

Understanding Changes Everything

What professionals, parents, and carers can learn together about neurodiverse children - and why getting it right transforms lives.



Luke Squires

DAD TO THREE NEURODIVERSE CHILDREN · DIAGNOSED WITH ADHD

Luke is a dad to three neurodiverse children aged 15, 13, and 10, and was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult. About a year out of the sharpest part of the crisis and still navigating the road ahead, he writes not as an expert but as someone living every page of this - and whose children tell him that feeling fought for made all the difference.

I have sat in a lot of rooms.

Rooms with social workers. Rooms with teachers. Rooms with SENCOs and CAMHS waiting list letters and people who had a clipboard, a process, and fifteen minutes to work out what was going on with my family.

Some of those people changed things for us. Genuinely. A handful of them I think about to this day, and I am grateful in a way that is hard to put into words.

But I have also experienced the other version. The reactive approach. The crisis-point response. The judgement that arrived before the curiosity. The courses I was

signposted to in the middle of genuine emergencies, as if a leaflet was the answer to what we were living through.

I want to be clear from the start: I do not think any of those people were bad at their jobs or unkind in their intentions. What I think is that the framework they were working within made it harder for them to see what was actually in front of them. And that when professionals cannot see what is actually in front of them, the families on the other side of the table pay the price.

We are about a year out of the sharpest part of the crisis, though the challenges are still very much present - my children are 15, 13, and 10, and I expect plenty more ahead. But they have started to talk to me, openly, about what those harder periods felt like. What helped and what didn't. What made them feel safe and what made things worse. Those conversations are what pushed me to write this down.

Behaviour Has a Cause. Always.

The single most useful shift I have seen in any professional working with neurodiverse children is this: moving from 'what is wrong with this child?' to 'what is this child trying to tell me?'

For children with ADHD, autism, or both, behaviour under stress does not always look like stress. It looks like a slammed door. A refusal to engage. An explosion that seems out of proportion to what triggered it. A child who has gone completely silent and unreachable.

What is happening underneath is almost always a nervous system that has hit its limit. Too much sensory input. Too many transitions. Too much social pressure and not enough space to process. By the time the behaviour surfaces, it has usually been building for hours - through a hundred small frictions the child did not have the language to name.

The ability to comply isn't being deliberately refused. It is temporarily unavailable. That distinction changes everything about how you respond.

Understanding this reframes the entire professional task. The goal is no longer to manage the behaviour. It is to understand what created it, and to reduce the conditions that made it inevitable. When professionals make that shift, something changes in the room. The child feels it. The parent feels it. And the interaction becomes something genuinely useful rather than something to endure.

Two Parents, Two Responses - and What That Taught Me

I want to share something personal here, because I think it illustrates something important about how families navigate professional involvement - and why the environment professionals create matters so much.

My children's mother is an incredible parent. Thoughtful, devoted, and deeply loving. Our approaches to the professional system were very different, and looking back, both of those approaches make complete sense given what we were each experiencing.

My approach was assertive. Focused. I pushed back when I thought something was wrong. I asked difficult questions. I challenged assessments that didn't reflect what I was seeing at home. At the time, I'm sure it wasn't always easy to be on the receiving end of that. But my children have told me - and we talk openly about this now - that they could see what I was doing. They knew I was fighting for them. It gave them confidence and, ultimately, it helped rebuild their trust - in adults, in the system, in the idea that someone was genuinely on their side.

My children could see the difference between someone managing a situation and someone fighting for them. That distinction stayed with them.

Their mother's response was different - and it is the more common one, and in many ways the more instinctively protective one. She focused on working with the professionals, following their guidance, engaging openly with every recommendation. She brought warmth, consistency, and a genuine willingness to trust the process. Not because she lacked instincts about her children - she had brilliant instincts - but because channelling those instincts into cooperation felt like the most loving thing she could do. When you are frightened, when you feel the weight of the situation, working with the system rather than pushing against it can feel like the safest and most responsible path forward.

That approach has real value. It kept doors open. It built relationships with the professionals involved. It created stability at a time when everything felt uncertain. And it is the response most parents will recognise - because it comes from exactly the right place. From love, from care, and from a desire to do whatever it takes to help your child.

Together, our approaches created something that I think genuinely served our children. My challenge opened conversations that might otherwise have stayed closed. Her cooperation kept those conversations from becoming adversarial. Neither approach on its own would have been enough. Both, sitting alongside each other, gave our children something better than either of us could have managed alone.

The point is not that one approach is right and one is wrong. Both are valid. Both come from the same place. But the environment professionals create has a direct influence on which version of a parent shows up - and a parent who feels safe enough to be fully honest, to push back when something doesn't fit, to bring their whole self to the table, is a far more powerful ally for their child than one who has learned to simply go along with what they are told.

Parents Are Frightened, and That Matters

This is something I think gets underestimated. When professionals become involved in a family's life - especially social services, but teachers and carers too - the experience for many parents is genuinely frightening. It is embarrassing. It feels exposing. It carries an undercurrent of blame even when no one intends to communicate blame.

A parent who is frightened does not show up as their most capable, most articulate, most coherent self. They may come across as defensive, or evasive, or unable to give you the clear account you are looking for. They may seem to be hiding something, when in reality they are simply scared and overwhelmed.

Professionals who understand this respond differently. They do not interpret defensiveness as obstruction. They understand that building trust before demanding openness is not a soft approach - it is the only approach that actually works. They know that a parent who feels safe enough to be honest is worth infinitely more to a child's outcome than a parent who has learned to say the right things in the right rooms.

When a parent feels safe, they become a partner. When they feel judged, they become a barrier - not because they want to be, but because the system has created the conditions for it.

Creating that safety is not complicated. It does not require extra time or additional resource. It requires the deliberate choice to lead with curiosity and empathy before assessment. To say, either in words or in manner: I can see how hard this is, and I am here to help rather than to judge.

That is the environment we need. For parents. For children. For the professionals themselves, who are trying to do good work inside a system that does not always make it easy.

School Refusal, the Calls to Collect, and What Was Actually Being Said

We have been through school refusal. Sustained, nothing-will-get-me-through-that-door school refusal. And I have had the calls in the middle of the working day asking me to come and collect my child because the school could not cope.

I understand the pressures schools are under. I genuinely do. But there is something worth naming in that experience: a phone call asking a parent to collect their child because the institution cannot manage them is not a neutral act. It lands on a parent who already feels responsible for everything, at a moment when their capacity is already stretched, with an implied message that the child - and by extension the parent - has failed in some way.

What I have come to understand is that school refusal is not a child deciding they would rather be at home. It is a nervous system that has associated school with a level of threat it cannot override by choice. The question is never simply 'how do we get them through the door?' It is 'what is making the door feel unsurvivable, and what do we need to change on the other side of it?'

The professionals who helped us most with this did not start with attendance figures or legal obligations. They started by asking what my child's experience of school actually felt like from the inside. That question, asked genuinely, opened a conversation that the attendance letter never could.

Masking Is Real - and Dismissing It Causes Real Harm

I want to be careful with the word 'harm' here, because I know that no professional reading this got into their role to hurt children or families. But I think it is important to name something clearly: when a parent tells you their child is struggling at home, and you respond by pointing to a school report that shows everything is fine, you are not just missing the picture. In many cases, you are actively making things worse.

Masking is real. It is what happens when a neurodiverse child spends an entire school day holding themselves together in an environment that requires enormous effort just to appear okay. They perform. They comply. They hold the lid on. And then they come home and the lid comes off completely - because home is the only place safe enough to stop.

The parent absorbing that collapse every evening, while being told by every professional involved that their child seems perfectly fine, is not confused. They are not exaggerating. They are not the problem. They are seeing the real and total cost of a performance the school gets to see the surface of and then hand back.

When you dismiss what a parent is telling you about their child's reality at home, you are not just failing to help. You are adding to the weight they are already carrying. That is worth sitting with.

The professional response in those moments - clearer guidelines, firmer consequences, more structured behaviour management - is often exactly the wrong one. Not because those tools have no place, but because they treat the symptom and make the underlying cause harder to reach. A child who is already spending all of their available resource on appearing okay does not have more to give. Adding more pressure does not build capacity. It depletes what little is left.

This is not the 1990s. We understand neurodiversity in ways we simply did not before. We have the research, the clinical evidence, and enough lived experience now - from parents, from autistic and ADHD adults reflecting on their own childhoods - to know that the old frameworks cause harm when applied rigidly to children who are wired differently. Knowing that, and continuing to default to those frameworks because they are familiar and procedurally safe, is a choice. And it is a choice with consequences for real children.

I am not asking for perfection. I am asking for curiosity. For the willingness to look at the person in front of you rather than the framework behind you. To ask what is driving this before reaching for the response you were trained to give.

The best professionals I have encountered - the ones my children still talk about, the ones who genuinely moved the dial - were the ones who were willing to put the textbook down and look at what was actually in the room. That is not recklessness. That is professional maturity.

The Headteacher Who Built Something Outstanding

I want to tell you about a primary school headteacher.

At the time my child was at his school, they were causing some of the biggest disruption the school had seen. That is not an exaggeration. There were hard days. Days where I imagine even the most patient members of staff questioned how things were going.

But this headteacher had built something different. He had created a culture of nurture - genuine nurture, not as a policy document but as the way the school actually operated. Every adult in that building understood that behaviour was communication. That a child acting out was a child who needed something, not a child who needed to be managed harder. That safety and belonging were not rewards for good behaviour - they were the conditions that made good behaviour possible.

That school received an Outstanding Ofsted rating. I was not surprised. Because Outstanding was not just their results - it was the environment they had built. One where every child, including mine, felt safe, valued, and capable of more than anyone had previously expected of them.

I think about that a lot. A child who was, by any conventional measure, a significant challenge - and a school that chose to see past the challenge to the child. That choice, made consistently and at a cultural level, did not lower standards. It raised them. For everyone.

Outstanding does not happen despite a culture of nurture and inclusion. In my experience, it happens because of it. When children feel safe, they learn. When they feel valued, they engage. When the adults around them are curious rather than controlling, something opens up that no amount of consequence or compliance can create.

That is the model. Not a soft one. Not one without structure or expectation. But one where the human being inside the child is the starting point, not an obstacle to the curriculum.

This Happened Last Week

Someone close to me recently told me about her son.

He is eight years old. A beautiful, kind soul - her words, and from everything I know, entirely accurate. He is on the waiting list for an autism diagnosis. A lengthy waiting list, as they all are. The school knows about his challenges. Interventions are in place. Everyone is aware.

Recently he started refusing to read during lessons. Becoming disruptive. Out of character, certainly at school. His mum was concerned. She knew something was going on beneath the surface.

The school's response? Keep him in at break time to read.

I want to sit with that for a moment. An eight-year-old boy who is struggling, who is on a waiting list for an autism diagnosis, who has started behaving in a way that is out of character and is clearly communicating that something is wrong - and the response is to take away his break. His time with his friends. The one part of the school day specifically designed for children to decompress, reset, and be themselves without any performance required of them.

That is not a consequence that helps. That is the removal of the one thing most likely to. And it was done by people who care about this child and reached for the tool they were trained to use.

His mum pushed back. She did what many parents in that situation are too frightened, too exhausted, or too worn down to do - she challenged it. She said this was not simple refusal. She asked them to look at what was underneath it. She

suggested they dial up the positives with him rather than add to the pressure he was clearly already feeling.

And what did they find? He needed a new book. That was it. That was the whole thing. He had lost interest in the one he had and did not have the words or the confidence to say so. So he shut down. And the shutdown looked like defiance, and the defiance got consequence, and the consequence was the worst possible response to what was actually happening.

He has his new book now. He is reading it. Happily. Because the problem was never that he did not want to read.

I am not sharing this to criticise that school. They are trying. The interventions are in place. They are aware of this child. And they still reached for consequence first - because that is what the training says you reach for when a child refuses and disrupts.

Imagine if the first response had been curiosity instead. One genuine conversation with his mum, earlier. What has changed for him? What is he trying to tell us? Is there something we are missing? That conversation would have cost five minutes. Everything that followed cost far more - from everyone, including a child who just wanted a different book.

That is the shift. That is the whole shift. And it costs nothing except the willingness to ask a different question first.

What Collaboration Actually Looks Like

Everything I have described comes down to one thing: the difference between a system that processes families and a system that partners with them.

Processing looks like assessments conducted on families. Partnership looks like assessments conducted with them. Processing looks like recommendations handed down. Partnership looks like recommendations built together, tested against the family's actual experience, and adjusted when they do not fit.

My children look back on the professionals who helped them and describe a specific feeling. Not that those people were the most qualified, or the most experienced, or the most thorough in their paperwork. They describe feeling like someone was genuinely trying to understand them. Like the adult in the room was curious about who they actually were, not just what they were presenting as.

That is not a complex professional skill. It is a human one. And it is entirely learnable.

What collaborative, empathetic practice looks like in the room:

- Asking what the family has already tried before offering recommendations

- Believing parents when they describe their child's reality, even when it differs from what you observe
- Being explicit that you are on the same side - do not assume families will infer it
- Treating defensive responses as a signal about how the family feels, not about who they are
- Following up on what you say you will do - consistency is safety for these families
- Naming the difficulty of the parent's situation before moving to the agenda
- Asking children what would help them, directly, in language they can access
- Creating space rather than pressure when a child is dysregulated
- Being willing to set aside the standard response when it clearly is not working

None of this is about abandoning appropriate processes or professional standards. Accountability matters. Safeguarding matters. The structures exist for good reasons.

It is about recognising that those structures work significantly better when they are built on a foundation of genuine human connection. When families feel like partners rather than subjects. When children feel seen rather than managed.

That is the environment we need to build together - professionals and parents, side by side. When we do, the outcomes for our children change. Not gradually. Noticeably. Quickly.

One Last Thing - About the Parent Who Shows Up With Some Fight

Advocacy is our job. It is not optional, it is not aggressive, and it is not something any parent should feel they need to apologise for.

When a parent walks into a room with energy - challenging a decision, pushing back on an assessment, refusing to accept an answer that doesn't fit their child - that is not a problem to manage. That is a parent doing exactly what they should be doing. It is love in action. It is someone who knows their child better than any professional in the room and is trying, desperately, to make sure that knowledge counts for something.

It should not feel like the fight of our lives. But for too many of us, it is the biggest battle we face. Read the fight for what it actually is.

Parents of neurodiverse children should not have to walk into professional meetings braced for conflict. They should not have to rehearse their arguments, anticipate being doubted, or leave feeling like they have failed an audition for the right to be

heard. That is the reality for far too many families right now - and it is exhausting in a way that is hard to describe to anyone who has not lived it.

So when a parent shows up with some spice - when they are direct, or frustrated, or not willing to simply accept what they are being told - please read it charitably. They are not being difficult. They have almost certainly been here before, been dismissed before, watched their child struggle while waiting for someone to listen. The fight in the room is not directed at you personally. It is the accumulated weight of a system that has asked them to prove themselves over and over again.

Meet that energy with curiosity rather than defensiveness and something shifts. The parent who walked in ready for a battle becomes a partner. And a partner is worth everything when you are trying to actually help a child.

A Final Word

My children are 15, 13, and 10. We are about a year out of the most intense period, still navigating things, and I have no illusions that the road ahead is straightforward. But the conversations I have with them now - about what those harder times actually felt like from the inside - are some of the most remarkable I have ever had.

What they describe, consistently, is a feeling. Not a policy or an intervention or a programme. A feeling of being seen. Of having an adult in the room who was genuinely curious about them as a person, not just managing them as a situation.

That is what we are building toward. Not a perfect system - I do not think that exists. But a more human one. One where the curiosity comes before the judgement. Where the parent is believed. Where the child's behaviour is a question to answer rather than a problem to contain.

We know enough now to do this differently. The understanding is there. The evidence is there. The only thing left is the choice to apply it - to look at the people in front of you rather than the framework behind you, and to trust that when you do, something genuinely better becomes possible.

For our children, that choice is everything.

Written from lived experience. Luke Squires is a dad to three neurodiverse children and was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult. He writes on neurodiversity, parenting, and the systems families navigate.