Mental Health and Behaviour: Mislabelling

Mental health and behaviour

Mental health challenges can show up in children and youth through their actions and words, also known as *behaviours*. Children and youth haven't yet developed the parts of their brains that help them communicate their trickier thoughts and feelings in adult-like ways. So when they are struggling, they might yell, punch walls, throw objects, hit others and/or self-injure (for example, head-banging, hand-biting and scratching). They can also express themselves through positive behaviours!

Children and youth who are **neurodivergent** may have additional things getting in the way of effectively communicating their feelings or needs. They may communicate in different ways altogether. They may also be more sensitive in the way they process information from their environment (for example, they may experience loud sounds and bright lights when others around them do not). These things can pile up and affect their ability to cope. Children and youth who are neurodivergent may sometimes have "outbursts" or "meltdowns," which may be the result of a lot of things piling up and being released all at once. These may be explosive and seem to happen out of the blue.

It can be challenging to know how to support a child or youth who is neurodivergent and who is also experiencing mental health challenges.

It's important to remember two things:

Behaviour is a form of communication.

Many of the difficulties children and youth who are neurodivergent are facing may be "invisible."

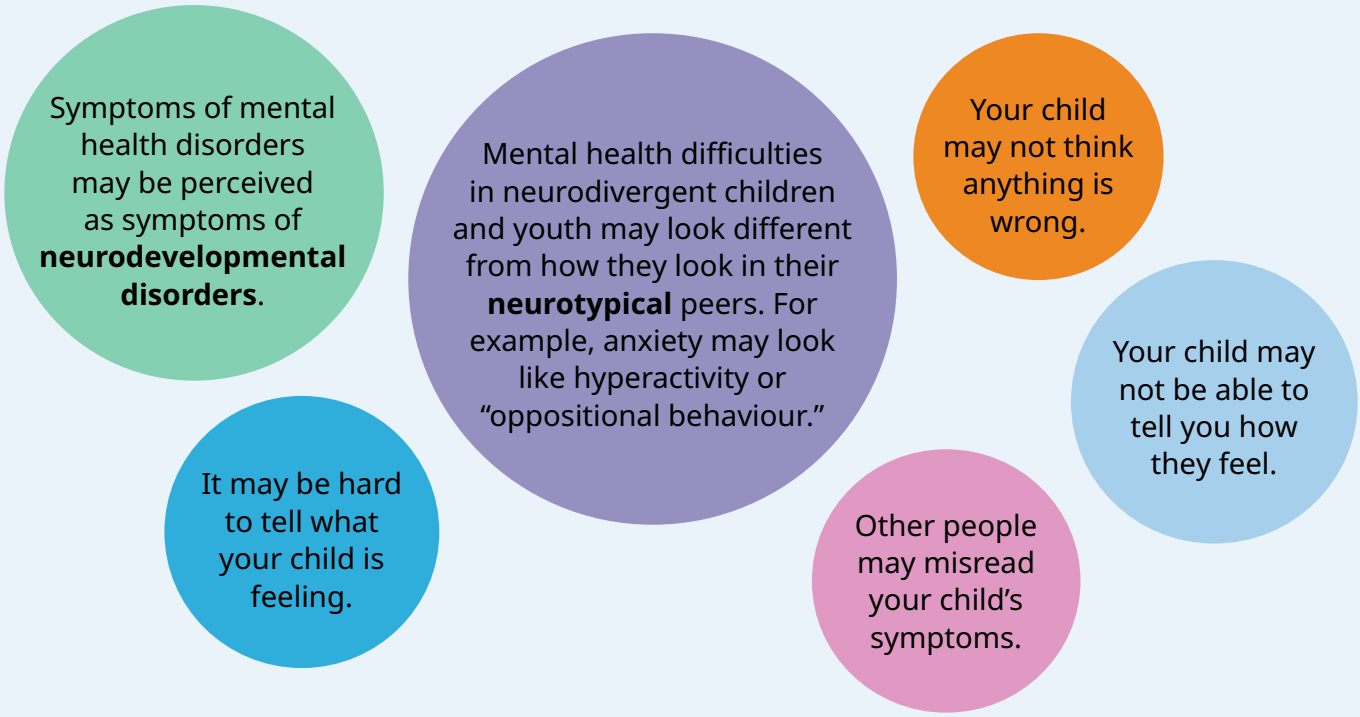
In some settings, children and youth may quickly be labelled as having "bad behaviour" based only on what is happening on the outside.

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

Source: healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca

British Columbia | Ministry of Children and Family Development

Challenges in assessing the mental health of children and youth who are neurodivergent



Ways to support the mental well-being of your child

- **Validate their feelings:** Let your child know that you understand how they're feeling and that their emotions are valid. This can help them feel heard and supported.

- **Provide a safe space:** Create a safe space that meets your child's **sensory** needs. This could be a quiet room or a cozy corner with soft blankets and pillows.

- **Use calming sensory tools:** Provide your child with sensory tools like fidget toys, weighted blankets or noise-cancelling headphones, which can help them feel comfortable.

- **Stick to routines:** Children and youth with neurodevelopmental disorders often thrive on routine and predictability. Keep regular routines for meals, bedtime and other daily activities to provide structure and consistency.

- **Practise co-regulation:** Teach your child deep-breathing exercises that they can use when they're feeling overwhelmed or anxious, and practise them together. This will help you both become familiar with the interactive process of **co-regulation** (promoting self-regulation in a child through modelling, coaching and feedback).

- **Engage in calming activities:** Offer your child calming activities, such as drawing, listening to music or taking a warm bath.

- **Offer choices:** Giving your child choices can help them feel more in control and reduce their anxiety. Offer choices in activities, food or clothing.

- **Seek professional help:** If your child is experiencing significant anxiety or agitation, a therapist or other health-care provider may be able provide additional strategies to support your child's mental health.