

Understanding and Supporting Neurodivergent Students During GCSE Preparation

When we talk about a neurodivergent young person struggling to "just get on" with their studies—especially when they're clearly intelligent and capable—it's often less about laziness or defiance and more about something like inertia, though that word might not fully capture it. Think of it as a kind of mental gridlock: the engine's running, but the gears won't shift. This can hit hard around adolescence, when the demands of school ramp up—GCSEs looming, more abstract thinking required, less structure spoon-fed to them—and it clashes with how their brain processes the world.



by Michelle Stonehill

Executive Functioning: The Brain's Air Traffic Control

Think of executive functioning as your brain's air traffic control tower. It coordinates multiple "flights" of thought, directs where attention should land, and ensures all cognitive tasks take off and land safely. For many neurodivergent people, this control tower works differently. They might excel at processing individual pieces of information—like memorising facts or understanding complex concepts—but struggle with the coordination aspects: starting work, switching between tasks, managing time, or maintaining focus when motivation dips. In primary school, they often thrive because the environment provides external structure—like having preset runways and flight paths. But when puberty arrives and academic demands increase, suddenly they're asked to be their own air traffic controller, juggling multiple things, and unclear or unknown expectations. They're not **choosing** to struggle; rather, their brain's coordination system is operating on a different frequency, making it harder to smoothly direct all this mental traffic.



Barriers to Progress: Understanding the Challenges

1

Overwhelm

When faced with organising GCSE revision materials, many neurodivergent students freeze at the sheer volume. Simple tasks like being asked to create a revision timetable (which actually probably isn't a good idea), or deciding which topic to tackle first, can feel like scaling Everest - especially when executive functioning challenges make categorising and prioritising naturally difficult.

2

Perfectionism

A student might spend three hours perfecting notes for a single Biology topic, rewriting them multiple times until exhaustion sets in, leaving no energy for the remaining topics. This perfectionism often stems from past experiences where their different way of working was criticised, leading to an overcorrection in precision.

3

Sensory Overload

The noise (or quiet) of home, the hum of electronics or noise from family activities, the smells, the pets... all can derail focus.

4

Motivation Challenges

Even when fully understanding the importance of GCSEs, a neurodivergent student might find themselves hyper-focused on a personal project or researching an unrelated special interest for hours. Their brain's reward system often responds more strongly to these immediate, engaging activities than to the delayed gratification of exam preparation.

What might appear as procrastination or avoidance is often a complex defense mechanism - protecting themselves from the frustration of not being able to perform at their known potential, despite having the underlying capability. This is particularly evident during GCSE preparation, where the gap between intellectual ability and executive function challenges becomes most apparent.

Effective Strategies for Parents and Teachers

As parents or teachers, pushing harder can backfire—think of it like revving an engine that's already flooded. Instead, break the gridlock gently:

- Chunk the work into stupidly small, concrete steps: not "study biology," but "Just read this section on BBC Bitesize about plant cells".
- Pair it with something they're into—tie it to a silly song on YouTube they can be silly to, or let them pace while reciting facts.
- Routine's gold; same time, same place, no surprises.
- Ditch the guilt trips—focus on what **works** for them, not what's "normal."
- If they're dodging, dig for the why: sensory stuff? Anxiety? Too abstract?
- Tools like visual timers or body doubling (you sit nearby, working on your own thing) can kickstart momentum.
- Don't miss spotting burnout—sometimes they do need a real break, not just a nag to "try harder."

Understanding Executive Functioning

Executive functioning—the brain's command centre—handles starting tasks, staying on track, switching gears, and seeing things through. For a neurodivergent young person stalled on GCSE revision, it's often less about willpower and more about that system misfiring. There are strategies to scaffold it, like externalising the bits their brain struggles to manage. These aren't one-size-fits-all, but they're practical, tweakable, and might be able to nudge momentum when inertia's set in.

Practical Strategies for Executive Function Support

Task Initiation: Kickstarting the Engine

Break tasks into absurdly small pieces. Pair it with a cue: a specific song, a sip of tea. Use visual starters and body doubling. Try the "five-minute rule"—commit to just five minutes, then stop if they want.

After five minutes they may feel able to do five more, then five more, and then they may be so engrossed an hour has gone by!

Planning and Prioritising: Mapping the Chaos

One goal per day. Focus on must-haves. Anything else is a bonus. Use their interests as a filter. A simple paper list can offload the mental juggling. Don't have big charts and extensive timetables for revision, because once it's gone wrong there'll be no point in carrying on in their mind.

Time Management: Taming the Clock

Use visual timers for concrete time representation. Set short bursts - whatever works. Link it to their rhythm and avoid open-ended study sessions.

Additional Strategies for Focus and Self-Monitoring

Focus and Distraction: Guarding the Zone

Finding a good work spot: quiet room, noise-cancelling headphones, or white noise. Clear the desk—minimal clutter. Bargain with hyper-fixations. Use tech wisely—block distractions but definitely use it for note-taking if helpful.

Self-Monitoring: Checking the Gauges

Build in checkpoints. Use sticky notes with prompts. Track progress like game stats. Celebrate micro-wins.

Flexibility: Dodging the Perfection Trap

Aim for "good enough" instead of perfection. Pivot when tasks stall. "Done is better than perfect" is the mantra.

Tailoring Strategies and Moving Forward

Every brain operates on its own unique software, so customisation is key. If traditional methods like timers create anxiety, switch to natural breaks like "one topic, then rest." If visual aids don't resonate, try audio approaches—record key points or discuss concepts aloud. Pay attention to energy levels: like any processor, they need cooling-down periods. Match strategies to their interests—turn revision into a game for competitive spirits, weave concepts into stories for narrative thinkers, or transform study sessions into movement with walking discussions or exercise bike reviews.

These strategies aren't about fixing a 'bug'—they're more like installing helpful plugins to support executive function. The key is finding the right combination of tools and using them consistently.

The pressure of GCSEs is significant, but it's crucial to remember that neurodivergent brains aren't defective—they're running on a different, equally valid operating system. Instead of forcing compatibility with standard approaches, we can customise the interface. When we find adaptations to match their processing style, that's when we see their true capabilities emerge.