A fact sheet about

Competing access needs at home

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Competing access needs at home

When your needs and your child's pull against each other, and one small step.



Key points

- When you and your child are both neurodivergent, the things you each need to stay steady can pull against each other. This is called competing access needs (definition below).
- It might be your need for quiet next to their need to make sound, or your need for space next to their need to be close. Neither need is wrong.
- The strain comes from two sets of real needs and too little support. It does not come from you or from your child.
- One step to try: pick the need of yours that gives way most often, and give it one small accommodation you can set up on your own.

What competing access needs are

It is the end of the day, and you need quiet to settle. The person you care for needs to talk, sing or move about to settle too. Or they want to be close, and touch is the one thing you have run out of. Your child might be four, fourteen or forty.

Most advice for parents is about the child. This page is about you: what you need to stay steady, and how to keep some of it on an ordinary day.

An access need is something you need so you can take part, feel safe or stay steady. Quiet, low light, movement, time alone, being close, a set routine and knowing what comes next can all be access needs.

Competing access needs means two people's needs pull against each other, so meeting one makes the other harder. Some people call them conflicting access needs. It is not about whose need matters more.

In a home with more than one neurodivergent person, this can happen often. Autistic mothers in one study (nine mothers) described weighing their own needs against their child's. One example was a child who wanted lots of close contact and a parent who needed the opposite.

The clash can go either way. Autistic adults describe some input as too much, some as too little, and some they seek out and enjoy. ADHD adults also report being more or less sensitive than most people, often to sound. So you may be the one who wants music on, and your child may be the one who needs quiet.

When your needs keep coming last, and what that can cost

Many parents put their own needs last. In another study (seven mothers), autistic mothers said time alone to recharge was essential. But it was often hard to get, and other people did not always respect it. Some said the ways they used to settle, like being on their own, were not open to them once they became parents. Autistic adults describe burnout building when life asks more of them than they have, for a long time, without enough support. You can read more about autistic burnout here. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

How much you can bear can also change from day to day. Neurodivergent adults have said a sound may be fine on a rested, calm day and too much on a stressed or tired one. They also said input they could not get away from was harder to bear. So a need that gives way every day can add up.

Your own steadiness is not time taken away from caring. Co-regulation, which means settling through someone else's calm, goes both ways, and it is hard to lend calm you do not have. You can read more about co-regulation between adults here.

More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other marginalised groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: make regular room for one of your needs, so it does not always come last

Choose the one need of yours that you most often go without. Then give it one small accommodation that you can set up on your own, with no one to hand over to. Some ideas to choose from:

- soften the sound: earplugs or headphones that turn noise down but still let you hear what is going on
- change the light: a lamp instead of the main light, or sunglasses inside on a bright day
- a few minutes alone close by: the bathroom, the back step or the car, or another room with the door open
- a few minutes on something you love, because for many people an interest is how rest works
- a sign or a card you can show, so you can let others know you need a few minutes without speaking

Tie it to something that already happens each day, like the kettle boiling or the first hour after everyone gets home. You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for that time. You can also keep a note there of the fix you chose, by talking or typing. Then you do not have to decide again on a tired day.

If you have a support worker, or someone who helps you at home, they can help you set it up. On some days your child's need will come first, and that is okay. The aim is that your need has a place on most days, not that it always wins.

This step comes from what neurodivergent parents and adults say has helped them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. And lived experience is valid too.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Autistic mothers in one study said asking for help was hard, but it helped when they did. Many found that talking with other autistic mothers helped, because they did not feel judged. If you are starting to see yourself in your child, you can read more about what to do with that here.

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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