

PERSONAL ESSAY · NEURODIVERSITY & FAMILY

Why I Don't *"Push Through"* Anymore

Rethinking behaviour, stress, and what neurodiversity has
taught me, as a parent and as a person

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Luke Squires

DAD TO THREE NEURODIVERSE CHILDREN · LIVING WITH ADHD

Luke is a dad to three neurodiverse children and lives with ADHD himself. For years he assumed the answer was to try harder, to be

more organised, more consistent, more like everyone else seemed to be. It took understanding his own neurodiversity, and watching his children navigate a world not built for them, to realise the question was never about effort.

He writes honestly about what it actually looks like to parent differently-wired kids, the meltdowns, the masking, the moments that break you and the ones that put you back together. Not as an expert, but as someone still figuring it out, one hard day at a time.

His focus is on understanding over compliance, and on building environments where neurodiverse children don't have to fight to be themselves.

There is a moment every parent recognises.

Your child is melting down. Or refusing. Or shutting you out completely. And every instinct you have says: push. Stay firm. Don't give in.

But what if that instinct is wrong?

What if what looks like defiance is actually something else entirely?

What Behaviour Is Really Telling You

For many neurodiverse children, those with ADHD, autism, or both, stress doesn't always look like stress. It doesn't arrive with a label. It arrives as a slammed door, a screaming match, or a child who has simply gone completely silent and unreachable.

It can look like avoidance. It can look like aggression. It can look like your child choosing to do anything other than the thing you've asked them to do.

But underneath that behaviour is almost always a nervous system that is overwhelmed. Too much sensory input. Too much social pressure. Too many transitions in one day. Not enough predictability, control, or space to process.

In those moments, the ability to comply, to reason, to "just get on with it" is not a choice being deliberately rejected. It is a capacity that is temporarily unavailable.

That distinction changed everything for me as a parent.

"The ability to comply isn't being rejected. It's temporarily unavailable. Once I understood that, I stopped taking it personally."

The Fire We Keep Feeding

There's a simple analogy that has stayed with me, and I've come back to it more times than I can count at the end of long, hard days.

If you put wood on a fire, it gets bigger. If you stop feeding it, it burns out.

When a child is already in crisis, already dysregulated, already overwhelmed, adding more pressure, more instruction, more urgency, more consequence doesn't help. It escalates. It creates cycles of conflict that spiral and leave everyone exhausted, including the child who never wanted any of it in the first place.

I used to think backing off in those moments meant giving in. That it would teach my children that refusing was a strategy that worked.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Removing the fight isn't about giving in. It's about recognising what the moment actually requires.

Sometimes the most effective thing you can do is stop. Remove the pressure. Create space. Let the fire burn down before you try to have any kind of conversation at all.

The conversation always lands better afterwards. Always.

I Didn't Understand This About Myself First

I have ADHD. I wasn't diagnosed until I was an adult, which means I spent a long time believing the problem was simply that I wasn't trying hard enough.

I was disorganised. I was inconsistent. I started things with enormous energy and struggled to finish them. I lost things. I forgot things. I said I'd do things and then didn't, not because I didn't care, but because my brain genuinely did not work the way I assumed everyone else's did.

And the response, from myself mostly, was to push harder. To compensate. To build elaborate systems and tell myself that this time I'd be more disciplined.

What I didn't understand was that I wasn't lazy or careless. I was operating against the grain of an environment that wasn't built for how I think.

Understanding that, really understanding it, was what allowed me to finally understand my children.

Three Kids. Three Very Different Experiences.

All three of my children are neurodiverse. Each of them experiences the world differently. Each of them has different triggers, different signals, different ways of telling you, if you know how to look, that they're approaching their limit.

One shuts down. Goes quiet. Monosyllabic answers, retreating to their room, a kind of flatness that tells you the tank is empty.

One explodes. Loud, fast, seemingly disproportionate reactions to things that seem minor. Because by the time the explosion arrives, it hasn't been minor for a while, it's been building all day, through a hundred small frictions they didn't have the words for.

One masks. Holds it all together at school, in public, around friends. And then comes home and falls apart, because home is the one place safe enough to stop performing.

Learning to read each of them has taken time. It has required me to let go of the idea that there is one right way to respond, and to actually meet each child where they are.

"By the time the explosion arrives, it hasn't been minor for a while. It's been building all day through a hundred small frictions they didn't have the words for."

It's Not About Lowering Expectations

This is the thing people get wrong most often, and I understand why. If you stop pushing, doesn't the child just learn they don't have to try?

In my experience, the opposite is true.

When children feel understood rather than managed, something shifts. They become more willing to engage, not less. The resistance decreases, not because the expectation has gone, but because the fear and overwhelm surrounding it has reduced.

What actually helps isn't lower expectations. It's removing the unnecessary barriers between the child and the expectation.

Clearer, simpler instructions given one at a time

More predictable routines and fewer unexpected transitions

Warnings before changes happen, not during them

Recognising when they need to decompress before they can engage

Space to do things differently, even if it's not how you'd do it

None of this removes accountability. It creates the conditions in which accountability can actually exist.

The Masking Problem

One of the hardest things to navigate as a parent of neurodiverse children is the gap between how they present and how they feel.

Schools often tell you your child is fine. Doing well. No concerns. And then you pick them up and within twenty minutes of being home, everything unravels.

That isn't your child playing up at home. That is your child having spent an entire day holding themselves together in an environment that requires enormous effort, and finally being somewhere safe enough to let go.

It's exhausting for them. And it can feel confusing, even painful, for the parent who is absorbing the collapse.

Understanding masking changed how I responded to those evenings. Less frustration. More recognition. They made it through the day. This is what that cost them.

Medication Is Part of It, But Only Part

For our family, medication has made a meaningful difference. For me personally, and for some of the children, it creates space, quietens the noise enough to think, to regulate, to engage with the world with a bit less friction.

But I want to be honest about what medication doesn't do. It doesn't fix the environment. It doesn't remove the need for understanding. It doesn't mean you can stop paying attention.

On the days when everything else is wrong, when there's been too much, too fast, with not enough support, medication doesn't hold any of that back. The foundations still matter. The environment still matters.

Medication gave us more capacity. Understanding gave us somewhere to put it.

What I Wish Someone Had Told Me Earlier

That your child isn't giving you a hard time. They're having a hard time.

That behaviour is almost always communication, and the worse the behaviour, the more urgent the message.

That the moments when your child is hardest to love are often the moments when they need it most.

That repair is possible. After every difficult day, every explosion, every long silence, connection can be rebuilt. Children are remarkably resilient when they feel safe.

And that you don't have to get it right every time. You just have to keep showing up, keep trying to understand, and keep choosing curiosity over frustration when you have enough left in the tank to make that choice.

A Final Thought

Neurodiversity is not something to be fixed. It is not a phase. It is not a failure of parenting or a failure of the child.

It is a different way of being in the world, one that often comes with real gifts alongside real challenges, and one that needs environments designed around understanding rather than compliance.

When I stopped asking my children to push through, and started asking what they needed to move forward, everything began to change.

It didn't become easy. But it became something better than easy.

It became real.

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experience