

Is My Child Neurodivergent, and What Does That Mean?

By | NESCA Notes 2024



“It is essential to remember that neurodivergence is not a label or limitation but a spectrum of diverse traits and abilities that contribute to the richness of human experience. By recognizing and embracing neurodiversity, society can benefit from the unique perspectives, talents, and contributions of individuals with diverse neurological profiles.”

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By: **Cynthia Hess, PsyD**
Pediatric Neuropsychologist

One of society’s leading sources of information is social media, which can be an excellent source of information and support. Parents may turn to social media when they notice their child struggling, trying to find others with similar concerns or answers about why their child seems “different.” Additionally, many children, adolescents, and young adults who feel different or out of place seek and find people or ideas that resonate with them online. While it may put them at ease, it often leads parents and their children to question if there is a diagnosis that will help them understand their child or themselves. Increasingly, people are asking if it is autism or another neurodivergent condition.

Neurodivergence is a term used to describe individuals whose brains function differently from what is considered typical. Neurodivergence is a broad term describing neurodevelopmental disorders present at birth and lasting throughout one’s life. Identifying if your child is neurodivergent can be the first step in understanding their unique strengths and challenges. There are numerous neurodivergent conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), **dyslexia**, and others, each with their own characteristics and support needs.

Recognizing signs of neurodivergence in children can vary depending on the specific condition, but some common indicators include:

- Difficulty with social interactions and communication
- Repetitive behaviors or intense interests
- Sensory sensitivities or aversions
- Challenges with attention and focus
- Delayed speech or language development
- Difficulties with organization and planning
- Impulsivity or hyperactivity

- Unusual reactions to sensory stimuli
- Emotional regulation difficulties
- Learning and academic challenges

Observing patterns of behavior, communication, and sensory processing in your child can help indicate if they may be neurodivergent. Seeking a **professional evaluation** from a psychologist or developmental specialist can provide a more accurate diagnosis and guidance on supporting your child effectively. It is essential to remember that neurodivergence is not a label or limitation but a spectrum of diverse traits and abilities that contribute to the richness of human experience. By recognizing and embracing neurodiversity, society can benefit from the unique perspectives, talents, and contributions of individuals with diverse neurological profiles. **Proper diagnosis**, support, understanding, and accommodation are essential in helping neurodivergent individuals thrive and succeed in their lives.

About the Author

Dr. Cynthia (Cindy) Hess conducts neuropsychological evaluations as a pediatric neuropsychologist at NESCA. Dr. Hess enjoys working with children and young adults with complex emotional and behavioral profiles. She is skilled at evaluating social and emotional challenges as well as a range of learning profiles. Her experience allows her to guide families in understanding the supports and services their child requires to be successful in school.



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“Currently, evidence-based treatment methods for managing ADHD symptomology include medication, behavioral interventions, or the combination of the two. In addition, one domain that has received increased attention from the scientific community over the past several years is the integration of mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) within treatment (Felver & Jennings, 2016).”



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By: Lauren Halladay, Ph.D.
Pediatric Neuropsychologist, NESCA

Children with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often struggle to sustain attention, follow directions, and appropriately interact with peers when compared to children with typical development. **Executive functioning** challenges, including difficulties with self-regulation, are also common in individuals with **ADHD**. Executive functioning refers to the neuropsychological-based functions involved in the regulation of behavioral states and the organization of goal-directed behavior. This can present as difficulty breaking down goals into steps, planning, monitoring the effectiveness of an approach to a task, modulating one's emotions, etc.

Currently, evidence-based treatment methods for managing ADHD symptomology include medication, behavioral interventions, or the combination of the two. In addition, one domain that has received increased attention from the scientific community over the past several years is the integration of mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) within treatment (Felver & Jennings, 2016).

Mindfulness is the ability to bring one's attention to experiences occurring in the present moment, which can allow an individual to consider alternative ways to perceive and react to a situation (Singh et al., 2007). Many MBI curriculums include lessons on focusing one's attention on the present moment, which can improve individuals' self-regulation, executive functioning, concentration, and emotional-reactivity, while reducing aggressive behavior, **social problems**, and anxiety (Keng et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2014).

One such curriculum, originally developed for adults with Intellectual Disabilities and aggressive behaviors, is Soles of the Feet (SoF) (Singh et al., 2003). The purpose of this exercise is to shift the individual's attention from a typically triggering situation to a neutral stimulus. The SoF intervention involves teaching an individual to recognize situations that trigger an emotional response in real life or through role-play scenarios. Next, the individual is guided through steps in the curriculum that consist of finding a neutral body posture, breathing naturally while thinking about the triggering event, and shifting attention to the soles of the feet. Then the individual is guided to be mindful of their feet on the ground. The goal is for the individual to end this process having appropriately responded to the situation without engaging in behavior that was contrary to expectations. Research suggests that

engaging in this intervention significantly improved participants' ability to regulate their aggressive and disruptive behaviors, and appropriately engage with others (Felver et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2007).

There are several mindfulness-based activities, such as progressive muscle relaxation and focusing on your five senses, that can be modified to support children's attentional and emotional regulation. For some ideas, please consider visiting the American Psychological Association (APA)'s [Magination Press](#) website, where they offer several children's book titles related to a variety of topics, including mindfulness.

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About Lauren Halladay, Ph.D.

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Navigating Screen Time: Understanding the Impact on Child Development

By | Nesca Notes 2023



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“Excessive screen time can have a variety of effects on child development. These effects can be physical, cognitive, emotional, and social, and vary depending on the content and purpose of screen time. This is largely due to what children are not doing when they are using screens.”

By: [Cynthia Hess, PsyD](#)
Pediatric Neuropsychologist

At school, we have had increasing difficulty with children refusing to leave their car at drop-off because they are on their tablets and do not want to stop what they are doing to go to school. Screen time has long been discussed regarding how much is too much and recommendations offered for limiting screen time. Now, with mobile devices, screens can be taken anywhere. Furthermore, there is never a shortage of entertaining options to engage with, from games like Minecraft, Roblox, and Fortnite to YouTube, all of which draw children in and make it difficult to stop. This article aims to provide a nuanced exploration of the **impact of screen time** on child development. While screen time is not inherently negative, it requires **thoughtful management** and consideration, particularly in the context of the developmental needs of children.

Screens are pervasive in daily life and have become integrated into the fabric of 21st century family dynamics, mostly due to the numerous ways of engaging with screens. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), children between the ages of eight to 12 spend at least four to six hours a day watching or using screens. According to Common Sense Media, children between birth and eight spend an average of two and one-half hours per day, with children two and under spending approximately 49 minutes on average. While screens can teach and entertain, too much may lead to problems.

Excessive screen time can have a variety of effects on child development. These effects can be physical, cognitive, emotional, and social, and vary depending on the content and purpose of screen

time. This is largely due to what children are not doing when they are using screens. Extended periods of screen time can lead to a sedentary lifestyle, which can lead to obesity, poor posture, and disrupted sleep patterns. In terms of cognitive development, overuse of screens with fast-paced and visually stimulating content can overwhelm a child's developing brain and potentially affect attention span, impulse control, and the ability to concentrate. It can also impede the development of language and communication skills. When children spend too much time in front of screens, they may have fewer opportunities to engage in real-life conversations and interactions, which are crucial for language development. And, while educational content can have benefits, excessive screen time can still disrupt the learning process. It may lead to reduced engagement with traditional forms of learning and limit a child's ability to exercise critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

It is important to note that not all screen time is detrimental. Age-appropriate and high-quality content, as well as supervised and interactive screen time, can have educational and social benefits. Additionally, technology can be a valuable tool for learning and creativity when used in moderation and with parental guidance. Parent and caregivers can help mitigate the potential negative effects of screen time by setting limits, monitoring content, and encouraging a balanced lifestyle that includes a variety of activities, such as physical play, reading, and face-to-face interactions. Sometimes the best conversations happen in the car.

References:

- Screen Time at Age 1 year and Communication and Problem-Solving Delays at age 2 and 4; <https://jamanetwork.com>
- Screen Time and Children [Screen Time and Children \(aacap.org\)](https://www.aacap.org)
- [Common Sense Media: Age-Based Media Reviews for Families | Common Sense Media](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/)

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Neurodevelopmental Evaluations for Children under Age 5

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“When children are showing delays in achieving those milestones within expected age ranges, seeking an evaluation may be warranted. If delays in any of the areas are observed, pursuing an evaluation sooner rather than later is recommended, as research has shown that early diagnosis and intensive treatment are the most important factors in determining rapid progress and long-term prognosis.”

By: Lauren Halladay, Ph.D.
Pediatric Neuropsychologist, NESCA

Many families are curious about neurodevelopmental testing. **Neuropsychologists** who specialize in working with young children are often asked about when it is appropriate to pursue an evaluation, what the evaluation process entails, and where to go.

Why Would a Young Child Need an Evaluation?

There are developmental milestones across several domains that children are expected to achieve within certain timeframes. When children are showing delays in achieving those milestones within expected age ranges, seeking an evaluation may be warranted. From birth to 5 years of age, the areas of development that are especially important to monitor include:

- Speech and Language (e.g., use of single words/phrases, following directions)
- Social Skills (e.g., eye contact, social smile, interest in others, imaginative play skills)
- Motor Skills (e.g., crawling, walking, using a pincer grasp)
- Cognition/Early Problem Solving Skills (e.g., matching shapes and objects, completing simple puzzles)

If delays in any of the areas listed above are observed, pursuing an evaluation sooner rather than later is recommended, as research has shown that early diagnosis and intensive treatment are the most important factors in determining rapid progress and long-term prognosis.

What Does a Neurodevelopmental Evaluation Entail?

Within a comprehensive neurodevelopmental evaluation, the child is administered tests that look at the developmental areas listed above. Information should also be collected from parents, teachers, and other caregivers who know the child well. These evaluations help to provide a better understanding of the child’s developmental profile, including areas of relative strength and weakness.

In other words, the evaluation can provide more information about where the child's skills currently fall when compared to their same age peers. Such information can provide diagnostic clarification, as well as help to inform recommendations for services if needed.

Where to Go

There are several options for where families can pursue evaluations, each with their benefits and drawbacks:

- **Early Intervention (EI):** EI is meant to support families of children birth to three years of age who have developmental delays or are at risk of developmental delays. The goal of the Massachusetts EI program is to collaboratively promote skill acquisition based on the family's priorities and child's individual needs. Evaluations are typically conducted within the home setting to determine the child's eligibility for **EI services**. While these evaluations can provide valuable information about the child's strengths and weaknesses, a diagnosis will not be provided.
- **Hospital-based Setting:** These evaluations are structured differently depending on the hospital system. In most cases, these evaluations are interdisciplinary, meaning that they involve a team of providers from different disciplines (i.e., psychologist, medical provider (pediatrician, nurse practitioner) speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist, etc.). While outcomes of these evaluations can include diagnosis and recommendations for services when appropriate, waitlists are often long, and reports tend to be brief.
- **Independent Setting/Private Practice:** Independent evaluations usually involve several visits with a pediatric psychologist or neuropsychologist, rather than with a team of providers. Similar to the hospital-based evaluations, independent evaluations can result in diagnosis when appropriate. Specific recommendations based on the child's individual profile are offered. These evaluations tend to be more detailed and comprehensive than those conducted by EI and within hospital-based settings. Clinicians also have the option to observe the child in other settings (e.g., daycare, preschool, elementary school), as well as attend school-based meetings.

Relatedly, NESCA is currently providing evaluations for children 12 months to 3 years of age who are showing early signs of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The wait time is 1 month or less – by design – so children who meet criteria for an ASD diagnosis can access the appropriate interventions for them. If you are interested in learning more about ASD Diagnostic Testing through NESCA's ASD Diagnostic Clinic, please visit our website at <https://nesca-newton.com/asd-diagnostic-clinic-2/> and/or complete our online [Intake Form](#).

Related resources and links to help track developmental milestones:

- [CDC's Developmental Milestones](#)
- [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](#)

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October is Gap Year Exploration Month – Why Should Teens on IEPs Care?

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“In working with a large number of clients in Massachusetts and other Northeast states, I have observed that most middle and high school students have the same postsecondary vision: College. There is a strong consensus that college is the only goal to reach after high school, rather than an important step that leads to gainful employment in an area of strength, interest, or aptitude.”

By: **Kelley Challen, Ed.M., CAS**
Director of Transition Services, NESCA

On September 12th, I received an email from a colleague with the title *May I nominate you?* The body of the email described that October is Gap Year Exploration Month (GYEM) and asked if I would be willing to be a GYEM Amplifier, meaning would I be willing to share information with my personal and professional network to create awareness about gap years and increase student consideration of gap years as one of their post-secondary options. This was an easy “YES!” for me because I have spent the majority of my career trying to help students and families who I work with to understand that there are many other options besides college, or before college, for students to pursue after high school. Just last week, I was in an IEP meeting for a 10th grade student recommending that the student have an IEP goal and objectives that would help to enhance his understanding of a variety of post-

12th grade options so that he could make an informed and active choice about his post-high school activities.

In the United States, every student who is on an IEP has the right to postsecondary transition planning. This is a process by which a young person is supported in the setting of goals and expectations for themselves and in building the skills and resources that will enable them to reach those goals. This should be a completely individualized process. However, in working with a large number of clients in Massachusetts and other Northeast states, I have observed that most middle and high school students have the same postsecondary vision: College. There is a strong consensus that college is the only goal to reach after high school, rather than an important step that leads to gainful employment in an area of strength, interest, or aptitude. Students with and without disabilities often know that they want to go to college (or that they are expected to go to college), but they have no career goals or sense about whether a college degree will actually benefit them in finding employment related to their aptitudes. Despite the data, most young people (and their parents) simply take as fact that college is what you do after high school. So how do we empower students to better manage the transition process? First and foremost, we need to start discussing career development, and to help our youth to understand the wide range of postsecondary options available to them, at earlier ages. A bachelor's degree is one academic pursuit that has a place for many students, but for a great number of students, it is not the best immediate option available after high school. There are many other options worth exploring, such as two-year college programs, vocational or certificate programs, apprenticeships, military, employment, **and gap year programs**. So today, let's talk about those gap year programs!

What is a gap year? A gap year is a deliberate period of personal growth typically taken by students after high school and before post-secondary education or career. During a gap year, individuals engage in various activities that foster personal growth, skill development, and exploration of different paths before committing to further education or career choices. These activities may include volunteering, interning, traveling, working, learning new skills, or pursuing other forms of experiential learning. The purpose of a gap year is to gain valuable life experiences, expand one's perspective, and make informed decisions about future educational and career endeavors.

What can you do on a gap year? The options are endless! Gappers can choose from structured programs like service learning or volunteer projects, or pursue independent activities, such as interning, hiking, or working on organic farms. There are opportunities both within the US and abroad.

Is a gap year expensive? A meaningful gap year can be planned on various budgets. Students can offset costs through work, fundraising, scholarships, and financial aid. Some gap year programs accept funds from 529 Plans. Moreover, gap year students often graduate from college in less time, potentially saving families money in the long run. Explore a comprehensive list of [scholarships here](#).

What are the evidence-based benefits of taking a gap year?

- Academic Success: Recent studies show that gap year students outperform traditional students academically when they enter college.
- Employability Boost: 88% of gap year graduates report that their experience significantly enhances their employability.
- Personal Development: 98% of gap year graduates claim that their gap year helped them grow as a person.
- Career Exploration: 60% of gap year graduates credit their experience with either confirming their choice of career or setting them on their current path.

References for these statistics can be [found here](#).

Can you still attend college after a gap year? According to the best data on this question, 90% of gap year students who intended to go to college enroll within a year of graduating high school.

How can I learn more about planning a gap year?

Seek guidance from your school counselor.

Attend local USA Gap Year Fairs or online events to meet with programs and gather more information.

Check out some of the following Articles/Videos:

- [Parents Magazine: What Is a Gap Year and Should Your Kid Take One?](#)
- [US News & World Report: How a Gap Year Prepares Students for College](#)
- [Forbes: Why High School Graduates Should Consider a Gap Year](#)
- [Go Overseas: What is a Gap Year and How to Take One](#)
- [TEDx: Gap Year: A Path to Purposeful Education](#)
- [TEDx: The Higher Education Crisis – and How the Gap Year Could Help Solve It](#)
- [Gap Year Alumni Video Playlist](#)
- [NYTimes: How Taking a Gap Year Shapes Your Life](#)
- [NYTimes: The Four Secrets of Success](#)
- [Forbes: Here's Every Reason You Should Take a Gap Year Before College](#)

Visit the web sites below:

- [Gap Year Association \(GYA\)](#)
 - [Planning Guide for Students](#)
 - [List of Gap Year Programs](#)
 - [List of Gap Year Counselors](#)
- [USA Gap Year Fairs](#)
- [Go Overseas](#)
- [Teen Life](#)
- [Go Abroad](#)

Listen to a Podcast

- [The Gap Year Podcast with Michelle Dittmer](#)
- [Gap Year Radio](#)
- [Zero to Travel Podcast](#)
- [AFS Exchange Podcast](#)

Read a Book

- [The Price You Pay for College: An Entirely New Road Map for the Biggest Financial Decision Your Family Will Ever Make](#) by Ron Leiber, 2021
- [The Complete Guide to the Gap Year](#) by Kristin White, 2019
- [Gap to Great: A Parent's Guide to the Gap Year](#) by Andrea Wien, 2015
- [Gap Year: How Delaying College Changes People in Ways the World Needs](#) by Joseph O'Shea, 2013
- [Gap Year, American Style: Journeys Toward Learning, Serving, and Self-Discovery](#) by Karl Haigler, 2013

Is a transition program the same thing as a gap year program? Not exactly. Postsecondary transition programs are typically programs for young adults with disabilities that target skill development in one or more transition planning areas: life skill development, vocational skill development, and/or readiness for college. Often, developing executive function and social skills is a strong emphasis of these programs. Some of these programs are therapeutic and target the mental health needs of the young adult while supporting skill development in transition planning areas. While some students will participate in transition programs or transitional living programs as gap experiences, transition programs are typically a different category of program. At NESCA, we specialize in helping families determine whether transition programming is needed beyond 12th grade and support families to find – or create –

postsecondary transition programs. We also coordinate with local specialists – Gap Year Consultants, College Consultants, and Therapeutic Educational Consultants—when students may need special expert support in any of those areas.

REFERENCE: Several of the FAQs in this blog are copied directly from GYEM: Digital Dispatch materials created by the Gap Year Association of America and distributed to Gap Year Exploration Month Amplifiers throughout the world.

About the Author

Kelley Challen, Ed.M., CAS, is NESCA's Director of Transition Services, overseeing planning, consultation, evaluation, coaching, case management, training and program development services. Ms. Challen also provides expert witness testimony in legal proceedings related to special education. She is also the Assistant Director of NESCA, working under Dr. Ann Helmus to support day-to-day operations of the practice. Ms. Challen began facilitating programs for children and adolescents with special needs in 2004. After receiving her Master's Degree and Certificate of Advanced Study in Risk and Prevention Counseling from Harvard Graduate School of Education, Ms. Challen spent several years at the MGH Aspire Program where she founded an array of social, life and career skill development programs for teens and young adults with Asperger's Syndrome and related profiles. She additionally worked at the Northeast Arc as Program Director for the Spotlight Program, a drama-based social pragmatics program, serving youth with a wide range of diagnoses and collaborating with several school districts to design in-house social skills and transition programs. Ms. Challen is co-author of the chapter "Technologies to Support Interventions for Social- Emotional Intelligence, Self-Awareness, Personality Style, and Self-Regulation" for the book *Technology Tools for Students with Autism*. She is also a proud mother of two energetic boys, ages six and three. While Ms. Challen has special expertise in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, she provides support to individuals with a wide range of developmental and learning abilities, including students with complex medical needs.



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