

# Dr Georgia Pavlopoulou

## *Situating “emotion regulation” in autism and ADHD.. Whose deficit?*



**GRRAND**



Group for Research in Relationships And NeuroDiversity



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georgia.pavlopoulou@ucl.ac.uk

Director of Group for Research in Relationships And NeuroDiversity-GRRAND, University College London

BLUE SKY @grrand-team.bsky.social

INSTAGRAM grrand\_neurodiversity

Chair of Autism Central- Commissioned by NHS [autismcentral@annafreud.org](mailto:autismcentral@annafreud.org)



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# Kids do well if they can

“Concerning behavior is often best thought of as a frustration or stress response...it’s simply the signal by which a child communicates they are having a difficulty meeting certain expectations.”

Dr. Ross Greene, Clinical  
Psychologist



# Been there myself!



Georgia

**Belonging begins not only with acceptance from others, but with the possibility of understanding oneself**

**“Feeling supported did not come from being told to ‘try harder’ or ‘being dramatic’, but from small, attuned acts of care.”**



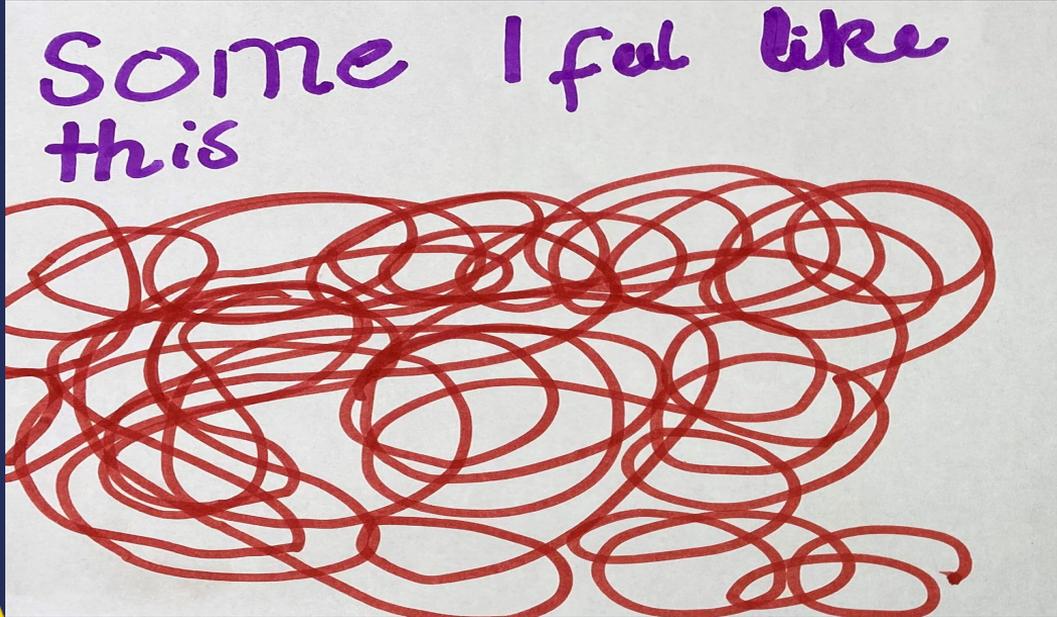


# An experience sensitive approach



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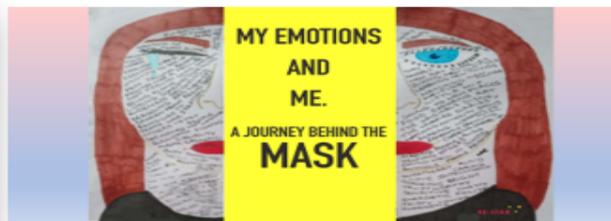
# An experience sensitive approach



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# Interviews with 57 young adolescents with diagnoses of ADHD and autism

- New insights into the sources of **emotion dysregulation** in autism & ADHD.
- High **frequency of upsetting event and encounters**.
- How they are experienced (**intensity**).
- Difference and similarities in sources of upset.



## Co-created Hypothesis

The accumulation of high levels of common upsetting events, intensely felt, creates 'emotional burden' - a source of significant unhappiness in itself and a potential risk to mental health in the long run.



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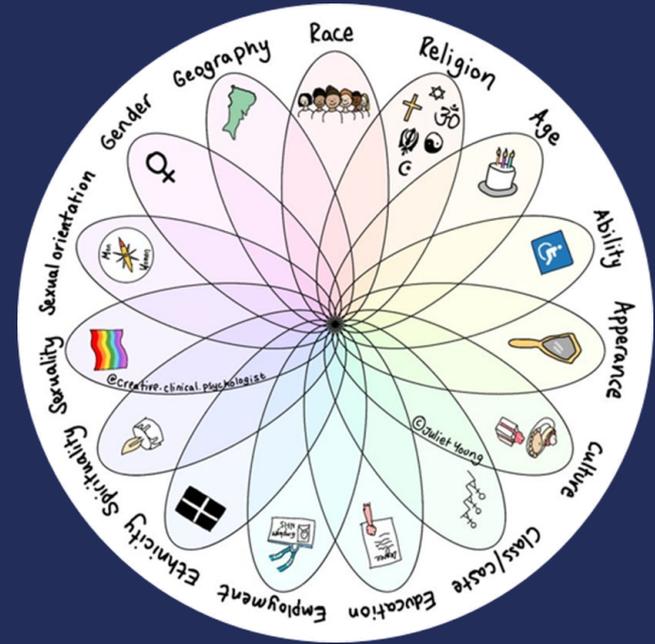
# Autistic, ADHD and AuDHD pupils are not a single group

Their experiences are shaped by **overlapping identities** – such as gender, race, language, disability, faith, and class – which influence:

- how they are understood
- how safe they feel
- how support shows up (or doesn't)

When difference is misunderstood, harm increases.

When difference is met with curiosity and care, identities can become sources of **strength, pride, and belonging.**



# Where is the love?



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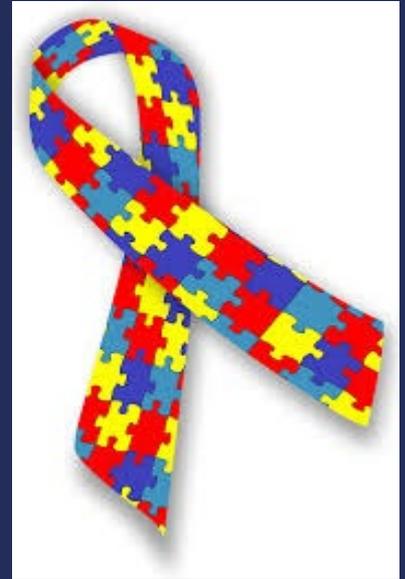
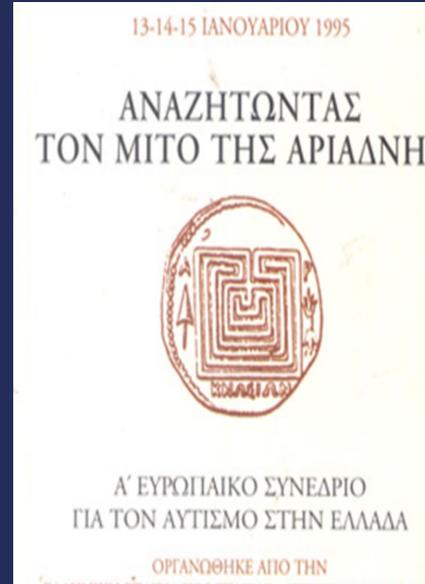
Evidentially, in every measure,  
life outcomes for Autistic  
people are, on average,  
*significantly poorer* than those  
for non-Autistic people



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# How do people become who and what they are?

- We are shown who and what we are in relationship with others and the world
- What narratives shape neurodivergent people's' deepest narratives about self in your society?



# 1. Introduction

Emotional disability is one of the major symptoms of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) [1, 2]. Children with ASD often have specific perception deficits which manifest in difficulties of recognition and interpretation of emotionally charged stimuli [3]; these include the perception of nonverbal aspects of voice prosody and facial expressions [4, 5], difficulties in recognition of emotional and mental states [6, 7], and lack of preference for the mother's voice [8, 9] and pleasant or familiar voices [10].

A deficit of emotional perception could be also associated with impaired auditory perception [9, 11, 12]. In particular, it was found that children with ASD had a higher variability of auditory ERP components compared to typically developing (TD) children [13]. Moreover, impaired auditory perception in children with ASD occurred, regardless of impaired speech perception [14, 15]. Previous studies have shown that the presence of these disabilities in even high-functioning children with autism makes it difficult for them to identify relevant information and suppress irrelevant information from emotional stimuli [16, 17]. When interacting with other people, children with ASD rarely focused on the emotional state of another person and were unable to express their emotions correctly; therefore, their behavior is often perceived as pretentious and irrelevant to the context of the situation [18–20].



# Media



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# Scientists 'switch off' autism symptoms using 50-cent epilepsy drug

Scientists are reporting a breakthrough discovery — a 50-cent per pill epilepsy drug may be a potential cure for autism.

[Adriana Diaz – New York Post](#)

 2 min read February 15, 2023 - 12:49PM 

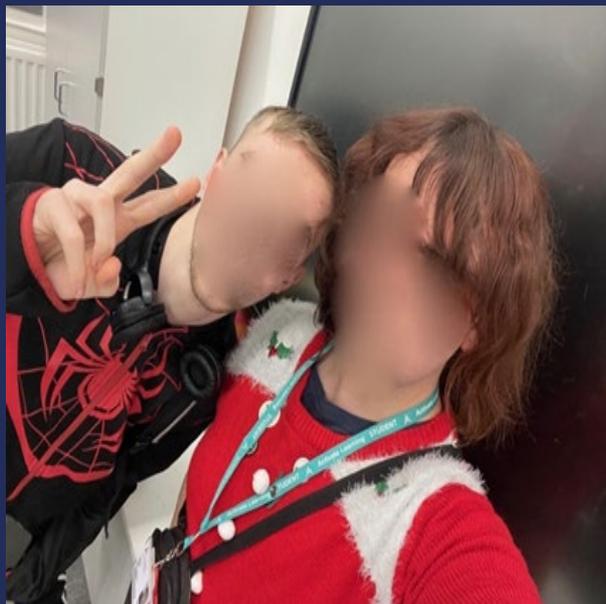
 10 Comments



# AI representations of autism-what do you notice? (Botha et al., 2024)



# Autistic young adults' expressions of belonging (Bates, Pearson, Clarke, Pavlopoulou, In prep)



# Experiences of belonging among autistic adolescents assigned female at birth in mainstream school settings

Pearson, Brennan, Clarke, Kakoulidou, Kelly, Moyse, Pavlopoulou (2025) School Mental Health, Springer Nature

*“I guess when a lot of people collectively outwardly don’t like you, you start to find a dislike within yourself - like why does nobody else like me... you feel like you are not good enough for the people and that’s why they don’t like you or are mean about you. Then you start to feel bad about how you look, and then you think well then maybe there is something wrong with how I look.”*



## Sensory build-up results in shutdown Pearson et al, 2025

Jade: “[the drawing] reflects my school life cause when I am having a bad day, I am usually in the corner of the study room on the floor... the school environment is not sensitive to the noise experiences we have... but there is no way to eliminate crowds but I can take myself away”.





**The neurodiversity paradigm offers a powerful shift: seeing these differences as natural variations in human thinking and behaviour.**

**From fixing deficits → to creating supportive environments** that reduce barriers and boost wellbeing.

**From “us versus them” → to shared humanity,** do we ever consider our similarities?

**From theory about difference → to collaboration,** centering neurodivergent voices in research, practice, and training.



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## A number of cultural, ideological and scientific reasons contribute to the need for a “shift” (Sonuga-Barke, 2023)

- Disconnect between systems and lived experience
- Ethical reasons around dehumanising interventions- what do we even intervene with?
- Very little progress in translational science and gaps in understanding



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Together our teams are building a different kind of future for autism and adhd research: one rooted in collaboration, respect, and innovation through lived experience.

[georgia.pavlopoulou@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:georgia.pavlopoulou@ucl.ac.uk)

<https://www.neurodiversity-research.org/>



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EDITED BY GEORGIA PAVLOPOULOU  
WITH LAURA CRANE, RUSSELL HURN  
AND DAMIAN MILTON

Foreword by Peter Fonagy



# IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIES FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Promoting Self-agency, Curiosity and Collaboration

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families: Best Practice

Central to our approach is the involvement of neurodivergent people themselves in shaping science and practice, a focus on our shared humanity and an adventure in co-production and co-delivery in both research and training.



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# Prepare

(ground rules, scope, safety, duty of care).

# Partner

(co-design interviews and tasks, shared training).

# Progress

(reflect, refine, generate new insights and hypotheses).

# Produce

(co-interview, co-analyse).

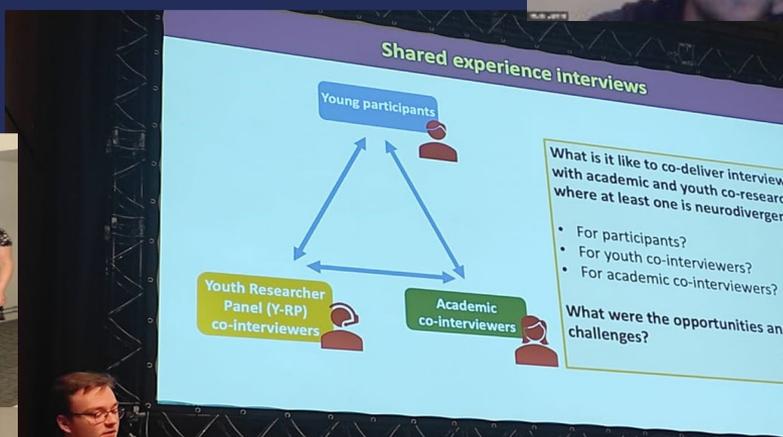


**Why is this research important?**  
Notes from a discussion on research ethics with our East England partners.

- "It's generally been understood as the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the research is safe and that the participants are protected from any harm that might come from participating in it."
- "Complicated and often difficult to navigate. Adds to the complexity of the research process."
- "Some people are more cautious than others. It's important to be aware of this and to have a clear understanding of the research process and the potential risks."

"The established research methods with neurodivergent participants are not always the most effective. They have often been designed for neurotypical participants." Georgia Pavlopoulou

## The "fast track tour of EEG research"





# Key findings from interviews with 57 Autistic and ADHD adolescents aged 11 to 15 years



ORIGINAL ARTICLE | [Open Access](#) |

## **Upsetting experiences in the lives of neurodivergent young people: A qualitative analysis of accounts of adolescents diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and/or autism**

Georgia Pavlopoulou , Susie Chandler, Steve Lukito, Myrofora Kakoulidou, Isabel Jackson, Elisa Ly, Maciej Matejko, Beta Balwani, Tiegan Boyens, Dorian Poulton, Luke Harvey-Nguyen, Sylvan Baker, Edmund J. S. Sonuga-Barke , on behalf of the RE-STAR team ... [See fewer authors](#) ^



# What did we do?

## Participants (N= 57)

- Adolescents with diagnoses of ADHD (N=24), autism (N=21) or both (N=12)
- 11 to 15 years
  
- Attend a UK mainstream secondary school

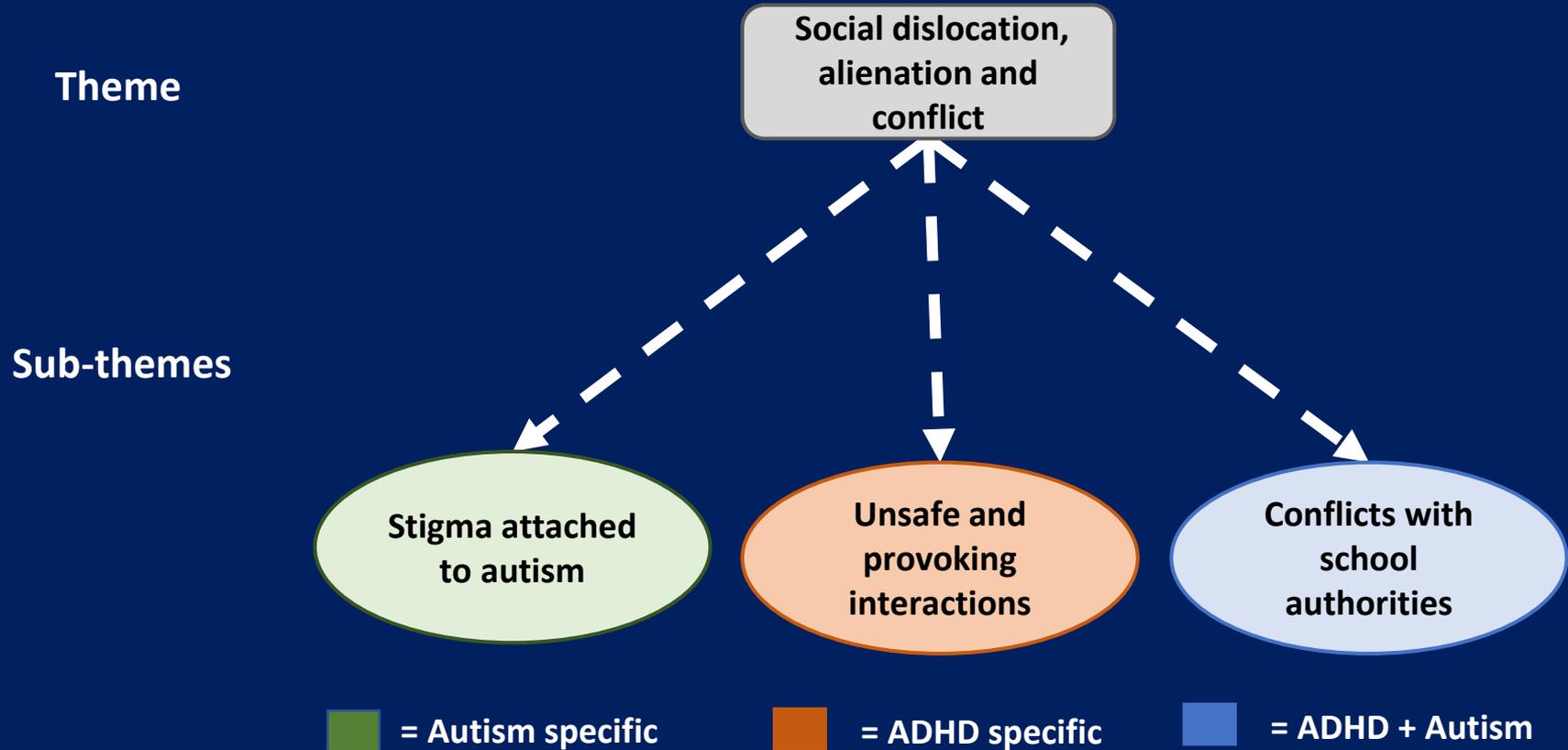
## Procedures

- Online introduction and interview with a researcher
- Before and during the interview: Complete multimedia creative tasks to respond to prompts about everyday emotions, upsetting experiences and what helps



# Common upsetting experiences (Pavlopoulou et al, 2025)

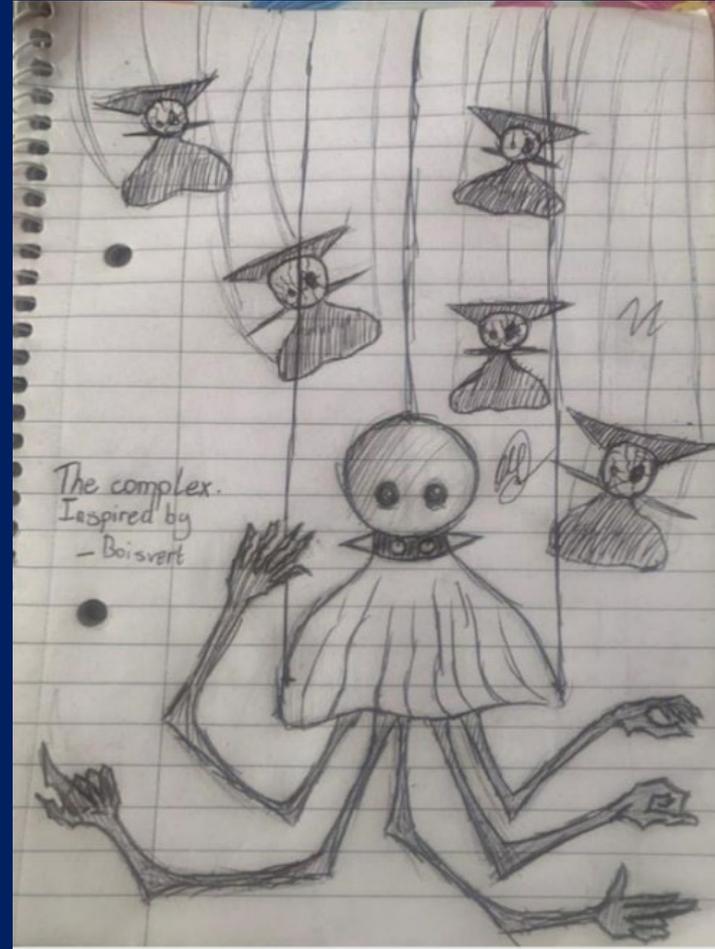
## Theme 1: Social Dislocation, Alienation and Conflict



# Common upsetting experiences (Pavlopoulou et al, 2025)

## Theme 1: Social Dislocation, Alienation and Conflict

“... I didn't know why these people didn't like me...I feel like I don't have a concrete friend group, at all. It really does hurt sometimes...That I'm gonna die alone, or without any friends, or I'm gonna die single...I feel like the extra friend a lot ... It feels horrible...” (Male, 15, Autistic)



# Common upsetting experiences (Pavlopoulou et al, 2025)

## Theme 2: The experience of hiding one's true self, the need to mask

Theme

The experience of hiding one's true self

Sub-themes

Protecting others from my feelings

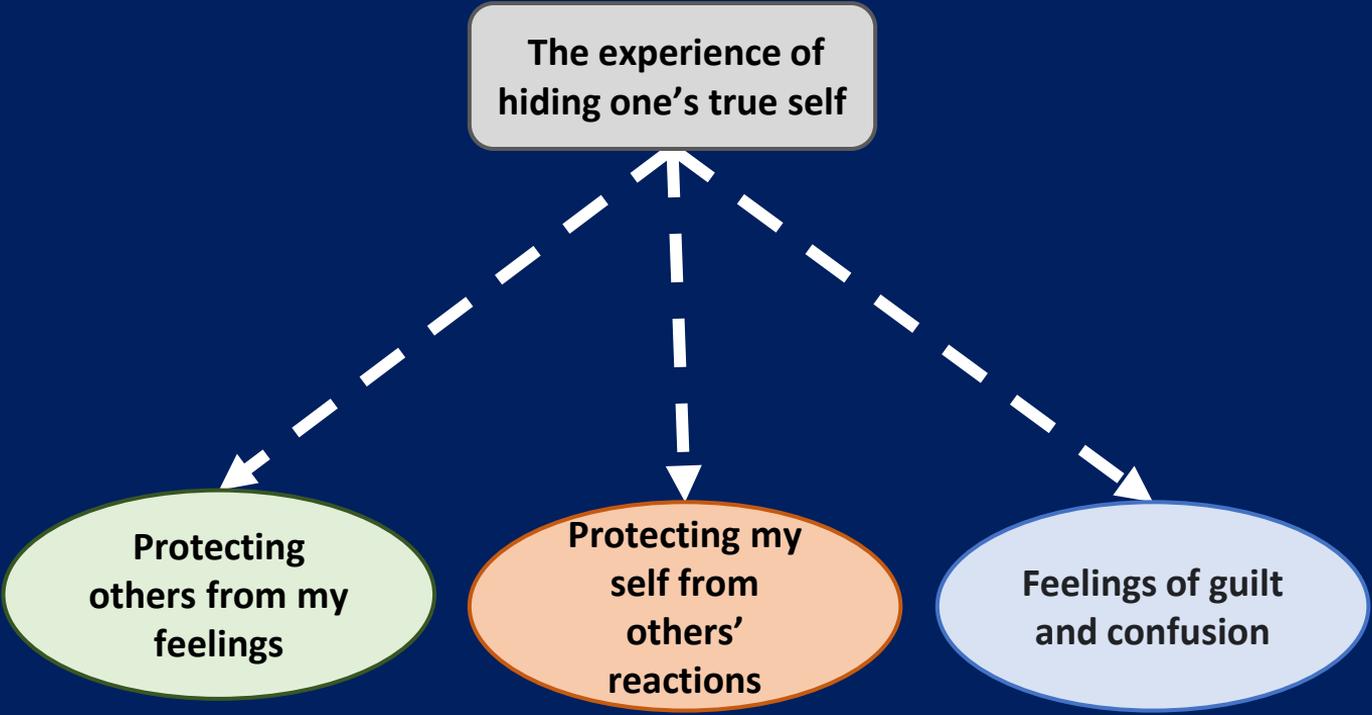
Protecting my self from others' reactions

Feelings of guilt and confusion

■ = Autism specific

■ = ADHD specific

■ = ADHD + Autism



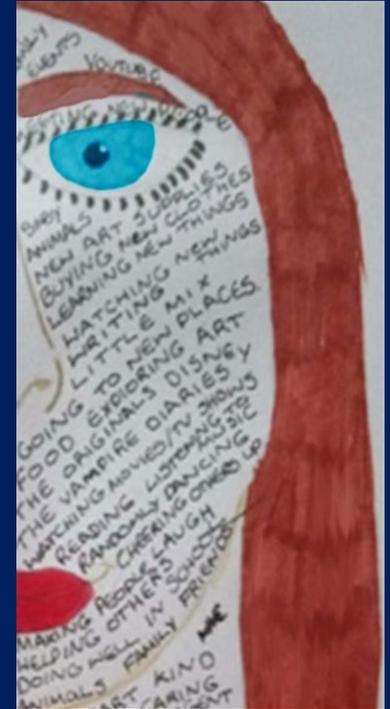
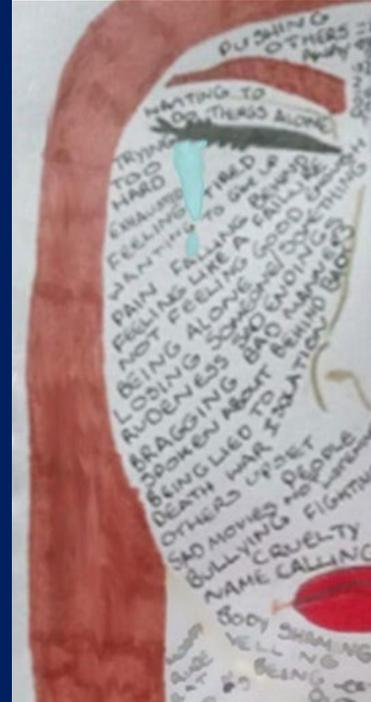
## Theme 2: The experience of hiding one's true self, the need to mask

“I don't feel good masking them [the emotions], but **it's better than actually showing my feelings and getting made fun of**, me getting angry and maybe get a detention or ...to be seen as a wimp.”

(Male, 13, ADHD)

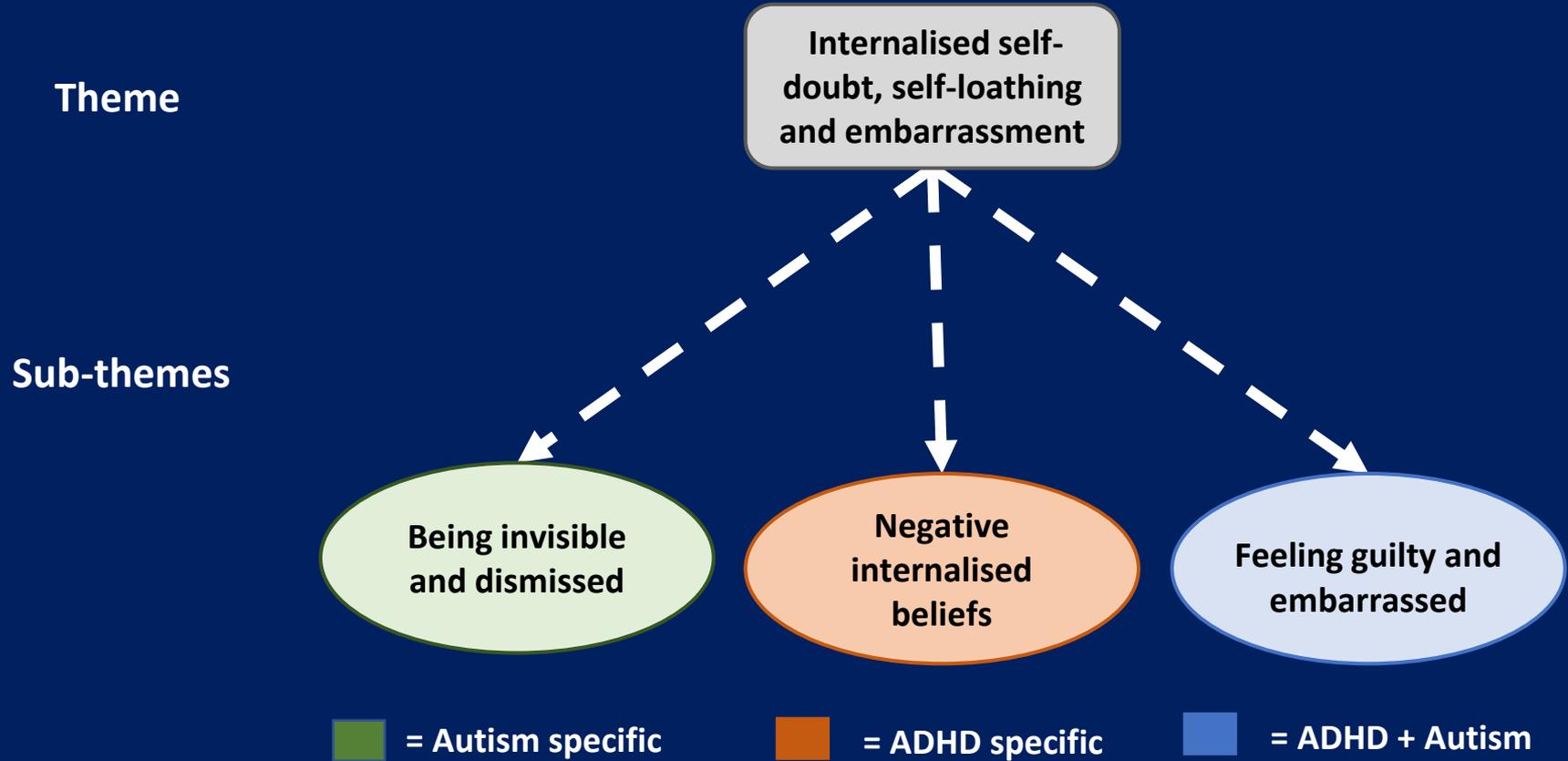
“I do think I **definitely mask a lot at school**. I mask a lot of my feelings, of how I feel. **Especially to teachers** as well, if they ask me if I'm okay, I'll say, Yeah, I'm fine.”

(Female, 15, dual diagnosis)



# Common upsetting experiences (Pavlopoulou et al, 2025)

## Theme 3: Internalised Self-Doubt, -Loathing and Embarrassment



# Common upsetting experiences (Pavlopoulou et al, 2025)

## Theme 3: Internalised Self-Doubt, -Loathing and Embarrassment

*"I'm just scared that I'm going to say the wrong thing. In the sense of that, I'll pick up the wrong piece of information (...) I'm scared that they are going to be like 'You lied to me', or something like that."* (Male, 15, ADHD)

*"I'll feel like I've disappointed myself, I'll feel like I've done bad for myself, like I've caused a problem or I've disappointed other people than myself."*

(Male, 13, Autistic)



## Theme 4: Under/Overstimulation and Sensory Mismatch

*"(...) if I'm trying to focus on something and then there's kind of noises in the background, they will really irritate me. Or if I'm really anxious by something, and then there's that extra noise and things like, I can be very irritable with, like, all my senses really."* (Female, 12, Autistic)

*"During school [I experience big emotions], mostly, because what we do now is just going over the stuff we've already learned which is just a bit boring, the repetition. And then I guess **when a lesson or doing something is boring and I just switch off.**"* (Male, 15, ADHD)



# Measuring *emotional burden* – a new questionnaire (Lukito et al, 2025)

- Interviews informed the development and validation of the new **My Emotions in School Inventory (MESI)**

The Journal of Child  
Psychology and Psychiatry



Original Article | [Open Access](#) |

## Emotional burden in school as a source of mental health problems associated with ADHD and/or autism: Development and validation of a new co-produced self-report measure

Steve Lukito, Susie Chandler, Myrofora Kakoulidou, Kirsty Griffiths, Anna Wyatt, Eloise Funnell, Georgia Pavlopoulou, Sylvan Baker, Daniel Stahl, Edmund Sonuga-Barke , on behalf of the RE-STAR team ... [See fewer authors](#)



Interview paper inspired us to construct and validate items for a new tool the **My Emotions in School Inventory (MESI**, Lukito et al, 2025). We used MESI to understand:

How do upsetting events and their emotional impact differ between neurodivergent (autism/ADHD) and neurotypical youth?

Does emotional burden independently predict mental health difficulties?

Are commonly upsetting events similar or different across groups?



# MESI content & structure

## Commonly upsetting events/triggers lead to emotional burden

- Frequency - how **often**?
- Intensity of the experience - how **upsetting**?
- **EB = Frequency x Intensity**



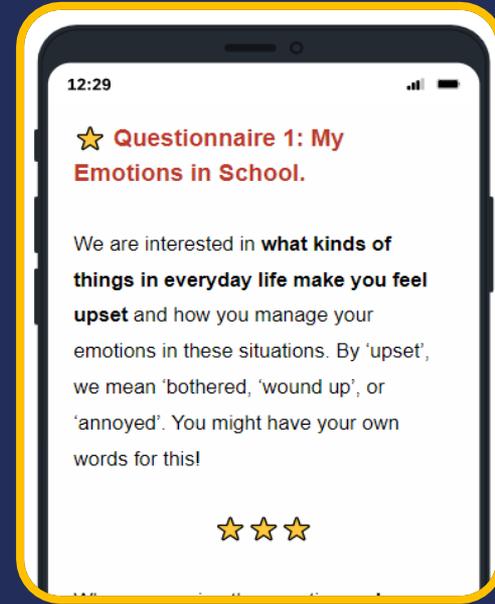
“School **staff don’t listen** to you or challenge what you say”



“Finding out your peers have been **talking about you behind your back**”

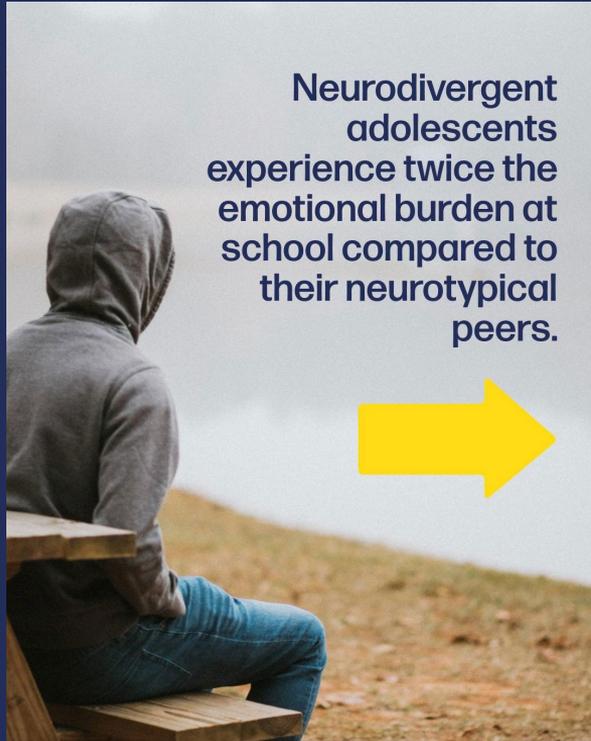


“When you’re asked to do something really **boring**”



# Findings from MESI validation in a cross-sectional study

- 735 adolescents aged 11-16 years
- ADHD (N=100), Autism (N=104), Autism+ ADHD (N=79), Neurotypical (N=452)



- **Emotional burden** was strongly associated with depression/anxiety.
- Both **school-induced emotional burden** and **emotional regulation struggles** were linked to depression independently of the other.
- Need for a **more joined-up approach to managing mental health risks** in neurodivergent youth at school

# Emotional burden: Different students, different sources of

## Autistic students

- social safety
- being misunderstood
- sensory discomfort
- time pressure & unpredictability

## ADHD students

- conflict with adults
- not being listened to
- boredom or lack of meaning
- being told to “try harder”



# Longitudinal work soon to be published!

## My Emotions and Me Over Time (MEMO)

Received: 30 October 2024 | Accepted: 16 July 2025

DOI: 10.1002/jcv2.70052

REGISTERED REPORT STAGE 1

JCPP Advances 

Why do attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder and/or autism traits place adolescents at risk for depression? Protocol for a longitudinal comparison of the mediating role of emotion regulation deficits versus emotional burden

Edmund J. S. Sonuga-Barke<sup>1,2,3</sup>  | Melanie Palmer<sup>4</sup> | Kirsty Griffiths<sup>1</sup> |  
Anna Wyatt<sup>1</sup> | Andrea Danese<sup>1</sup>  | Susie Chandler<sup>1</sup>  | Daniel Stahl<sup>5</sup> |  
Steve Lukito<sup>1</sup> | Georgia Pavlopoulou<sup>4,6</sup> | Emily Simonoff<sup>1,7</sup> | on behalf of  
the RE-STAR team<sup>1</sup>

*But..What helps to manage emotional burden?*

www.nature.com/scientificreports

**scientific** reports

 Check for updates

OPEN

## Situating emotion regulation in autism and ADHD through neurodivergent adolescents' perspectives

Georgia Pavlopoulou<sup>1,2</sup>, Susie Chandler<sup>1</sup>, Steve Lukito<sup>1</sup>, Myrofora Kakoulidou<sup>1,3</sup>, Maciej Matejko<sup>1</sup>, Isabel Jackson<sup>3</sup>, Beta Balwani<sup>3,4</sup>, Tiegan Boyens<sup>3</sup>, Dorian Poulton<sup>3</sup>, Luke Harvey-Nguyen<sup>1</sup>, Zoë Glen<sup>1</sup>, Archie Wilson<sup>3</sup>, Elisa Ly<sup>3</sup>, Elizabeth Macauley<sup>3</sup>, Jane Hurry<sup>5</sup>, Sylvan Baker<sup>1</sup>, Edmund J. S. Sonuga-Barke<sup>1</sup> & The RE-STAR team\*



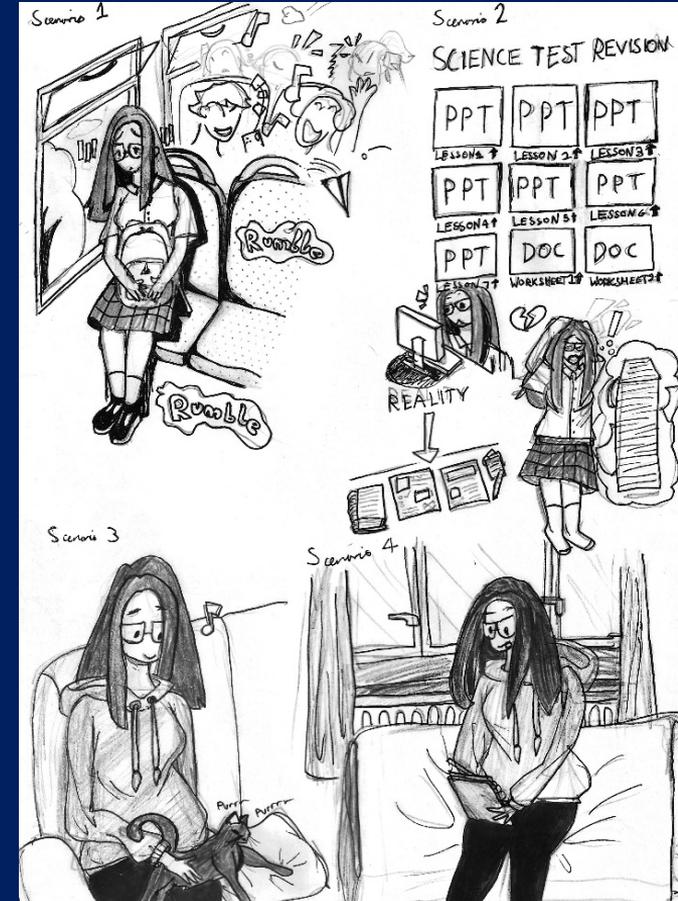
## Theme 3: Leveraging own strengths - drawing strength from “within”

Experience a sense of achievement

Self-reflection

Building a positive self-image

Learning from previous experiences



 = Autism specific

 = ADHD specific

 = ADHD + Autism

# Connection and acceptance regulate emotion more effectively than rules

## Prevention: *What helps stop situations from becoming upsetting?*

Consistent, predictable supports and routines

Acceptance & ND-affirming relationships

Kind, understanding interactions rather than rigid rule enforcement

Flexible class structures, sensory-friendly spaces, choice in seating/activities

*“The student body being bigger and relating to me a lot more is really, really helpful and inspiring... We share a lot more in common... and just generally from my experience with them, they’re all very nice people... They’re what I need in this stage of life.” (female, 15, autism)  
In Pavlopoulou et al. 2025*



# Emotional safety is environmental, not internal

## During Upset: *Managing emotional responses when distress occurs*

Emotional validation & non-judgmental check-ins from trusted adults/peers

Reassurance, calm guidance (not correction)

Support for self-directed regulation and autonomy over strategy choice

Opportunities for breaks or co-regulation supports

*“They could know the fact that I do have ADHD... And then friends, including teachers... can start to give me more chances and opportunities to fix that thing, instead of telling me off straight away.”*

*(male, 13, dual diagnosis)  
In Pavlopoulou et al. 2025*



# Agency, autonomy, & strengths are protective

## Leveraging Strengths: *Using personal assets to support wellbeing*

Access to personally meaningful activities (special interests, creative outlets)

Opportunities to integrate strengths into learning or coping (e.g., project choice, interest-based tasks)

ADHD: personalised assistive tech to support learning & social participation

Teaching self-care routines and sensory strategies as part of wellbeing curricula

*“..when I’m at school, I calm down by...maybe I play a quick game on my laptop. We have our own laptops, so I’ll just play a quick game on my laptop and then get on with the work. Just quickly do something that’s different and then get on with the work.”*  
*(female, 15, ADHD)*  
*In Pavlopoulou et al. 2025*



# The ABCs of experience sensitive practice

**Agency:** Feeling heard, respected, and involved.

Agency means students have a real say in what happens to and around them.

**Belonging:** Feeling accepted, valued, and emotionally safe.

Belonging goes beyond inclusion or “fitting in”.

**Collaboration:** Working together to make school work better.

Collaboration is where agency and belonging come together.



# Place Positive

*Lifting emotional burden in schools – unlocking potential for all*

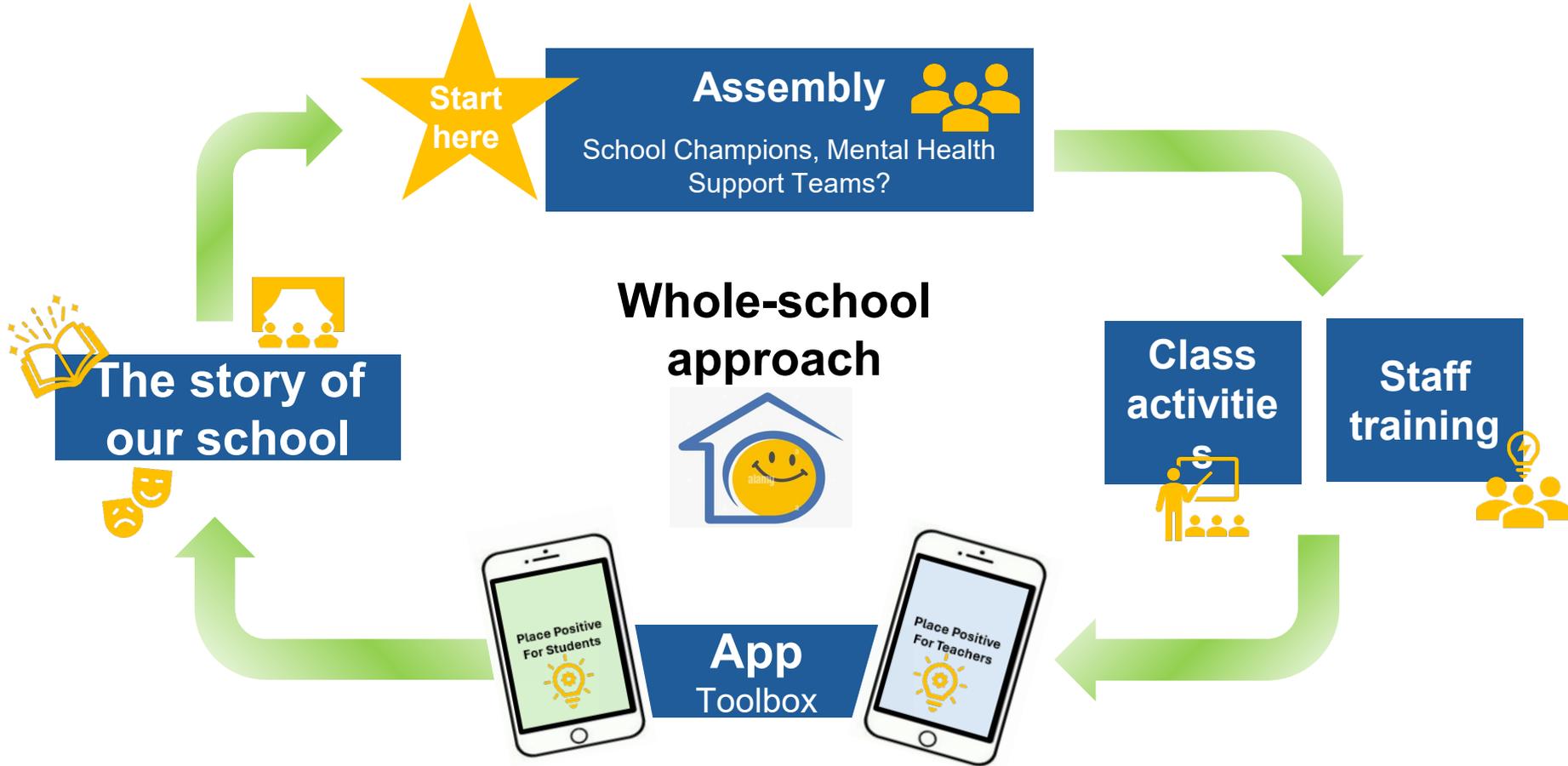


RESTAR team is developing a new whole school  
intervention!

# Place Positive Principles

- ✓ **Prevention focused** – promoting wellbeing, preventing reduce depression risk.
- ✓ **Universal** - limit stigma for & acceptance of, neurodivergence to benefit all.
- ✓ **Neurodivergence-informed** – especially relevant for people with ADHD and/or autism.
- ✓ **Collaborative** - school staff & students coproduce and co-evaluate change.
- ✓ **Evidence-based & experience-driven** - research informed & neurodivergent insights.
- ✓ **Practical** – solution focused.
- ✓ **Low cost & scalable** – digital implementation.
- ✓ **Multilayered** - transform culture then build skills/change environments.

# Embedding Place Positive in Schools



# In-school resources for teachers ... class activities

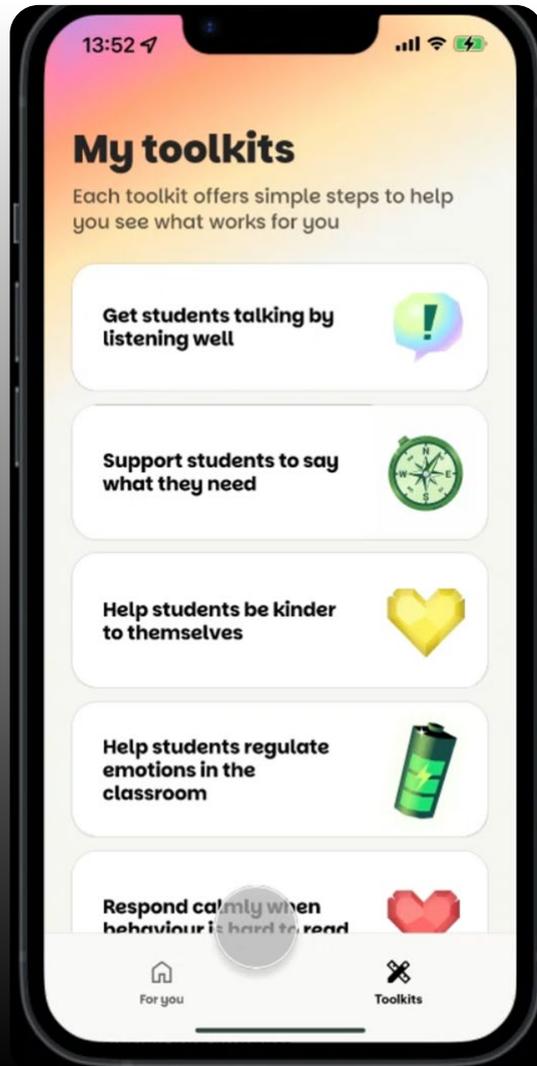
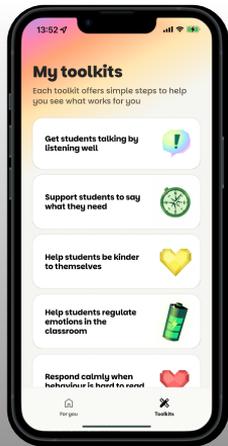
The screenshot shows the 'Place Positive' teacher's interface. At the top, it says 'Place Positive' and 'Help everyday at school to feel better'. There is a 'Class A102' button and a 'Your notes for Class A102' button. A 'Term 1: School and our emotions' section is visible. The main content area is titled 'Activity 1: How We Feel at School' with the objective 'Strengthen students' connection with their own emotions (self-awareness)'. Below this is an 'Activity Plan' section with instructions: 'Play Video (Scenario) - Begin by playing the video if this scenario with the class. It depicts a young person dealing with multiple upsetting events at school. Say what happened. Help students sort themselves into pairs (or small groups if needed). First, have students share what they say happen in the video with their partner. Encourage them to describe just "what the eye sees" without interpretation. (2min) Discuss feelings. Next, have students discuss: (5min) How does the main character feel? Why does he feel this way? Why do things like this upset people? Finally, ask students discuss: (5min) Have you ever been upset by similar things in school? If so, why did these things upset you? If not, what parts of school do you find challenging? Take some time at the end to have a couple of the pairs share back with the class. Ask students if they discussed similar or different ideas than their peers.'

Teacher's screen

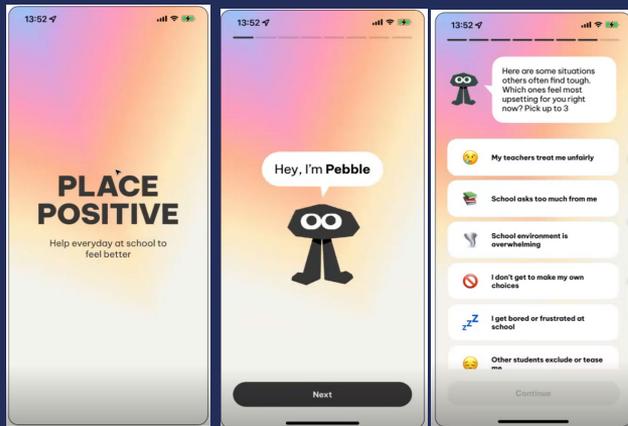


The screenshot shows the 'Place Positive' class whiteboard. It features a cartoon character with large eyes and thumbs up. A speech bubble says: 'Nice work today! You were learning how to notice, listen, and understand.' Below the character, the text reads: 'Everyone sees and feels things differently. Talking about it helps. Next time something feels tricky, for you or someone else, maybe you'll notice it a little sooner. That's a good step.' There is a 'Finish' button in the bottom right corner.

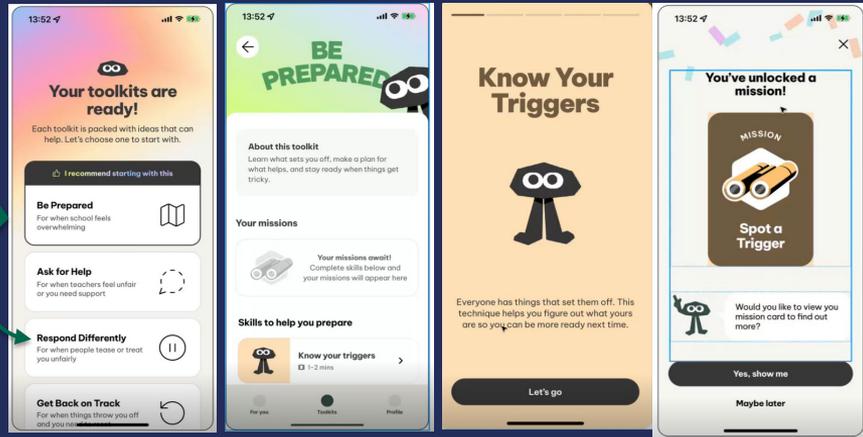
Class Whiteboard



# Organised around six gateways linking specific challenges to toolkits & missions.



Mini MESI



13:52



Good evening, Jack



Here are some things that you can focus on today

Power up of the day

“

**You get to choose what keeps your peace, that's your power**

A gentle reminder to protect your calm today



For you



Toolkits

13:52



## My toolkits

Each toolkit offers small steps you can try when something feels difficult, helping you find what works best for you.



Start with this one

### Be Prepared

For when school wears you down and you want to power back up



### Ask for Help

For when you need to be understood and want better ways to get support



### Respond Differently

For when people or situations push your buttons and you want to stay in control



For you



Toolkits

13:52



SKILL 1

## Know your triggers

**Everyone has things that set them off.** This technique helps you figure out what yours are so you can be more ready next time.

Get started

13:52



MISSION

**Spot a Trigger****You've unlocked a new mission!**

You've earned the right skills to unlock this mission. It's been set for you to do in while you're at school. Try to do when you can sometime.

Let's take a look

13:52



# My toolkits

Each toolkit offers small steps you can try when something feels difficult, helping you find what works best for you.

Start with this one

## Be Prepared

For when school wears you down and you want to power back up



## Ask for Help

For when you need to be understood and want better ways to get support



## Respond Differently

For when people or situations push your buttons and you want to stay in control



For you



Toolkits

13:52



TOOLKIT

# Be Prepared



SKILLS

MISSIONS

## Get skills to get ready like a pro

School can throw curveballs, but we can get ahead of them! Spot what upsets you and handle it like a pro.



SKILL 1

Know your triggers



SKILL 2

Be ready for your triggers



13:52



TOOLKIT

# Respond Differently



SKILLS

MISSIONS

## Get skills to get ready like a pro

School can throw curveballs, but we can get ahead of them! Spot what upsets you and handle it like a pro.



SKILL 1

Find a way to communicate



SKILL 1

Share what upsets you calmly



13:52



TOOLKIT

# Ask for Help



SKILLS

MISSIONS

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SKILL 1

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SKILL 1

Share what upsets you calmly



# RE-STARs



Edmund  
Sonuga-  
Barke



Sylvan  
Baker



Georgia  
Pavlopoulou



Daniel  
Stahl



Angus  
Roberts



Johnny  
Downs



Emily  
Simonoff



Andrea  
Danese



Jane  
Hurry



Graham  
Moore



Dennis  
Ougrin



Steve  
Lukito



Eloise  
Funnell



Kirsty  
Griffiths



Umay  
Prasad



Lauren  
Low



Myrafora  
Kakoulidou



Amy  
Edwards



Jessica  
Lennon



Susie  
Chandler



Youth  
Researcher  
Panel



Funded by  
MRC, ESRC  
and AHRC

KING'S  
College  
LONDON

TOAD.

For further info:

 [re-starinfo@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:re-starinfo@kcl.ac.uk)

 [www.kcl.ac.uk/research/re-star](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/re-star)

# Key take-home messages

- **Crucial role of environmental factors** – implications for design, effectiveness and sustainability of mental health interventions
- **Prioritise positive relationships** with understanding teachers and peers to foster **belonging**
- Design neuro-inclusive environments that promote **agency and emotional safety**
- **Work closely with young people** to help them manage everyday emotions



# Thank you!

Have more Qs/want to stay in touch?

Email: [georgia.pavlopoulou@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:georgia.pavlopoulou@ucl.ac.uk)

Group for Research in Relationships And NeuroDiversity-  
**GRRAND**

BLUE SKY @ggrand-team.bsky.social

INSTAGRAM grand\_neurodiversity



Group for Research in Relationships And NeuroDiversity



**Anna Freud**  
building the mental  
wellbeing of the  
next generation