Co-occurring and Complex: Looking Through Many Different Lenses

Society is not designed to take into account the challenges that children and youth who are **neurodivergent** often face. These children and youth may come across barriers that their **neurotypical** peers do not experience, leading to reduced well-being and increased risk of mental health difficulties.

According to the World Health Organization, **mental health** is "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community."

Understanding, responding to and accommodating children and youth who are neurodivergent can improve their mental health. Meeting their mental health needs requires a holistic approach to care that takes into account mental, **sensory**, communication and social factors.

Sensory processing differences

Children and youth who are neurodivergent often process information from their senses differently. This can include heightened sensitivity (**hypersensitivity**) or reduced sensitivity (**hyposensitivity**) to sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.

Children and youth with hypersensitivity react strongly to things like:

- **Loud noises**
- **Bright lights**
- **Labels in clothing**
- **Strong smells and tastes**

This can lead to discomfort or pain. Children and youth who are hypersensitive may have strong emotional responses to these **stimuli**, including anxiety, distress, irritability and anger.

Children and youth with hyposensitivity may seek additional stimulation through behaviours ranging from fidgeting to head-banging.

Social and communication differences

Children and youth who are neurodivergent may experience more social difficulties than their neurotypical peers because of communication differences. They may have fewer friendships or feel "different" from their peers, which can lead to feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Words that are highlighted in bold are defined in the Glossary.

Source: healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca

BRITISH COLUMBIA | Ministry of Children and Family Development

Recognizing signs of struggle

Children and youth who are neurodivergent and have mental health difficulties may experience distraction or decreased motivation. Some may also experience **emotional dysregulation**—difficulty in responding to and managing their emotions. This can result in intense and prolonged emotional reactions, such as “meltdowns” and “outbursts,” in turn causing feelings of shame, further impacting their mental health.

Other signs that a child or youth who is neurodivergent may be struggling with their mental health include: