with caregivers. When these bonds are strong and consistent, they help children feel safe, valued, and capable.

Here's how the attachment cycle typically works in the early years:



This cycle helps develop the child's trust, self-worth, and ability to regulate emotions.

Why Attachment Can Be Disrupted... And What That Means

There are many reasons why the early attachment cycle might be disrupted:

- A difficult pregnancy or birth
- Parental mental or physical health issues
- Separation from a primary caregiver
- Frequent changes in care, housing, or routines
- Neurodevelopmental differences that affect how the child seeks or receives comfort

When this cycle is interrupted, children may adapt in ways that don't always look like "secure" behaviour. They might:

- Act out or become withdrawn
- Seem clingy or excessively anxious
- Struggle to understand or manage their emotions

These behaviours are not signs of "bad parenting" or "difficult children." They are signs that a child is seeking safety and understanding, often in the only ways they know how. Even children raised with great care and love may struggle with attachment if their early needs were missed, misunderstood, or experienced through a neurodiverse lens.

What This Guide Offers

This booklet has been developed to:

- Help you understand attachment and how it develops
- Explain how neurodiversity may influence emotional connection
- Share practical, achievable strategies to build strong bonds
- Support neurotypical siblings and wider family dynamics
- Empower you to feel confident in meeting your child's emotional needs

Whether you're at the start of your parenting journey or further along, this guide is here to offer insight, encouragement, and tools you can use every day.

“
The hardest thing can be feeling I do not get a single moment on my own.
”

A Relationship Unique to Every Child

It's important to remember that attachment is not a one-size-fits-all relationship. Children, even in the same family, can have very different needs, sensitivities, and responses. One child may cope well with change; another may find it deeply unsettling. That doesn't mean anything went wrong, it simply means each child needs to be understood on their own terms.

This guide aims to help you do just that.

Understanding Attachment in Neurodiverse Children

“All children seek connection. Some just have a different language.”

Why This Understanding Matters

Attachment is often discussed as something “natural” or “automatic.” But for families raising children with neurodevelopmental differences, supporting secure attachment often requires a more conscious, responsive approach. Children with autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, or physical conditions may express their needs in ways that are less easily understood, but their need for connection, comfort, and safety is just as deep.

This chapter explores how attachment typically develops, how neurodivergent children may express or experience attachment differently, and what parents can do to recognise and respond to their child’s unique emotional world.



How Attachment Typically Develops

Attachment begins in infancy and evolves throughout childhood and adolescence. While every child is different, there are some key developmental stages:

Stage	Typical Features of Attachment Development
Infancy (0–18 months)	Seeks closeness to caregiver, uses crying and movement to signal needs, builds trust through repeated caregiving responses.
Toddlerhood (18 months–3 years)	Begins to explore, tests boundaries, checks back for reassurance, begins co-regulation with adult support.
Early Childhood (3–6 years)	Attachment behaviours expand, verbal reassurance, play, problem-solving. Needs clear, consistent responses.
Later Childhood & Adolescence	Shifts toward peer relationships but still needs emotional security from caregivers. Attachment continues to shape self-worth and emotional regulation.

How Neurodivergence May Influence Attachment

Autism

- May resist touch or eye contact
- Seeks predictable routines more than physical closeness
- Uses special interests as connection points
- Attachment may be shown through presence, not affection
- Needs help with regulation

ADHD

- Highly impulsive, emotional intensity fluctuates
- Needs help with regulation and boundaries
- Attachment may show as clinginess, withdrawal, or outbursts, but often reflects strong, unspoken emotional connection.

Learning Disabilities

- May struggle to express needs verbally
- Needs simplified, repeated reassurance and visual cues
- Attachment seen through reliance, imitation, or parallel play
- Risk of overprotection can affect independence

Physical Disabilities

- May need help accessing exploration
- Risk of overprotection can affect independence
- Eye gaze, gestures, and facial expressions become key connection point

Recognising Internal and External Expressions of Attachment Needs

Children express attachment needs in many ways, especially when they don't have the language to say, "I feel unsafe" or "I need you."

Table showing examples of internal and external cues:

Internal (Emotional/Invisible)	External (Behavioural/Observeral)
Anxiety, worry, low mood	Aggression, defiance, tantrums
Withdrawal, masking	Clinginess, over-compliance
Difficulty sleeping or eating	Controlling or avoidant behaviour
Hyperalert to changes	Repetitive questions or seeking reassurance

These are not signs of being 'difficult.' They are signs of a child doing their best to get their needs met.

“
For a long time, I thought my child was being defiant or difficult. But once I understood that the outbursts were really a way of saying, “I need you,” or “I am confused” everything changed. Now, instead of reacting with frustration, I try to respond with connection. It’s not always easy, but it’s helped us both feel safer.
”



The Five Conditions That Help Secure Attachment Flourish

Attachment grows best under five emotional conditions. These are helpful for all children, but they are especially important for children whose needs or communication styles differ. We outline the basics of these emotional conditions. In this guide we will explore strategies and activities we can use in the following sections.

1. Feeling Safe

Children must feel emotionally and physically secure. Neurodivergent children may need:

- A predictable environment.
- Gentle transitions.
- Calm, consistent responses.
- Even if they don't seek closeness in conventional ways, they benefit from your availability and protection.

2. Feeling Seen and Understood

Neurodivergent children may express needs through movement, tone, repetition, or silence, not words. 'Tuning in' to their communication style builds connection.

"When I flap, I'm excited." "When I'm quiet, I may be overwhelmed."

Responding to their cues builds trust and the message you send is that: "I see you. I know what you need. I will help."

3. Feeling Comforted and Reassured

Children learn to manage emotions through co-regulation by being soothed by a calm, responsive adult. Your presence teaches them safety. During distress, stay nearby, offer quiet reassurance, and help them recover. Instead of sending them away (time-out), try staying close (time-in) to show they are still safe, seen, and supported.

4. Feeling Valued

Children need to feel they are loved for who they are, not just what they do. Express joy, not just instructions. Celebrate quirks and passions, not just achievements.

Expressing in many ways and conveying the message, "You don't have to change to be loved."

5. Feeling Supported to Explore

A child who feels safe will explore. Children with disabilities may explore differently, through sensory play, structured routines, or small changes. Support their autonomy while being their safety net.

Practical Strategies to Support Attachment in Neurodiverse Children

Address the Anxiety, Not Just the Behaviour

- Ask yourself “Is this behaviour protecting them from a fear or anxiety?” Questioning if this is part of your child’s normal range of behaviour and reactions to the world, or if they are feeling anxiety, is an important way to know how to nurture and support them.
- Avoid punishment-based discipline, use empathy and boundaries. Behaviours are more often a subconscious reaction. Therefore discipline can create more confusion. That is not to say we avoid addressing difficult behaviour, but we must be mindful of the consequences and apply clear boundaries.

Create a Trusting Relationship

- Use relationship-based play: focus on enjoyment, not achievement. We are so often trying our hardest to help our children by increasing their skills, understanding and development. It is very common to forget that play can just be play. Not everything needs to be a teaching moment. Fun times are so important for you and your family.

Adapt to Developmental (Not Chronological) Age

- Older children may need nurturing experiences such as rocking, sensory play, or extra reassurance. This isn’t regression, but a way to meet needs they may have missed earlier. Responding to their emotional age helps build the trust and security that supports long-term development and emotional resilience. Keep your mind open to opportunities to display nurture no matter their stage or age.
- Let them engage with younger peers or play styles. Both neurodiverse and neurotypical children can benefit from engaging in younger play. It allows children to relax and feel no pressure to perform.

Use Specific, Low-Key Praise

- A powerful technique is to always find one positive that can be expressed in any situation. Not an easy ask in times of conflict and dysregulation. Practice finding even a small thing and it will become more natural for you. Be descriptive: “I liked how you waited your turn”
- Use private over public praise to avoid overwhelm. Public praise can feel confronting, and difficult for us as parents, as the reaction to positivity can be negative. Try smiley face stickers as a quiet sign, or establish a subtle thumbs up as confirmation they are doing well.

Promoting Self-Regulation and Reflection

Children learn to manage emotions over time with support. For older children or teens, begin helping them reflect:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What do I need?
- What could I do next?

Simple reflection tools or feelings charts can help children develop awareness and choice.

Being Predictable Builds Trust

You don't need to get everything right, just be consistent. Predictability builds safety. It helps your child know what to expect and reduces the "on edge" feeling that many neurodivergent children live with.

"I know what Mum does when I'm upset. I can trust her to stay calm."



Secure attachment is not about doing things perfectly. It's about showing up consistently, being open to your child's unique ways of connecting, and letting them know, in all you do, you are here for them and their needs.

**You are safe, you are
loved, and I am here for
you!**

Building Secure Attachment

"Attachment is the invisible thread that helps a child feel seen, safe and heard."

Secure attachment doesn't happen by chance, it is created through consistent, responsive caregiving and a relationship that feels emotionally safe. For neurodivergent children, building this security may require adaptations in how we connect, soothe, and support. Here we will share strategies for creating a predictable environment, responding with sensitivity, and building connection through shared experiences and play.

Every child has their own unique way of connecting with the world. Whether your child experiences developmental delays, a physical disability, is non-speaking, or communicates in other ways, the ideas in this chapter are designed to be flexible and adaptable. Our aim is to provide approaches that you can tailor to your child's strengths, developmental stage, and communication style.



Providing a Secure Base

A secure base is the heart of a strong parent–child bond. It’s the emotional “home” from which children can explore the world, take risks, and return when they need comfort or reassurance.

Neurodivergent children may need their secure base to be even more predictable and regulated. This doesn’t mean doing more, it means doing things with greater intention and clarity.

Here we explore essential components and offer practical guidance for building that base.

Being Available

- Be present physically and emotionally. This isn’t about constant attention, it’s about reliable connection. “I know that Mum focuses her attention on my needs after dinner”. Choosing a regular time, when the house feels calm and you are not expected to be caring for others, can give a reliable time and space each day.
- Children feel secure when they know where you are, what you’ll do, and how you’ll respond. “I feel that Dad understands when I am struggling and responds in the same way each time”. “We always focus on my favourite thing when I am finding things hard.”



Helpful Tips:

- Keep routines visual: use charts or picture diaries.
- Use consistent greetings and goodbyes to support transitions. A wave can be confusing as this means both hello and goodbye. Maybe a different greeting for each.
- It can be hard to be available when we have other roles and responsibilities. For example, cooking is a time when we often feel frustrated and overwhelmed. Try having your child present in a safe and secure way (maybe in their secure chair). Explain what you are doing and how to cook each item. You can turn this into your own cooking show. This can reduce your own stress and turn a busy task into a connected moment you can enjoy together.
- After time apart (school, respite), re-establish closeness through a shared activity or snack. Including the family in this close time, re-groups you all as a unit and welcomes everyone back together.

Activities:

- Read together while sitting close.
- Ride in the car with music you both enjoy.
- When cooking, try allowing those who can, mash the potatoes, or stretch the dough. There will be low risk activities that can be enjoyed, although they may be a little messy!
- Try allowing your child to taste the cooking. “Is that nice or yucky?” “Do we like that texture?”
- Bubble games, beanbag catch, clapping games to build attunement. Include family members in this
- Turning chores into a game or chance to explain your time and actions.



Being Sensitive

Understanding your child’s cues is essential, especially when they don’t communicate in typical ways. For some, distress may look like silence, pacing, or shutdown rather than tears or words. Think about how you communicate safety, “I think this is hard for you right now, and I want to stay close.”

Helpful Tips:

- Use ‘time-in’ instead of ‘time-out’: stay near during distress. “Let’s sit quietly together, while we calm our feelings”. In times of extreme behaviour, you may need to separate yourself. Once regulation has returned, ensure to focus on your reconnection.
- Avoid punishments that withdraw attention or care. Resist the temptation to remove yourself or put your child away from you. Again, for safety, you may need to step away briefly, but return to encourage a quiet time where everyone can regulate their actions and emotions together.
- Repair after conflict, let them know the relationship is never at risk. “I love you. When things feel upsetting or overwhelming, I am here to love you”.

Activities:

- Use clay or crayons to “draw your feelings”. This does not have to be reciprocated or joined in by your child. You can draw just to show them a range of emotions you can feel.
- Make cakes or toast and talk about the smells and feelings. “Does the smell of toast make you feel happy”?
- Watch a film and pause to talk about / explain what characters might be feeling.

Nurturing

Nurture can mean a range of different things to different people. In this guidance we will use it to mean ‘to care for and protect’. Some children will find physical contact uncomfortable, without understanding why, and will find it harder to accept. Nurturing in a range of different ways helps build trust and connection.

Nurturing when we don’t feel there is a natural connection, or when our child is resistant to what we try, can lead to us feeling hurt, rejected, and helpless. It can take time and your child may not respond positively. They will, however, feel the consistency and the love.

Helpful Tips:

- Start small: sit nearby, offer gentle touch, and build up to hugs or a kiss. Remember that in many cultures, we hug or kiss people as a greeting. This can seem strange to a neurodivergent child, who will be confronted on a sensory level, such as texture, smell, and closeness of another.
- You might try offering a kiss on the cheek at a specific time, such as when they are receiving a treat. Associating this physical closeness with something else can begin to build this into their physical world.
- Starting with self-touch can open a sensory door to nurturing. You can lead by example, “Sometimes I like to stroke my own hand, this feels like a self-hug.”
- Offer warmth after school or in bad weather, cosy clothes, drinks, quiet space. Clothes can cause sensory difficulties as we know. A weighted blanket may help.

Activities:

- Gentle hand massage or cream game (“draw a heart” with lotion).
- Butterfly kisses (fluttering eyelashes), feather strokes.
- Create a comfort box with soft textures and favourite objects. For those who find contact harder, finding their own ‘comfort’ objects can help self-soothe and build that feeling of safety with you. This is also useful when going on holiday.

“Even if they act like they don’t need you, stay close. Soothing now builds resilience later.”

We are grateful to share this honest and heartfelt account from a parent in Gibraltar. Personal stories like this can offer comfort, recognition, and hope. By sharing one family's journey, we hope to reflect the complex, emotional experiences that many parents navigate and remind you that you are not alone.



A Parent's Story

I love my son endlessly. I would do anything for him, yet there was a time that I felt this was not reciprocated, and it made me feel angry and sad.

When I went to hug him, he would run away.

When I went to kiss him, he pushed me away.

I felt rejected by my own son.

He only looked at me when I had something he wanted.

He would only come to me when he needed food, water, or changing.

This made me feel used. It felt like a relationship of convenience.

He didn't want to play with me. I tried all sorts of resources and equipment to engage him. I remember that I became obsessed with toy shops and spent hours looking online for different types of toys. I was desperate to find something that would interest him. This became unhealthy for me, and very expensive.

I vividly remember sitting on the floor with an array of toys in front of me, feeling upset because he didn't want to play with me. I took it very personally. Although I knew that it wasn't about me, and that he simply didn't enjoy toys or shared experiences, I still felt like he didn't want to sit with me. I felt that I wasn't a good mother, and that he didn't love me.

This went on for years, until I finally gave up. And giving up was the best thing that happened.

I gave him space, and I started listening to what he wanted to do. I used to say to my husband, “Let’s go with the flow and pick our battles.” In doing so, I came to realise that my son does love me. He loves me in his own way. He might not show it in the way that I want him to, but he does love me.

He might not want to play with me in the way I imagined, but he does want me there while he plays in his own way. He just wants me to be present. He wants me to sit on the floor and be there. He won’t let me be on my phone either – he’ll take it away. He literally just wants me to sit and watch him, so that’s what I do.

And in doing that, he will occasionally stop, look at me, and give me a smile. I think it’s his way of saying, “Thank you for being with me.” I’ve come to accept that this is his way of playing, loving, and wanting me. I do have a secure attachment with him. I just needed to reframe what that looks like. It looks different to the typical secure attachment, but it’s still real.

My advice to other parents:

- Be present, even if that just means sitting down in silence.
- Be patient. We need to follow the child’s timeline, not ours.
- Don’t force it. Take a step back and listen to the signs your child is giving you.

My son doesn’t like kisses, yet I forced him to learn how to stand still and offer his cheek so we could kiss him... but why? Why does he HAVE to fit into our societal norms? He pulls a face when we kiss him. I think he doesn’t like the smell of others, the wetness of the kiss, the invasion of personal space, the feel of my dangly earring, or my hair brushing against his cheek – the list goes on.

With some children, teaching them this skill works well, but for my son, it was forcing him to conform to something that really bothers him. And all just to make me, the parent, feel loved.

Since stopping this, my son now comes towards you, stands in front of you, with a smile on his face. This is his way of saying he wants a hug.

Listening to the signs, not forcing the relationship, and allowing him space has finally led to him asking for affection.

”

Building Self-Esteem

We all need to feel we are valued, capable and that those around us understand what we are capable of. Children thrive when they feel capable, appreciated, and valued for who they are.

Helpful Tips:

- Celebrate effort and uniqueness, not just outcomes. “I know you really wanted to grab and throw the chair. I am so proud that you resisted and played with your car instead”.
- Use private praise to reduce pressure. Taking a quiet moment to quietly praise or celebrate them, reduces pressure, and can make a special moment between you.
- Let them teach you or show you something, they can feel important when they can share their understanding. Many of our children will have a hyperfocus activity or object. Initially watch what they are doing and praise. “I see how you put all your things in a row. That is such a good idea. I am going to start doing that with my pens.”

Activities:

- Create a “You Can Do It” wall with their small wins.
- Use storybooks that highlight difference and strength.
- Play “What I like about you” games with family members.



Embedding Attachment in Everyday Life

It's not the grand gestures that matter most, it's the repeated, dependable, quiet ones. You're building secure attachment every time you:

- Sit with your child when they're upset.
- Say, "I'm here, even when it's hard".
- Keep your word, even in small things.



Using Support Services to Strengthen Attachment

Using support services, like respite care or in-home help, can be a powerful way to sustain your wellbeing and meet your child's needs. "It is important that your cup is full to be able to pour others!" However, we do need to be mindful of how we strengthen attachment and ensure we do not increase sensitivity to separation. It's important that support does not unintentionally disrupt the very bond you're working to strengthen.

When used with care and intention, services can enhance family life, allow for meaningful shared experiences, and create breathing space, without damaging connection. "Support should help you stay connected; not make you feel replaced."

Helpful Tips:

- **Start with what matters most:** Focus on preserving the emotional connection. Even if your child is with another adult for a short time, knowing you are coming back, and being told clearly when, helps reduce anxiety.
- **Use respite thoughtfully:** Breaks can support family wellbeing. However, frequent or unpredictable separations can confuse a child's internal model of safety, particularly if they have experienced early development instability.
- **Ensure respite feels positive:** When using respite in periods of adversity consider how you can make the transition a positive one, and not feel like recrimination. Attempt to have a moment of calm with those family members in the house, to re-group and bond, before your child leaves. Then try to bring them back into the same calm feeling in the house. This helps frame the separation and return as a positive experience. Life can be busy, but this only takes a few minutes.

- **Prioritise in-home support when possible:** Inviting support into your home can be less disruptive than separating your child from their familiar environment. For those of us lucky enough, our extended family or friends can offer support around the logistics of family life, giving you a break and time to focus on family time and activities. Home support is an alternative to respite.
- **Keep attachment at the centre of planning:** We all need support and time to re-charge! We just want to ensure respite support doesn't create further problems down the line. When using any support service, try to ask: "Does this help preserve and strengthen our relationship?"

Activities and Ideas:

Plan a family outing with support built in:

Use your extended family or support assistant to manage bags, snacks, or transitions on a trip to the park, cinema, or beach. This allows you to focus on the emotional and relational parts of the day, listening, laughing, and connecting.

Create a "Who Helps Me" visual chart:

For younger children or those with learning disabilities, build a visual guide to who is in their support circle. Include photos and brief descriptions like "Jane helps us when we go out" or "Mike stays with me when Mum goes to the shop." This helps demystify roles and maintain predictability.

Debrief together after time apart:

When respite is used, talk to your child afterwards. Ask about their experience. Reassure them of your continued presence: "I missed you while you were away. I'm so happy we are back together."

Family life and parenting is changing, especially where our extended families are concerned. Our generational style of parenting where we can rely on grandparents and other family members is not the same. People work longer, travel more, and have more freedom than in the past. This can mean we feel more isolated and unsupported. Support services are designed to help but should be considered part of a complete package that allows us to manage the pressures we face.

Support should never be seen as a sign of failure. It is a vital tool for preserving energy, reducing stress, and allowing more time for meaningful emotional connection. When chosen carefully and with your child's attachment needs in mind, it becomes part of the secure base, not a barrier to it.

The goal isn't to step away, it's to stay connected, with support that helps you do just that.

Supporting the Whole Family

Helping Families Stay Strong, Connected and Resilient

Families raising children with neurodevelopmental or physical disabilities often face complex and ongoing demands. Supporting secure attachment within these families is not just about the parent-child relationship in isolation, it's about understanding the whole family system, responding to stress and change, and keeping everyone emotionally connected.

We explore how families can support one another, including neurotypical siblings, through everyday pressures, relationship challenges and the natural ups and downs of family life. With a focus on family strengths, this section offers practical tools and compassionate guidance to reduce stress, strengthen bonds and promote a sense of belonging within varied family structures.

Our aim remains to be sensitive and understanding to the individual needs of your family and to provide approaches that are flexible and adaptable.



Managing Stress and Family Pressures

Raising a child with additional needs can bring added emotional, financial, and practical pressures. Parents often describe feeling stretched thin, guilty about not doing well enough by everyone, and often emotionally overwhelmed. These experiences are common, and life can feel hard.

We understand that every family is unique and that parenting a child with disabilities involves years of trying, adapting, and revisiting what works. Many families will already have explored a wide range of approaches to support family life. This guide does not suggest a single right way forward, but instead offers tips you may find helpful, or that you might choose to revisit at a different time or stage of family life. A strategy that does not seem effective right now might prove useful in the future, as your child develops and family circumstances change. We hope these suggestions feel encouraging and practical, meeting you where you are.



Create a Rhythm to the Week

We know that structure brings calm but creating a routine can feel overwhelming at times. Visual timetables, colour-coded calendars, or magnetic charts can help everyone understand what's coming up. These tools make the day more predictable and reduce uncertainty. You might include stickers or simple images to mark regular events, like 'family night,' 'quiet time,' or 'after-school snack.' Try using consistent sounds, like setting your phone alarm or a musical cue, to signal the transition to preferred activities. This is especially helpful for children who find it hard to move between tasks.

Making routines visible and engaging can also empower children to feel involved and in control. For families managing additional needs or changes in availability, it's okay to have a flexible rhythm rather than a rigid schedule. The goal is to build habits that feel familiar and safe, while still allowing space for your child's individual pace and preferences.

Limit Unnecessary Pressure

It's easy to feel like every day must be productive, but constantly striving for perfection can increase stress for everyone. Instead, focus on one or two achievable goals each day. This might mean completing a short homework task, helping with one household job, or simply getting through the day calmly. Celebrate these small wins using a "done list" on the fridge or a shared notebook, where each family member can record something they feel proud of.

These visible reminders help shift attention from what didn't get done to what did. Some families find it helpful to share a quiet moment in the evening to reflect on their efforts, rather than results. This creates a more compassionate household rhythm. Removing unnecessary pressure doesn't mean lowering your expectations, it means creating space to notice progress and joy, even on tough days. Remember, what looks like a small step may be a big achievement.

Connect During Transitions

Transitions can be tricky times for children, especially if they experience anxiety, sensory sensitivities, or difficulty with changes. Creating small rituals around separations and reunions helps children feel safe and connected, even when apart. Try using a special goodbye phrase, rhyme, or gesture like a high five or a hug, if contact allows. These predictable moments build trust and reinforce connection. When children return from school or activities, greet them warmly with a consistent welcome routine. This might include a snack and a short check-in, or a shared 'hello' song.

These gestures communicate, "You matter, and I'm here for you." For some children, having a photo of home in their bag or a shared object can also help bridge the time spent apart. When these transition rituals become part of daily life, they create emotional safety, helping children move between environments more confidently, while strengthening your bond.



Rebuild when Things Go Wrong

Every family experiences difficult moments. The important part is how we come back together. A 'repair routine' is a simple way to show that relationships can recover after stress or conflict. For example, after a hard moment, you might sit together for a calm snack or look at photos of a happy memory. You could draw pictures of "us when we're feeling happy" or share something kind with each other. This gives children a clear message: "Even when things go wrong, we make it better." Try to involve everyone who was part of the conflict, including siblings or carers, where possible.

Keep these routines consistent, low-pressure, and separate from any discipline or consequences. Over time, these rituals help children understand that their relationship with you is secure, even when there are ups and downs. They also support emotional regulation and teach children how to apologise, forgive, and move forward.



Care for the Carer

Children learn a lot by watching how adults care for themselves. Talking about your own strategies for calming down or recharging shows children that it's normal and healthy to need support. You might say, "I'm going to take a few deep breaths," or, "A cup of tea helps me feel settled." These small moments model self-regulation. It's also essential to find brief opportunities to care for yourself, even if time feels limited. Ten minutes of reading, stretching, or simply sitting with quiet music can help restore your energy. You might try building a short routine for yourself after the children are asleep, such as lighting a candle, journaling, or having a warm drink.

While it may feel impossible at times to prioritise your own needs, your wellbeing supports the whole family. Remember, self-care is not selfish, it's part of sustaining the love, energy, and patience that caring for others so often requires.

Supporting Neurotypical Siblings

Siblings of children with SEND often play a unique and deeply important role within the family. They may show immense pride, love, and loyalty, while also experiencing confusion, jealousy, sadness, or guilt. These complex emotions are entirely natural. Parents often feel a strong desire to protect their neurotypical children from stress, while also nurturing a close sibling bond. It is common to worry about whether siblings are getting enough attention or whether they are burdened with too much understanding. Recognising and validating these feelings is vital. Siblings need their own space to express themselves, be heard, and be supported in their individual identity. It is helpful to create moments of connection between siblings that feel positive and shared, as well as giving one-to-one time for each child. This strengthens sibling relationships over time and reassures both children that they are equally loved and important within the family.



Helpful Tips:

- **Protect one-on-one time:** A regular ‘just us’ moment, even 10 minutes, can help a sibling feel valued. During this time, let the child choose the activity, such as reading a book together or baking cupcakes. Ask them how they feel and to share a good thing from their day.
- **Use creative tools to explore feelings:** Give siblings a simple “My Week” journal with space to draw or write what made them happy, sad, or proud. You might say, “It sounds like that moment was really hard. Let’s talk about it together.”
- **Explain sibling needs with honesty and empathy:** Use books, stories, or puppets to help explain why their sibling may behave differently. Invite their questions and reassure them that all feelings are okay. For older children, you may want to explore how their sibling’s actions made them feel. Don’t shy away from negative feelings or diminish them. It is okay that they felt scared for example. Expressing this, can open up valuable conversations about how we keep each other safe and secure.
- **Celebrate who they are:** Avoid always positioning them as “the helper.” Instead, promote their unique strengths: “I love how you notice things,” or “You have such a kind heart.” Let them take photos for a ‘happy wall’ that shows their world. Displaying pictures like this is a lovely visual reminder of good times for all the family. Consider a family wall too.
- **Create shared memories:** Plan low-pressure family outings or if this is not possible, sibling days at home. Try this supported by home care or family members if needed, to ensure everyone has positive shared experiences.

Reconnecting After Rupture

We know how things can go wrong, sometimes in distressing ways. What we do to repair connections and emotions afterwards builds emotional stability and a core family trust. All families experience disconnection especially in the context of sensory overload, meltdowns, or moments of misunderstanding. These moments can leave everyone feeling disrupted and emotional. What truly matters is how we repair those ruptures.



Helpful Tips:

- **Be present during distress:** Even if a child cannot tolerate closeness in the moment, stay nearby. Sit quietly, breathe slowly, or offer a favourite object. Say softly, “I’m here when you’re ready.” Other family members and extended family, such as grandparents, who witnessed this disruption may also need time to calm and soothe. Try to encourage everyone to come back together, once calm, for a positive moment together. This could be something like sitting down to share a meal, playing a familiar game, or listening to a calming piece of music together. These shared moments remind everyone that connection is possible again and help rebuild the sense of safety in the family.
- **Show self-regulation:** Our family looks to us for regulation. A proven joint regulation technique is to exaggeratingly take a deep breath while saying “I need to take a second to calm myself.” Then keep taking big, calm, obvious breaths. This helps those around you to see and feel you using regulation. It signals we all need to calm. You may even find that they begin to mimic you, and this action, the more you demonstrate it.
- **Use rituals for reconnection:** After big emotions settle, invite your child to join you in a shared activity. For example, play with a simple toy together, use your sensory box, or blow bubbles in the garden, focusing on ‘calm breaths’ as you do. Including everyone involved in this if you can.

- **Name what went wrong without shame:** “We were both upset. I shouted, and that didn’t help. We’re okay now.” Offer physical connection if welcomed, such as a cuddle, a hand on the shoulder, or a quiet song. No matter how difficult their behaviour can be at times, it is important for children to see that adults make mistakes too, and that mistakes can be repaired. When a parent names their own behaviour without shame, it models accountability, resilience, and emotional honesty. This helps children feel safe to reflect on their own actions without fear and shows that relationships can stay strong even when things go wrong.
- **Use symbolic repair tools:** Keep a “repair basket” with items like soft clay, comfort cards, or a favourite book. Let your child choose something after a difficult moment to help them feel safe and in control again.



“
Is now a good
time to talk?
”

Helpful Tools and Approaches for Everyday Life

Creating secure family attachments often comes down to small, daily interactions that make each person feel seen and valued. You will have tried some of these. If they didn’t work for you, please remember to re-visit as your family develops. You may find they are more effective at different stages.

Helpful tips:

- **Check in emotionally:** At dinner or bedtime, ask “How did you feel today?” You can use visual stickers of emotion faces, for those with different communication styles. This helps children reflect and feel heard. Older children and siblings, they will often want their own space respected. Be sure to check in daily about how their day was, and how they are feeling, even if they don’t always have an answer for you. A good technique is to ask, “Is now a good time to talk?”. This recognises that they may not want to talk when you do and establishes that you respect their needs and boundaries.
- **Make connection visible:** Use a memory jar where family members can drop in notes about things they appreciated that day. Read them together at times of bonding.

- **Empower choice and voice:** Let children make age or development appropriate decisions, like picking a storybook or choosing the dinner vegetable. Use visuals or symbols if communication is a barrier.
- **Build a family charter:** Sit together and agree on simple values like “We try to listen,” “We fix things when they go wrong,” or “We all matter.” Let each child decorate it with handprints or drawings.

A Note on Family Conflict

It is not uncommon for parents to experience tension or conflict in their relationship, particularly when raising a child with complex needs. Many couples report feeling emotionally or physically disconnected from one another as they navigate the ongoing demands of care, planning, and advocacy. The pressures can be relentless, and often leave little time or energy for maintaining the couple’s relationship.

"We were so focused on surviving each day that we forgot how to be with each other. It wasn't about love fading, it was about exhaustion taking its place."

Parents of neurodivergent children or those with complex needs may also be at increased risk of experiencing mental health difficulties, including anxiety, low mood, or depression. In one study with parents 85% experienced anxiety and 85% experienced depression when parenting a child with a neurodevelopmental disorder. These feelings can be isolating, but they are understandable and more common than many people realise. Acknowledging this strain is not a sign of failure, but rather an important step toward seeking the support that can make a difference, for you, your partner, and your family as a whole.

“
Some days I feel like I’m
holding everything together
with string, but I don’t know
how to relax without
everything falling apart
”



All children are sensitive to the emotional atmosphere at home. When parents are stressed or in ongoing conflict, even if not directly expressed in front of the child, it can impact how safe and secure they feel. Children are often quick to notice tension, silence, or changes in mood. Over time, high levels of parental stress or unresolved conflict can contribute to emotional insecurity, behavioural challenges, or difficulties with self-regulation. This does not mean that families need to be perfect. What matters most is emotional repair and reconnection. It is not about getting everything right, but about showing that relationships can withstand hard moments. When children see adults managing difficult feelings and staying connected, they learn that problems can be worked through and that love is reliable, even when things are hard.



Helpful tips:

- **Model repair between adults:** Let children see you apologise, problem-solve, or take a break respectfully. Remember when your children have seen the argument or disagreement, they should also see the make-up.
- **Use consistent routines:** When adult stress is high, having 'anchor points' like a regular mealtime, evening story, or weekend walk helps children feel safe and grounded.
- **Seek support if needed:** Family therapy, SEND-focused parent groups, or counselling can help reduce emotional load and strengthen co-parenting relationships.

Taking time for each other: This can feel like an impossible task and ridiculous to suggest. Feeling connected and valued with your partner can be an enormous source of comfort and strength.

- Ensure to keep communication open, even about the hard things. This reduces miscommunication, which is common in families with high needs.
- Revisit your rituals whether it's having a cup of tea in the evening, cooking a favourite meal together, or listening to music you both enjoy, small rituals can anchor your relationship. Doing chores together reduces the strain and can be made a moment of bonding if we try to keep a sense of humour with it.
- Getting to watch the same show together when the children are in bed can bond us over a simple common interest.

Empowering Single Parents

Parenting a child with additional needs can be intense and isolating at times. For single parents, this can bring a particular kind of pressure. Without a co-parent to share decisions, night-time wakeups, appointments, and emotional weight, many single parents tell us they feel stretched in all directions. We want to acknowledge that and share a few ideas that may help or offer reassurance.

Helpful Tips:

- **Build your support circle:** You may not have a parenting partner, but you can still build a team around you. Trusted friends, extended family, neighbours, and professionals can all play a role. Let people know what kind of help is most useful: an occasional school run, sitting with your child while you shower, or simply checking in regularly.
- **Create small anchor points in your day:** Structure can help you feel more in control. This might be a cup of tea after drop-off, a short walk with music, or a call to a friend in the evening. These small rituals can offer a sense of rhythm, even on difficult days.
- **Use services without guilt:** If you have access to respite care, family support workers, or after-school clubs, using them is not a failure. It's a way to protect your energy so that you can show up more calmly and consistently for your child.
- **Name and normalise the hard days:** It's okay to say, "Today was really tough," and to feel fed up, sad, or tired. Suppressing these feelings doesn't make them go away. Talking to someone safe about it can bring relief.
- **Find emotional connection:** You may not have someone to debrief with at the end of the day, but journaling, counselling, or support groups can offer space to process your experience. Online communities, especially those designed for single parents of children with SEND, can be a lifeline.
- **Celebrate what you are achieving:** You're doing many jobs in one. Notice and affirm yourself: "I got us through today," or "I handled that calmly," even when things feel messy. Your child doesn't need perfection, they need your presence, and that's what you're giving.

“Being the only parent can feel relentless, but it also means I've built something strong and steady between me and my child. It's not easy, but it's ours.”



Conclusion: Taking One Step at a Time

We hope this guide has offered helpful insights, practical strategies, and a renewed sense of possibility as you support your child’s emotional and developmental needs. If some of the ideas felt new or challenging, please remember that building strong family connections is a journey, not a checklist. These approaches take time, and no one gets it right all the time.

Caring for a child with additional needs often comes with complexities that require patience, flexibility and, above all, support. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. You are doing one of the most important jobs there is: helping your child feel safe, loved, and understood.

In the next section, we share real-life case studies from parents in Gibraltar. These stories reflect the highs, lows, and learning that many families experience, and we hope they offer reassurance that you are not alone. You’ll also find signposting to local and national services that can offer further guidance and connection as you move forward.

Secure attachment grows not from perfect conditions but from honest, warm, and repeated efforts to stay emotionally connected. By supporting every member of the family and making space for individual needs and feelings, we help build a home where everyone feels safe, seen and heard.



“
I know that the strategies to maintain a healthy relationship can be simple, but I struggle to find the energy and strength to do them. However, I always try to persevere and then I realise that it was worth it.
”

Real Stories from Parents

Personal Experiences and Emotions Shared with Love.

Parenting a child with additional needs can bring immense love and meaning, but it can also be isolating, overwhelming, and deeply emotional. Each family's experience is unique, yet many parents find themselves navigating similar challenges: grief, misunderstanding, exhaustion, and the pressure to carry on without showing cracks. In the following pages, we share two personal stories from parents in Gibraltar.

These are honest accounts of pain, strength, and learning to seek support. We hope these reflections help you feel less alone, and remind you that it's okay to struggle, to reach out, and to find your own way forward.





A Parent's Story: Feeling Isolation

The first eight years were very lonely for me.

My son was born breech, with several medical issues. From day one, we also had feeding difficulties. He wouldn't feed, and when he finally did, he would throw up. People kept telling me it was normal, that he had colic or reflux, but he was vomiting up to 14 times a day. This was not normal. No one validated what I was experiencing. It made me feel like I was the problem, like I simply couldn't cope with a newborn.

He also had severe sleep issues. He would only sleep for 30 minutes, then wake. I would change his nappy, feed him, he would vomit, we would wash him, feed again, then hold him upright for 20 minutes before settling him back. The cycle repeated all night. Again, people said it was normal, that babies don't sleep. But I was surviving on 30-minute naps. How could that be normal?

My family helped when they could but everyone worked. I was alone all day and night with the baby, until it broke me. I remember one night I was crying, shivering, unable to hold my own body weight. I woke my husband and told him, "Either you take the baby or I will throw him out the window." This wasn't a joke. I'm not ashamed to say I meant it. I wasn't well.

By the time my son was four months old, I could tell something was not quite right, though no one else could see it except the Health Visitors. I even had an argument with a family member who said I was overanalysing.

At age two, he was formally diagnosed with a rare condition, which means he has a learning disability, autism, and several medical conditions. He was diagnosed in September, but we weren't given any more information until January. Those four months were awful.

Thankfully, the Autism EarlyBird Course helped us as a couple. But I still had to explain everything to the wider family, who didn't attend the course. It took years for them to accept the nature of his condition. I remember how they misunderstood his rigidity and kept buying him new things to try. I kept explaining that part of his autism was needing routine and familiarity, but they thought I was just being difficult.

I don't want this to sound like one of those stories with a neat, happy ending. Life doesn't work like that. The challenges haven't gone away. But when I found the courage to reach out again, I did find comfort.

For years I felt like a prisoner in my own home. Life was passing me by. But when I finally told my friends about his diagnosis, they were so kind. They have always invited me to every party and outing, even though I usually couldn't go. That meant a lot. They never made me feel guilty for turning things down. Just knowing they understood, even if they couldn't truly imagine what my life is like, helped me feel less alone. And because of that, I now feel more able to share when I'm struggling.



A Parent's Story: Finding Strength in Support

On the surface, we looked like a happy, typical family. I had always dreamed of being a mother, and when my daughter was born, it felt like everything had fallen into place. She was a bright light in our lives. We had a strong marriage, a close extended family, and a stable home. But things began to change when she was a few months old. Something didn't feel right.

At three, she was diagnosed with a learning disability. I felt a wave of emotions: love, fear, confusion, and deep sadness. My husband struggled to accept the diagnosis. He wasn't angry, but I could see how hard it was for him to understand. Our families tried to be supportive, but it was complicated. We come from a traditional background, where grandparents are very involved and ideas about parenting are often rooted in "what worked for them."

I needed to find a new way to parent my daughter. I was learning to communicate with her differently, support her differently, and celebrate her differently. But to our parents, this looked like “giving in” or “being too soft.” They didn’t understand why I was doing things they had never heard of, and at times, I think they felt embarrassed. Not about her exactly, but about the whole idea of disability. I began to feel isolated in my own home.

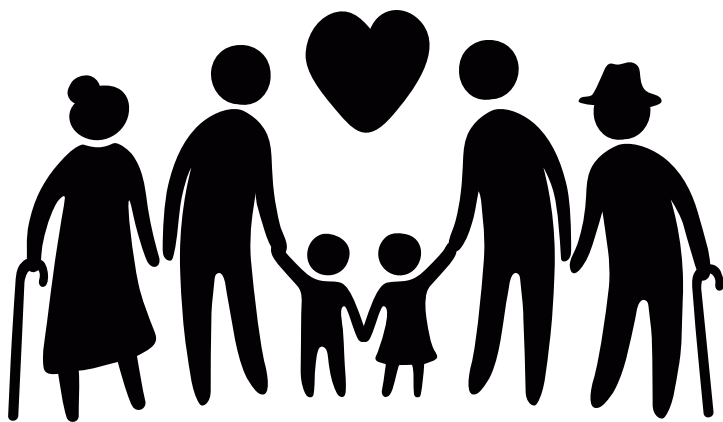
I stopped trying to explain myself. I bottled everything up. I kept smiling in front of others, but inside I was exhausted. The constant judgement, the pressure to keep things running smoothly, the guilt when I couldn’t, and the grief for the things I had once imagined all began to take a toll. I was barely sleeping. I wasn’t eating properly. I cried most days, often in secret. I didn’t feel like myself anymore, but I was too ashamed to say anything. I thought I was meant to be stronger than this.

Eventually, I reached a breaking point. A friend gently suggested I might need to talk to someone. I resisted at first, but something she said stuck with me: “If someone had the flu, you’d tell them to go to a doctor. Treat depression like you had the flu.” That comparison helped me take the first step.

I reached out for counselling. Sitting in that first session, I felt vulnerable, but also relieved. I didn’t have to pretend anymore. I began to understand what I was going through and how normal it was to feel this way. I wasn’t broken, I was overwhelmed and grieving, and I needed help.

Counselling didn’t change the challenges we faced as a family, but it changed how I saw myself. It gave me space to speak without judgement and slowly rebuild my confidence. I learned that getting help isn’t a sign of weakness. It’s what allows us to keep going. Today, things are still hard, but I’m no longer carrying everything alone. I’m proud of the parent I’ve become, and I hope my story encourages others to seek support when they need it.

”



Signposting for Support

The Supported Needs and Disability Office works closely with all support services across Gibraltar and has specialist expertise in understanding your needs and connecting you with the right help.

For further guidance or assistance, please contact



The Supported Needs and Disability Office
Ministry of Equality
HM Government of Gibraltar
Europort Building 9, Floor 5

Phone: 200 42196
WhatsApp: 56003195
Email: sndo@gibraltar.gov.gi
Website: disability.gov.gi
Facebook: SN DO



Supported Needs & Disability Office

A Note on Continued Support

Parenting a child with additional needs can be challenging, but you are not alone. Many of the strategies shared in this guide will take time and repetition. You may need to come back to them at different stages. There is no perfect way to parent, only the path that works for you and your child.

Please revisit this guide when you need a reminder that your efforts matter. And when things feel too heavy to carry alone, reach out to someone you trust or a local support service.

Glossary of Terms

Attachment and Emotional Development

Attachment

The emotional bond formed between a child and their caregiver. A secure attachment builds trust, safety, and the foundation for healthy relationships.

Secure Attachment

A relationship where a child feels safe, valued, and supported by a consistent and responsive caregiver.

Internal Working Model

The beliefs a child develops about themselves, others, and the world based on early relationships. These shape how they understand and form future relationships.

Rupture and Repair

Moments of disconnection (rupture) between child and caregiver are normal. Repair is the process of reconnecting and rebuilding trust after these moments.

Co-regulation

When an adult helps a child calm down or manage their emotions through presence, support, and calm communication.

Self-regulation

The ability to manage one's own emotions, behaviour, and reactions. Children often learn this through co-regulation first.

Reframing

A way of thinking that helps you interpret a child's behaviour through a compassionate or developmental lens rather than judgment or blame.

Neurodiversity and Developmental Needs

Neurodivergent

Describes individuals whose brain processes or behaves differently from what is considered typical. This includes autism, ADHD, and learning disabilities.

Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)

A neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, sensory processing, social understanding, and behaviour. Also known as autism.

ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)

A neurodevelopmental condition marked by differences in attention, impulse control, and activity levels.

Learning Disability

A lifelong condition that affects how someone learns new things, processes information, or communicates.

Sensory Processing

How the brain receives and responds to sensory input like sound, touch, light, and movement. Children may be over- or under-sensitive in different areas.

Stimming (Self-Stimulatory Behaviour)

Repetitive behaviours (like rocking or hand-flapping) often used by neurodivergent people to self-regulate, reduce anxiety, or express joy.

Processing Time

The extra time some children need to understand information, respond to questions, or adjust to a change. Allowing for this can support communication and confidence.

Daily Life, Behaviour, and Communication

Meltdown

An intense emotional or sensory overload response. Unlike a tantrum, it is not a choice and often results from stress or overwhelm.

Shutdown

A response to stress or sensory overload in which a child withdraws or becomes unresponsive. It may look like silence, stillness, or zoning out.

Transitions

Changes in activity, routine, or environment. Transitions can be challenging and may require additional support and preparation.

Visual Timetable

A schedule using pictures or symbols to help a child understand the order of daily tasks or events. It supports predictability and independence.

Rituals and Routines

Predictable patterns that bring a sense of safety and structure to family life. Rituals can include bedtime routines, transition cues, or daily check-ins.

Repair Routine

A specific set of steps a family uses to reconnect after conflict or emotional difficulty. These promote emotional resilience and trust.

Support and Community

Respite Care

Short-term care or support that allows families and caregivers time to rest or attend to other needs.

Trauma-Informed

An approach that recognises how trauma can affect behaviour and relationships, and emphasises safety, compassion, and choice.

The Supported Needs and Disability Office (SNDO) are a government department under the Ministry of Equality. One of their remits is to support individuals and families of persons with supported needs and / or disabilities in their journey and to advocate for them.

The SNDO found through interactions with the community that families with children who are neurodivergent are under greater stress and anxiety when compared to other families with neurotypical children. They also found that divorce rates for these parents are higher and that some siblings may take on a greater sense of responsibility. Many families have reported to the SNDO that they find it difficult to participate in enjoyable activities together and are asking for help and for respite support.

This Information Guide has been developed as one way in which the SNDO can support families to build a greater connection with each other so that every member of the family feels listened to, respected and loved. The contents within this Information Guide serves to validate the emotions that families may be feeling and also to validate the difficulties that the families may be facing so that families feel empowered and know that they are not alone.

The Author of this resource and guidance book is Alice Macleod. A Trauma and Attachment Practitioner, specialising in behaviour science. With over 20 years of experience across education, social care, and family support, she has worked alongside children, parents, and professionals to better understand behaviour through the lens of connection and emotional development. Her practice is rooted in compassion, evidence-based approaches, and a deep belief in the power of secure relationships to help families thrive.



**HM Government
of Gibraltar**

Ministry of Equality, Employment,
Culture and Tourism



**Supported Needs &
Disability Office**