

Reframing Autism: end of funding evaluation report

1. What did we plan to achieve?

Our aim:

To reframe Autism for Autistic children/young people and their families by empowering them to embrace their neurology, validate their strengths and create community connectedness through their Autistic identity, thereby improving overall mental health.

To meet this aim, our objectives were:

- To create a safe, nurturing space in the woods, supported by a team of therapeutic practitioners, designed to encourage Autistic authenticity and autonomy via:
 - Play Therapy
 - Occupational Therapy
 - Support and guidance from Kieran Rose (The Autistic Advocate)
 - Forest School
- To offer a support hub for parents/carers and family members to gain transferable skills and guidance which will shape how they support their children at home.
- To reframe Autism within both neurodivergent and neurotypical communities by sharing the Autistic voices of our children/young people via digital stories.

2. Why was this provision needed?

Mental ill health within the Autistic community is disproportionately high. The averaging range of death for Autistic people is between 36-54 years; depression is experienced by 40% of the Autistic population¹; and up to 77% of Autistics have a recognisable anxiety disorder². 66% of the Autistic population has contemplated suicide, while 35% of the population has attempted suicide³; meaning Autistics are 3 times more likely to commit suicide than the general population⁴.

There's a growing body of academic and anecdotal work which recognises that poor mental health experienced by Neurodivergents is mostly down to developmental trauma from

¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29497980/>

² <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/aut.2019.0044>

³ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-020-04643-9>

⁴ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2774847>

invalidation and marginalisation by a stigmatising society designed to meet the needs of Neurotypical people and exclude those whose needs differ⁵. Mental Health for Neurodivergent people improves when those needs are identified and met, enabling them to be authentic and autonomous⁶ and allowing them to fulfil their own social needs, rather than meet the social expectations of others. It also improves when Neurodivergent people are given the opportunity to share space with each other⁷.

Reframing Autism provided that space, whilst enabling long term community connectedness and identity. The digital film created will be used by Stomping Grounds North East and The Autistic Advocate to support other families to better understand what it means to young people to be neurodivergent; and how family members, services, and peers can adapt their communication styles and social expectations, therefore enabling positive mental health and avoiding burnout.

3. How did the voice of local neurodivergent families shape our provision?

The feedback from neurodivergent families that we have worked with long term has been overwhelmingly positive:

“She has found her people. I have never seen her so happy and so true to herself.”

Conversations and focus groups have highlighted a lack of support for families rather than individuals, and how to meet a variety of different needs when siblings may present differently.

“Forest school is the only place my kids can co-play as it suits both hypo & hypersensitive. This is our main struggle at home. Catering to both.”

When consulted, 77 % of families said that long wait times for assessment, OT appointments and access to Play Therapy were their main barriers to improved mental health. Many suggested that support for families and carers would be helpful, rather than having to wait until crisis point:

“Waiting lists. Support only tends to be offered if the person is in crisis. However, support with day to day issues, tips, skills would also be beneficial to prevent getting

⁵ <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/aut.2019.0044>

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2020.1822782>

⁷ <https://openresearch.surrey.ac.uk/esploro/outputs/doctoral/Autistic-community-connectiveness-as-a-buffer/99512577202346>

to crisis stage in the first place and to help have a greater quality of life and reduce stress in family carers.”

Others stated they need access to Occupational Therapy but waiting lists were too long. Access to multidisciplinary support would help provide:

“Guidance on parenting neurodivergent children. Guidance on educating others in social/family circle.”

A chance to gain transferable skills and advice to better support their children at home was also important:

“Input on what my son is gaining from a particular thing he is doing & how we could transfer that sensory input at home.”

Including an Occupational Therapist and Play Therapist in the session design and delivery ensured that parents had professional input and access to support and advice that they could then take away and implement in other settings.

4. How did we recruit participants to our provision?

We advertised this project on our social media channels, online newsletter, and invited regional autism support organisations to share with their members.

We shared an online application form, which invited potential participants to tell us about how they would benefit from this project. We received 49 applications from families across the region.

We met as a team to shortlist which families we felt would most benefit. We scored applicants on whether they were already accessing SG, how far along their journey of diagnosis, acceptance and advocacy they were, which other services were involved and their local support networks. We also took into account co-morbidities and perceived parental and sibling mental health.

Originally we had intended to offer 12 spaces, but due to the overwhelming need we decided to offer 24 spaces and split the sessions into 2 groups. We split the 12 available sessions to allow each family to attend 6 sessions in total. This increased the total number of families accessing our provision as a reflection of the level of interest and need demonstrated in the applications we received.

5. Who attended our provision?

At each session delivered, a combination of practitioners attended; at every session a Therapeutic Forest School Practitioner was present, with at least 2 other specialist practitioners attending also, including an Occupational Therapist (5/11 sessions), Play Therapist (8/11 sessions) and Autism Consultant (9/11 sessions).

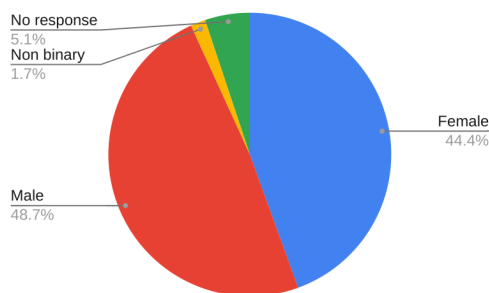
In total, over a 12 month period, we:

- Delivered **11** sessions
- Reached **117 people** from **28 families**
- Welcomed **60 children/young people** and **57 adults**.

We collected data on gender, ethnicity and disability to establish our current reach within local autistic communities, identify where gaps in representation might impact our offer, acknowledge the impact of intersectionality on neurodivergent people and reflect on ways in which to this represent diversity in future cohorts.

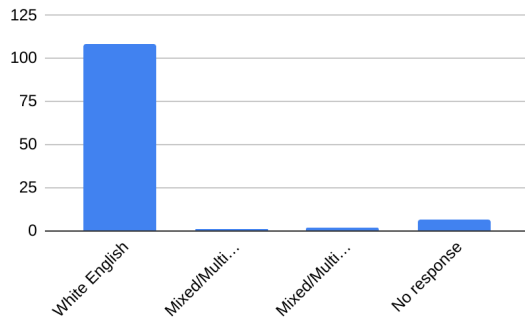
Gender

Female	52
Male	57
Non binary	2
No response	6



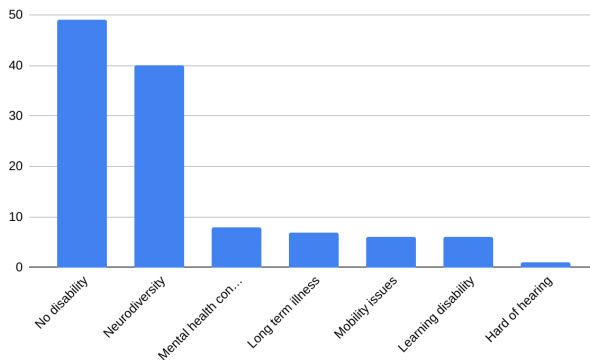
Ethnicity

White English	108
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups: White and Asian	1
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups: Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background	2
No response	6



Disability

No disability	49
Neurodiversity	40
Mental health condition	8
Long term illness	7
Mobility issues	6
Learning disability	6
Hard of hearing	1



6. How did we evaluate our provision?

This project had short, medium and long term objectives; short and medium term objectives were measured throughout its delivery in an iterative process of ‘feedback - analysis - reflection - action’. In this way, our provision responded to its participants in a timely manner and shaped practitioner delivery in real time by collecting feedback to try and meet individual needs. As such our evaluation strategy was threefold, collecting data using:

- Pre and post surveys for parents/carers - at beginning and mid point of project

- Face to face semi-structured interviews⁸ with children/young people and their families - at mid point with our evaluator and with our filmmaker
- Practitioner observations - of each child/young person following each session, to include in their Passports.

10 parent/carers, **6** children/young people and **3** practitioners participated in semi-structured interviews; **10** parent/carers responded to surveys; **4** practitioners completed Passports for **37** children/young people.

Our Forest School Practitioners used feedback from parents/carers after their first session in the woods to shape provision moving forward. For example, respondents stated that it was difficult for them to see who were staff and who were participants; we wore high vis jackets for subsequent sessions.

Project outputs included:

- Digital stories of Autistic children/young people and their families to share within our project and externally (link to film included within this report).
- ‘Passports’ for Autistic children/young people illustrating their personal story, holding all relevant information about their neurodivergent journey to share with relevant agencies and stakeholders.
- Evaluation report discussing aim and objectives achieved, and next steps.

7. How did we meet our aim and objectives?

7.1. Creating a safe, nurturing space to encourage Autistic authenticity and autonomy

Freedom of expression in a low demand space

One of our forest school practitioners summarised our approach to this project in the woods:

“Reframing Autism means here, for us, that we are taking our time to look at what being autistic means for the autistic person, following their lead and trying to join

⁸ We found that using Blob Tree images to initiate conversation and collect data interrupted the flow of families engaging with forest school during sessions. Instead, our evaluator engaged in conversation during shoulder to shoulder opportunities, joining in with children/young people and finding spaces to ask questions in a way which lent itself to more natural interaction.

their world, rather than thinking we need to make them try to conform to ours.” (FS practitioner)

Feedback from parents/carers and children/young people (CYP) illustrates how was received by families in the woods:

“The practitioners make it clear that there are no rigid expectations; you don't have to conform and you can just be yourself. This brings out the best in everyone I think. There's no pressure.” (Parent/carer)

For some families, the loose structure suited the needs of their CYP and support regulation during the session:

“We liked how laid back it was - the structure worked well for us as it wasn't so restrictive. We liked that we knew we could leave at any point if she did struggle too much, and it's been one of the only autism friendly things we've done recently that we've actually managed to stay the whole session and not carry her out upset or overwhelmed.” (Parent/carer)

Some of the CYP participating compared their experience in the woods with their time in school, highlighting the importance of freedom to move and express themselves:

“We're free to do whatever we want - it's not like school where we're trapped in a building, basically like a prison, we can't get out whenever we want. Out here we can run around and do what we want and make things, and it's much more fun.” (CYP)

“There's a lot more things to do and it feels calmer than school. (CYP)

“I usually light the fire, go in the hammock and have a cup of tea - perfect life!” (CYP)

“Sometimes I prefer to go (to the fire circle), and sometimes I don't.” (CYP)

Some of our staff team are neurodivergent and expressed a similar sense of freedom in a space where they felt safe to be themselves:

“For me, this is a really good environment to be in as someone who's autistic because it's not too claustrophobic and there's a lot of freedom, and you kind of get to be who you want to be.” (FS practitioner)

Whilst the CYP experience their time as feeling free, our practitioners were acknowledged for offering opportunities to build on this, through interests-based activities:

“The forest school practitioners are so supportive and are interested in what the children have to say and encourage them always. The activities offered are wide ranging and always interest the children and encourage them to try new things.”
(Parent/carer)

Opportunities for freedom of expression in whichever ways fulfil their sensory profile are abundant for CYP in the woods:

“With autism, it's all about expressing. So if they can get out and just express themselves with mud, or just through voice - [child] is brilliant with songs, he loves to sing.” (Parent/carer)

“When he's confined to 4 walls, there's not enough to keep him occupied, so he really enjoys it [here]. It's the exploring, and for [child] it's the textures - he's a really sensory person so he loves all the feel of it and the noise. Also the fact that if he wants to go and wander further away, in a quiet place, there's plenty of that as well.”
(Parent/carer)

“Happy, and a little bit relaxed.” (CYP)

“I love it because I get to go in the water and get muddy.” (CYP)

Responsive and flexible forest school (using family feedback to shape provision)

An important aspect of forest school is reflection informing planning; this occurred in sessions and via online surveys, then shaped our offer in the woods:

“Every session we are offered an opportunity to say how it went and what we would like to see going forward.” (Parent/carer)

Some parent/carers felt the structure of our sessions was lacking; whilst this suited some of our cohort, it did not work for others:

“I know forest school ethos is child led but I know my child responds better to structure so it may be an idea to put more structure if possible.” (Parent/carer)

“There's not really a structure to the sessions - we spend a lot of time wandering as my son finds it hard to focus without any structure.” (Parent/carer)

In response, we provided a written, visible ‘structure’ on a blackboard, available for families and participants to access and apply their own timings to.

Another parent/carer commented that visual prompts would have been beneficial for our participants, supporting their understanding of what was on offer and potentially reducing anxiety around the unknown:

“Some visuals saying tea, coffee cups etc in the sheltered area would have been good as we weren't sure what was what, but we rely a lot on visuals at home and she does at school.” (Parent/carer)

In response, we made small signs and information boards about the activities on offer, as well as signs for different spaces, “tea/coffee”, “Toilet this way”.

A sense of belonging - a space to be authentically Autistic

One of our staff team is an Autism Consultant with lived experience; here he summarises his purpose within our provision, focused on supporting the family as a whole:

“What I’m doing here is to support parents to understand their children and to reframe those narratives around those children, but also to help provide a natural, authentic space for autistic people and autistic children in which they can flourish, access natural sensory environments and develop a community alongside each other.” (TAA)

Creating and holding this space for our families in the woods reduced feelings of isolation, highlighted shared experiences amongst families and began to consolidate a sense of community amongst our participants as sessions progressed. A common theme in parent/carer feedback was around safety; largely this was not about safety and risk in the sense of potential physical harm, but of feeling safe for their child to express their authentic autistic self without judgement and reaction of others:

“Stomping Grounds is definitely a safe environment for us. As parents we feel we can be our true selves without judgement; our children are instantly more relaxed than they are in most other environments. We see a significant difference in them both.” (Parent/carer)

“[This] safe environment is key as sometimes in sessions that are not just autism but for everyone, people judge you for the melt downs , they see you as having badly behaved kids and it can be hard.” (Parent/carer)

“Spending time with other neurodivergent families has a positive impact. Our children play freely; they do not feel judged as they sometimes do in other environments.” (Parent/carer)

Some parents/carers discussed neurodivergent masking (concealing or suppressing neurodivergent behaviours/traits; artificial performance of social behaviours deemed more 'socially acceptable' in a neurotypical culture). Masking can have a significant negative impact on the mental health of neurodivergent people; this project has offered a safe space, free from judgement, connecting with nature and with freedom of expression, and parent/carers are reporting their children being able to be their authentic selves. At our forest school sessions, with long term provision alongside the same participants and staff, some children/young people felt safe to unmask:

"My daughter is completely herself and just drops her mask as she knows this is her space and place." (Parent/carer)

"Coming to this has helped [child] just be himself and there is no judgement from others." (Parent/carer)

"She just comes alive a bit more when you take the pressure off and this is definitely one of the environments where the pressure comes off. There's no mention of having to be anyone's anything." (Parent/carer)

One parent/carer described the impact of a discussion with one of our forest school practitioners with lived experience upon their child's understanding of themselves:

After chatting with [practitioner] at our session on Sunday, [my child] said "When we come here I realise that we're not the only ones and lots of people have struggles like I do". This is one of the most wonderful reassuring things I could have heard, no one telling her this, just her observation. That has had more positive impact and is more empowering than any Early Help worker or CYPS practitioner." (Parent/carer)

Other parent/carers shared a similar sense of joy at accessing a space with other neurodivergent people, focused on inclusivity and a sense of belonging:

"My daughter being with other children like her and not being judged is the best feeling as a parent who is used to the looks and judgements from others." (Parent/carer)

"It's lovely that he can be part of a club - sometimes I think with [child] being autistic, it's really hard for him to join in clubs and things. There's not that many inclusive things that he can go to every time and get excited about." (Parent/carer)

"We've been waiting for (this session) all month because it's the only thing that he does and the only thing that he can do, and he absolutely loves it. He's been asking

every day when are we coming back, he just constantly asks about it - he loves it.
(Parent/carer)

For one family, attending Reframing Autism has had a wider impact, encouraging two CYP to attend one of our settings elsewhere in Newcastle: their parent/carer explains:

“This experience has meant (YP1) and (YP2) now go to forest school at Benwell in the past two school holidays, which is something I normally struggle to get (YP1) to agree to as she struggles with new places and making friends . She can’t wait to go back and see the practitioners.” (Parent/carer)

As our staff team includes many practitioners with Therapeutic forest school training and an organisation level ethos of inclusivity, our wider forest school offer can provide a next step for some CYP who engaged with Reframing Autism. Our hope is that through this project many more CYP can embrace their authentic autistic selves and feel safe to access other forest school sessions on offer with us, thereby offering a sustainable arm to this project.

7.2. Offering a family support hub and opportunities to build transferable skills

Impacting wider family relationships and developing greater understanding of what being Autistic means

Reframing Autism has developed a support hub for families, where neurodivergent and neurotypical family members can benefit from forest school and the expertise of our multi-professional staff team. Here parent/carers describe how they have benefited from the breadth of our offer and its whole family impact:

“The timing was perfect for us; it gave us the opportunity to talk about autism without it seeming negative. It has created a foundation of positivity for us to build our journey on. [...] Our family has been through the mill a little and I'm very conscious that her younger sibling was going through all of this too. Forest school brings them together in a beautiful way; it reconnects them as sisters somehow.”
(Parent/carer)

“As a family - (our children) are not very secure necessarily going to places without us - so it was being able to do that, but in a space where they could still play. An environment that we know that they enjoy, coupled with access to conversations and support, all together.” (Parent/carer)

“It has been good for my husband and myself as we have only had interactions in a really safe space with people who have had and are having interactions with YP1 and

YP2 through school. We have also learnt how wide the spectrum is and how we all have different journeys, but we can support each other.” (Parent/carer)

Reframing Autism provided families with the safety, connection, knowledge and skills they needed to develop their understanding of autism and encouraged them to embrace their neurodivergent identities.

Access to fully funded, in-person professional support

Some parent/carers explained Reframing Autism was the only support which had a positive impact upon their families and autistic children; specifically parent/carers described a lack of professional support post-diagnosis and felt there was a gap in provision focusing on skills, knowledge and practical support for autistic CYP:

“Forest school is 'real' help. We have been given a bombardment of leaflets and links to web pages but no other true opportunity to access support. We're immensely grateful.” (Parent/carer)

“We do not have experience of any other form of family support and have not accessed any other provisions. We felt this was accessible to us as we greatly enjoy being in the outdoors and value the many benefits it has to offer us. We are not aware of any provision that offers this for this age group. Your ethos gives us great hope.” (Parent/carer)

“I struggle to access other provisions for family support as in the Gateshead area there is not much around and also nothing for my daughter that I have come across yet. The access to an occupational and play therapist is invaluable.” (Parent/carer)

For some parent/carers, Reframing Autism offered a simple opportunity for peace and relaxation:

“It's really peaceful; it helps us as well. We're really stressed out with him, and really tense all the time, and exhausted. To be honest this is 2 hours of peace and quiet and it's just lush - we absolutely love it.” (Parent/carer)

Other families explained that they would not have been able to access Reframing Autism if it had not been free at the point of service: it is vital we build in sustainability to future projects:

The project being funded meant we could actually access it, without funding we couldn't have enrolled. I can't work full time anymore, I am forever chasing medication and needles and back and forth to school attending trips, hospital

appointments, not to mention her sick days, so I'm extremely grateful for Comic Relief funding the project." (Parent/carer)

Developing skills to identify and fulfil needs at home

As families engaged with our multi-professional team, with practitioners available to observe/play/discuss with CYP and parent/carers, they were able to benefit from the shared skills and knowledge of our Occupational Therapist, Play Therapist and Autism Consultant. This sharing of knowledge and skills builds in sustainability to this project as those families can use this experience in practice in the longer term. The following parent/carers share the impact of their time with our specialist staff team:

"I'm now learning who we can talk to here, to work stuff out, where (TAA) might have experience and be able to help." (Parent/carer)

"[OT] gave so much fantastic advice which I have acted upon and that was just one session with her. I booked doctor's appointments in order to get referrals." (Parent/carer)

"We are at the very beginning of referral for [child] and I was a little overwhelmed with what my role should be, how I could help her best. [OT] spent time with me, listening to me and sharing her thoughts and ideas, which was invaluable. I came away feeling much more prepared and much less anxious. Nobody seems to tell you what you need to be doing and she truly was my knight in shining armour when I needed it." (Parent/carer)

"The OT has gave good strategies to help calm situations. She has also gave sensory input ideas for our sensory seeking." (Parent/carer)

[PT] really engaged with the children and encouraged them to not just do one thing but guided them in how else to do something." (Parent/carer)

One of the team I spoke to about [my child's] trichotillomania and their daughter had it as well. That was massive, especially for me, to find another parent whose daughter had it. To have a discussion with somebody else who'd been in that boat. To then have that professional part added onto it - "I know what that's like. I also know that this can help and this can help". She was talking about pushing and pulling, shoulders, doing push ups - and it's from that we were like, right, let's go and buy a pull up bar, let's get resistance bands, let's get a yoga ball.

Over the next few months, when we are going to have to navigate different things for her at school, being able to have those conversations with specialists, to ask them “what can we do in this situation?”.

This feedback illustrates the individualised nature of the support offered by our practitioners to families at Reframing Autism. Their guidance is based on their specialist knowledge, skills and experience, on what they are observing in families in the woods, on the in-depth knowledge that parent/carers have of their children’s needs, and on the queries presented during each session. The Young Person’s Passport is then used to record these conversations and offer a shared document where parent/carers and practitioners can communicate, and then share with other professionals involved with that CYP if needed.

7.3. Young Person’s Passport - sharing stories of Autistic children/young people

Our multi-professional team of practitioners offered valuable support and guidance to our families participating in Reframing Autism. The interactions experienced during sessions were then evidenced in the Young Person’s Passport, where they could be accessed for personal reference and as an important standalone document summarising the journey of their child to share with other professionals.

As one parent/carer explained, the passport can act as a record of change over time, a chance to reflect on the impact of various stimuli and support, and the potential to shape requests for future provision:

“It was looking back through the notes, going back to the Passport, now that our situation has changed [for child], going back to that and “Actually, that was really helpful”. There was stuff there from an OT’s perspective that - like sucking with straws and those big movements.” (Parent/carer)

Examples of input from professionals to parents via their Young Person’s Passport

As the Young Person’s Passports are confidential documents, we cannot share an example here. However, excerpts of guidance from our practitioners are included below to illustrate the individualised approach to Reframing Autism.

Families benefited from the following input:

- Knowledge and practical application of polyvagal theory and 8 senses
- Sharing knowledge of health and education services, and which is appropriate to access
- Support around family relationships
- Validating parenting approaches

- Practical guidance to accessing forest school
- Validating the ways in which children/young people access forest school

Knowledge and practical application of polyvagal theory and 8 senses

We also discussed the guttural noises [child] makes and how he needs to make these noises to regulate himself. We talked about how guttural noise can be helpful to stimulate the vagus nerve which can trigger the parasympathetic nervous system, helping calm and soothe the body. We talked about how to communicate with school about all the ways [child] regulates himself so this can also be passed to the next school. (OT)

We talked about the receptors in the skin, some being towards the surface of the skin and some being far down in the skin - by stimulating the deeper receptors, this has a more regulatory effect on the system and this is what is important for [child] and why she is seeking deeper pressure to help her system feel calmer. Light touch could be very alarming and shocking for [child] releasing stress hormones and a fight/flight response. School and all that are around her need to be aware of this, but regular deep pressure rubbing of her skin with the palm of the hand, pressing quite firmly and using regular downward strokes can help to desensitise her heightened response. (OT)

We talked about the systems in your body that you use and they are called the proprioceptive, vestibular and tactile system. You are definitely the best person to notice what your body needs. When we do certain behaviours and certain movements, it's our body telling us what our brain and body need, but sometimes we need help with identifying that and your friends and family can help with that maybe by pointing out to you what you do through your day that helps you. Some recommendations are: press ups work out, using linear movement like rocking or jumping, blowing and sucking activities like drinking from a sports bottle, using a chin up bar (with supervision), use of a bean bag chair to gain deep tactile. (OT)

You mentioned the sequencing challenges [child] has and we talked about the usefulness of picture/photo boards that can be undertaken when doing tasks such as self care. We talked about the photos being of him so he can have ownership over the sequence of the activity and make it more meaningful to him. He talked about the importance of start and finish and how this message is important to give, to make transitions easier. Using language such as 'we will do this and then that' is often helpful also so [child] is always clear on what is expected. (OT)

Sharing knowledge of health and education services, and which is appropriate to access

We talked about getting support from SENDIASS who give support and advice to parents. Contact alison bravery 01670623555 who is in the office in county hall and she will signpost you to the right person. Sendiass will support you with meetings at school and support for you during this difficult time. I am happy to talk further next session. (OT)

Support around family relationships

We talked about [child]'s new school and you expressed that when you visited you saw another four little [child's name], rather than him being the different one. We talked about [sibling]'s needs and how [child] being in a different school will give him a break and a certain freedom, and how this may result in a different dynamic between them when they see each other again after school. We talked about [child]'s much longer journey time to school; this may be challenging for him and he may benefit from having various activities to do/ eg listening to music/ audio, things to fiddle with etc. This longer journey time for [child] can also mean some uninterrupted time for [sibling] and you - we talked about possibly building some special things into this extra time in order to meet some of [sibling]'s needs. (PT)

Validating parenting approaches

[Child] asked for help to climb down the zip line. He became distressed, which presented as loud noises and crying. He said 'it's too crowded' and being able to identify and articulate this meant that the situation could be fixed easily. I noticed that mum was extremely in tune with his needs, validating his emotions, helping him to articulate his needs, and 'wondering' about solutions. (FS)

[Parent/carer] is doing a ***fantastic job*** as a parent but is understandably having a hard time with an emotionally draining and demanding job and as main carer to three children, all of whom have significant needs in various ways. [Parent/carer] is also exploring her own Neurodivergence which is adding to the mix. (TAA)

I saw 2 parents who were co-parenting collaboratively and understood their son's needs. I chatted with both who agreed that [their children] don't usually play like this at home. You and the children were 'in the thick of it' today and I wonder if this has changed slowly over time as you become more comfortable in the setting and with

the other families. It was great to hear that you have coordinated with other families to make sure that you attend the same sessions and that [child] has made friends within the group. You commented that he seems more able to play collaboratively within the sessions than at other settings and we wondered if this was because there were less restrictions and 'rules', and there was enough space for him to wander off and regulate during the play when needed. (FS)

We talked about how challenging it is for parents when they are on their own journey to find out more about themselves and unravel their challenges, but at the same time being available for their children emotionally. We talked about the importance of having time to be with yourself and how difficult it is sometimes to accept things we know deep down about ourselves, especially when it leaves us vulnerable and scared. We talked of being in the moment and noticing the small joys that are around us. We enjoyed together hearing the birds singing, the light through the treetops and the wind in our faces and we both reflected on how wonderful it was to notice the small things in our families, and how being thankful and grateful daily for the treasures we have around us, in those that we love and are loved by. (OT)

Practical guidance on accessing forest school

Towards the end of the session I observed [child] really getting into his play in the stream and not minding at all that his feet were now soaking wet. This seemed really important to him but uncomfortable for you - I think you were concerned about him being cold, wet and uncomfortable? Or about how you would dry the trainers ready for another day? I wonder if you could think about how you can allow him to make the most of these surroundings whilst being comfortable yourself with what he is doing? Wellies or perhaps old trainers if you have some, that can be changed if soaked? (PT)

I noticed how cautious she is in her play but how determined she is to test things out. Initially it appeared she was bothered about getting her pink wellies dirty in the stream but her strong physical skills allowed her to manoeuvre and reach her goal without getting dirty. I wondered if more tactile experiences, that were not messy, could be tried at home with dry items e.g. putting hands in a bowl of pasta while making pasta picture/necklace or using dry sand and playing hide things and hiding her hands. This may build up her tolerance sensitivity to manage more messy substances on her body (OT)

Validating the ways in which children/young people access forest school

It was fantastic to meet you [child's name] and to share your love of the fire! You were so keen and persevered so hard to get the fire going. You got upset when we had to pause the fire lighting for a break. I really enjoyed our time lighting a fire in a quieter part of the woods. We were able to learn what communication worked best between us, without distractions. You got frustrated when you weren't able to do the things you wanted to but you persevered and got the fire lit. You need slow clear instructions and sometimes physical intervention before you try something risky. I'd love to try firelighting again with you or maybe use some tools. (FS)

I spoke to [parent] about your struggles with school and the fact that school are not really meeting your intellectual needs well enough. I validated your Dad in his supposition that he needs to challenge school around the basic level of work they are giving you - which from your perspective must be really invalidating and boring. It does make me question - if they are missing this basic need in you, what else are they missing and how much are they holding you back, it also makes me question how much they are misinterpreting you and not understanding your physical and emotional needs too... I know you'll be conscious of all this. (TAA)

7.4. Reframing Autism within both neurodivergent and neurotypical communities by sharing the Autistic voices of our children/young people

One of our objectives included co-production of digital stories of the autistic children and young people participating in Reframing Autism; these digital stories would then be shared publicly to reframe autism within neurodivergent and neurotypical communities by:

- Empowering autistic children and young people to embrace their identity
- Increasing knowledge and understanding of what being autistic means for our participants
- Encouraging others to listen to those with lived experience and make appropriate accommodations to improve accessibility

A link to this digital story is shared here (click image):



8. What do participants need from our provision moving forward?

Sustaining our autistic community in the woods

The feedback from participants at Reframing Autism sessions has been overwhelmingly positive. This provision has begun to establish a safe community for autistic children/young people and their families to connect with themselves and one another in an authentic way that was not previously accessible.

“I've never ever seen anything else like this, where you've got access to other families who are in the same position, and the access to specialists - it's so valuable.”
(Parent/carer)

Our participants told us that our provision has become a stepping stone towards other Stomping Grounds' forest school sessions, where they attend without that parent/carers.

“It's also opened up both my children to try the (forest school) holiday clubs which have previously been a barrier because they were mainly around sport.”
(Parent/carer)

Significantly our participants also explained that whilst Reframing Autism has been impactful, their children are only at the beginning of their journey to autistic authenticity and will require more time within our setting accessing these sessions to observe change:

Our daughter greatly struggles with her autistic identity; she has had her diagnosis for 2 years now but never talks about it. We hope by attending the sessions she is empowered and can start to embrace her identity, but this may take more sessions. It is a big positive that she wants to attend the sessions so perhaps it is helping her and she's not talking about it yet. (Parent/carer)

It is particularly important that this provision continues to be free at the point of access, or subsidised so that families who cannot afford to attend can still access it,

“I would like to continue with this project and hope that there is funding available but unfortunately at present we would be unable to contribute.” (Parent/carer)

“The project being funded meant we could actually access it, without funding we couldn't have enrolled.” (Parent/carer)

9. What will the legacy of our provision be?

Following the success of this project, the legacy of Reframing Autism includes:

1. *Young People's passports:*

- These documents have been used by parent/carers to support their children outside of our sessions; parent/carers have used their passports to access other relevant services; some families used their passport to appeal for school places for their children; other families have used their passport to help them navigate children's Social Services.

2. *Digital stories of participating families*

- Film has been shared with our community and the wider autistic community to showcase how neuro affirming provision is important.

3. *A connected community*

- Our current cohort from this project have created their own WhatsApp group to stay connected with one another beyond the life of Reframing Autism.

4. *Sustainability*

- We have recently successfully secured funding from Sir James Knott Trust to continue Reframing Autism and reach those neurodivergent families in greatest need. We will develop our practice and model so that we can offer neurodivergent families across the region a longer term, relational approach that allows them to become a part of a community of practice and advocate for other families with neurodivergence.