

OxPCF & Oxfordshire CAMHS NDC Webinar: Autistic Burnout

December 2025

Introduction

Hosted by OxPCF in partnership with Oxfordshire CAMHS Neurodevelopmental Conditions (NDC) team, this session explored autistic burnout. The webinar focused on understanding what autistic burnout is, how it can present in children and young people, what may contribute to it, and practical ways families and professionals can support recovery and reduce long-term impact.

Presenters:

Laura Agnew: Clinical Lead Nurse, CAMHS NDC Team, Oxford Health

Emma Kinnard: Clinical Psychologist, CAMHS, Oxford Health

This document summarises the key themes, concepts, practical ideas, and anonymised Q&A, with suggested resources for families.

Key Insights from the Webinar

A gentle note about this topic

Autistic burnout can be deeply distressing for both children and families. The presenters acknowledged that experiences of burnout are often linked to long periods of overwhelm, unmet needs, and exhaustion.

The shared message was:

- Families are doing their best in very complex circumstances
- Burnout is not a failure or lack of resilience
- Understanding and reducing pressure is more helpful than pushing through

How we talked about autistic burnout safely

The session encouraged an approach grounded in:

- Respect for lived experience
- Neurodivergent perspectives and understanding
- Parents and carers as experts in their child
- A focus on curiosity, not judgement

What is autistic burnout?

Autistic burnout is:

- A term widely used by the autistic community
- Increasingly recognised by clinicians and researchers
- Not a medical diagnosis

It is understood as a state of:

- Chronic exhaustion
- Loss of skills or reduced functioning

- Reduced tolerance to everyday demands

It is often linked to:

- Long-term stress
- A mismatch between expectations and capacity
- Insufficient or inappropriate support

What autistic burnout can look like

Autistic burnout may include:

- Extreme fatigue or exhaustion that does not improve with rest
- Loss of previously held skills (e.g. self-care, organisation)
- Increased sensory sensitivity
- Greater difficulty coping with everyday demands
- Increased meltdowns or shutdowns
- Withdrawal from activities, relationships, or learning
- Increased anxiety or low mood

The presenters highlighted that burnout may:

- Develop gradually over time
- Appear suddenly after a period of masking or coping
- Last for weeks, months, or longer

Understanding the “why” behind the autistic burnout

A key message was that burnout is not caused by the child, but by the interaction between the child and their environment.

Autistic burnout as a mismatch

Burnout can occur when:

- Demands consistently exceed a child’s capacity
- Expectations are not adjusted to meet needs
- Support is not sufficient

Contributing factors may include:

- School demands and expectations
- Masking or camouflaging throughout the day
- Sensory overload
- Social pressures
- Transitions and life changes
- Lack of understanding or appropriate adjustments

The role of masking

The presenters highlighted masking as a significant factor.

Masking can involve:

- Hiding autistic traits
- Trying to “fit in” socially
- Suppressing needs or distress

Over time, this can:

- Be exhausting
- Reduce capacity to cope
- Contribute to burnout

Energy and “battery” thinking

The session introduced the idea of energy as a limited resource.

This was described using:

- A battery
- A bank account
- Spoon theory

Key ideas:

- Some activities drain energy
- Some activities restore energy
- Burnout occurs when energy is consistently depleted

What can help in the short term

The focus in burnout is recovery, not pushing through.

Suggested approaches included:

Reducing demand

- Lower expectations where possible (school and home)
- Consider reduced timetables or flexible approaches
- Remove non-essential pressures

Prioritising rest and recovery

- Increase opportunities for rest
- Allow more downtime than usual
- Accept that capacity may be very limited

Supporting predictability

- Maintain simple, consistent routines
- Reduce unexpected changes where possible

Sensory support

- Reduce overwhelming environments
- Use sensory tools (e.g. weighted items, quiet spaces)

Focusing on positives

- Prioritise activities the child enjoys
- Support special interests
- Build in moments of connection and enjoyment

What can help in the longer term

Longer-term support focuses on preventing future burnout.

This may include:

- Adjusting expectations to better match capacity
- Increasing appropriate support in school and daily life
- Reducing the need for masking where possible
- Supporting the child to understand their own needs

- Building in regular rest and recovery time

The presenters emphasised:

- Recovery is not linear
- Progress may include setbacks
- Small steps are meaningful

What may not help

The presenters noted that some approaches may be unhelpful during burnout, particularly:

- Increasing demands too quickly
- Expecting children to “push through”
- Introducing intensive therapies too early
- Adding additional pressures (e.g. homework, appointments)

Traditional therapy approaches may need to be:

- Adapted
- Delayed until recovery has begun

Autistic burnout and mental health

There is overlap between burnout and:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Other mental health difficulties

It can be difficult to distinguish between them.

The suggested approach was:

- First reduce environmental stress and demands
- Then review whether additional mental health support is needed

The role of school

The presenters acknowledged that:

- Schools vary in their understanding and flexibility
- Systems can make change difficult

Helpful approaches include:

- Building relationships with key staff
- Sharing the impact on the child clearly
- Focusing on needs rather than labels

There was a strong emphasis on:

- Adjusting the environment, rather than expecting the child to change

Parent carer wellbeing

A clear message throughout the session was:

- Supporting a child in burnout is demanding and emotional
- Parent carers need support too
- Protecting your own wellbeing helps support your child

Q&A Summary

The following questions were submitted by parent carers during the webinar and have been anonymised for privacy. Responses have been summarised from input provided by CAMHS clinicians and aim to reflect common themes and practical approaches for supporting children and young people experiencing autistic burnout.

1. What is autistic burnout and how is it different from general burnout?

Autistic burnout is characterised by:

- Chronic exhaustion
- Loss of skills
- Reduced tolerance to demands

Unlike general burnout, it often includes:

- Sensory overwhelm
- Reduced ability to mask
- Greater impact on daily functioning

2. How can we tell the difference between autistic burnout and depression or anxiety?

There is significant overlap.

Helpful indicators:

- Burnout often includes loss of skills and sensory intolerance
- Depression may include persistent low mood and loss of enjoyment

A practical approach is:

- Address environmental stress first
- Then review whether mental health symptoms remain

3. What can we do if our child is in burnout and cannot attend school?

Suggestions included:

- Focus on reducing demand and supporting recovery
- Maintain connection with school where possible
- Share the impact on the child clearly
- Seek advice from SENDIASS or other support services

CAMHS noted that:

- They are often reluctant to “sign off” school
- The focus is on adapting the environment rather than removing the child

4. How do we balance reducing demands without things getting worse?

The presenters suggested focusing on:

- Achievement (small successes)
- Connection (relationships)
- Enjoyment (positive experiences)

Progress should be:

- Gradual
- Flexible
- Led by the child’s capacity

5. What if burnout has been ongoing for a long time?

Suggestions included:

- Start with very small, manageable steps
- Focus on anything that feels less overwhelming
- Consider additional support (including mental health support if needed)

Recovery may:

- Take time
- Be uneven
- Require ongoing adjustments

6. How can we help our child understand burnout?

Helpful approaches include:

- Using simple language or metaphors (e.g. battery, red/green zones)
- Being clear and non-judgemental
- Using alternative communication methods (e.g. writing, drawing)
- Reflecting together after difficult periods

7. What if my child cannot identify what helps or drains them?

This is common.

Suggestions included:

- Using simple visual tools (e.g. like/dislike, red/green)
- Observing patterns and sharing what you notice
- Modelling your own experiences
- Building understanding over time

8. Can therapy help during burnout?

Traditional therapy may not always be helpful during active burnout, as it can:

- Increase demands
- Require emotional effort

It may be more helpful to:

- Focus on recovery first
- Introduce therapy later if needed

9. What if school says my child needs to build resilience?

The presenters highlighted that:

- This can feel invalidating
- Burnout is not a lack of resilience

The focus should be on:

- Reducing overwhelm
- Adapting support
- Understanding needs

10. What if my child is worried about falling behind in school?

Suggestions included:

- Exploring flexible or part-time approaches
- Maintaining a connection to learning without pressure
- Reassuring that education pathways are not fixed

The presenters noted:

- There are multiple routes to achievement
- Timelines can be flexible

11. Can physical health issues be linked to burnout?

Yes.

The presenters recommended:

- Checking for underlying physical health issues (e.g. anaemia, vitamin deficiencies)
- Considering the impact of physical health on energy and wellbeing

12. What is the most important thing to focus on?

The strongest message from the session was:

Start with reducing pressure and understanding the child's experience.

Support is most effective when it:

- Matches the child's needs
- Reduces overwhelm
- Builds safety and trust over time

Useful Resources/Further Signposting

These resources have been recommended by CAMHS clinicians, OxPCF, and parent carers as helpful sources of support, guidance, and practical tools for families navigating emotionally based school avoidance and school-related anxiety.

They include information about EBSA and school distress, anxiety and emotional regulation, neurodivergence and education, SEND advice and advocacy, and peer support networks across Oxfordshire and nationally.

Click on the blue text to visit each website directly. Where books are mentioned, we have included details so you can find them easily online or through local libraries.

Autistic Burnout and Neurodivergent Wellbeing

- [Ambitious about Autism](#)

Information and guidance about autistic burnout, education, wellbeing, and supporting autistic young people.

- [National Autistic Society \(NAS\)](#)

Information about autistic burnout, sensory differences, masking, and practical support for autistic children, young people, and adults.

- [The Curly Hair Project – Alis Rowe](#)

Practical and emotional support for autistic people and their families, including resources that help explain autistic experiences in accessible ways.

- [ADHD UK](#)

Guidance on supporting children and adults with ADHD, including information relevant to overwhelm, stress, and burnout.

- [The PDA Society](#)

Helpful information about demand avoidance, overwhelm, and reducing pressure for children and young people with a PDA profile.

Emotional Regulation, Burnout and Recovery

- [Beacon House](#)

Free downloadable worksheets and resources explaining stress, overwhelm, trauma responses, and the nervous system.

- [Self-Reg – Dr Stuart Shanker](#)

Understanding stress behaviour and supporting regulation in children and young people. The link takes you to a free podcast explaining this

- Window of Tolerance

A useful framework for understanding when someone is regulated, overwhelmed, or shut down.

- Bucket, Battery, and Spoon Theories

Visual ways to explain limited energy, emotional load, and the need for recovery time.

- Low Demand Approaches

Supportive approaches that reduce pressure and help lower anxiety and overwhelm.

- Double Empathy Problem

A concept that recognises mutual communication differences between autistic and non-autistic people.

Communication and Emotional Literacy Tools

- Zones of Regulation

Framework to help children recognise and communicate emotional states.

- [The Incredible 5 Point Scale – Kari Dunn Buron](#)

Visual tool to help identify and manage levels of stress.

- [Social Stories \(Carol Gray\)](#)

Short personalised stories explaining social situations in predictable ways.

- [Widgit Symbols / Twinkl Visual Supports](#)

Visual aids to support communication and structure.

Neurodivergence and Education

- [Autism Education Trust \(AET\) now known as Neuroinclusive Education Network \(NEN\)](#)

Resources for supporting autistic pupils in education settings.

- [National Autistic Society \(NAS\) – Education Resources](#)

Advice and support for families navigating education and school-based challenges.

- [Ambitious about Autism – Education Resources](#)

Support and guidance around autistic young people's needs in education.

Mental Health and Peer Support

- [Oxfordshire CAMHS](#) – The main mental health service for children and young people in Oxfordshire.
- [Action for Children - Parent Support Line](#). Free, confidential support via phone, webchat, or email.
- [Walking With You \(WWY\)](#) – A parent and carer peer support group facilitated by Oxfordshire CAMHS, meeting online via Teams.
- [Supportive Steps](#) – A CAMHS-run peer support service for parents and carers of children with mental health challenges.
- [Carers Oxfordshire](#) – Support for unpaid carers, including wellbeing advice, training, and carer’s assessments.
- [Oxfordshire SEND Room](#) - a peer support group hosted and moderated by Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum
- [Oxfordshire Mind](#) – Children and Young People’s Services – One-to-one support, workshops, and emotional wellbeing resources.
- [MindEd for Families](#) – Free online training and advice for parents and carers about children’s mental health.
- [YoungMinds](#) – National charity supporting young people’s mental health and parent advice.
- [The Curly Hair Project](#) – Practical and emotional support for autistic people and their families, founded by Alis Rowe.

Online Tools, Platforms, and Concepts

[NDC YouTube Channel](#) – Short, accessible videos on topics such as anxiety, self-harm, aggression, and emotional regulation.

[21 and Sensory](#) – Engaging, visual content sharing lived experiences and sensory coping strategies.

Education and Advocacy

- [IPSEA](#) – Free legal advice on SEND rights, EHCPs, and school support.
- [SENDIASS Oxfordshire](#) – Free, impartial advice for families navigating SEND services.
- [Oxfordshire's SEND Local Offer](#) – Directory of local SEND services across education, health, and social care.
- [Contact](#) – National charity providing information on education rights, benefits, and advocacy.

Recommended Reading

For Parents and Carers

- [Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Children: A Guide for Thriving](#) – Dr Luke Beardon
- [The Parents' Guide to Managing Anxiety in Children with Autism](#) – Raelene Dundon
- [Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child \(and You\) Break the Stress Cycle](#) – Dr Stuart Shanker
- [Can't Not Won't: A Story About a Child Who Couldn't Go to School](#) – Eliza Fricker
- [A Different Kind of Parenting: Neurodivergent families finding a way through together](#) - Eliza Fricker
- [The Family Experience of PDA](#) – Eliza Fricker
- [Changing Our Minds](#) – Dr Naomi Fisher
- [A Different Way to Learn](#) – Dr Naomi Fisher

For Children and Young People

- [All Birds Have Anxiety](#) – Kathy Hoopmann
- [The Panicosaurus](#) – Kay Ingle
- [The Red Beast](#) - Kay Ingle
- [The Teenager's Guide to Burnout: Finding the Road to Recovery](#) – Eliza Fricker

Stay Connected and Share Your Voice with OxPCF

Join OxPCF (Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum) to stay informed, connect with other parent carers, and have your voice heard in shaping services for SEND families.

Links

 Website: www.oxpcf.org.uk


 Email: info@oxpcf.org.uk

 Join our Mailing List: eepurl.com/dNVTTE

 SEND Connect Newsletter: tinyurl.com/SENDConnectNewsletters

 Events: oxpcf.org.uk/events

 Volunteer with Us: oxpcf.org.uk/volunteer

 Join our Online Peer Support Group: facebook.com/groups/oxsendroom/

 Join our Community WhatsApp Group: [chat.whatsapp.com/
BRH9Knm8fuNBIFY1OhrZIE](https://chat.whatsapp.com/BRH9Knm8fuNBIFY1OhrZIE)

Help Us Build Our Resource Page!

We're putting together a comprehensive resource page to support families of neurodivergent children in Oxfordshire. If you have any useful recommendations—whether it's a local support group, charity, website, book, or practical resource—we'd love to hear from you!

Please email your suggestions to: info@oxpcf.org.uk