Supporting Neurodiversity and Wellbeing in Schools: A Practical Briefing for SENCOs and Inclusion Leads

(Updated November 2025)

1. Why Neurodiversity Matters in Education

Neurodiversity describes the natural variation in how brains think, learn, and process information. It includes ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and Tourette's. These are differences, not deficits.

Around 1 in 5 pupils are neurodivergent (DfE SEND 2023). ND pupils are six times more likely to be excluded, with many undiagnosed, especially girls and minority students. Inclusive practice benefits attendance, wellbeing, and achievement.

Prof Jason Arday (NeuroBloom 2025) emphasised the need to view neurodiversity as part of the human spectrum, not as a condition to be 'fixed'.

2. Why Exclusions Peak in Year 7: The Transition Challenge

Pupils move from small, nurturing primary classrooms to larger, louder environments with multiple teachers and higher cognitive load. Executive function demands—organisation, working memory, emotional regulation—rise sharply. ND pupils lose consistency and trusted adults.

Exclusion rates triple between Years 5–7 (DfE, 2023). 41% of young people in custody were previously excluded (Lammy Review, 2017), demonstrating the school-to-prison pipeline.

Schools can:
- Use transition passports with student profiles.
- Provide mentors and familiar staff contacts.
- Schedule reduced-timetable inductions for ND pupils.
- Replace punitive sanctions with restorative practices.

|AUTHOR: **Sarah Gardner**

3. ADHD and Focus: Understanding Attention Regulation

ADHD involves difficulty directing and sustaining attention, not a lack of it. Pupils may hyperfocus on interesting topics but struggle with mundane tasks.

Common classroom adaptations:
• 45-minute lessons followed by 5-minute regulation breaks.
• Chunk tasks into smaller steps with visuals.
• Provide movement seating, wobble cushions, or standing desks.
• Give positive feedback and structure.
• Use timers, checklists, and visual routines.
• Provide quiet regulation zones.

ND Bright Brains (2025) emphasises that consistent routines and visual supports reduce anxiety and improve performance.

4. Whole-School Neurodiversity Framework

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Present information in multiple ways and offer flexible ways for pupils to show learning.

Behaviour and Belonging:
• Implement restorative practices.
• Teach self-regulation and emotional literacy.
• Create low-arousal spaces and calm corners.

Staff Development:
• Provide ND, trauma, and sensory training.
• SENCO drop-ins for staff support.

Curriculum Adjustments:
• Alternate seated tasks with movement activities.
• Integrate outdoor and sensory learning.
• Use practical subjects (gardening, art) for emotional regulation.

5. Movement, Bounce, and Regulation

Rebound Therapy UK and Flexi-Bounce Therapy research shows that movement boosts focus and self-regulation. Schools can:
• Create bounce corners or mini-trampolines.
• Schedule ‘move-to-focus’ breaks (5 minutes every 30–45 minutes).
• Encourage outdoor movement corridors.

Evidence: Trivedi et al. (2023), Kuppusamy (2020).

Resources: Rebound Therapy UK, Flexi-Bounce Therapy.

6. Food, Focus, and Grow-Your-Own Initiatives

Nutrition directly affects brain health. Omega-3s, iron, zinc, magnesium, and B vitamins improve attention; ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are linked with impulsivity.

Practical actions:
• Build school gardens linked to science and PSHE.
• Grow herbs, fruit, and vegetables for lunch clubs.
• Use gardens as calm sensory spaces.
• Launch healthy breakfast clubs ('Fuel for Focus').
• Reduce UPFs and increase wholefoods – Work with catering suppliers / kitchen staff to develop healthy balanced menus that reduce process foods and increase omega 3.

Resources: RHS School Gardening, Food for Life, Nutritious Minds Trust (Dr Rachel Gow).

7. Involving Students, Families, and Community

• Establish a Neurodiversity Student Council.
• Involve families in food-growing and recipe events.
• Create awareness displays and assemblies.
• Partner with community gardens and chefs.
• Celebrate Neurodiversity Week (March) and ADHD Awareness Month (October).

8. Measuring Impact and Sustaining Change

• Track exclusions, attendance, wellbeing, and engagement.
• Use feedback from pupils and parents.
• Benchmark with ADHD Foundation's Umbrella Project.
• Embed inclusion in the School Improvement Plan.

9. Key NeuroBloom 2025 Presenters and Recommendations

Prof Jason Arday – Inclusion Leadership.
Dr Rachel V. Gow – Nutrition & Brain Health (grow-your-own, breakfast clubs).
Prof Mitul Mehta – Executive Function & Movement.
Susana Gonzalez (ND Bright Brains) – Classroom chunking, visuals, EF teaching.
Lucy Vincent (Food Behind Bars) – Student-led food systems.
Rebound Therapy Team – Regulation through movement.
Adele Wimsett (Harmonise You) – Hormonal cycles and ND girls' support.

10. Key Takeaways

• 45-minute lesson rhythm + 5-minute movement breaks.
• Movement and food interventions improve focus.
• Inclusion prevents exclusion.
• Student voice is vital.
• Healthy brains grow in healthy environments.

11. Further Reading & Useful Links

ND Bright Brains – https://www.ndbrightbrains.com
ADHD Foundation – https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk
RHS School Gardening – https://schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk
Food for Life – https://www.foodforlife.org.uk
Nutritious Minds Trust – https://www.nutritiousminds.org
Rebound Therapy UK – https://www.reboundtherapy.org
Flexi-Bounce Therapy – https://www.flexi-bouncetherapy.org
Lammy Review (2017) – https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lammy-review-final-report
Timpson Review (2019) – https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5cd7c1a2ed915d07c38b91bd/Timpson_review_of_school_exclusion.pdf