

# **The Silent Struggle:**

## **Supporting Working Parents and Carers of Neurodivergent Children**



*March, 2026*

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## Executive Summary

This white paper explores the experiences of working parents and carers of neurodivergent children, the challenges they encounter, and the impact on their professional lives. Parents and carers often manage complex care needs, frequent appointments, and ongoing advocacy within education and healthcare systems, in addition to their work responsibilities. Much of this effort is unseen, yet it significantly increases their cognitive, emotional, and logistical burden.

Despite these pressures, working parents of neurodivergent children contribute valuable strengths to organisations, including resilience, empathy, problem-solving abilities and adaptability. In this ever-changing world, these qualities are in high demand among employers, not only to enhance team and organisational culture but also to boost business performance.

However, without adequate support, the cumulative strain on parent workers can result in burnout, reduced well-being, and difficulties maintaining performance.



**88% of parents of neurodivergent children report that caregiving responsibilities impact their work or career.**

**One in seven UK employees balances work with caring responsibilities**



Key challenges include inflexible working structures, unpredictable caregiving demands, stigma or misunderstanding about neurodivergence and limited access to tailored workplace support.

This paper examines how increased awareness and compassionate strategies can help overcome these barriers to foster a culture of psychological safety, ultimately leading to enhanced employee loyalty and engagement.

Fostering a neuroinclusive organisation is not only a moral responsibility but, importantly, a strategic advantage. When employers acknowledge the challenges faced by working parents of neurodivergent children and respond with empathy and structural support, they create workplaces that benefit everyone.

Neuro-inclusive performance management focuses on removing workplace barriers to support retention, unlock innovation, and meet obligations under the Equality Act (2010).

We will outline practical strategies for embedding neuro-inclusion into performance frameworks, including inclusive objective setting, strengths-based approaches and accessible communication and manager capability building.

Measuring impact helps organisations move beyond compliance towards systems that recognise diverse talent and support sustainable growth (3, 16). Our expertise lies in helping organisations realise these benefits while confidently navigating any challenges that arise.



## The Neurodiversity Landscape

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for describing natural variations in human function. It encompasses a broad spectrum of cognitive profiles, including Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, and Tourette Syndrome (1). Current estimates suggest that approximately 15–20% of the UK population identifies as neurodivergent (2).

For parents and carers of neurodivergent children, this reality often brings complex and sustained responsibilities beyond typical caregiving demands. Many parents must coordinate multiple healthcare appointments, navigate lengthy diagnostic pathways, liaise with educational settings, and advocate persistently to secure appropriate support.

According to NHS England data (3), as of March 2025, 137,977 children were waiting for an autism assessment in children's mental health services, and up to 316,000 children were waiting for an ADHD assessment. This is a total of around 454,000 children waiting for one or both diagnostic assessments. These prolonged waiting periods require parents to manage significant uncertainty while continuing to support their child's needs without formal recognition or access to services.

Research indicates that 88% of parents of neurodivergent children reported adverse effects on their personal or professional lives, with one in ten losing their jobs as a result. Over half (54%) reported needing to take time off work, while 44% experienced career setbacks, including reducing working hours or leaving roles entirely (4).



For parents and carers, the challenge of balancing employment and caregiving is multifaceted. While the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the potential benefits of flexible and remote work arrangements (5), many organisations have since reinstated rigid working patterns that don't accommodate the unpredictable realities of caregiving. Industry surveys suggest that 60% of parents do not disclose their child's neurodivergence to their employer (6), often due to concerns about judgment, career impact, or lack of meaningful support. This lack of psychological safety can prevent employees from accessing adjustments that would enable them to perform at their best.

Despite this shift, workplace policies and practices have not evolved to reflect this reality. As a result, many working parents and carers continue to navigate demands without adequate organisational recognition or support. Organisations that react proactively can retain skilled employees, strengthen workplace resilience, and foster inclusive workplace cultures.

## **The Context: Education as a Systematic Barrier**

It is estimated that approximately 10 -15% of children have traits of, or are diagnosed as, neurodivergent. In a typical classroom of 30 pupils, this equates to approximately four to five neurodivergent children. Mainstream education settings play a significant role in shaping the daily experiences of these children and families.

However, traditional school environments do not always accommodate diverse learning needs. Many pupils experience sensory overload in classrooms characterised by bright lights and noise, which is detrimental to their ability to focus (7). Furthermore, difficulties with executive functioning, such as organisation and task initiation, can lead to barriers if they are not recognised and supported.

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When schools misinterpret distress behaviours as defiance, zero-tolerance policies often exacerbate the issue.

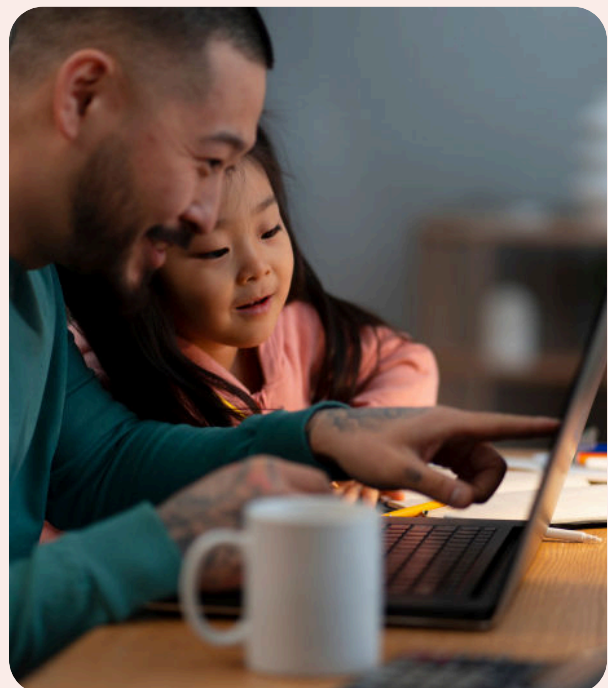
Research demonstrates that sensory sensitivities and uncertainty within school environments contribute substantially to clinically significant anxiety in neurodivergent pupils (8).

The Department for Education data highlights the scale of these challenges. Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are permanently excluded at a rate five times higher than for their peers (9). Specifically, suspension rates for pupils with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan are significantly higher than those without SEN support.

These educational barriers are compounded by social challenges, including difficulties in peer relationships, which can result in isolation (10). For working parents, the stress of managing suspensions, school refusals, advocating for statutory support, and mitigating their child's anxiety can lead to heightened parental burnout (11).

This can create a direct impact on their health, well-being, energy levels, and capacity to fully engage at work.

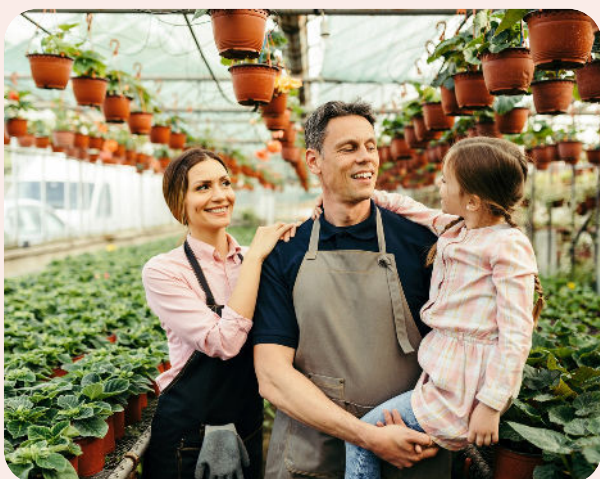
Employers who understand the potential pressures faced by parents are better positioned to provide meaningful support. Practical adjustments, such as flexible start times, consideration around key school transition periods, and advance notice for meetings where possible, can make a significant difference. These small adjustments help to minimise stress for employees, resulting in increased levels of belonging and engagement, which will benefit all.



## Heritability and Intersectionality

Despite the expanding body of research on neurodiversity, the experiences faced by working parents who may be neurodivergent themselves remain significantly under-researched. The intersection of neurodivergent identity with the high-pressure dynamics of caregiving presents a subtle yet significant set of challenges.

Autism and ADHD are among the most heritable expressions. Studies estimate heritability rates of 70–90% for autism and 70-80% for ADHD (12). As a result, many parents may recognise their own neurodivergent traits through their child's assessment process. This can lead to a period of self-reflection and adjustment as they begin to understand their own experiences through a new lens.



Research has identified several intersecting factors impacting parental well-being. Mothers often carry a disproportionate share of the emotional labour associated with navigating complex healthcare systems (13).

Moreover, the link between child and parent mental health is closely linked. Recent statistics suggest that nearly 30% of children with ADHD also experience anxiety disorders (14), which can contribute to sleep disruption, school refusal, and increased caregiving demands.

While societal understanding is growing, disparities in employment and healthcare persist (15). The Neurodiversity Index (2024) found that 50% of neurodivergent employees reported feeling compelled to take leave due to insufficient support resources (16). This highlights the urgent necessity for organisations to implement support systems that address the unique needs of neurodivergent families.

The landscape is shifting rapidly. Longitudinal analysis indicates that autism diagnoses increased by 787% between 1998 and 2018 (17). Concurrently, prescriptions for ADHD medications have seen an eightfold increase historically, with continued growth in recent years (18). In addition, neurodivergent individuals experience at least two forms of expression, necessitating a holistic approach to employee well-being (19).

Employers can help employees navigate these intersecting experiences by providing access to workplace needs assessments, occupational health support, and clear signposting to relevant resources. These measures would provide the employee with some actionable strategies to ease workplace challenges and, in turn, reduce the overall cognitive and emotional burden.



## **The Business Case: Workforce Dynamics**

Supporting working parents and carers of neurodivergent children is not simply an act of corporate social responsibility; it is a strategic investment with direct implications for workforce performance, culture, and retention. As the awareness and identification of neurodiversity evolves, so too does the number of employees balancing professional responsibilities with complex caregiving roles.

Many working parents of neurodivergent children are mid-career or senior professionals who have valuable organisational knowledge and leadership capability. These responsibilities often coincide with peak career stages, meaning the loss of these employees represents a significant loss of expertise. Research shows that replacing an employee can cost between six and nine months' salary (20), highlighting the financial and operational impact of preventable turnover.

When employers recognise and support these strengths, they make a strategic investment in workplace sustainability. Employers can strengthen organisational capability, improve engagement, and build more inclusive and resilient workplaces.

### **1. Support Strategies**

As we have outlined, working parents and carers of neurodivergent children bring valuable strengths to the organisation. However, without appropriate support, these employees face an increased risk of burnout, disengagement, or leaving the workforce. Employers who proactively address these challenges create cultures where staff feel valued and able to sustain long-term careers, leading to higher retention and stronger organisational loyalty (24).

To foster an inclusive culture, organisations should implement holistic support strategies tailored to the needs of neurodivergent families. Many of the adjustments below are low-cost but have a significant impact on employee retention, well-being, and long-term organisational performance.

### **2. Flexible and Agile Working**

One essential adjustment is the implementation of meaningful flexibility. Moving away from rigid, hours-based approaches allows parents to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, such as school exclusions or health concerns. Research confirms that flexible working arrangements are linked to improved overall well-being and productivity (25). This may include flexible start and finish times, remote or hybrid working options, and the ability to adjust schedules at short notice when urgent caregiving situations arise.

### **3. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)**

Establishing neurodiversity or carer-focused ERGs provides a vital support network. These peer networks alleviate the isolation many parents face, allowing employees to share resources and coping strategies. Beyond mutual support, these groups serve as a strategic feedback mechanism, informing policies that relate specifically to the unique needs of these families (26).

#### **4. Targeted Signposting**

Organisations should prioritise effective signposting to guide parents toward appropriate counselling and healthcare resources. This may include access to employee assistance programmes, occupational health services, specialist neurodiversity organisations, and external parent support networks. This approach helps employees navigate challenges more effectively and fosters a more resilient workforce (27).

#### **5. Training for Managers on Neurodiversity and Family Inclusive Practice**

Line managers play a critical role in shaping employee experience. Providing managers with practical evidence-informed training on neurodiversity and family-inclusive leadership helps build understanding, confidence and capability. This enables them to respond appropriately to employee needs, implement reasonable adjustments, and foster open, supportive conversations. Effective training also plays a crucial role in reducing stigma and misconceptions.

In addition to strengthening trust and psychological safety within teams. Research consistently identifies line manager support as one of the most influential factors in influencing employee retention, engagement, and well-being.

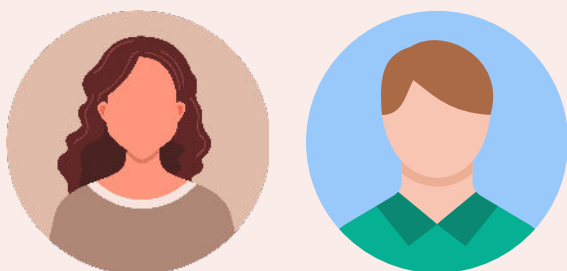
#### **6. Carer-Inclusive Workplace Policies**

Formal recognition of caregiving responsibilities within organisational policy frameworks helps ensure employees are not disadvantaged due to their family circumstances. This may include carers' leave, flexible leave arrangements, and explicit inclusion of caregiving within equality, diversity, and inclusion strategies. Clear policies signal organisational commitment to supporting working families.

The experiences of working parents of neurodivergent children are not abstract policy considerations but everyday realities that shape performance, engagement, and long-term retention. Behind the data are individuals navigating complex family needs alongside demanding professional roles.

## Case Vignettes

The following case vignettes reflect common experiences reported by working parents of neurodivergent children and illustrate how workplace practices can either create barriers or enable employees to thrive.



### Case Vignette 1: Sally and Riley

Sally is a manager and the mum of nine-year-old Riley, who is autistic and has a diagnosis of ADHD. Their home is full of imagination, movement, and creativity, but it also relies heavily on routine to help Riley feel settled.

Sally often finds that key work commitments fall during school pickup times or overlap with the structured evening routine that helps Riley settle. When meetings run late or schedules shift unexpectedly, it can create stress both at home and at work.

Periods of transition can be particularly challenging. For example, after school holidays or half term, Riley often feels overwhelmed at the thought of returning to school and may refuse to attend. On these mornings, Sally may need to remain at home to provide reassurance, communicate with the school, or wait until Riley feels calm enough to transition. These situations are difficult to predict and can create significant stress when they conflict with scheduled meetings or leadership responsibilities.

Sally would benefit from a working pattern that recognises the predictability Riley needs. Greater flexibility around meeting times, the option to work remotely when needed, and advance notice of schedule changes would help her manage both roles more sustainably. Clear agendas and written follow-ups would also support her when switching between the cognitive demands of leadership and parenting Riley. With thoughtful support, Sally can continue to excel professionally while maintaining the stability Riley depends on.



### **Case Vignette 2: Daniel and Leo**

Daniel works in operations and is the foster carer of Leo, who is dyslexic. Daniel is also dyslexic, which gives him insight into Leo's learning experiences and the challenges he faces at school. Evenings often involve supporting homework, advocating for accommodations, and helping Leo navigate frustration around reading and writing tasks.

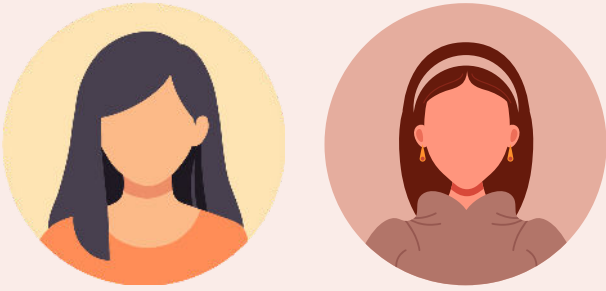
At work, Daniel's strengths lie in problem-solving and verbal communication, but written tasks and high-volume admin require more time and energy. When both home and work demand high levels of organisation, Daniel can feel stretched thin.

There are also times when Leo's school identifies concerns about his progress, requiring Daniel to attend meetings with teachers or complete additional paperwork to secure appropriate support.

Homework that involves extended reading or writing can lead to frustration and emotional distress for Leo, often extending into late evenings. This can leave Daniel balancing his own work deadlines while providing encouragement and the advocacy his son needs.

Daniel would benefit from adjustments that reduce unnecessary administrative load and allow him to work in ways that align with his strengths. Access to assistive technology, opportunities to communicate verbally rather than through lengthy written formats, and protected time for focused tasks would help him manage his workload more effectively. These supports would also enable him to maintain his performance at work while continuing to support Leo.





### **Case Vignette 3: Aisha and Maya**

Aisha is a project coordinator with ADHD and the mother of Maya, her 13-year-old daughter, who is autistic. Maya thrives with structure, clear expectations, and predictable routines, particularly after school when sensory overwhelm is common. Aisha's ADHD brings strengths in creativity, relationship-building, and rapid problem-solving, but transitions and time blindness can be challenging. When meetings overrun or project demands shift suddenly, it becomes difficult for her to leave on time, which can disrupt the carefully planned routine Maya relies on.

There are occasions when Maya experiences sensory overload during the school day and needs to be collected early. These situations require Aisha to rearrange her work at short notice, creating additional pressure and uncertainty.

Aisha would benefit from a working environment that supports predictability and respects the boundaries she needs around her finish time. Consistent scheduling, realistic expectations around late meetings, and clear task breakdowns would help her manage both her ADHD and her parenting responsibilities. Tools such as shared calendars, reminders, and structured workflows would also support her ability to transition smoothly between work and home. With a supportive and neuroinclusive culture, Aisha can continue to thrive professionally while supporting Maya.

### **Conclusion**

This white paper highlights the importance of adopting a holistic, informed approach to supporting working parents of neurodivergent children. Flexible working arrangements, such as remote options, predictable scheduling, and adaptable hours, can significantly reduce parental stress and enable employees to perform at their best. Equally essential is access to comprehensive mental health support and a workplace culture that actively challenges stigma and encourages open dialogue.

Training and awareness initiatives strengthen teams by improving understanding, communication, and confidence in providing adjustments. When organisations identify, embed, and share best practices, they create environments where employees and their families can thrive.

As neurodiversity identification continues to rise and awareness grows, the number of employees balancing professional roles with complex caregiving responsibilities will increase. Organisations that act now to build neuro-inclusive and family-inclusive cultures will be better positioned to retain experienced talent, maintain organisational knowledge, and foster sustainable performance.

Organisations that fail to adapt risk losing skilled employees at critical career stages. By recognising and supporting working parents of neurodivergent children, employers have an opportunity to create more resilient, inclusive, and future-ready workplaces.

## **How Thriiver Can Help**

At Thriiver, we partner with organisations to turn these principles into meaningful, practical action. We offer specialist webinar sessions designed specifically to raise awareness around working parents and carers of neurodivergent children and young people, and the emotional and logistical challenges they may experience when balancing work with advocacy and support.

Alongside this, we deliver targeted training for managers, equipping them with the confidence and skills to lead neuroinclusive teams and respond effectively to the needs of caregiving employees.

We also provide facilitated support sessions for parents and carers within the workplace, creating safe spaces for shared learning, peer connection, and practical problem-solving. Through these programmes, Thriiver helps organisations build cultures where neurodivergent families feel understood, supported, and able to thrive.

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## Our Feedback

“I couldn't make the session live as I was in a team meeting. I watched the content today, and I was blown away by how good it was. Sometimes when you watch back a session, it is easy not to be fully invested, but this was not the case here- so good all round”

“I just wanted to say, as a carer of two neurodivergent daughters, I thought I wouldn't learn anything new, but I was really impressed by how forward-thinking the approach and research were. I really liked the way neurodiversity was discussed as an overarching idea rather than condition-specific, which can feel very formulaic and a bit patronising – I have not seen it done like this before. I was new to the RSD term – but my word do I live amidst it – and the research linked to menopause was very interesting.”

Beyond my expectations. The discussions and answering of questions. People were very open to sharing experiences.

I liked how interactive it was, and it felt personal, which allowed people to open up and talk through their experiences.