

How to Make Therapy More Accessible for Neurodivergent Kids:

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS



UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS

Traditional therapy is often built around neurotypical expectations—sitting still, making eye contact, and talking through feelings in a structured way. For neurodivergent kids, this setup can be frustrating, uncomfortable, or even impossible. Some kids may struggle with verbal communication, sensory overload, or executive dysfunction that makes it hard to show up and engage. If therapy isn't adapted to their needs, it won't be effective.

The good news? Therapy doesn't have to be one-size-fits-all. There are plenty of ways to make it work for neurodivergent kids without forcing them to mask or conform to neurotypical norms.



FINDING THE RIGHT THERAPIST

Not every therapist understands neurodivergence, so finding one who truly gets it is key. When looking for a therapist, ask about their experience working with autistic, ADHD, or otherwise neurodivergent kids. Some good questions to ask:

- Do you use a strengths-based approach instead of focusing on "fixing" behaviors?
- How do you accommodate sensory sensitivities during sessions?
- Do you allow movement, fidgets, or alternative forms of communication?
- Are you informed about trauma-sensitive care for neurodivergent individuals?

A therapist who dismisses these concerns or insists on rigid, traditional methods probably isn't the right fit.



FLEXIBLE SESSION FORMATS

Sitting still in a quiet office might work for some kids, but for many neurodivergent kids, it's the worst possible environment for meaningful engagement. Consider these alternatives:

- **Movement-Friendly Therapy:** Walking sessions, play-based therapy, or allowing movement during conversations can make sessions feel more natural and engaging.
- **Virtual Sessions:** Some kids do better in their own space. Online therapy, especially with options for chat-based or asynchronous communication, can be a game changer.

Shorter, More Frequent Sessions: Instead of one long session per week, some kids benefit from shorter check-ins a few times a week to reduce overwhelm.



SENSORY-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATIONS

Therapy environments can be full of unintentional sensory triggers. Even small changes can make a big difference: **Lighting:** Fluorescent lights can be harsh. A therapist who can dim the lights or use natural lighting might be a better match. **Noise Management:** White noise machines, noise-canceling headphones, or allowing a quiet space can help kids focus. **Fidgets and Alternative Seating:** Weighted blankets, fidget tools, or sitting on a yoga ball instead of a chair can help with regulation.



ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION STYLES

Not every kid communicates verbally, and even those who do might not always find words easy during therapy. A neuroaffirming therapist should be comfortable with:

- Nonverbal Communication: Writing, texting, AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) devices, or art-based communication.
- Interest-Based Conversations: Using special interests as a way to engage in therapy rather than redirecting away from them.

Pauses and Processing Time: Some kids need longer to process their thoughts. Rushing them to respond isn't helpful.



ADJUSTING GOALS TO FIT THE CHILD

Traditional therapy goals often focus on “fixing” behaviors—like making eye contact, sitting still, or forcing social interaction. These goals can be harmful and miss the bigger picture. Instead, therapy should focus on helping neurodivergent kids navigate the world in ways that feel right for them.

Better therapy goals might include:

- Learning how to self-advocate for their needs
- Understanding their own emotions and sensory needs
- Finding communication strategies that feel comfortable
- Practicing self-regulation skills that actually work for them



HELPING YOUR CHILD FEEL COMFORTABLE

Starting therapy can be overwhelming, but there are ways to make it easier:

- Let them bring a comfort item, like a fidget, stuffed animal, or weighted lap pad.
- Talk about what to expect beforehand, including the therapist's name and what the space looks like.
- If something isn't working, advocate for changes. A good therapist should be willing to adapt.

Therapy should be a space where neurodivergent kids feel safe, not pressured to act neurotypical. With the right adjustments, it can actually be a place that supports them on their own terms.

