

## Self- Support Resources

### **Knowing myself, my body and my mind, helping me to understand myself including sleeping, exercise, eating and drinking.**

Supporting neurodiverse young people involves tailored strategies for sleep, nutrition, hygiene, exercise, and understanding masking (hiding true feelings to fit in). Each area has their unique challenges and solutions.

The below information provides some practical tips alongside a selection of trusted online resources. Supporting self-understanding means listening carefully, believing what the young person communicates, and creating safe spaces where they do not need to mask.

## Sleep Support

Sleep challenges are common among neurodiverse young people. Young people's brains may process sensory input differently, and their internal sleep signals, like melatonin (sleep hormone) might not follow typical patterns. This guide offers gentle, practical ways to support better sleep:

### **Understanding Sleep Differences**

Some young people:

- Don't feel sleepy at expected times
- Wake frequently during the night
- Struggle to settle due to sensory sensitivities or anxiety

This can be linked to how their body releases melatonin—the natural sleep hormone. For some, it doesn't kick in when it's supposed to, making it harder to wind down.

### **Building a Sleep-Friendly Routine**

Consistency and comfort are key. Try:

- **Same bedtime and wake time daily**, even on weekends
- **Visual schedules** to show the steps before bed (e.g., bath → pyjamas → story)
- **Calming activities** like reading, drawing, or listening to soft music
- **Low-stimulation environment**: dim lights, quiet sounds, and cozy textures

If you sensitive to textures or smells, explore sensory-friendly bedding and unscented products.

### **Supporting the Body's Sleep Signals**

To help your body feel ready for sleep:

- **Limit screens** 1–2 hours before bed
- **Encourage outdoor time** during the day—natural light helps reset the body clock
- **Try calming snacks** like bananas or warm milk if hunger disrupts your sleep

### **Creating a Safe Space to Unwind**

Sleep can feel vulnerable. To help you feel safe try;

- Choosing a comfort item (soft toy, blanket)
- Speak gently to reassure
- Avoiding pressure—some young people need extra time to settle

If a young person masks during the day (hiding their true feelings or traits), bedtime might be when they finally decompress. Be patient and open to their needs.

### **Helpful Resources**

- [Support with sleep - MindMate](#)
- [Sleep Hygiene for Neurodivergent People | Tips for ADHD and Autistic Sleep Needs](#)
- [Sleep Advice for Neurodivergent Children and Young People - Options Autism](#)
- [Children - The Sleep Charity](#)

## **Nutrition Support**

Eating well helps our bodies grow strong, gives us energy, and supports our brains to focus and feel good. But for neurodiverse young people, food can sometimes feel tricky—especially when certain textures, smells, or routines make meals stressful.

This guide offers gentle ways to explore good nutrition together.

### **Why Nutrition Matters**

Good nutrition means:

- Eating a mix of foods that give us energy, vitamins, and strength
- Drinking enough water
- Listening to our body's hunger and fullness signals

It helps with:

- Better sleep
- Stronger immune systems
- Improved mood and focus

- Steady energy throughout the day

## Common Challenges

Some young people might:

- Only want familiar foods
- Avoid certain textures (like mushy or crunchy)
- Feel anxious at mealtimes
- Prefer routines and dislike surprises

That's okay. Everyone's body and brain are different. The goal is to gently explore new foods while respecting comfort zones.

## Helpful Strategies

- **Visual Meal Plans**  
Use pictures or charts to show what's for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This helps reduce anxiety and gives a sense of control.
- **Gradual Food Exposure**  
Try "food play" without pressure to eat—touching, smelling, or helping prepare new foods builds comfort over time.
- **Involve Young People in Meal Prep**  
Let them help choose ingredients, stir, chop (with support), or plate food. It makes meals feel more fun and less scary.
- **Offer Predictable Choices**  
Keep favourite foods available while gently introducing new ones. Use divided plates if mixing foods causes stress.
- **Respect Preferences**  
If a food feels "wrong," that's okay.

## Helpful Resources

- [Autism UK: Eating and Nutrition](#)
- [Eating and food - MindMate](#)
- [ARFID Awareness UK](#)
- [Eating](#)

## Hygiene Support

Taking care of our bodies—like brushing teeth, washing hair, or bathing—is part of staying healthy. But for neurodiverse young people, hygiene routines can feel overwhelming. This guide helps families understand why and offers gentle ways to make hygiene more manageable.

## Why Hygiene Can Be Tricky

Some young people may:

- Feel uncomfortable with certain textures, smells, or temperatures (like scratchy towels or strong shampoo scents)
- Forget steps or lose track of time during routines
- Feel anxious or rushed, especially in busy mornings

These challenges often relate to **sensory sensitivities** or **executive functioning**—how the brain organises and carries out tasks. It's not laziness or defiance. It's about finding the right support.

## Helpful Hygiene Strategies

- **Step-by-Step Visual Guides**  
Use picture charts or checklists to show each part of the routine (e.g., "1. Wet toothbrush, 2. Add toothpaste, 3. Brush top teeth..."). This helps with memory and independence.
- **Timers or Music to Pace Routines**  
Set a gentle timer or play a favourite song to guide how long to brush teeth or shower. It makes routines feel more fun and predictable.
- **Sensory-Friendly Products**  
Choose unscented soaps, soft towels, and gentle textures. Let your child help pick items that feel good to them—like a toothbrush with soft bristles or a shampoo with a mild scent.
- **Break Tasks into Smaller Steps**  
If a full shower feels too much, start with washing hands or face. Build up gradually.
- **Use Routine and Repetition**  
Doing hygiene tasks at the same time each day builds comfort and confidence.

## Helpful Resources

- [Supporting neurodivergent children with personal care - Family Action](#)
- [Engaging and Free Personal Hygiene Teaching Activities for Neurodivergent Learners - Learning For A Purpose](#)
- [Hygiene Routines and SEND](#)

## Exercise Support

Movement helps neurodiverse young people regulate emotions, sleep better, and stay focused. It doesn't have to be structured or competitive—just fun, flexible, and tailored to their needs.

## Why Movement Matters

- Releases energy and reduces anxiety
- Improves sleep and focus
- Builds confidence and body awareness
- Encourages social interaction and routine

### Practical Tips for Families

- **Short, Fun Activities**  
Try dancing, jumping on a trampoline, riding a scooter, or playing chase. Even 5–10 minutes can help reset the brain and body.
- **Routine-Based Movement**  
Build movement into everyday life—walk to school, stretch before bed, or do chores with music. Predictable routines reduce stress.
- **Fine Inclusive Sports Clubs**  
Look for clubs that offer:
  - Smaller groups
  - Sensory-friendly environments
  - Coaches trained in neurodiversity awareness

*Ask your local council, school, or charities for recommendations. Many offer neurodiverse-friendly activity groups.*

- **Let Them Lead**  
Offer choices: and respect their energy levels and preferences.
- **Sensory-Friendly Tips**  
Choose comfy clothes, avoid noisy spaces, and use headphones or fidget tools if needed.

### Helpful Resources

- [Supporting Neurodiverse Youth Through Movement and Physical Activity - Youth Sport Trust](#)
- [Neurodivergence Learning | Access Sport](#)

## Understanding Masking

Masking is when someone hides or changes their natural behaviours for example stimming, their preference for not making direct eye contact, or rehearsing / planning scripts to support conversation, with the aim to blend in or avoid being judged. It's common among neurodivergent young people, especially in school or social settings.

While masking can help you feel safe in the moment, doing it all the time can lead to exhaustion, anxiety, or even burnout.

## What Masking Might Look Like

Young people might:

- Copy how others talk or act to fit in
- Suppress stims (like hand-flapping or fidgeting)
- Script conversations ahead of time
- Smile or laugh even when they're uncomfortable
- Hide their true feelings or needs

Parents might notice their child seems "fine" at school but melts down at home, this is often a sign of masking fatigue.

## How to Support Healthy Unmasking

- **Create Safe Spaces**  
Let your child know home is a place where they can be themselves—no pressure to act "normal." Use calming routines and sensory-friendly environments.
- **Validate Their Identity**  
Celebrate what makes them unique. Say things like "You don't have to pretend here" or "It's okay to stim if it helps you feel calm."
- **Encourage Open Conversations**  
Talk about feelings and energy levels. Ask, "Did you feel like you had to mask today?" or "What helped you feel more like yourself?"
- **Explore Self-Expression**  
Support creative outlets like art, music, or journaling. These can help young people express who they are without words.
- **Therapeutic Support**  
A therapist who understands neurodiversity can help your child explore their identity, build confidence, and manage masking-related stress.
- **Connect with Peer Support**  
Meeting others who "get it" can be life-changing. Look for neurodivergent-led groups or online communities where young people can share experiences safely.

## Helpful Resources

- [Masking](#) – National Autistic Society
- [Understanding Masking | Kids Charity](#)
- [Masking](#) -hiding in plain sight