

A GUIDE TO NAVIGATING SCHOOL PICK-UP FOR ADHD MUMS

WRITTEN BY JANE

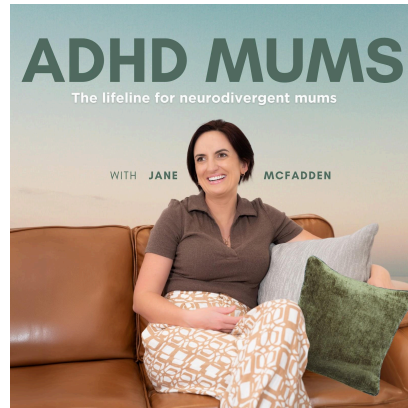
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ADHD Mums



Introducing Jane McFadden - Founder of ADHD Mums



Certified Autism Spectrum Clinical Specialist Neuroscientist and Autism/ADHD Assessor and Specialist

Jane McFadden is a former psychologist turned Neuroscientist, Author, and Neurodiversity Specialist. After completing her studies in psychology, Jane initially worked as a psychologist but later decided to change her path. In 2019, she wrote the first-ever online psychology program for veterans with PTSD, which became the foundation of a business that has grown into the largest psychology company in Australia by 2024.

Jane has both lived experience and clinical expertise, which uniquely positions her as an expert in the field of neurodiversity. After years of battling burnout, stress, and anxiety, she received a life-altering ADHD diagnosis in 2022, which answered many of her questions and ignited her passion to help other women and girls avoid being misdiagnosed and wrongly medicated. While ADHD medication was life-changing, it also unveiled Autistic traits, leading to her being diagnosed as Autistic in 2024.

Currently pursuing a Master's in Child and Adolescent Psychology to further understand neurodiversity, Jane began the ADHD Mums podcast in 2023, which hit #2 in Australia within its first year. The podcast has been a great success, earning Jane multiple awards and a nomination as a Rising Star finalist at the Australian Podcast Awards. She is also the author of multiple books aimed at supporting neurodivergent women and girls.

Jane's unique combination of personal experience and clinical knowledge allows her to speak with deep insight on the challenges and needs of neurodivergent individuals. Now, she works as a speaker, author, and neurodiversity advocate, sharing her journey and expertise to raise awareness and support others navigating similar experiences. She lives on the Sunshine Coast with her husband and three children.



Dedicated to:

To all the neurodivergent mums who have been called snobby, rude, or a bit of a bitch - despite your best intentions - and sat there afterward replaying the conversation 87 times wondering what on earth just happened. This is for the moments you've felt misunderstood, out of sync, or left out.

You're just navigating a world that wasn't built with you in mind, and it's exhausting.

Here's to you, for showing up, trying again, and refusing to let a few awkward moments define your worth. You're doing an amazing job, even if it doesn't always feel that way.

Introduction

If the thought of navigating school pick-up makes you want to fake a dentist appointment, hide behind your sunglasses, or suddenly 'remember' that you forgot to defrost chicken for dinner - same. I've been there. For a long time, my best strategy for school pick-up was just not showing up. My husband became *Mr. Popular Dad* at our kid's school - I would pack the bags, make the lunches and do the hard yards, and he would arrive shaking hands and laughing with everyone, while I was the mysterious figure occasionally spotted in a car, half-ducked behind the steering wheel, praying no one would see me.

But eventually, I realised that approach wasn't exactly sustainable. Kids notice when you're avoiding their friends' parents - and, spoiler alert, they care. My daughter started pointing out how 'everyone else's mum chats at pick-up' while I was halfway to the car, pretending I hadn't heard. Turns out, me lurking in the shadows wasn't helping her build the social confidence I desperately wanted for her.

So, I decided to try. And by 'try,' I mean embarrassing myself repeatedly while figuring out the unspoken rules of playground socialising. I interrupted closed conversations, waved at the wrong mums, and once said, 'Oh, hi! You must be Emma's mum!' to someone who had literally never met me and whose kid was *not named Emma*. Turns out, being neurodivergent in a neurotypical playground is kind of like trying to play charades when everyone else has the rules memorised, and you didn't even know you were supposed to be guessing.

The worst was when I over-committed. One particular day, I was feeling guilty about being so elusive that I drank too much coffee, and I enthusiastically volunteered to co-run the school disco. By the time the day arrived, I was googling 'how to fake your own death' just to get out of it.

I ended up standing in the corner of the gym with glow sticks, trying to look busy while avoiding eye contact with every mum who clearly *lives* for these events.

But here's what I've learned: it doesn't have to be this hard. It's not about changing who you are or becoming the mum who thrives on P&C meetings and group texts about uniform colours. It's about finding strategies that work for *you*. It's about building connections that feel genuine (or at least tolerable) without sacrificing your sanity. And, honestly, it's about faking it just enough to make things easier for your kids - and maybe even for yourself.

This guide is for all the neurodivergent mums who've walked out of the playground wondering why socialising feels like an Olympic sport you forgot to train for. It's full of tips,

stories, and scripts to help you survive - or maybe even enjoy - school pick-up. No promises. But at least you'll know you're not the only one who once accidentally called another mum 'Olivia' for an entire year when her name was actually Sarah.

So grab a coffee (or something stronger), settle in, and let's navigate this chaotic, wonderful, often ridiculous world of school pick-up together. It's messy, it's awkward, and you'll probably forget someone's name - but you've got this. Probably... either that or another neurodivergent mum will spot you and grab you to let you know.... Your skirt is caught in your undies. (BTW: my skirt was caught in my undies on the first day of my daughter's Prep) and the Mum who came over to pull my skirt out gently and whispered in my ear became one of my best friends.

Why do we even need a guide when other women seem to do it so easily?

For many neurodivergent mums, social settings like playgrounds or school pick-ups can feel like an obstacle course filled with unwritten rules and unspoken expectations. These environments - casual and high-pressure at the same time - are often a source of dread. While other women may appear to enjoy these moments of connection, laughing easily and forming friendships, neurodivergent mums are left wondering why these situations feel so overwhelming, draining, or even impossible.

A Personal Struggle with School Pick-Up

I remember when my eldest started prep. The school pick-up and drop-off routine was one of the most jolting experiences of my life. It brought my differences into sharp focus and contributed to my burnout. I would find myself asking, *Why is this so hard for me? Why do I hate this? Why do I not know when library is or what the seesaw password is?* The weight of it was crushing - I felt like something was fundamentally wrong with me.

Avoidance as a Short-Term Fix

I would beg my husband to go instead of me, or I'd pick up my daughter early, upsetting her, just to avoid the gauntlet of social interaction. The small talk, the forced interactions, the constant feeling of being 'on' - it all left me completely drained. But avoiding it wasn't the answer either. It was a requirement for the parents of Prep children to walk into the Prep playground twice a day, and I couldn't hide from it forever.

How Neurodivergent Traits Impact Social Dynamics

For neurodivergent mums, these challenges are magnified by traits like impulsivity, forgetfulness, zoning out, or social anxiety. These traits can unintentionally come across as aloof, dismissive, or even snobby - creating a false 'bitchy' or 'standoffish' vibe. And when you're already grappling with feelings of being different or not enough, these misunderstandings can cut deeply. You may be trying *just so hard*, and still, people can see you are 'not the same' and you feel excluded.

The Purpose of This Guide

This guide isn't about masking who you are. It's not about pretending to be someone else to fit in or abandoning your authenticity to meet societal expectations. Instead, it's about offering tools - real, actionable strategies - to help you navigate these situations with confidence and intention while staying true to yourself.

You're not alone in feeling this way. You're not broken or wrong. You're navigating a world that wasn't built for brains like ours, and that's no small task. With the right tools and a little self-compassion, you can approach these moments with clarity and connection - on your terms.

Quick Glossary

This guide is designed for ADHD mums, but many of the struggles we face aren't exclusive to ADHD. That's why I use the term 'neurodivergent' throughout - because many of us also navigate being autistic, experiencing trauma, or managing other co-occurring conditions. It's uncommon for ADHD women to have only ADHD without any other co-occurring condition.

Using neurodivergent as an umbrella term keeps this guide practical and inclusive without turning it into a diagnostic tool. If you're looking for something specifically tailored to diagnosis, you can check out my [ADHD Pre-Diagnosis Workbook](#) or [Autism Assessment Workbook](#). These resources help you understand what might be happening for you by exploring which traits are associated with being autistic and which with ADHD, offering clarity on the 'why.'

For clarity, when I refer to a 'neurotypical brain,' I mean someone who isn't navigating ADHD, autism, current trauma, bipolar disorder, or similar conditions. It's simply a way to differentiate those with different neurological experiences from the challenges faced by neurodivergent mums.

I refer to mums as female-assigned at birth, but any parent of any gender navigating playground dynamics can use this guide.

Quick Reference Roadmap

What You're Looking For	Where to Find It
Navigating playground social dynamics	☐ The Social Codes of the Playground (Section 1) ☐ Why Neurodivergent Traits Are Misinterpreted (Section 1)
Deciding when and how to engage in social interactions	☐ When to Engage in Small Talk and When Not To (Section 2) ☐ Preparing Exit Lines for Social Chats (Section 4)
Managing sensory overload in busy environments	☐ Managing Overstimulation with Subtle Sensory Hacks (Section 12) ☐ Bridging Fluctuating Energy Levels (Section 2)
Building better relationships with other parents	☐ Key Types of Playground Mums (Section 6) ☐ Structured Social Interaction (Section 5)
Boosting confidence and finding your place	☐ How to Break In and Stop Feeling Like the Outsider (Section 14) ☐ Navigating Small Talk with Advanced Precision (Section 9)
Protecting your energy with effective boundaries	☐ Conflict-Free Boundaries: Handling Sensitive Topics (Section 10) ☐ Recognising Red Flags (Section 3)
Handling rejection sensitivity	☐ Managing Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD) (Section 13)
Online group dynamics	☐ Navigating Online Playground Dynamics (Section 11)
Rebuilding social connections	☐ I've Made Too Many Mistakes: How to Start Rebuilding Connections (Section 15)
Approaching or recognising other neurodivergent mums	☐ How to Spot a Neurodivergent Mum (Section 8) ☐ The Double Empathy Problem (Section 15)
Scripts and strategies for tricky social situations	☐ Real-Life Scenarios and What to Do When... (Section 15)
Understanding how neurotypical mums communicate	☐ Why Neurotypical People Value Small Talk (Section 16) ☐ Recognising Unwritten Rules (Section 18)
Teaching your child social skills and playground confidence	☐ Teaching Playground Skills to Children, Tweens, or Teens (Section 15)

Section 1: The Social Codes of the Playground

It often feels like there's an unspoken rulebook for playground dynamics that neurotypical mums seem to have received - but the rest of us didn't. As neurodivergent mums, we can find ourselves unintentionally breaking these 'rules' simply because we don't know they exist. Expectations like engaging in small talk, participating in group chats, or politely observing other people's children come naturally to neurotypical people. However, for us, they can feel unclear or even painful for us to say or do when our currency is authentic connection, and these behaviours don't feel authentic.

Why Neurodivergent Traits Are Misinterpreted

Neurodivergent traits often don't align with neurotypical expectations for social behaviour, leading to frequent misunderstandings. For ADHD mums, traits like interrupting, forgetting details, or zoning out can come across as rude or disinterested. For autistic mums, traits like sharing detailed information ('info-dumping') or intense focus on niche topics can be misread as self-centred or dismissive of others' feelings. These are not character flaws - they're natural ways neurodivergent people try to connect with others - but neurotypical people often just don't understand this.

Here's how some of these traits are misinterpreted:

- **Interrupting:** ADHD brains often process thoughts so quickly that the urge to share becomes overwhelming. Neurotypical people might see this as rude or attention-seeking rather than as enthusiasm or a genuine desire to connect.
- **Zoning Out or Forgetting Details:** Neurodivergent mums might zone out during conversations, especially if the topic isn't engaging or if they're overwhelmed by sensory input. Neurotypical people may interpret this as a lack of interest or care.
- **Info-Dumping:** Autistic mums often share detailed stories or facts about topics they love. While this is a way of connecting, neurotypical people may feel that the conversation isn't reciprocal because the focus stays on one person's interests.
- **Hyperfocus:** Jumping deep into one topic - whether it's child development, a shared hobby, or school policies - can be misread as being overly intense.
- **Appearing Aloof or Snobby:** Social anxiety or sensory overload can make neurodivergent women seem distant or unapproachable, even when they're simply trying to manage internal chaos or just not feeling up to engaging that day.

Let's Reframe 'Faking It'

When you've been diagnosed and are beginning to rediscover your authentic self, the idea of masking in a playground setting just to fit in can feel exhausting and disheartening. You might feel frustrated, drained, or simply over the whole process - you've been doing this your whole life, haven't you? Let me be clear - you don't have to do it.

Sitting in your car and opting out is absolutely a valid choice - I've spent months, even years, doing just that. However, having the skills to opt in when you choose to can be empowering. Without these skills, you may unintentionally limit yourself. By practising these strategies at times that feel right for you, you're not excluded because others are shutting you out; instead, you're taking ownership of whether or not you want to participate. It's about creating options for yourself, on your terms.

This guide is for women who *want* to connect, who *want* to be part of the social dynamic, and who *want* to build relationships with the mums of their children's friends but struggle with the skills to do so. It's important to normalise that everyone adapts their behaviour in social settings to some extent, and what some call 'faking it' can actually be seen as building a toolkit for smoother, more purposeful interactions.

Wait - doesn't masking go against the idea of unmasking and embracing who we are? Isn't it supposed to be harmful?

While masking can be draining and harmful if it's a constant, unchosen state, there are times when a small degree of masking can feel like a purposeful strategy to navigate social situations. The key difference lies in choice and awareness. When you're masking because you've decided it serves a specific goal - like building a social circle or creating a sense of connection - it's a manageable, intentional tool. This is very different from feeling forced to mask in environments where you have no control, like a workplace where you feel you need to suppress your true self for 50 hours a week.

Personally, I aim to stay authentic while bringing a slightly more upbeat tone to social situations. I make an effort to ask general questions, even when the topic doesn't resonate deeply with me - like how someone's four-year-old is settling into Prep. Honestly, I don't find personal meaning in the progress of a child I barely know, but I reframe the interaction. It's not about being captivated by the answer; it's about using the conversation to get a sense of the parent's values and communication style. I find this important, especially if their older child might come to my house for a playdate or if my child might spend time at theirs. For me, this kind of conversation isn't just small talk - it's purposeful, and that makes it feel more worthwhile. Try your best to search for meaning and reframe the small talk interaction to something purposeful.

Section 2: When to Engage in Small Talk and When Not To

Engaging in small talk can feel particularly challenging for neurodivergent mums, as these interactions might feel draining or inauthentic. The key is to approach small talk strategically, making deliberate choices about when to engage and when to conserve your energy.

When to Engage in Small Talk

When	Description	Example
When it Builds Useful Connections	If the conversation has a clear purpose - like getting to know the parents of your child's close friends - it can be worth the effort. These relationships can help facilitate playdates, ease logistical planning, or create a sense of community around your child.	You notice a parent regularly picking up a child who your child mentions playing with during recess. A friendly introduction and brief exchange can lay the groundwork for a potential playdate.
When You're in the Right Headspace	If you're feeling calm and open to light conversation, engaging can be an enjoyable way to strengthen bonds or even learn something new. Small talk in these moments doesn't have to be a chore - it can simply be about being present. (Easier said than done for some of us.)	Chatting about an upcoming school event or discussing shared parenting experiences can feel like low-stakes, mutual exchanges.
When It's Short and Manageable	Sometimes, small talk is a way to fulfil a social expectation without overcommitting. A simple comment about the weather or a compliment on someone's shoes (it's not about making up fake compliments but finding things you genuinely do like) can be a quick, positive interaction that doesn't require prolonged engagement.	'Wow, this weather turned around fast! Perfect for the kids to play outside today.'
To Avoid Misunderstandings or Tension	Engaging minimally with parents you see regularly - like those in your child's class - can smooth interactions over time. A simple acknowledgment here and there can prevent awkwardness or the perception of aloofness.	'Hi there, how's everything going with your little one?' even if you don't plan to continue the conversation.**

****This may seem very weird to neurodivergent people - to ask a question with no plans to continue the conversation onto a deeper topic - but we'll explore neurotypical communication style further in this guide.**

When to Avoid Small Talk

Sometimes, the best way to protect your energy and well-being is to avoid small talk altogether. Whether you're feeling mentally depleted, managing fluctuating energy levels, or trying to avoid unwanted commitments, it's okay to prioritise yourself. This section outlines strategies for these moments while offering ways to maintain relationships without overwhelming yourself.

1. *When You're Mentally Depleted*

If your social battery is running on empty, forcing small talk will only leave you more drained. Recognise that your well-being comes first, and it's okay to prioritise yourself.

Strategy

- Offer a polite smile and nod to acknowledge someone without opening the door to a full conversation.
- If you feel you need to explain, you can say:
 - 'Sorry, I'm really tired today - I've got a bit of a headache.'
 - 'Crazy day at work. I feel really exhausted.'

What Not to Do

- Avoid walking past someone you've already connected with without offering at least a small smile, wave, or brief greeting.
- As neurodivergent mums, it can feel awkward or even anxiety-inducing to engage in even a short interaction when you're not in the mood to talk. However, this is often where we unintentionally give off the impression of being 'bitchy,' 'snobby,' or 'aloof.'

Why Consistency Matters

Inconsistency - being warm and engaging one day but quiet or distant the next - can confuse people and make them feel rejected. Consider how you would feel if:

- You made a good connection with someone.
- Then waved at them the next day, only to have them 'ignore' you.

Even small gestures like a wave or a smile can help bridge these moments and maintain a connection.

2. Bridging Fluctuating Energy Levels

It's normal for your energy levels to vary from day to day. Some days, you may feel ready to connect and engage, while on others, even small interactions can feel overwhelming. Acknowledging these fluctuations and preparing for them can help you maintain relationships without overextending yourself.

If your goal is to build relationships, having a simple, low-effort dialogue prepared can help. For example:

- 'Sometimes I don't eat lunch when I'm working hard, so by the time I get to pick-up, I'm tired, dehydrated, and out of energy - sorry if I seem a bit all over the place.'

Whether or not you choose to share that you're neurodivergent is entirely up to you. Some days, a simple acknowledgment like this can go a long way. The one thing to avoid, though, is completely ignoring people - especially if you're trying to build a connection. Small gestures can help bridge those fluctuating energy levels without overwhelming you.

Sample dialogues:

- 'I'd love to catch up, but I'm not always the most consistent with social energy - so if I seem off some days, it's nothing personal.'
- 'I'm so glad we chatted today - I'm not always feeling up for it, but this was really nice!'

These phrases let people know that when you're quiet or distant, it's not a reflection of how you feel about them. They may even respond, 'Me too!' - opening the door to a friendship where some days you just stand next to each other without talking.

When I have a 'real friend' at pick-up, I often feel more like talking. I can speak freely without overthinking or performing. My goal is always to make a few meaningful connections so that these moments feel easier. If you can make one 'real friend,' they might introduce you to one or two others you also connect with. You might even find yourself in a neurodivergent mums group. The trick is just to get started.

3. When the Interaction Could Lead to Unwanted Commitments

Some conversations can unexpectedly turn into requests for your time, energy, or resources - like volunteering for school events or taking on hosting duties. If you're

not in a place to take on those pressures, it's helpful to navigate these interactions with intention and boundaries.

Example: If you see the P&C president approaching and you're not ready to be roped into a discussion about the next Mother's Day Stall or event planning, a quick smile, wave, and purposeful walk in another direction can help you avoid feeling cornered.

On the other hand, if you do enjoy volunteering and feel it helps you connect socially, engaging in small talk with committee members could lead to opportunities that make socialising feel more structured and purposeful. However, be mindful - P&C committee members are often skilled at making you feel included as a way to recruit more volunteers.

If you already know you're short on time, feeling overwhelmed, or prone to overcommitting and regretting it, avoid engaging in small talk with them unless you're prepared to politely but firmly decline.

What to Say:

- 'Thanks for thinking of me, but I'm stretched a bit thin right now and wouldn't be able to give it the attention it deserves.'
- 'I'd love to help another time, but I can't commit to this right now.'

This approach allows you to set boundaries without guilt, giving you the option to say yes later when it feels manageable.

Section 3: Recognising Red Flags in High-Maintenance Relationships

Ever had an encounter that feels very, very heavy? High-maintenance relationships often feature individuals who:

- Thrive on drama.
- Overshare private details without boundaries.
- Dominate conversations with 'heavy' information, leaving little room for balance or reciprocity.

These interactions can quickly drain your energy and leave you feeling exhausted or unfulfilled.

Trauma Dumping vs. Interest Dumping: Knowing the Difference

There's a fine line between authentic connection and emotional overwhelm, and it's important to know the difference.

- **Trauma dumping** involves unloading deeply personal or distressing stories without consent, often leaving the listener overwhelmed or drained.
- **Interest dumping**, on the other hand, is a passionate (sometimes overzealous) sharing of favourite topics that may unintentionally dominate the interaction.

I've noticed that both behaviours stem from a desire for connection - one seeking validation, the other sharing joy - but they can strain relationships if boundaries aren't respected.

Falling Into the 'Helper' Role

I've fallen into the trap of becoming an ad hoc counsellor for people without realising the relationship wasn't offering anything in return. Here's what happened:

- I felt comfortable in the 'helping role.'
- After a while, I became drained from constantly providing emotional support.
- I didn't know how to step away and ended up avoiding the person entirely.

How to Manage These Dynamics

If You're the Listener (Highly Empathetic): Be mindful of your emotional capacity and set limits when needed. It's okay to say: 'I'd love to listen, but I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed right now - can we talk about this later?'

If You're the Sharer: To avoid falling into these traps yourself, check if someone has the emotional space for your stories, or match their enthusiasm before diving into your interests. For example: 'Do you have the space to talk about something personal right now?' **or** 'I'd love to share this with you - are you in the mood to chat about it?'

True connection thrives in mutual respect, not in one-sided exchanges. If someone consistently offloads onto you or monopolises the conversation without consideration, it's okay to protect your peace with firm but kind boundaries.

When There's No Clear Benefit or Reason

Not every interaction needs to be a relationship-building opportunity. If the conversation doesn't serve your goals - whether personal or logistical - it's perfectly acceptable to skip it.

Example: A parent rarely sees comments on your child's backpack. You can simply nod and say, 'Thanks, they picked it out themselves!' without engaging further.

How to Step Away Gently

If you realise you've been caught up in this dynamic and are unsure how to distance yourself, you could gently suggest consulting a great psychologist. You might say:

- 'It sounds like you're dealing with a lot right now, and I think a psychologist could be really helpful. I'm not qualified to provide the support you deserve.'

If you're highly empathetic, it's easy to get caught up in someone else's world. However, if you don't have the space for it, it's crucial to set boundaries. A simple 'Great to see you!' - delivered with a smile and no pause - can help you protect your emotional reserves while maintaining kindness and clarity.

Navigating “Small” Interactions as a Neurodivergent Mum

A common challenge I notice among neurodivergent women is the struggle to say things they don't feel like saying - whether it's engaging in small talk or responding in social situations. Often, they'll stay silent to avoid interaction, especially if they don't know the other person well.

While this might seem insignificant, these minor social exchanges are more important than they appear. Neurotypical people often navigate them effortlessly and are significant for maintaining the fabric of social interactions. From another perspective, avoiding these exchanges can unintentionally send the wrong signal.

For example, as a neurodivergent person who struggles with **Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD)** (which we'll cover [later in this guide](#)), saying very little or nothing at all might unintentionally make others feel like your quietness is about them - even when it isn't.

Authenticity

I pride myself on being deeply authentic - the same person on my podcast, on social media, and in real life. For me, authenticity is non-negotiable. But when I'm rushed, tired, or simply can't be bothered, even simple acknowledgements can feel fake.

For example, if someone compliments my child's backpack and I say, 'Thanks - my son picked it out himself, it's from Big W,' it feels like mud coming out of my mouth. It's as though I'm lying, and I struggle to control my face and tone because my entire being does not want to answer, as it's against my values, when it feels inauthentic.

In those moments, I know I probably should have asked my husband to pick up the kids or stood back and waved to them instead of engaging.

I want to acknowledge that it's hard - and that's okay. You get to decide how much effort you put into these moments. It's not about forcing yourself to engage but recognising the value of these interactions so you choose where and how to engage authentically in ways that feel manageable.

When It's Not Sustainable

Socialising regularly with the same parents can create an unspoken expectation for ongoing engagement. If you know you can't maintain consistent interaction with a specific parent, it may be better to spread out and talk to a few different parents so it's not an expectation.

Strategy: Start Small and Stay Balanced

- Begin with **surface-level acknowledgments** rather than going into deeper topics or shared activities if you're unsure if you want to build a friendship.
- Be mindful of **impulsivity** - this can be a big trap for me. For example:
 - If I'm feeling good one day, I may overshare, invite a child over for a playdate on the weekend or volunteer at a school disco.
 - The next day, I can't believe I've said that or done that, and I'm either in anxiety over it or trying to figure out how I can cancel.

The key to navigating the playground is consistency.

Avoid being overly sociable one day, only to withdraw completely the next because of a social hangover.

Even if you're feeling great, set a timer on your social interactions to maintain balance.

Spending an hour chatting with everyone one day and then avoiding people for the rest of the week sends mixed signals, both to those around you and to your children.

This isn't about teaching your children to mask - it's about modelling **social flexibility**. By showing consistency, you're helping your children develop the skills to navigate a variety of social environments with confidence.

Section 4: Preparing Exit Lines for Social Chats When You're Not Up for It

Sometimes, getting caught in an unplanned social chat can feel overwhelming, especially when you're running low on energy or just not in the mood for small talk. Having prepared exit lines can save you from awkwardness while keeping relationships intact. If you're a people pleaser, practising these lines in the mirror can help you deliver them confidently without guilt.

Examples of Polite Exit Lines

1. **The Appointment Excuse:** 'So nice seeing you! We actually have an appointment to get to.'

This is versatile and believable, especially if you frequently have activities or commitments.

2. **The Partner Call:** 'Oh, my partner has called me three times - I think they're locked out. I have to get going, sorry!'

This adds a touch of urgency and doesn't invite follow-up questions.

3. **The Shops Excuse:** 'I actually have to run past the shops - I've got someone coming over.'

A practical reason that's relatable and doesn't require further explanation.

Why Exit Lines Work

The reason I rely on these prepared lines is that I don't want one negative or awkward interaction to undo the social groundwork I've built on other days. If I'm dismissive or short because I'm drained, it could dampen the relationship and make future interactions harder.

Instead, I force myself to smile and say something like:

- 'Love to chat more, but I'm in a rush today.'

This conveys warmth and leaves the door open for future conversations, helping maintain the connection while protecting your energy.

A lot of neurodivergent people struggle to 'fake it' because we pride ourselves on authentic connection. So, if we aren't up for it, we can't hide it - and accepting an invitation when we're

not feeling good can feel impossible. Prepared exit lines can help bridge this gap, allowing you to stay true to yourself while navigating tricky social situations.

Impromptu Playdates and Small Talk with Other Parents

Unplanned playdates can be particularly tricky to navigate, especially when you're not emotionally prepared for the inevitable small talk. If your child tries to drag you to the playground after school, having a ready excuse can save you from feeling stuck. Here are a couple of examples I've found helpful:

- 'Oh, I'm so sorry, I've actually got to call Aunty Sarah in a bit as she had something urgent she needed me for.'
- 'We've got to head home quickly today - dinner needs to get started as I've got to marinate something.'

These lines roll off my tongue because I've practised them, and they help me set boundaries while maintaining politeness.

If I feel the interaction could use some follow-up, I might message the other parent later to reschedule or explain. For example, if I value the relationship and worry I came across as rude. Other times, if I feel I exited without offending anyone, I leave it be.

When it's someone I'm not interested in building a relationship with, I skip the follow-up entirely. Having this clear decision process helps me manage my energy and maintain the relationships that matter most to me.

Honesty Also Works

If you're comfortable being upfront, honesty can be a great approach. You could say something like:

- 'I've had a big day, and I'm not really up for an impromptu playdate, but I'd love to schedule something another time that works for both of us.'

This approach works well for mums who want to move beyond quick excuses and be more direct in the moment.

It's important to be firm and clear. Vague excuses like, 'Oh, I don't have a water bottle,' can lead to another mum jumping in with solutions, like, 'No worries, just grab one from the café!'

Setting a general boundary can also help. For example, saying something like:

- 'I don't usually do impromptu playdates.'

This not only handles the current situation but also reduces the likelihood of being asked again in the future.

Section 5: Structured Social Interaction

For autistic mums who thrive on structure and prefer clear, black-and-white 'rules,' navigating social dynamics at school pick-up can feel overwhelming. Creating a framework for categorising the parents you interact with might help provide clarity and guide your communication style. (Just make sure to keep this journal private!)

Here are some suggested categories for parents to consider:

Respected People (RP)	These are figures of authority, like the principal, your child's teacher, or the head of inclusion. Neurotypical people often communicate with these individuals in a professional and polite manner, so it's helpful to mirror that approach.
Very Important People (VIP)	This group includes the parents of your child's best friends or other mums you genuinely like and want to connect with. These are relationships worth prioritising and nurturing.
Important People (IP)	These are the parents of other kids in your child's grade or circle. While the connection might not be as strong, maintaining friendly and respectful communication here can still benefit you and your child.
People (P)	These are individuals you see at pick-up who aren't directly relevant to your child's schooling experience. They're friendly acquaintances but not necessarily people you need to engage with deeply.
People You Don't Like (X)	This category includes those you've met but don't feel inclined to build a connection with. It's okay to set boundaries and focus your energy elsewhere.

Why Categorising Helps

By organising your interactions into these categories, you create a structured approach that honours your need for clarity while reducing social overwhelm. It also ensures your limited social energy is directed toward relationships that truly matter to you and your child.

The Importance of Prioritisation

One of the most important reasons to categorise people is to preserve your energy for meaningful interactions. For example:

- If you're at the school uniform shop and spend all your energy chatting with the shop assistant (who might fall into the general 'People' category), you might too drained to follow up with your child's best friend's mum about an upcoming birthday party.
- That follow-up could have been a valuable opportunity to build a connection by asking about her daughter's interests or party plans.

Knowing your limits and prioritising your efforts helps you focus on relationships that add value to your life and your child's experience.

Neurodivergent people often have a natural tendency to treat everyone the same without adjusting their behaviour based on context or relationship. While this approach reflects fairness and equality, adapting your interactions based on the person and situation can help you focus your energy on what matters most.

For instance, you wouldn't need to invest energy in building a deeper connection with someone in the 'People' category, as it's not necessary for that relationship. Tailoring your approach ensures your energy is spent on fostering meaningful connections with those in your VIP or RP categories.

Practical Examples for Treating Groups Differently

Here are some examples of how you might treat each group of parents in different scenarios. Of course, this is an individual process - you may want to shuffle or move things around based on your own needs and preferences.

1. If you declined an ad hoc playdate/event and feel you may have been rude

- **Respected People (RP):** Maintain professionalism and avoid over-apologising. Instead, show appreciation. For example:

'I hope I didn't come across as abrupt when I declined your invitation. I really appreciate you thinking of us, and I wanted to make sure that came through. Thank you again!'

- **Very Important People (VIP):** Express warmth and reinforce your value for the relationship:

'I hope I didn't sound off when I declined your invite - I really appreciated being included. Let's catch up soon - I'd love to plan something together!'

- **Important People (IP):** Strike a balance between politeness and maintaining boundaries:

'I hope my response earlier didn't come across the wrong way - it wasn't my intention at all. I appreciate the invite and hope everyone has a great time!'

- **People (P):** Keep it brief and polite without investing too much emotional energy:

'I hope I didn't seem abrupt - I appreciate you inviting us, and I hope it's a great time!'

- **People You Don't Like (X):** No follow-up message needed.

2. You're planning a class party and need to organise contributions.

- **RP:** Ask the teacher or inclusion leader for input on how to coordinate the class event. For example:

'How do you usually coordinate contributions for class events? Are there specific ways you'd like parents to be involved?'

'I'm coordinating the class party. Are there any preferences or requirements I should keep in mind, like allergies, food restrictions or event timing?'

- **VIP:** Collaborate with these parents to brainstorm ideas or handle key tasks. For example:

'I'd love your input on decorations or party games. Would you be interested in helping organise this part?'

If they offer to help, you might delegate tasks you know they'll enjoy or excel at, like baking, organising, or setting up activities.

- **IP:** Assign simple, clear tasks that align with their availability. For example:

'Would you be able to bring some juice boxes or chips for the kids?'

Focus on smaller, low-effort contributions that don't overburden them or you.

- **P:** Keep requests minimal and focused on items that are easy to pick up or prepare. For example:

'If it's convenient, we could use some paper plates or napkins. Let me know if that works for you!'

Avoid relying on them for tasks that require significant coordination or effort.

- **X:** Minimise their involvement unless absolutely necessary. If they ask to help you or you need them to contribute, keep it simple and neutral. For example:

'We're just short on cups - if you're able to grab a pack, that would be great.'

3. You notice a parent looking upset at a school event.

- **RP:** Offer a polite check-in, like 'I hope everything is okay,' if it feels appropriate, or respect their space.
- **VIP:** Approach them warmly and ask, 'Are you okay? Would you like to chat?' Show genuine care.
- **IP:** Offer a friendly but light check-in such as: 'Everything alright? Let me know if you need anything.'
- **P:** Offer a friendly nod or smile to acknowledge them but avoid prying.
- **X:** Avoid engaging directly. If they approach you, respond briefly and excuse yourself politely.

4. *You're running late and need someone to keep an eye on your child briefly.*

- **RP:** Respectfully inform the teacher or authority figure and ask if they can temporarily supervise your child.

'I'm running a few minutes behind. Would it be okay if [child's name] stayed here with you until I get back?'

- **VIP:** Ask a close mum friend with warmth and gratitude.

'Would you mind keeping an eye on [child's name] for a few minutes?'

- **IP:** Casually ask a mum you know well enough to feel comfortable.

'Would you mind watching [child's name] for a minute? I'm running late and will be back as quickly as I can. Thank you so much!'

- **P:** Look for another mum you know better than others or consider handling the situation yourself if possible. If you ask, keep it light:

'Hi there, I'm in a bit of a pickle. Would it be okay if [child's name] stood with you for a couple of minutes while I sort something out?'

- **X:** Avoid asking these individuals for help unless there's no alternative. If absolutely necessary, keep the request neutral and brief.

'Hi, I'm in a bind - could [child's name] stay near you for a moment while I sort something out? I'd really appreciate it.'

5. *A parent approaches you about joining a committee you're unsure about*

- **RP:** Thank them for their suggestion and ask for more details before committing. Use a polite but professional tone.

- **VIP:** Be honest about your uncertainty (but non-committal): 'That sounds interesting. Can I think about it and let you know?'

- **IP:** Thank them for inviting you but ask for details if needed, but keep your tone friendly but neutral: 'Thanks for mentioning this. Could you let me know what's involved?'

- **P:** Politely decline without leaving room for follow-up: 'Thank you for thinking of me, but I won't be able to commit to that right now.'

- **X:** Decline firmly and politely, keeping it brief: 'I appreciate the offer, but I can't commit right now.'

Section 6: Key Types of Playground Mums

Type	Example	When to Interact	How to Spot
The Supportive Ally	A mum who notices you're struggling and offers to help. She listens without judgment and shares her own relatable parenting stories.	When you need emotional support, a friend to vent to, or someone to validate your experiences.	Warm, kind, and empathetic. Actively listens and responds in an encouraging way.
The Informative Resource	A mum who knows the best local playgroups, paediatricians, or parenting hacks and loves sharing helpful tips.	When you need specific advice, such as school recommendations, extracurricular activities, or parenting strategies.	Talks about activities, resources, or solutions to common parenting challenges. Often has practical, actionable advice.
The Acquaintance	A mum you exchange light pleasantries with, like commenting on the weather or the kids playing.	When you want friendly, low-pressure interaction or to keep the mood light.	Casual, short conversations without much personal depth. Friendly but doesn't delve into personal topics.
The Judger	A mum who makes critical or comparative comments, like: 'Oh, you let your kids eat snacks before lunch?'	Only when necessary, such as resolving a kid-related conflict. Avoid prolonged engagement to conserve energy.	Judgmental tone, critical comments, or a tendency to compare kids and parenting styles.
The Listener/Observer	A quiet mum who sits on the bench and watches her child play. She may smile if you greet her but rarely initiate conversation.	When you need a calm, low-pressure interaction or just someone to sit 'with' without the pressure of talking.	Calm and reserved, often focused on her child or quietly observing the playground.

The Connector	A mum who organises playdates, knows everyone's name, and invites people to events like birthday parties. She's the go-to person for playground socialising.	When you want to expand your social circle, get your child involved in playdates, or learn about local events. Great for building your network.	Outgoing, often coordinating activities or casually introducing mums to each other. Comfortable in groups and remembers everyone's name.
The Neurodivergent Mum	Find more details in Section 19: How to Spot a Neurodivergent Mum		

Why Identifying Different Types of Mums Matters and How to Build Meaningful Connections with Them

Type	Why They're Valuable	How to Build the Relationship	Cautionary Note
The Supportive Ally	They create a safe space for discussing challenges without fear of judgment and they are a great place to feel validated and supported in any challenging situations. They help build a sense of community and emotional resilience.	Share a relatable parenting story or express gratitude for their empathy. Over time, these interactions often evolve into deeper friendships.	Be mindful of boundaries - while they're empathetic, avoid overburdening them without reciprocating the support.
The Informative Resource	They can save you time and effort by sharing firsthand insights openly and honestly. Some neurodivergent women like to take on an informative or helping role as a way to build friendships.	Ask open-ended questions and update them if you used a recommendation from them and it went well. Show appreciation by sharing useful tips you've discovered, too.	Their advice may not always align with your parenting style, so approach their suggestions with an open mind but adapt them to suit your needs. It can be tempting if you are Autistic to 'correct' their information if you don't agree with it - however this could be interpreted as rude. Particularly if the other person prides themselves on helping others by providing information.
The Acquaintance	Practising light interactions can be really helpful in a low pressure situation. They're great for keeping things casual.	Keep topics neutral and upbeat. Compliment their child's play or share a brief laugh over a common parenting experience.	Don't expect a deeper connection or unless they show interest in taking the relationship further. Respect their comfort zone.

The Judge	They can offer unexpected insights or perspectives, even if their delivery isn't ideal.	Engage minimally and redirect the conversation to neutral ground, such as the weather or the playground itself. <i>*I would recommend only building a relationship with them if they are also your child's best friend's mum or an important person in some way to your child.*</i>	Don't internalise their comments. Their judgments often stem from their own insecurities or rigid beliefs, not a reflection of your parenting.
The Listener / Observer	Their quiet presence can provide comfort, especially on days when socialising feels draining. You can stand near them and not feel out of place or that you 'should' stand with someone. They are often great listeners when approached.	Start with small talk or a warm smile. Respect their pace - trust may take time to build.	They may prefer a low-energy dynamic, so don't expect them to join in highly social activities like playdates or group chats.
The Connector	They create opportunities for your child to socialise and build their own friendships. They're also great for fostering a sense of inclusion especially if you are trying to build relationships.	Offer to host a playdate or volunteer to help with an event they're organising. Showing initiative can strengthen the connection.	Their energy may feel overwhelming for some neurodivergent parents. Set boundaries if you feel pressured to participate in every event.
The Neurodivergent Mum	They often bring a unique perspective, kindness, and authenticity to social interactions. Their approach to parenting may align with or inspire your own.	Be patient and nonjudgmental. Respect their sensory needs or potential social fatigue by offering low-pressure ways to connect, like a quiet walk or one-on-one playdates.	Avoid assumptions about their neurodivergence or parenting style. Instead, let the relationship develop naturally and reciprocate their openness.

Where do you fit in?

Recognise Your Own Role:

Consider which 'type' you might be and how you show up in the playground dynamic. Self-awareness can help you connect more authentically.

If you're unsure which role fits you, consider which one you could take on. Adopting a role as a way to build friendships is a common approach for neurodivergent individuals. While you don't need to take on a specific role, many neurodivergent people find it helps them feel more at ease in social settings.

Adapt Your Approach:

Different mums have different social preferences. Match your energy to theirs for a smoother interaction.

Embrace Diversity

Each "type" adds value to the playground ecosystem. By understanding these dynamics, you can create a richer, more supportive community for yourself and your child.

Section 7: Preparing for the Playground: Proactive Strategies

Navigating the playground can feel overwhelming, but preparing in advance can help you approach these moments with confidence and ease.

1. Understand Your Weaknesses

Think about areas where you have struggled in the past - like remembering other mums' faces and names - and consider proactive solutions.

Do your homework - keep a list of names: Use a notebook or phone app to jot down parents' names and their children's names. This avoids awkward moments when you forget who's who.

2. Jane's Battle with Prosopagnosia

Prosopagnosia, or facial blindness, is a neurological condition that affects the ability to recognise faces. It can make even familiar faces, such as friends and family members, difficult to identify, adding complexity to social interactions.

Causes: While it can result from brain injuries, prosopagnosia is often congenital, meaning individuals are born with it. It's not related to memory loss or vision problems but stems from how the brain processes facial features.

Coping Mechanisms: People with prosopagnosia often rely on other cues for recognition, such as:

- **Voice:** Recognising tone, pitch, or specific speech patterns.
- **Hairstyle or Accessories:** Noticing consistent or unique features like haircuts, glasses, or jewellery.
- **Clothing:** Associating people with their distinct clothing style.

Jane's Perspective

Challenges: Socialising and maintaining connections can be tricky when I may not recognise someone in a crowd, especially if they're without their child.

Strategies:

- **Linking Parents with Children:** Associating adults with their kids creates context for recognition.
- **Transparency:** I openly communicate about my condition with those I connect with. I might say:
 - 'I have facial blindness, I may not remember you, so please come up to me. Don't take it personally if I walk past you - I just don't recognise faces.'

3. Other Strategies

Dress for Confidence: Wear clothes that make you feel comfortable and confident, avoiding anything that might cause embarrassment or sensory overload. If you feel good in what you're wearing, it's easier to communicate with confidence.

Mindful Arrival: Arrive with a game plan:

- Decide where you'll sit or stand to feel more at ease.
- Use a quick grounding routine to manage social anxiety.

Give Yourself Permission to Adjust:

- On low-energy days, sit in the car and wait til the bell rings or consider transitioning your children to walk out to the gate or the car by themselves.
- Remember: Just because a strategy works one day doesn't mean it will always work. Motivation and energy fluctuate - adapt your approach to match how you're feeling.

Section 8: Understanding the Social Web

Navigating the social dynamics of the playground can feel daunting, but understanding the unspoken rules and social cues can make it much easier.

Social Hierarchies Exist, But They're Fluid

Unlike workplace environments, playgrounds often have unspoken cliques based on commonalities like grade, class, parenting style, or suburb. These aren't rigid - many parents are just looking for someone to relate to, and groups often shift over time.

Unseen Social Cues

Watch for Micro-Openings: Look for subtle signs someone is open to chatting, such as:

- Adjusting their posture to face you.
- Making eye contact
- Shifting toward your direction.

Avoid Interrupting Closed Conversations: If two or more parents are standing shoulder-to-shoulder, facing inward, it's likely a private or focused conversation.

- If you choose to approach even with parents you've enjoyed speaking to before, be mindful that they may stop speaking if they're discussing something confidential, which can create an awkward moment.

Actionable Steps

1. Test the Waters with Observational Comments:

- Try a simple comment to ease into conversation, such as: 'It looks like your little one loves climbing - what's their favourite thing here?'

2. Rotate Circles:

- If one group feels unapproachable, don't force it. Move naturally to another area where parents are more dispersed.
- Smaller groups or parents standing alone are often easier to approach.
- Observe the tone of the conversations: If it's slower or less animated - like chatting about an upcoming storm or school holidays - it's easier to join in than a more focused or intense discussion.

3. Look for New Families:

- If your child mentions a new child in their class, often that child's parent might be in the playground during the first few days or weeks. This is a great opportunity to connect with someone who doesn't have established relationships yet.
- You might start with: 'Hi, I think our kids are in the same class - how's [child's name] settling in so far?'

Navigating the playground social web doesn't mean you need to transform into a different person. It's about finding a balance that feels authentic to you and aligns with your comfort level. Connection doesn't happen all at once - it's built moment by moment, one friendly exchange at a time. The playground can be an opportunity for your own growth and connection, rather than just another obligation you navigate for your child's sake.

Section 9: Micro-Interactions: Navigating Small Talk with Advanced Precision

Mastering small talk can feel unnatural for neurodivergent people, but with the right strategies, you can navigate these moments more effectively while conserving your energy.

Strategies:

1. *Micro-Tone Awareness*

- ADHD or Autism can sometimes make you sound abrupt or disinterested, especially when you're overstimulated or bored by the topic.
- Counter this by focusing on tone:
 - Start with a light, curious inflection when asking questions.
 - If it feels forced and draining, you're probably doing it right (sad but true).

2. *The 30/70 Rule*

- Aim to listen 70% of the time and speak 30% of the time to avoid oversharing.
- Neurodivergent people can tend to hyper-verbalise, so practising this balance keeps conversations flowing smoothly.
- **Tip:** If you aren't sure when to talk or listen, default to listening and ask another question. However, make sure to *actually* listen to their response. We can be guilty of firing off question after question.
- **Leverage Observation for Re-Entry:** If you zone out during a chat, instead of asking them to repeat themselves, try reconnecting by commenting on something happening around you. For example:
 - 'Oh wow, did you see how high they just climbed?'
 - Or you can admit it: 'I'm sorry, I just got distracted in my mind for a moment. Could you please repeat that?'

Real-Life Example

What to Say: 'I noticed your daughter brought a scooter today - do you find she prefers wheels to the playground equipment?'

What Not to Say:

- Avoid launching into deep anecdotes about your own child unless prompted.
- Steer clear of tangents or something you think is more interesting, like how scooters are made or importation laws. Instead, focus on their cues to keep the interaction light and relevant.

Understanding Light Small Talk

If the conversation feels like it's not going anywhere, that's light small talk - and it's intentional. The reasons why neurotypical people engage in this will come up [later in this guide](#), but for now, remember it's about connection, not depth.

Section 10: Conflict-Free Boundaries: Handling Sensitive Topics Gracefully

Navigating sensitive topics or avoiding gossip in the playground requires tact and thoughtful boundaries. By staying neutral and redirecting conversations, you can maintain positive relationships without engaging in negativity.

Boundary Management

Redirection Phrases for Nosy Questions

As neurodivergent women, we often love purposeful discussions and may find ourselves asking nosy questions to dive into deeper topics. However, when you're on the receiving end of such questions - especially from a parent known for gossip (for example, on an inflammatory topic like teacher selection) - redirect gracefully to avoid sharing more than you're comfortable with. Examples:

- 'That's an interesting perspective - I'd love to hear more about how you handle that.'
- 'It's a work in progress for us - what's worked best for you?'

Spotting a Gossip Trap

If another parent makes negative comments about someone, don't engage. Use neutrality to redirect - respond in a way that redirects the conversation and signals that you're not interested in gossiping. Example:

- 'I don't know them well, but I'll keep an eye out for and [insert a positive comment].'
- **Using Positivity:** By saying something positive about the person being discussed, you send a clear signal that you're not up for speculation or negativity.

Recognising Hooks in Gossip

Some people use 'hooks' to see whether the other parent will engage in speculative or inflammatory conversations. Here are examples of common hooks:

- 'I saw Debbie's son Thomas hit Edward again today at recess - Edward's Mum is so angry she emailed the principal.'
- 'I offered to sell my candle range at the Mother's Day stall, but Vicki, the president, refused to accept them.'
- 'Did you know Mrs Smith is pregnant? I can't believe the substitute we're going to get - are you going to complain?'

How to Respond:

Use neutrality to avoid taking the bait:

- 'That's interesting. I'm sure it will all work out.'
- 'I hadn't heard that - I hope everyone's okay.'

Politely use an exit line if needed:

- 'I've got to run - catch you later!'

By using redirection, neutrality, or exit strategies, you can handle sensitive topics and gossip traps gracefully while protecting your boundaries and energy.

Gossip as a Currency for Friendship

Gossip at pick-up often serves as a kind of social currency for mums navigating the complex dynamics of playground friendships. It can feel enticing in the moment - like a shortcut to connection. Sharing information, venting frustrations, or discussing others can create a temporary bond that feels deeper and more exciting than small talk.

However, this connection often comes at a cost. Gossip can easily backfire, leading to misunderstandings, broken trust, or even outright conflict when words are twisted, exaggerated, or shared out of context.

Why Gossip Happens

Gossip often stems from:

- **Boredom:** Seeking entertainment or stimulation in the monotony of daily routines.
- **Insecurity:** Using gossip to deflect attention from one's own vulnerabilities.
- **Validation:** Sharing or listening to gossip can create a fleeting sense of belonging or support.

For some, gossip becomes a way to rally others to their side in a conflict. While it may feel like camaraderie in the moment, it often creates a culture of mistrust.

Challenges for Neurodivergent Mums

Neurodivergent women may find themselves caught off guard by gossip dynamics, struggling to navigate or interpret the unwritten rules that others seem to instinctively follow. This can make playground interactions feel confusing or even stressful, especially when trust is broken.

Why Gossip Isn't Worth It

For mums trying to protect their emotional energy, it's worth remembering: connection built on gossip is rarely genuine. Participating can leave you vulnerable to being:

- **Misquoted:** Your words may be taken out of context.
- **Dragged into Conflict:** Gossip often pulls people into disputes that don't align with their values or intentions.

As the saying goes: 'What they say about someone else, they will say about you.' Gossipers often spread information indiscriminately, and any details you share could eventually be used against you.

A Better Alternative

Instead of gossip, focus on conversations that foster authenticity and shared purpose. These connections may take more effort to cultivate but are far more rewarding in the long term. Prioritise interactions that align with your values and intentions, even if they feel less immediately engaging than gossip's fleeting allure.

If you'd like to reconnect with your values and turn that clarity into simple, actionable steps that fit your ADHD brain, check out my **Personal Values Workbook** [here](#).

Section 11: Navigating Online Playground Dynamics: A Cautionary Tale

For neurodivergent mums, social dynamics often extend beyond the playground and into online spaces like WhatsApp or Facebook groups. While these forums can be valuable for sharing information and building connections, they also come with pitfalls - particularly for those of us who value honesty and direct communication.

A Personal Example

When my child was in Year 2, I was deeply unhappy with the teacher selection for her class. It was the worst-case scenario for her needs, as she had just been diagnosed. Feeling compelled to advocate not just for her but for all the kids, I volunteered to be the parent-teacher liaison, thinking this role would allow me to make a meaningful difference.

It backfired.

I made a post in the class Facebook group outlining concerns about the teacher. The issues were serious, such as the teacher refusing to let children eat lunch and using detention as punishment. I tagged other parents in the comments who had asked me to help and expressed serious concerns.

In my mind, this was a constructive step - why couldn't we be honest and open? Wasn't the goal to advocate for our kids? Everything I said was factual and true? But the fallout was immediate. Parents asked me to untag them, pointing out that these concerns were supposed to be handled subtly and unspoken. I was blindsided. What I saw as transparency and advocacy was perceived as inappropriate. If we openly talked about these issues in the playground, why can't we address them online in a parent group?

The Lesson Learned: This experience taught me that high emotions and a sense of social justice can backfire, especially in online settings where unspoken rules and social dynamics are amplified. I've learned to approach advocacy differently, ensuring my efforts are constructive without unintentionally alienating others.

Basic Social Rules on Parent Social Media Groups

Parent social media groups can feel like a minefield of unspoken rules. For neurodivergent mums, the norms can be tricky to navigate, especially when directness feels like the most natural and honest approach. But understanding these dynamics can save you from unnecessary drama while helping you advocate effectively.

Recognise the Unspoken Online Codes	Neurotypical parents often save their venting or frustrations for private chats or coffee meetups. Online groups, on the other hand, tend to expect more subtle, indirect approaches. Public confrontation or blunt posts can be seen as stirring the pot - even if your intentions are constructive.
Understand How Directness Can Be Misinterpreted	What feels like clear, honest communication to you might come across as abrasive or confrontational in an online setting. This isn't about silencing yourself - it's about knowing your audience. Sometimes, softening your delivery can make your point land more effectively.
Gauge the Dynamics Before Posting	Before you dive into sensitive topics, take a moment to observe how the group operates. Are parents typically venting about teachers publicly, or do they stick to logistical posts and light-hearted banter?
Check Before You Tag	If someone has shared concerns with you in private, don't assume they're comfortable being named in a public post. A quick message like: 'I'm planning to bring this up - are you okay with me mentioning you?' can prevent misunderstandings.
Balance Advocacy with Diplomacy	Advocacy doesn't have to mean making bold public statements. Instead, try: • Asking questions: 'Does anyone else have thoughts on how we can best support the class this year?' • Seeking feedback: 'I'm thinking of raising this with the school - what's your take on it?' For trickier topics, stick to DM's or in-person discussions. These approaches can feel more collaborative and less like putting someone on the spot. However be aware that whatever is written in a DM can be shown to someone else - so be really careful what you say and who to. If you aren't sure, then don't write it.

Exit Strategies for Online Forums

If online group dynamics start feeling overwhelming or draining, it's perfectly okay to take a step back. You don't have to be in every discussion to advocate effectively for your child.

Simple Ways to Step Back

- **Unfollow Notifications:** Stop updates for posts or threads that don't need your input.
- **Set Engagement Boundaries:** Devise how often you'll check in - e.g., once a week - and stick to it.
- **Focus Your Energy:** Direct your attention to where it matters most, such as:
 - Trusted **Very Important People (VIPs)**: Parents you value and want to maintain meaningful connections with.
 - Practical conversations with **Important People (IPs)**: Stick to low-pressure logistical discussions without overextending.
 - Direct conversations with teachers or **Respected People (RP)**: Instead of airing concerns publicly, approach teachers or school staff directly for more effective and constructive outcomes.

By focusing on the conversations that matter - whether it's with a trusted parent or directly with the teacher - you'll save your energy for the things that actually make a difference.

Section 12: Managing Overstimulation with Subtle Sensory Hacks

Playgrounds are a sensory minefield - squealing kids, barking dogs, buzzing phones. For neurodivergent mums, all that chaos can quickly tip you into overstimulation. These small adjustments can make a big difference. It's not about eliminating the chaos (because that's impossible) - it's about giving yourself a way to manage it and still show up for your kids without losing yourself in the noise.

Strategies to Stay Grounded

1. *Pre-Game Your Sensory Environment*

Before you even step into the playground, prep your sensory defences:

- **Noise-Cancelling Tools:** Use headphones, AirPods, or Loop earplugs during the walk to the playground to help ground yourself.
- **Sunglasses:** Even on cloudy days, sunglasses can take the edge off light sensitivity.
- **The Full Armour:** If I'm not feeling 'up for it' and I have to walk in for some reason - I usually wear a cap, sunglasses and AirPods and hang around the back area as much as possible.

2. *Create a Mental Escape Hatch*

When everything feels like too much, have a pre-planned excuse to step away. Try: 'I'm just going to grab my water,' then take a few deep breaths away from the noise to reset.

3. *Fidget Adaptations*

Fidgets aren't just for kids - they're lifesavers for long conversations or tricky situations:

- Keep a small, pocketable, sensory tool like a pebble or a coin to ground yourself during chats without zoning out.
- For parent-teacher interviews or challenging discussions, I usually take one of my kids' sensory toys. If you haven't tried a sensory toy, you should - I had never used one until my daughter showed me how she uses it - now I podcast interview with them as well.

Section 13: Managing Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD)

1. Pre-Plan Emotional Resilience Scripts

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD) can make even small social missteps or perceived slights feel devastating. One way to navigate these intense emotions is by preparing emotional resilience scripts in advance. When someone doesn't respond as warmly as expected, instead of spiralling into self-blame or anxiety, remind yourself:

'That's about them, not me. I showed up, and that's enough.'

This simple script helps separate your self-worth from others' behaviour and reminds you that your effort matters, regardless of their response.

Label and Reframe Your Feelings

Often, our minds create negative narratives about situations that aren't grounded in reality. When this happens, pause and:

- **Label the emotion you're experiencing:** Is it disappointment, embarrassment, or frustration? Acknowledge it without judgment.
- **Reframe the situation:** Shift your perspective to break out of the self-blame loop. Examples:
 - From: 'They're ignoring me.' To: 'They're probably just distracted with their own stuff.'
 - From: 'I'm bad at this.' To 'I'm learning, and progress is messy.'

This practice shifts your focus from feeling rejected to understanding that others' reactions are rarely about you.

2. Avoid Over-Apologising

When you feel ignored or dismissed, try to resist the urge to over-apologise for perceived social mistakes. Constant follow-ups can sometimes be more off-putting than the original misstep - one that others may not have even noticed.

For example, I once had a friend from a mothers' group who would leave me long voice messages after every interaction, going into great detail about how I might have been offended by something she said - things I didn't even remember. Instead of feeling

reassured, it made me anxious. I started wondering if I had offended her or missed some unspoken social cue. Eventually, the stress of these follow-ups made me reluctant to continue building the friendship.

Sometimes, letting small social missteps go without excessive apologies is the best way to move forward and keep relationships comfortable and natural.

3. Use Light Humour or Humility to Diffuse Tension

If you feel like you've made a mistake, try light humour or humility to call it out without making a big deal about it.

- 'Whoops, I interrupted! Too much coffee this morning - please, go ahead.'

This response shows you're aware while diffusing tension and avoiding overthinking.

4. Incorporating Mel Robbins' 'Let Them' Technique

Mel Robbins' 'Let Them' technique is particularly effective for managing RSD. The concept is simple: when people behave in ways that frustrate, dismiss, or hurt you - remind yourself to *'let them.'*

This doesn't mean accepting mistreatment - it's about recognising that their actions are theirs to own, not yours to fix.

Examples of 'Let Them' in Action:

- If someone is short with you, think: 'Let them be in a bad mood - it's not about me.'
- If someone cancels plans, remind yourself: 'Let them prioritise their needs - I'll find another way to enjoy my time.'

This mindset is so liberating because it takes the pressure off feeling responsible for other people's behaviours or moods. It shifts your focus back to your own actions and boundaries instead of getting stuck overanalysing what others are doing (or not doing).

Practical Examples for Everyday Situations

At Pick-Up Lines or Social Gatherings: If a parent seems uninterested in chatting, instead of internalising it, say: 'Let them have their space today - I'll connect with someone else.'

In Friendships: If someone doesn't reply to your text immediately, reframe it: 'Let them reply when they're ready - it doesn't mean they're upset with me.'

Balancing 'Let Them' with Boundaries

Letting people behave how they choose, doesn't mean you have to tolerate poor treatment. If you notice someone frequently cancelling plans or not showing you respect, it's absolutely okay to reduce your interactions with them.

But don't exhaust yourself trying to change who you are or overthinking the situation as if you're the problem - because often, it's *not about you*.

Section 14: How Do You Break In and Stop Feeling Like the 'Outsider'

1. Be a Connector

One of the easiest ways to break into a group is by playing a role - the parent who helps others feel comfortable. Instead of waiting for someone to approach you, take small, low-pressure steps to connect with those around you.

Technique: Introduce yourself with humour or observation.

- 'Hi, I'm [name]. My daughter is the one running through every puddle - what's your little one's name?'

This approach doesn't put pressure on the other parent to carry the conversation and helps set a warm, approachable tone.

2. The Rule of Three

Social inclusion often depends on familiarity. Neurotypical parents, in particular, may need repeated interactions to feel comfortable opening up. Commit to engaging with the same group at least three times before deciding if they're a good fit for you.

Technique: Gradual connection-building.

- *First encounter:* Exchange pleasantries and share a light anecdote.
- *Second encounter:* Build on the first interaction by referencing it: "I saw you here last week - how's the puddle-jumper today?"
- *Third encounter:* Introduce a new layer to the conversation: 'By the way, I keep forgetting to ask - what's your baby's name?'

3. Offer Acts of Service

Acts of service are a great way to break down social barriers without relying too much on verbal communication.

Examples:

- Hold a parent's coffee while they chase after their child.
- Keep an eye on someone's bag or belongings while they run after their toddler.
- Offer a spare wipe, bandaid, or snack if they're caught off guard.

Why It Works: These small gestures make you memorable and approachable. People are more likely to remember and value you when you've helped make their day a little easier. They also cater to neurodivergent women's strengths of empathy and care.

4. Layer Social Inclusion with Practical Engagement

If small talk feels overwhelming, focus on practical, task-oriented interactions that naturally build social inclusion.

Host a Playdate: Invite a child you're comfortable with for a simple, no-pressure playdate. Keep it casual: 'Would [child's name] like to come over? I've been meaning to set up a little play area in the backyard.'

Set Boundaries: If you prefer the parent doesn't stay: 'It's actually easier for me when another child is over - they usually jump into the Lego and slime machine, and I can catch up on some washing and tidying.' Alternatively, if you're open to them staying: 'If you'd prefer to come by for a coffee first to get to know me, you're very welcome.'

5. Volunteer for Small Roles

If your energy allows, take on non-committal tasks like setting up chairs at a school event. These small roles create opportunities to chat with others without the need for sustained interaction. Or, if you do want to take on a larger role to give your social skills more structure, consider taking on a committee role. Just be aware of any social politics at play within this committee group.

6. Pick one strategy, you don't have to do it all, I'm just showing all the options.

It's important to remind yourself that you don't need to fit in with every group or participate in every conversation. Being selective and intentional about where you invest your energy isn't selfish - it's self-care.

- *Mantra to Remember:* 'I don't have to do it all, and I don't need to connect with everyone to have meaningful relationships.'

7. When to Leave: Knowing Your Limits in Social Situations

Navigating small talk and masking takes energy, and for neurodivergent mums, that energy has clear limits. The challenge isn't just about knowing what to say but also it's about recognising *when you need to leave* to avoid burnout, awkwardness, or overstaying your welcome. Many neurodivergent people struggle to spot the cues that it's time to wrap things up, but learning this skill can make a huge difference.

Why Knowing When to Leave Matters

Masking and small talk come with a cognitive load, especially for neurodivergent mums already juggling the relentless demands of parenting. Staying too long can lead to:

- **Emotional Overwhelm:** Feeling drained, irritable, or snappish as your energy depletes - and struggling to mask this.
- **Missed Social Cues:** Overstaying because you misread or didn't notice the other person is trying to exit the conversation.
- **Information Dumping:** Feeling comfortable enough to overshare or ramble, which might overwhelm or put off the other person.

Learning to leave at the right time isn't just self-care - it's a skill that preserves your energy, builds positive social connections, and keeps interactions on your terms.

Strategies for Knowing When to Leave

1. **Set a Social Time Limit in Advance:** Before engaging in social situations, decide how much time you can realistically handle.
2. **Use a Timer:** Set a timer on your phone for 10–15 minutes (or whatever feels manageable). When it goes off, use it as your cue to gracefully exit.
3. **Leave While You're Ahead:** Aim to leave while the interaction is still going well. This creates a positive impression and helps you avoid the slippery slope of overstaying or energy depletion.

Example: If you're at a playground chat and your timer goes off, say something like, 'This has been lovely - I need to head off, but let's catch up another time!'

4. **Your body often knows when it's time to leave before your brain catches up.**
Tune into signs like:
 - Feeling restless or fidgety.

- Noticing your responses becoming less genuine.
- A subtle sense of dread or anxiety creeping in.

When you feel these signals, take them seriously and wrap up the interaction.

5. Watch for Social Exit Cues: Neurotypical people often give subtle signs that they're ready to end a conversation. Look for cues like:

- Shifts their body around of glancing around.
- Saying things like, 'Well, I should probably...' or 'It's been great chatting.'
- Check their phone, watch, or child.

If you notice these cues, respond quickly with a natural exit line:

- 'I won't keep you - it was great chatting!'
- 'Looks like we both need to get going - let's catch up again soon!'

6. Do You Feel Like Other Mums Avoid You? I've known neurodivergent mums who feel like other mums avoid them at school pick-up. When I dug deeper, it often came down to this: someone would ask: 'How have you been?' and they'd turn it into a 20-minute conversation. While the intent was to connect, the other mums often avoided them afterward because it took too long, and they had places to be.

Being mindful of other people's time and watching for subtle cues - like stepping back, checking their watch or shifting their body - can help you create positive interactions without unintentionally overwhelming the other person.

7. Recognise Your Child's Needs as a Cue: Children are great at providing natural exit opportunities, but neurodivergent mums can miss these signals if they're hyper-focused on the conversation. Look for signs like:

- Kids starting to bicker or wander too far.
- Subtle signs of boredom, like whining or repeatedly asking when you're leaving.

It's tempting to push past these signals when you're finally having a good conversation - those moments can feel rare and precious. But ignoring them risks your child reaching their limit, leading to a meltdown, or pulling you away entirely.

Example Exit Line:

- 'Looks like my little one's ready to go - we'll chat another time!'

Section 15: Real Life Scenarios: What to Do When...

(Taken from the ADHD Mums Facebook Group - [join us here](#))

Scenario 1: You Just Told a Story and Wish You Could Take It All Back

Recovery Line:

- 'I tend to get excited and talk a lot - thanks for letting me share!'

If you have more time try to turn the conversation back to the person listening and ask them a question about themselves. For example:

- 'Enough about me - what's been happening with you lately?'

This shifts the focus, keeps the interaction balanced, and helps smooth over any lingering awkwardness.

Scenario 2: You're in a Group Conversation But Don't Feel Included

What to Do: Take a moment to observe the group dynamics and look for natural opportunities to join in, like when smaller conversations break off or parents get distracted by their kids. Instead of pushing to be part of the main discussion, you can take a more passive approach - nod, smile, and listen. This helps keep you involved without feeling like you're forcing your way in.

In situations like this, I try to stick with it. I've found that my initial feelings of being excluded are often influenced by rejection sensitivity (RSD). If I leave too quickly, I sometimes spiral into overthinking and shame later, wondering if I made it more awkward (which, I usually have). By staying a few extra minutes, I've noticed that conversations often shift naturally. A child might interrupt, changing the dynamic entirely. Continuing to smile and staying present helps ease the tension, and I often leave feeling more connected than I expected.

Moments of not talking or not being spoken to in a group happen to everyone, but for neurodivergent people, they can feel jarring - like a spotlight on the fact that we're not connecting. Neurotypical people tend to just stand, listen, nod and wait for a natural moment to reconnect. If we take a moment to be patient, the conversation will often shift, and you might find an easier way to engage. Even if you don't talk much, standing there and staying engaged can help you feel included by the end.

Scenario 3: Responding to Parenting Critiques or Upsetting Comments

Handling criticism about your parenting can feel daunting, especially in public settings like the playground. These moments can be emotionally charged, but staying composed and setting boundaries can help protect your emotional wellbeing while keeping the conversation under control.

1. Validation Responses

Acknowledge the other person's input without committing to their advice or escalating the situation. These responses are polite yet non-committal:

- 'I appreciate you sharing that - I'm still figuring out what works best for us.'
- 'Thanks for that, I'll think about it later.'
- 'That's an interesting perspective. Every family handles things differently.'

These responses politely deflect further discussion while reinforcing your autonomy.

2. Setting Boundaries

When a comment crosses a line, it's okay to address it directly. This reinforces your boundaries while keeping the tone respectful.

If the critique happens in front of your child:

- 'I prefer not to discuss my child's behaviour in front of them, but thank you.'
- 'If you'd like to share your thoughts, let's talk privately.' (If their input might be helpful.)

If you feel confident in your approach:

- 'I'm comfortable with the strategies we're using, but I appreciate your concern.'
- 'Thanks for your input, but this approach works for our family.'

3. Reflect Before Reacting

It's natural to feel hurt or defensive, but taking a moment to reflect on the context can help you respond thoughtfully.

Consider the Intent:

- Was the comment meant to help, or was it poorly phrased?
- Has this person contributed positivity to your life before, or is this part of a pattern of negativity?

Ask Yourself:

- 'Do I value this person's opinion?'
- 'Is this feedback useful, or should I let it go?'

If you're unsure, consider writing a simple pro/con list to assess whether maintaining the relationship or addressing the issue is worth your energy.

4. *When It's Best to Let Go*

Not every interaction requires your energy. If the comment comes from someone who:

- Frequently undermines you,
- Habitually gossips, or
- Is a stranger or casual acquaintance,

then it's okay to step back and disengage.

- 'Thank you for your thoughts - I need to check on my child.'

Avoid further interaction and focus your energy on people who respect your boundaries and offer meaningful support.

5. *Why It's Okay to Let Go*

Recognising when a relationship doesn't align with the support you need is empowering. Letting go creates space to invest your energy in the connections that truly matter and align with your values.

Scenario 4: I've Been at a School for a Few Years and Feel Like I've Made Too Many Mistakes. How Can I Start to Rebuild?

Rebuilding social connections after a rocky start at a school can feel daunting but is absolutely doable. With a little strategy, self-awareness, and patience, you can shift how others see you and create stronger, more positive relationships.

1. Reframe Your Situation with Self-Compassion

Social missteps are a normal part of human interaction, especially for neurodivergent mums navigating neurotypical spaces. Instead of viewing these experiences as failures, see them as opportunities to learn and grow.

- Reflect on how far you've come since starting at the school. Ask yourself: 'Would I give another Mum a second chance if they made some mistakes?' Chances are, you'd say yes. Neurodivergent mums often understand social mistakes better than most!
- Remember, this process is hard - and that's okay. Modelling resilience for your child is worth the effort. How can we teach them to bounce back if we're not showing them how it's done?

2. Reset and pick an area to start

- **Focus on Key Relationships:** Pinpoint the connections that matter most, like teachers, influential parents, or the mums of your child's closest friends (see the categories in [Section 5 of this guide](#)). These connections have the most potential to impact your family.
- **Start Small and Simple:** Approach those who seem open or neutral toward you with quick, simple and friendly openers (examples in [Section 8](#)). Neurodivergent mums may be especially empathetic towards social missteps because they've likely been there too. (spotting a neurodivergent mum guide is in [Section 19](#)).

Volunteer: Participating in shared activities like class events offers low-pressure ways to reconnect, where interactions feel purposeful and less emotionally loaded. Helping out also creates opportunities to say something positive to other parents about their children, which can go a long way.

- Example: 'I noticed during the school disco that Annie fell over, and Katie was the only one who went to check on her - she's so kind to others!'

3. Address Misunderstandings Proactively

Take accountability for past misunderstandings without over-explaining or making excuses. A simple, honest acknowledgment can go a long way toward rebuilding trust and connection.

For example: 'I know I haven't always been the most approachable - I've been working on it and would love to meet up at the park again.'

If it feels right, share how neurodivergence shapes your communication can encourage empathy, as long as it doesn't come across as an excuse. Keep it honest and relatable:

- 'Sometimes I struggle with social cues or knowing what's expected. I'm really trying to slow down and check in more with how people are feeling.'

If an apology is warranted, offer one directly and without defensiveness.

- 'I'm sorry I made that comment about your child - it wasn't okay, and I've felt awful about it. I'm truly sorry.'
- 'I didn't show up to the Mother's Day stall when I said I'd volunteer. Then I blamed you for not following up- that wasn't fair, and I'm sorry.'

Owning your mistakes shows maturity, rebuilds trust, and can encourage others to let go of grudges.

Sometimes, it's about acknowledging patterns that have affected others:

- 'I feel like I've said no every time you've asked me to meet up socially, and I'm sure people have stopped asking. I haven't made enough effort to connect - I've been caught up in other areas of my life. I'd love to change that - maybe I can plan the next get-together?'

Why Apologise?

Moments of vulnerability like this can be incredibly powerful. They don't just help rebuild connections - they show that you're open to growth and willing to take responsibility for your actions. Often, others hold onto grudges because they feel there's been no accountability or genuine remorse. Offering a heartfelt apology is the first step in helping them let go of that resentment and move toward understanding.

4. Develop a Long-Term Connection Strategy

- **Consistency:** Small but consistent gestures - like remembering a child's name or commenting on a school activity, or offering a quick 'how's your day?' - build familiarity and trust over time.
- **Seek Inclusive Parents:** Look for quieter or more approachable parents who may not dominate the social scene but offer genuine connection without the drama.

5. Shift Focus to Self-Aligned Relationships

Not everyone will be open to rebuilding a connection, and that's okay. Focus on one or two supportive connections and celebrate the progress you make there.

Mantra to remember: 'I don't have to connect with everyone to create meaningful relationships.'

6. Teaching Playground Skills to Children, Tweens or Teens

- Show them how to mirror positive behaviour: 'Watch how I ask about something they care about.'
- Practise role-playing common scenarios together, like how to respond to teasing. 'If someone says something unkind, you could say, *'That's not true,'* or just walk away and focus on something else.'
- Share your own challenges to model resilience: 'I was nervous about talking to that mum too, but I reminded myself it's okay to feel that way. I smiled and said hi. It's all about trying.' This teaches your child that these efforts can be challenging but worthwhile and that even if things don't go perfectly, it's important to pick yourself up and try again. By sharing your own experiences, you show them that social courage is a skill you both continue to work on.

7. Long-Term Strategies for Building Playground Connections

Consistency Is Key:

- Show up regularly to the same playground or school events. Familiarity builds comfort (even if conversations start slow) - not just for you but for your child.

Expand Beyond the Playground:

- Arrange low-pressure meetups or playdates to build connections in a more relaxed setting. If you're hesitant about being rejected when asking for someone's contact details, try phrasing it in a casual, non-committal way, such as:
 - 'It's been so nice chatting with you - good to meet someone on the same wavelength.' (Pause, smile, and gauge their response.)
 - 'There's a café with a great playground that I think your little one would enjoy. I usually head there on Friday afternoons - do you ever head there?'
 - 'I'm often free on (specific day) - maybe we'll bump into each other again sometime?'

This approach mirrors how neurotypical people often test the waters before directly asking to spend more time together. It's a way to show interest without putting too much pressure on either party. If the other person isn't as keen, it's easy to step back and agree that it was just a nice one-off interaction without awkwardness. It also avoids the vulnerability of saying something like, 'I don't have many friends - can we hang out?' which can feel too direct and overwhelming for both sides.

8. The Double Empathy Problem

Dr. Damian Milton's concept of the Double Empathy Problem explains why communication between neurodivergent and neurotypical people can feel so challenging. It reframes these struggles as a two-way disconnect rather than a deficit on the neurodivergent side.

Why It Matters

Neurotypical people connect through small talk, which acts as a kind of 'social ritual' rather than a way to exchange meaningful information. Topics like the weather, weekend plans, or daily routines help build comfort and familiarity.

Neurodivergent people, however, tend to prioritise direct, meaningful conversations, which can clash with neurotypical expectations. This difference in communication goals can leave both sides feeling misunderstood.

Why It's Hard for ADHD and Autistic People

For ADHD and autistic individuals, small talk can feel perplexing or even exhausting.

- **ADHD Brains:** ADHD is driven by novelty and stimulation, so repetitive or surface-level topics like small talk feel tedious or irrelevant.

- **Autistic Individuals:** Autistic people often value directness, depth, or shared passion in conversations. They may not see the value in discussing 'pointless' topics like the weather or casual pleasantries, which can make neurotypical norms feel unnecessary or frustrating.

Where the Disconnect Happens

This difference in conversational goals can create friction:

- **Neurotypical Perspective:** A neurotypical person might feel an ADHD or autistic individual is dismissive, aloof or too intense if they bring up topics that feel 'inappropriate' for the current stage of the relationship.
- **Neurodivergent Perspective:** Meanwhile, the neurodivergent person might feel drained or frustrated by masking their preferences to meet neurotypical expectations, wondering why conversations lack depth or feel unfulfilling.

9. There is No Right and Wrong Answer in Social Dynamics

Social dynamics aren't black and white. It's not just about making small talk; it's about navigating unspoken rules, balancing social expectations, and figuring out how much of yourself to bring into each interaction.

The delicate balance between masking to build connections and staying authentic to your true self is exhausting - and there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Whether you're the mum who jumps in enthusiastically, masks for your child's sake, or sits in the car most days because it's all too much, your choice is valid.

This is your journey, and how you engage is entirely up to you. Some days, 'showing up' might just mean a quick wave before retreating to recharge - and that's more than okay.

Section 16: Why Neurotypical People Value Small Talk

For neurotypical people, small talk is like social 'grease' - it helps interactions flow smoothly. It's less about the content of the conversation and more about what it signals and facilitates:

- **Signal Openness:** Chatting about everyday things, like the weather or weekend plans sends the message: 'I'm approachable and interested in connecting.'
- **Test Compatibility:** Before diving into deeper topics, small talk acts as a low-stakes way to gauge comfort levels and mutual interest.
- **Diffuse tension:** In awkward or new social situations, neutral topics, like school events or kids' activities helps ease anxiety and creates a sense of normalcy.

These rituals are so ingrained in neurotypical social frameworks that they often go unnoticed - it's as natural to them as a handshake or a polite smile.

Section 17: How ADHD and Autistic Individuals Approach Connection

In contrast to neurotypical small talk, ADHD and autistic individuals often prefer interactions that align with their intrinsic values and mental wiring.

ADHDers

Conversations with ADHDers tend to be fast-paced, energetic, and jump between topics. ADHD brains thrive on excitement and creativity, so 'boring' small talk can feel like a missed opportunity for meaningful engagement.

Common traits in ADHDer communication:

- **Interrupting, switching topics abruptly:** This isn't rudeness - it's their brain seeking stimulation or chasing an exciting idea.
- **Appearing Inattentive:** They might seem distracted, but it's often because their minds are processing multiple ideas at once.

Autistic Individuals

Autistic people often gravitate toward deep, topic-specific conversations. They might light up when discussing their special interests but struggle to feign enthusiasm for surface-level topics.

Common traits in autistic communication:

- **Precision and Focus:** Their conversations reflect a desire for authenticity, not a lack of interest in the other person.
- **Challenges with Small Talk:** Topics like the weather or casual pleasantries may feel shallow or irrelevant, making neurotypical norms harder to navigate.

What might be misunderstood as aloofness or disinterest is often a reflection of their need for meaningful, authentic exchanges.

Insights and Strategies

Recognise the Rituals of Neurotypical Socialising	For neurotypical people, the process of conversation often matters as much as, if not more than, the actual content. Small talk acts as a signal that you're engaged, approachable, and interested. Tip: Instead of focusing on the 'point' of the conversation, view small talk as a way to show you're open to connection, even if the topics feel trivial.
Practise Structured Small Talk	Having a framework can make small talk feel less stressful. • Prepare conversational scripts or 'go-to' topics like asking about hobbies, recent movies, or pets. • Use open-ended questions to keep the other person talking, such as, 'What's something fun you've done recently?' or 'How do you usually spend your weekends?'
Balance Authenticity and Social Expectations	It's okay to redirect small talk into areas you find more interesting. If someone mentions the weather, you could follow with, 'I've always wondered how weather patterns affect mental focus. Do you notice that too?' This keeps the interaction engaging for you while still respecting the rhythm of the conversation.
Understand the Role of Nonverbal Communication	Neurotypical small talk relies heavily on body language - smiling, nodding, or maintaining eye contact. Tips: • If eye contact feels overwhelming, focus on the person's nose instead. • Use active listening cues like repeating back key points to show you're engaged without needing to mask who you are.
Know When and How to Shift to Deeper Conversations	Use transitions to steer away from small talk and into meaningful topics. For instance, if someone mentions a hobby, ask, 'What got you interested in that?' or 'What's the most rewarding part of it?' Respect boundaries: Some neurotypical people may prefer to keep things light. If they don't seem ready to dive deeper, that's okay - small talk can still serve as a foundation for future connections.

Your Choices Are Valid

Navigating social dynamics can be exhausting, especially when you're balancing parenting, neurodivergence, and your own emotional needs. Remember: however you choose to engage, your approach is valid.

Connect with Like-Minded People	If connecting with other neurodivergent mums feels easier and more rewarding, lean into that. Building relationships with people who share your experiences can be incredibly comforting and validating - and it's okay to prioritise those connections.
Skip Small Talk	If small talk feels draining or inauthentic, it's perfectly okay to avoid it. Focus on meaningful conversations when you're ready, or keep casual interactions brief and polite without guilt.
Prioritise Your Energy	If you'd rather sit in your car during pick-up or watch from the sidelines without engaging, that's completely acceptable. Sometimes, preserving your energy is the best choice for you and your family - and showing up in whatever way feels manageable is enough.

The Misalignment - and Opportunity - for Growth

While neurotypical and neurodivergent styles of connecting might feel at odds, they also have the potential to complement each other with a bit of mutual understanding.

- **For Neurotypical People:** The ADHD or autistic preference for directness and authenticity can offer a refreshing perspective, encouraging deeper, more meaningful conversations beyond small talk.
- **For Neurodivergent Individuals:** Small talk doesn't have to be a burden - it can be seen as a skill, a simple bridge to help reach deeper, more rewarding connections.

Bridging this divide isn't about one side 'faking it' for the other. It's about appreciating the unique ways we all connect and finding common ground that works for everyone.

Section 18: How to Spot a Neurotypical Mum - and How They May Appear to Us at Pick Up

Understanding the differences between neurotypical and neurodivergent communication can feel like solving a puzzle, but it's a skill worth building. It can be helpful to look for clues so you can:

1. Tailor your communication style.
2. Build a mixed social group that includes both neurotypical and neurodivergent mums.

It's not about limiting friendships to just neurodivergent mums or excluding others. Instead, it's about recognising who you connect with most easily and making space for those connections to grow. Neurodivergent mums may "get" your experiences more intuitively, but neurotypical friendships can bring new perspectives and expand your social circle.

Both types of relationships bring value.

1. Social Rituals: How Neurotypical Mums Connect

Neurotypical people often connect through the rhythm and flow of conversation, focusing on the act of chatting more than the content. For them, the exchange itself - regardless of the topic - is a way to build rapport, show interest, and create a sense of belonging.

- **What to Look For:** Watch for conversations that follow predictable patterns - like weather talk, weekend plans, or surface-level compliments. These exchanges aren't about the exchanging information - they're about maintaining social equilibrium.
- **How They May Appear to Us:** To neurodivergent mums, this can feel alien or even frustrating. "Why are we talking about the weather instead of something meaningful?" But their intent is connection over content.

Strategy: Reframe Small Talk

Engage with a 'translation' mindset. Instead of seeing small talk as meaningless, think of it as *laying groundwork* for future, deeper connections. Try pre-prepared scripts like, 'Do you have plans for the school holidays?' or 'What's your go-to activity when the weather's this nice?' This allows you to connect while staying authentic.

Reframing small talk from 'pointless' to 'I'm building a connection with a neurotypical person - how interesting!' shifts the focus from frustration to curiosity and purpose. This mindset encourages seeing small talk as a bridge to understanding someone else's world.

2. Indirect Communication: Implied Meanings and a Real Life Example from Jane

Neurotypical communication often relies heavily on implied meanings, where what's left unsaid can carry more weight than what is explicitly stated. This is especially common in situations requiring politeness or when addressing disagreement indirectly.

- **What to Look For:** Neurotypical individuals may drop subtle hints instead of directly expressing needs or preferences.

Real-Life Example

I was briefly on a P&C (I didn't get a return invite after the first two meetings), and one day at pick-up, another committee member, Angie, said:

- 'I'm really tired today as I'm getting over a cold.'

To me, this seemed irrelevant, so I ignored it and continued planning the meeting scheduled for that night. Later, I realised Angie meant:

- 'I don't want to attend the P&C meeting tonight.'

She ended up cancelling an hour before the meeting, and I found myself thinking: *'Why waste my time at pick up when she wasn't coming anyway?'*

How This Can Feel to Us

For neurodivergent people who value directness and clarity, this kind of communication can feel unnecessarily complicated - or even manipulative.

From My Perspective

- Angie's focus on being tired felt irrelevant to the meeting agenda.
- I interpreted her indirectness as inauthentic. I was thinking, 'Why not just say you don't want to come to the meeting?'
- I felt frustrated or confused as to why she doesn't either decline the meeting outright or follow through on her implied commitment.

From Angie's perspective

- Angie might have felt hurt or unsupported, thinking I didn't pick up on her subtle cues that she needed help or an offer to skip the meeting.

- My focus on the agenda could have come across as a lack of empathy or care for her wellbeing.

Where's the disconnect?

This disconnect isn't about bad intentions - it's about mismatched communication styles.

It's easy to see how Angie might have felt hurt, thinking I didn't care enough to ask if she wanted me to handle the agenda so she could rest and skip the meeting. Is that where the perception of being unempathetic, selfish, or even 'bitchy' comes from for neurodivergent people?

From my perspective, I couldn't understand why Angie didn't just say outright that she wasn't planning to come. I didn't feel the need to check in with her - after all, she's an adult, isn't she?

By the end of the exchange, I felt frustrated, like she was being inauthentic or wasting my time, while she likely felt uncared for or unsupported. This is the heart of the disconnect: communication styles where both sides come away with unmet expectations and misaligned interpretations of the situation.

So what can we do?

To navigate these communication differences, it helps to develop a framework for decoding indirect cues while maintaining clarity and understanding.

Ask Clarifying Questions

Instead of assuming Angie's intent, I could have followed up with in a kind and nonjudgmental way: 'Are you saying you'd prefer not to come to the meeting tonight? I'd be happy to handle it if you need a break.' This approach aligns expectations and provides clarity.

Learn Individual Patterns

Over time, you'll start to notice specific phrases or behaviours that hint at what someone really means.

For example, if Angie often mentions feeling tired when she needs a break, you can start recognising this as her way of saying, 'I'm not up for it.' It might not feel natural to you, but it's a useful shortcut for understanding her needs.

Tip: Using the Mum categories from earlier can help here ([Section 5](#)) - if Angie falls into a high-value category, it might be worth putting in the effort to figure out her patterns.

Acknowledge Without Overthinking

Sometimes, a simple response can go a long way. I might have said:

- 'It sounds like you've had a tough day. If you're too tired, I'm happy to handle tonight's meeting without you.'

This way, Angie feels heard and supported, while still leaving space for her subtle communication style.

The issue isn't bad intentions - it's just mismatched styles.

- **For Angie:** Her indirectness isn't manipulative; it's a common way some people signal their needs without outright asking for help.
- **For Me:** My preference for directness isn't unsupportive - it's about valuing clarity and efficiency.

In the end, we both walked away frustrated and misunderstood because we were approaching the same situation from completely different angles.

3. Recognising Unwritten Rules

Neurotypical people often follow unspoken rules about status and hierarchy. Their tone, posture, or behaviour will shift based on who's around. For example, they might be formal and polite with the principal but laid-back and chatty with the school mums.

- **How They Appear to Us:** For neurodivergent people, this can feel exhausting - or even insincere. You might find yourself wondering: 'Why can't you just treat everyone the same?'

Strategy

Instead of seeing this as a lack of authenticity, think of it as a cultural skill. If you want to engage in these spaces effectively, try mirroring the behaviour to an extent that feels comfortable for you. For example, adapt your tone slightly in professional settings without losing your unique voice.

4. Preference for Conformity

Neurotypical people often lean toward group consensus as a way to avoid conflict or rejection. This can show up in how they match opinions, dress, or behaviours within a social group.

- **What to Look For:**
 - Uniformity in conversation topics, fashion choices, or shared hobbies within a group.
 - Conversations that seem to follow the 'safe' or most popular trends rather than venturing into personal or unique interests.
- **How They May Appear to Us:** This can feel like a lack of individuality or being overly cautious. You might feel out of place if your interests, style or self-expression don't align with the group.

Strategy

Instead of masking entirely, find small-ways to align without losing your authenticity. For instance, if everyone is discussing a particular sport but you know nothing about the topic, ask questions about their interest instead of feeling pressured to fake expertise.

5. Recognising Discomfort with Vulnerability

Neurotypical people may avoid heavy or emotional topics in casual settings - not because they lack depth, but because they worry these conversations could disrupt social harmony.

What to Look For

- Watch for quick shifts to lighter or safer topics if the conversation veers toward personal struggles or controversial ideas.
- A tendency to keep things upbeat, even when deeper topics are hinted at.

How They Appear to Us: This might seem dismissive or shallow, leaving you wondering, 'Why do they avoid the things that matter?' This disconnect often stems from different approaches to vulnerability: neurodivergent people tend to dive deep right away, while neurotypical people reserve emotional openness for their most trusted relationships.

Strategy

If you'd like to build a connection, build trust gradually. Start with mid-level emotional exchanges, like sharing a personal story that's not too raw but invites connection.

6. Missing the Non-Verbal Cues

Neurotypical communication often relies heavily on subtle, non-verbal signals - like facial expressions, tone of voice, or body language - to convey emotions and intentions. These cues can be fleeting and easy to miss, especially if you're thinking about something else entirely, which can lead to misunderstandings.

What to Look For

- **Non-Verbal Signals:** A sigh, a slight pause, or a change in tone during a conversation might indicate frustration, excitement, or hesitation.
- **Context Matters:** Neurotypical people use these signals to complement their words, but what they say and what they mean don't always align.

Example

A neurotypical mum smiles, nods, and casually says, 'How was your day?' as she walk by at pick-up.

- A neurodivergent person might interpret this as a genuine question and respond with a detailed account of their day.
- However, the neurotypical person, likely meant it as a brief, friendly greeting while heading to their car. As they grow visibly agitated or distracted, the neurodivergent person may feel confused, wondering, 'Why did they ask if they didn't want to know?'

How They Appear to Us: To neurodivergent individuals, neurotypical people might seem emotionally inconsistent:

- They might smile and nod while feeling rushed or stressed, which can feel contradictory.
- Their questions may seem superficial or even disingenuous if their intent isn't fully communicated verbally.

How can we decode this and respond?

1. **Focus on Patterns and Context:** Observe common patterns in neurotypical interactions, such as how they use greetings or small talk. This would be exhausting to do with every person but try to do it with the high value category people.
 - For example, if someone often says, 'How was your day?' to everyone, it's likely a general pleasantry, not an invitation for a detailed response.
2. **Have Short Responses Ready:** Prepare concise responses for common questions like:

- 'How was your day?'
 - 'It's been good, thanks - getting ready for the school holidays is busy! How was yours?'

This matches their conversational pace while keeping it polite and easy for you.

3. **Gauge Their Engagement:** Pay attention to their non-verbal cues to determine whether they want to continue the conversation or are ready to move on. Signs they want to end the interaction might include stepping away, glancing at their watch, or giving brief responses.

This can feel very frustrating!

For neurodivergent people, it can feel pointless - or even infuriating - to be asked questions if the neurotypical doesn't want to know the answer. However, for neurotypical people, these exchanges are often about maintaining social bonds rather than exchanging in-depth information. Recognising this purpose can help reduce frustration and make interactions feel less confusing.

7. Neurotypical people often don't realise that not everyone else thinks like them.

Neurotypical individuals may unconsciously assume that their preferences are universal, which can feel invalidating to neurodivergent people.

What to Look For: Comments like 'Everyone struggles with focus sometimes' or 'That's just how the world works' or 'It's not that hard to arrive on time.'

How They Appear to Us: This can come across as dismissive or reductive, making neurodivergent individuals feel unheard.

Strategy: Firstly identify if this person is in the high value category and is someone you would like to build a relationship with. Gently challenge these assumptions by sharing your perspective without hostility. For example, 'I get why it seems that way, but my experience feels different. Let me explain what it's like for me.'

Why should we bother? Why is it always up to us?

It's important for neurodivergent mums to learn how to communicate with neurotypical people - not to change who we are, but to bridge that gap for our kids and show them what true inclusion looks like. Building those skills means we can better connect with teachers, parents, and even bosses when it matters most, creating stronger relationships that directly benefit our children. It's about showing our kids that while people may work differently, we can still communicate effectively, advocate for ourselves, and navigate those relationships with confidence.

This doesn't mean avoiding neurotypical people or masking to fit their style. It's about recognising that if a relationship is important - whether it's with your child's teacher, their best friends parent, or someone in authority - it's worth understanding how they operate. By bridging the communication gap, we can also teach neurotypical people that different isn't wrong, it's just different. When we do this, we model to our kids how to approach the world with curiosity and understanding, building an inclusive environment where everyone can thrive.

Section 19: How to Spot a Neurodivergent Mum

If you're looking to connect with neurodivergent mums, it can be helpful to recognise some common traits. These connections are often incredibly rewarding, as neurodivergent mums:

- Are more likely to have neurodivergent children, who might naturally click with your own child.
- Are often more accepting of your child's traits or quirks because they've likely experienced similar things.
- Tend to "get" your communication style, making interactions easier and more authentic.
- Offer a deeper level of connection through shared experiences and mutual understanding.

While building these connections can feel more comfortable, it doesn't mean neurodivergent mums have to be your only friends. Neurotypical friendships bring value too, offering different perspectives and social experiences.

Start with the Kids: Spotting Neurodivergent Traits in Children

Children often show neurodivergent traits more openly than adults, making them a good starting point for finding like-minded parents. Also, this is how I cope at birthday parties - I spot the neurodivergent child and work my way back to the parent.

Nonstop Movement	Children who are running and running without seeming to tire.
Intense Interactions	Children who get very up close and personal with adults or other children - sometimes overwhelming others with their intensity or don't stop even when the other child asks them too.
Emotional Regulation Struggles	Children who are visibly upset when things don't go as expected or who find it hard to recover from a change.
Unique Presentation:	Children present so differently they could be clinging to their mum, playing by themselves, or even grouped with other kids who share similar traits.
Sensory Sensitivities	Children who react strongly to sensory input—like blocking their ears at concerts, avoiding water play, or complaining about their clothes.

Spotting a Neurodivergent Mum

Once you've identified neurodivergent kids, it's easier to spot their parents. But you can also look for these traits in mums themselves:

1. *Social Behaviour Patterns*

- **Focus on Task-Driven Interaction:** Neurodivergent mums often prioritise practical communication. They may jump into conversations with questions or statements about logistics rather than starting with small talk.
 - **Example:** Instead of, 'How was your weekend?' they might say, 'Did you see the homework for the kids?'
- **Selective Participation:** They might seem engaged in certain settings but struggle in others. For instance, they may actively contribute in one-on-one conversations but avoid group settings like school committees.

2. *Overwhelm in Sensory-Rich Environments*

- Neurodivergent mums might appear anxious or fatigued in chaotic environments like school drop-offs, sports events, or busy playgrounds.
 - Look for signs like sunglasses on cloudy days, AirPods at the park, or a preference for standing on the edges of crowds.

3. *Parenting Styles*

- Neurodivergent parents may rely on structured routines or systems to manage overwhelm.
 - **Example:** They may have a strict sensory diet for their child or a hyper-detailed weekly schedule that guides all family activities. Or they are the opposite and are in disarray, late, and frantically asking questions like 'Is it swimming today or tomorrow?'

4. Unapologetic Authenticity

- Neurodivergent mums are often deeply themselves - sometimes to the point where they break unspoken social norms. This could manifest as:
 - Oversharing personal struggles in casual conversation.
 - Expressing blunt opinions about parenting styles.
 - Opting out of traditional 'mum culture' events like coffee mornings.

5. Masking with Clear Cracks

- Many neurodivergent mums mask in public spaces but might let their guard down with close friends or in safe settings.
 - **Look for:** Someone who seems polished and put-together but occasionally reveals raw honesty, like confessing how exhausting it is to socialise. Or someone with fluctuating motivation, one day they are polished, the next day they avoid people and abruptly leave.

6. Strong Advocacy or Specialised Knowledge

- Neurodivergent mums are often fierce advocates, especially if their child is also neurodivergent. They may have deep, research-backed knowledge on neurodivergent children.
 - **Example:** They might casually reference studies about executive dysfunction or bring up really interesting new strategies for inclusion.

7. Preference for Scheduling or Chaos

- Neurodivergent mums may show a lack of consistency in their preferred communication styles. Some might favour texting or emails over phone calls or face-to-face conversations, as processing social cues during live interactions can feel draining. You might notice a mum who schedules playdates or catch-ups over messages but rarely engages in lengthy conversations during school pick-up.
- However, this isn't always the case - some neurodivergent mums might struggle to reply to texts altogether and prefer spontaneous plans, like saying, 'Let's go to the park now.' The key is recognising that neurodivergent individuals are often less likely to be consistent in their approach, as their energy and communication preferences can vary depending on circumstances or sensory demands.

8. Sensory Habits

- Subtle stimming behaviours, like tapping fingers, playing with jewelry, or shifting positions frequently, can be clues.
 - **Look for:** Someone who seems to fidget during waiting periods or avoids eye contact during longer conversations.

9. Rejection Sensitivity and Emotional Intensity

- Neurodivergent mums can sometimes react strongly to perceived criticism, often going out of their way to repair any potential misunderstandings. You might notice quick apologies after a conversation or a follow-up message asking, 'Did I upset you?' This isn't about being overly sensitive - it's a sign of how much they value connection and want to make sure they're understood. Recognising these behaviours can help you approach these interactions with empathy and reassurance.

10. Dropping some hints

- Neurodivergent Mums often find deep connections through shared experiences. You might hear them say things like, 'I completely understand - my brain works like that too!' or 'I wish I'd had those tools when I was a kid.' These moments of relatability can create an instant bond, offering a sense of being truly seen and understood. Sometimes, neurodivergent mums will also drop a subtle comment or clue during a conversation - something only another neurodivergent mum would pick up on - as a way to gauge if they're on the same wavelength.
 - For example: 'I'm always forgetting things, even when I write them down. It's like my brain just takes a detour.' or 'My child gets so hyper-focused on their favourite topic - it's amazing to watch but hard to pull them out of it!'
- It's like testing the waters to see if the other person 'gets it,' creating an opportunity for connection based on mutual understanding.
- You can try this approach too by casually bringing something up without directly saying, 'I'm neurodivergent, are you?' This can feel more comfortable, especially if you're unsure whether the other person is familiar with neurodivergence. It's a way to test the waters without putting yourself in an awkward position if they don't understand or relate.

11. Let's not overcomplicate it and diagnose everyone at pick up to determine the communication style.

Neurodivergent mums don't have to be your only friends, but if you prefer connecting with them, it's absolutely okay to seek them out. While these patterns can offer clues about neurodivergence, it's important to remember that everyone experiences traits differently. Instead of jumping to conclusions or even telling another mum they could be neurodivergent - focus on building connection through open conversations about shared experiences.

Neurodivergent mums often gravitate toward spaces where advocacy, authenticity, and understanding thrive - creating environments where they and their families feel safe, seen, and supported. That's where real connections are built.

Conclusion

So, there you have it - the school pick-up survival guide you never knew you needed but are probably glad you've got now. If you're reading this thinking, 'Okay, great, but can I still just hide in the car?' - absolutely, yes. This isn't about becoming some perfect, Instagram-worthy parent who nails every playground interaction. It's about making school pick-up suck a little less, one awkward wave and over-thought conversation at a time.

It's hard to mask, and you don't have to. Trust me, I'm not out here expecting you to channel your inner social butterfly when most days my own inner butterfly has flown straight into a wall. I have built this guide and strategies not so I can do them everyday - but so I can use them when I need to.

This guide is about options, not obligations. Think of it like a toolkit you can grab from when the stakes feel high - like when you're trying not to offend a P&C committee member who seems like they run the entire school calendar or a principal who you just can't find a way to connect with. Pick your battles, because let's face it, some days are just *not* the day for trying to make eye contact or remember which mum is the one with twins.

And yes, I get it - it's exhausting to think about adapting your communication style when just remembering the right coloured t-shirt on the right day is more than enough. This guide is about giving you some social strategies for when you need them, not for becoming the next P&C president. (Spoiler: that's never happening for me, mostly because I'd be the one emailing the principal about whether we can turn the meetings into silent Zoom calls with no cameras.)

Whether you're the mum sprinting to the gate in yoga pants that may or may not have ever been to yoga, the one rehearsing small talk on the walk over, or the mysterious figure who only emerges from their car when the coast is clear - you're doing your best. And honestly? That's more than enough.

This is about showing up when you can, finding your people (or at least people you don't actively avoid), and teaching your kids that it's okay to be yourself - even if that self is awkward, a bit sweaty, and pretending you didn't just trip over your own feet on the way in.

Now, go forth and awkwardly nod at someone, or retreat to your car guilt-free. If I can survive this, you've got this too. (Or at least, you've got an exit strategy. And a guide written by someone who has learned the hard way not to bring up theories about what happens after you die as your small talk opener.)

Note: *This guide is designed to offer insights and strategies for navigating social dynamics, especially for neurodivergent mums. It's here to support and inspire you, but it's not a substitute for professional advice or personalised support.*

Every neurodivergent journey is unique, and what works for one person may not work for another. Take what resonates, adapt as needed, and use this guide as a tool to help you build connections and confidence in a way that feels authentic to you.

If you have questions, feedback, or want to share your experience, we'd love to hear from you! Reach out at admin@adhdiums.com.au. For tailored support, please consult a trusted professional.

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