Neurodivergent Minds

How to Be a Home Educator

A practical guide for the ongoing journey

For parents and carers home educating a neurodivergent child, grounded in over a decade of neurodiversity-affirming practice.

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Introduction

This guide is for families already home educating, or just starting, who need the ongoing, practical thinking that comes after the initial decision has been made. If you haven't started yet and want the first-steps version, our Home Education Starter Guide covers the different approaches available and what the early weeks tend to look like, and points you to Education Otherwise (www.educationotherwise.org) for the legal side, which is genuinely better covered there than in any guide of ours. This guide picks up from there: the actual, week-to-week practice of being your child's educator, not just their parent.

That dual role is the thing this whole guide is really about. You are, at once, the person your child trusts most unconditionally and the person now responsible for their formal education, two roles that don't always sit comfortably together, and that most teachers never have to hold simultaneously. Everything in this guide is written with that tension in mind, not to resolve it entirely, it doesn't fully resolve, but to make it more manageable.

This guide is organised around ten practical areas home educators encounter constantly: executive function for both of you, structuring a week around energy rather than a school timetable, teaching without lowering expectations, giving feedback to your own child, the home as both living space and learning space, masking and burnout for your child and for you, preventing overwhelm, recognising when the current approach isn't working, seeing strengths clearly and working with the wider system around you.

A note on scope: this is a set of practical, wellbeing-and-capability-focused tools, not a legal manual or a substitute for your own judgement about what your specific child needs. You know your child better than any framework in this guide does, use what's useful and leave what isn't.

Chapter 1

Executive Function for Both of You

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Executive function, starting, sustaining, switching, stopping, matters in home education in a way it rarely does in a classroom, because it's now relevant for two people, not one. Your child's executive function shapes how they engage with any given day's learning. Your own executive function shapes whether that day's learning happens at all, planning, gathering resources, deciding what's next, holding the shape of an entire week in mind without a staffroom, a curriculum team, or a timetable someone else built for you.

Worth naming clearly: struggling with the sheer administrative load of home educating isn't a sign you're not cut out for this. You're doing, single-handedly, work that a school distributes across dozens of staff, and the executive demand of that is real, regardless of how much you love doing it.

For your child, the same four processes apply as anywhere else: a child who can't start a task may need a smaller first step, not more time. A child who drifts after ten minutes may need the task broken into smaller, checked-off pieces, not a demand for more focus. A child who resists moving between subjects may need a clearer, more predictable signal that a change is coming. A child who reacts explosively when something goes wrong may need a pause built in before any response is expected, not a consequence after the fact.

Chapter 2

Structuring a Week Around Energy, Not a School Timetable

One of home education's genuine advantages is the freedom to build a week around your child's actual capacity rather than a fixed, school-shaped schedule designed for managing large groups. Our Home Education Planner covers this in more depth, using the Traffic Light Method™, Green (genuine capacity), Amber (needing to adapt), Red (needing recovery), to plan the heavier and lighter parts of a week around real energy rather than a copied timetable.

The core idea is worth restating here: on a green day, the more demanding or less-preferred learning can go ahead. On an amber day, review or interest-led work fits better. On a red day, rest is the plan working, not the plan failing. This isn't about having no structure, many neurodivergent children do better with real predictability, it's about building structure around your child's actual patterns rather than an arbitrary school-day shape that was never designed with them in mind.

A shape worth trying: a simple, consistent daily shape, an anchor routine, a core focus block, flexible time, movement, a calm close to the day, tends to work better than a rigid subject-by-subject timetable, because it stays predictable in its overall rhythm while remaining genuinely flexible in its content.

Chapter 3

Teaching Without Lowering Expectations

The worry that home education, especially an adapted, flexible version of it, means expecting less of your child is common, and often comes from measuring against a school-shaped yardstick that was never actually the right measure to begin with. The same distinction that runs through this whole series helps: separate the goal, the route and the output.

- **Goal:**
  what you're actually trying to help your child understand or be able to do, and this is the part that shouldn't move just because the route there looks different from a classroom.
- **Route:**
  how you get there, and this is where home education offers real, genuine flexibility, through movement, through a special interest, through a completely different pace than a school day would allow.
- **Output:**
  how your child demonstrates understanding, and this can also flex considerably, a project, a conversation, a demonstration can show genuine understanding as validly as a worksheet.

The useful question: especially on a day when things feel unstructured or informal: is the actual learning goal still being met, even if the route looked nothing like a school lesson? Very often, it is, and the informality was never the problem it can feel like in the moment.

Chapter 4

Giving Feedback to Your Own Child

Feedback from a teacher and feedback from a parent land differently, for better and for worse. Your child trusts you in a way they may never fully trust a teacher, which means your words carry more weight, in both directions. A careless correction from you can sting more than the same words from anyone else. A specific, genuine piece of encouragement from you can mean more too.

The same underlying principle from elsewhere in this series still applies: one specific, concrete piece of feedback is more useful than a flood of correction, and this matters even more at home, where there's no natural boundary between “lesson time” and “just being together” to contain a difficult correction within. A single, well-chosen comment, rather than a running commentary of everything that could be improved, protects both the learning and the relationship.

A specific home education risk: because you're both parent and teacher, a pattern of frequent correction can start to feel, to a child, like it's coming from the relationship itself, not just the lesson. Protecting genuine, non-evaluative time together, time that isn't about learning at all, matters as much as getting the feedback itself right.

Chapter 5

The Home as Both Living Space and Learning Space

Home education asks your home to do double duty: it's meant to be the place your child recovers and feels safe, and now it's also the place where learning demands happen. For many neurodivergent children, this dual purpose can blur in ways worth paying attention to.

A few things help:

- **Create some physical or visual distinction between learning time and home time,**
  even within the same room, a particular table, a particular cue that signals “now we're doing this,” so the whole house doesn't start to feel like it's always potentially a classroom.
- **Treat sensory comfort as a genuine asset, not an afterthought.**
  One real advantage of home education is control over the sensory environment, lighting, noise, seating, in a way no classroom can offer. Using that control deliberately, rather than defaulting to a school-style setup out of habit, is one of home education's real, practical strengths.
- **Protect at least some space and time that's never about learning at all.**
  If every corner of the day and every corner of the house can become a lesson, there's no remaining space for your child or for you, to simply be at home without it also being work.

Chapter 6

Masking, Burnout and the Deschooling Period

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Many children arrive at home education after a difficult experience at school, sometimes after years of masking just to get through each day. Our Home Education Starter Guide covers the deschooling period, the weeks or months it can take to unwind from school's pace and expectations, in more detail, it's worth revisiting that if you're in the early stages.

What's worth adding here is the parallel risk for you. Home educating offers no natural break from your child the way a school day provides one, no structural separation, no staffroom, no colleague to hand a difficult moment to. Parent burnout in home education is genuinely common, and it isn't a sign you're not suited to this, it's a predictable cost of doing, alone, what a school usually distributes across many adults.

Worth building in: deliberately building in recovery time for yourself, not as a luxury once everything else is done, but as a genuine part of making this sustainable, protects both you and, indirectly, your child's experience of home education as something calm rather than something that runs on your own depletion.

The Traffic Light Method™ applies here too, Green, Amber, Red, but catching your own child's amber signs as their parent is a genuinely different task than a teacher catching them in a classroom of thirty. You have far more data, you know your child intimately, but you may also have far less distance, making it harder to notice a pattern you're too close to see clearly in the moment.

What helps: it helps to actively name your child's own individual amber signs somewhere outside your own head, written down, discussed with a partner or another home educating parent, rather than relying purely on in-the-moment judgement. A child who goes quiet, or unusually silly, or starts a particular repetitive movement, these are worth noticing and naming explicitly as this child's own pattern, the same way a school staff team would be encouraged to share and recognise them collectively.

Chapter 8

When Home Education Isn't Working Right Now

There will be stretches where the current approach genuinely isn't working, a particular subject that's become a battleground, a structure that worked for months and suddenly doesn't, a period where nothing seems to land. This isn't failure, and it doesn't mean home education itself was the wrong choice, it usually means something specific needs to change, not that everything does.

Before assuming the whole approach needs rethinking, it's worth isolating what specifically has stopped working: is it the structure of the week, a particular subject's method, your own capacity right now, or something happening in your child's wider life that's unrelated to the learning itself? Treating a difficult patch as information about one specific thing, rather than a verdict on the whole project, makes it far easier to adjust without feeling like you're starting over.

Worth saying plainly: reconsidering school, for a term, for a specific need, or permanently, is a legitimate option if that's ever genuinely the right call for your family, not a failure of home education or of you. The goal was always your child's genuine wellbeing and learning, not a particular method proving itself right regardless of whether it's still working.

Chapter 9

Recognising Your Child's, and Your Own, Strengths

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Without a school's comparison group constantly visible, it's easy to lose a clear sense of your child's genuine strengths, there's no class of thirty to notice who stands out and how. It's worth deliberately naming what your child is actually good at, specifically, not just generally, in the same way this series asks professionals to do in records and reports: not “she's bright,” but “she can hold a complex story in her head and retell it accurately days later.”

The same applies to you: home educators, especially parents of neurodivergent children, are prone to measuring themselves against an impossible, invisible standard, a version of “doing it properly” that doesn't actually exist anywhere. Naming what's genuinely working, specifically, protects your own sense of capability the same way it protects your child's.

Chapter 10

Working with the Wider System

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Home education doesn't have to mean doing everything entirely alone. A local home education group, even an occasional one, functions a bit like the staffroom you don't otherwise have, somewhere to share what's working, what isn't, and simply be around other people doing the same thing. If you haven't found one yet, it's worth deliberately seeking one out rather than waiting to need it.

Specialist input, a tutor for a specific subject, an occupational therapist, a speech and language therapist, can be brought in for particular areas without it meaning you've somehow failed at home educating generally, using the right support for a specific need is simply good practice, not an admission of defeat.

On local authority contact: your local authority may make informal contact to check that a suitable education is being provided. We're not qualified to advise on the specifics of that process, and rules do change, so Education Otherwise (www.educationotherwise.org) is the right place for current, reliable guidance on your rights and what to expect, not this guide. Treating the contact itself as a straightforward, practical conversation, rather than an adversarial one, tends to make it considerably less stressful, but it's entirely reasonable to want to understand exactly where you stand first, and Education Otherwise is where to do that.

Bringing It Together

A Practical Checklist

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When a day, a week, or a particular subject feels like it's not working, it's worth running through a short set of questions:

- [ ] Is the difficulty really about the learning content, or about the structure and pace it's being delivered in?
- [ ] Is your own executive capacity, not just your child's, part of what's under strain right now?
- [ ] Is a particular adjustment really touching the learning goal, or just the route or output?
- [ ] Is feedback landing as teaching, or starting to feel like it's coming from the relationship itself?
- [ ] Is your home still offering genuine recovery space, or has every corner started to feel like potential lesson time?
- [ ] Could burnout, yours or your child's, be a bigger factor than the specific subject or task in front of you?
- [ ] Do you have a clear, named sense of your child's own individual amber signs, not just a general sense that something's off?
- [ ] If something specific has stopped working, have you isolated what that specific thing actually is, rather than questioning the whole approach?
- [ ] Can you name your child's genuine strengths specifically, not just generally, without reaching for a school comparison?
- [ ] Do you have some form of wider support, a home ed group, specialist input, or simply another parent to talk to, so you're not doing all of this in complete isolation?

No single week will need every question answered at once. But holding this list in mind, especially on the harder days, is often what makes the difference between a difficult patch that passes and one that quietly becomes unsustainable for you or your child.

A closing note

This guide draws on the Neurodivergent Minds frameworks used across our CPD course catalogue and publications, and reflects over a decade of neurodiversity-affirming practice. It is a practical companion, not a legal manual or a substitute for your own judgement about your child's specific needs.

Where to Get Help, and a Few Safety Notes

This guide is general information, a set of practical ideas and different ways of looking at things. It is not medical, mental health, legal or safeguarding advice, and it cannot replace a professional who knows your child. Every child is different, and what helps one child can be unsuitable for another. If something here does not feel right for your child, trust your own judgement and ask a professional.

If you are worried about your child

- Talk to your GP, or your child's school SENCO or pastoral team. Say what you are seeing and how long it has been going on.
- Waiting lists for children's mental health services (CAMHS) are long in many areas. That is not your fault. Ask what support is available in the meantime, in school and locally.
- If things get worse while you wait, say so again. You have not used up your chance.

If a child says they want to hurt themselves

- Stay calm, listen and take it seriously. Do not promise to keep it secret and do not leave them alone if you think they may act on it. Get help the same day through your GP or NHS 111, or call 999 if they are in immediate danger.

A note on home education and the law

- We are not qualified to give legal advice, and the rules change. For up-to-date legal information and support, please contact Education Otherwise (educationotherwise.org) and your own local authority.

Helplines

In an emergency or if someone is in danger	**999**
NHS 111, for urgent advice	**111**
Childline, for children and young people (free, any time)	**0800 1111**
YoungMinds Parents Helpline (weekdays)	**0808 802 5544**
Samaritans, for anyone (free, any time)	**116 123**
Contact, for families with disabled children (weekdays)	**0808 808 3555**

More helplines and support organisations are at neurodivergentminds.com/help.html. Phone numbers and services change, so please check each organisation's own website for current details.