

Finding your tribe online

Friendship is important if our children are to find happiness in life. With their friends they learn about who they are, develop self-esteem and become confident enough to be their best selves. They can find friendship in lots of different places, but connection is most easily made with the people who understand them: people who communicate and see the world as they do so they don't have to explain, pretend or suffer misunderstandings.

But what if they don't know anyone who gets them?

- Children with special educational needs (SEN) are less likely to have at least one good friend than their peers without these needs¹.
- According to the National Autistic Society, eight times as many autistic people report feeling often or always lonely when compared to the general population.
- Up to 70% of children with ADHD may have no close friends by the time they reach Year 4².

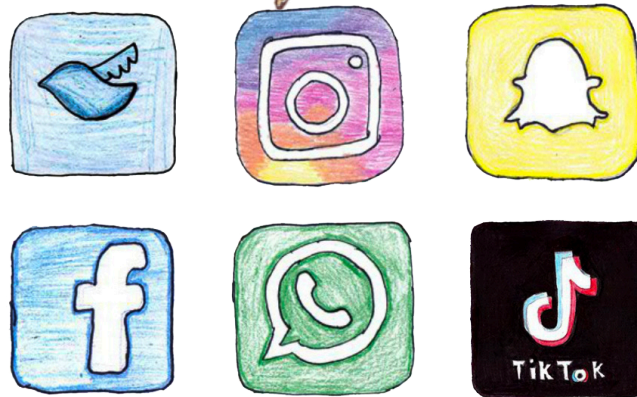
They try to fit in, to pretend and be different from their authentic selves because who they really are is not acceptable to others. This is exhausting and leads to burnout and meltdowns.

Autistic adults suggest several causes of burnout, including:

- Masking or camouflaging their autistic traits
- Suppressing stimming (repetitive or unusual body moves or noises)
- A sense of not meeting other people's/society's expectations of them.

Autistic fatigue - a guide for parents and carers, National Autistic Society (2020)

Neurodivergent young people, like those with autism or ADHD, can find their tribe and thrive socially in the environment where most young people interact regularly with their peers: the internet. The internet is the ideal place to find others who communicate in the same way or are as enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the same interests. Being in a neurodiversity group at school can be stigmatising for some young people, but chatting on the #ADHD Discord server about how frustrating it is when people tell you to make an effort when you're already trying really hard... is more accessible and comfortable. The internet also has a wealth of information and role models that can help them to understand what being autistic or having Tourettes means and that they are not alone.



Together we felt like a lost tribe. Normal is to be in the company of one like oneself. We all had a sense of belonging, of being understood: all the things we could not get from others in general.

Excerpt from Somebody Somewhere (1994) by Donna Williams, autistic author

¹Higley, S E (2017) *The social lives and friendships of children with special educational needs outside of school: Parent perspectives*. Doctoral thesis, UCL (University College London).

²Wehmeier P M, Schacht A, Barkley R (2010) *Social and Emotional Impairment in Children and Adolescents with ADHD and the Impact on Quality of Life*. *Journal of Adolescent Health* Volume 46, Issue 3, March 2010, Pages 209-217



However, while the internet offers opportunities for connection and all the benefits to mental health this brings, the neurodivergent young person's eagerness to finally find friendship can make them more vulnerable than their neuro-typical peers online. Children from vulnerable groups are more likely to visit websites intended for an adult audience and over share information online³.

Here are some resources that will help you to keep your child safe when they are finding their tribe online:

- Talk to your child: this is the most important thing you can do, but also the most challenging
<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/ask-the-awkward/>
- TechSafe leaflet: Talking about online safety with your neurodiverse child: <https://techsafe.org.uk/downloads/TechSafeTalkingOnlineSafety.pdf>
- Internet Matters information about online reputation: <https://www.internetmatters.org/issues/online-reputation/>
- The ThinkUKnow guide to being social online: <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/articles/parents-guide-being-social-online/>

- TechSafe leaflet: Supporting your neurodiverse teen to be safe and positive on social media: <https://techsafe.org.uk/downloads/TechSafeSendSocialMedia.pdf>
- TechSafe social narrative: When I see information on social media: <https://techsafe.org.uk/downloads/TechSafeNarrativesFakenews.pdf>



³Katz A & Asam E A (2020) *Refuge & Risk: Life Online for Vulnerable Young People*. [Internetmatters.org/Youthworks](https://www.internetmatters.org/Youthworks)



These apps are all **free** to download

