



Community Research

Final Report: Safety, Risk and
Feeling Unsafe for Children
and Young People with SEN or
Neurodiversity

Commissioned by the West
Midlands VRP, delivered by
BVSC Research and a team of
community researchers

Research conducted Jan-Apr 2026

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Experiences of Safety, Risk and Feeling Unsafe

for Children and Young People (16-25 years) with SEN or Neurodiversity

Introduction

This report presents findings from qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of safety, risk, and feeling unsafe among children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or neurodivergent conditions. The study draws on interview transcripts in which neurodivergent young people describe, in their own words, the environments, relationships, and situations that shape their sense of security — and those that do not.

For policymakers and commissioners, understanding these experiences is essential. Neurodivergent young people face a distinct and often underappreciated set of vulnerabilities in everyday public life, from public transport to online spaces. Their accounts reveal both the specific conditions under which they feel safe and the systemic gaps that currently leave them underserved. This report organises those findings to support evidence-informed decisions about services, education, and community infrastructure.

Methodology

To capture the experiences of communities across the West Midlands, a community research (CR) approach was employed. This involved working in collaboration with individuals who have direct experience of the issues being explored, or strong connections to the communities involved, to support the design, delivery, and analysis of the research.

In total, 16 community researchers were recruited. Their familiarity with local contexts was a key strength of the approach, enabling them to build trust and rapport with participants and support engagement from individuals who may otherwise be less likely to take part in research.

The project was delivered within a compressed timeframe, which created pressures at multiple stages of delivery. If community research was to be undertaken by (or commissioned by) the Violence Reduction Partnership in the future, it would be

highly recommended for the timeline to be significantly longer, particularly if the aim was to recruit, train and engage with new and inexperienced young people who have never delivered research work before. This approach of bringing in new researchers from across the West Midlands was originally suggested by BVSC Research, but the fixed deadline of the end of March 2026 for the fieldwork meant it wasn't possible to train new young researchers and maintain rigour, ethics and pastoral support for the young people involved.

While the project aimed to represent the full breadth of the West Midlands Combined Authority area, geographic coverage was uneven in practice. Most interview participants (77%) were based in Birmingham, reflecting the fact that the project primarily drew on existing BVSC Research community researcher networks, which are predominantly Birmingham-based. The BVSC Research team tried to ensure all areas were represented by creating a pipeline of interviewees, but in practice not all people who said they were happy to be interviewed responded to our community researchers when it came to organising an interview.

Despite these challenges, the methodology was still very community-engaged, with community researchers involved from the outset in shaping the research design. This included a collaborative topic guide development activity, where CRs worked together to identify key themes and co-produce the wording of the interview questions.

Two topic guides were developed, one designed for neurodiverse young people and those with special educational needs, and a second adapted for parents, carers and professionals working with this group. While both guides followed a similar thematic structure, the latter was tailored to capture observational perspectives on safety, risk, and support needs.

Both topic guides explored three core areas. The first focused on understanding safety, including how participants define feeling safe, the spaces and relationships that contribute to this, and the situations where they feel unsafe or at risk. The second explored experiences and perceptions of crime and violence, including exposure to different forms of harm, levels of concern, and how these experiences shape behaviour. The third examined drivers of risk and prevention, including why young people may become involved in violence, how feeling unsafe influences behaviour, and what support or changes could improve safety and reduce harm.

A semi-structured interview approach was agreed as the most appropriate method, allowing for consistency across interviews while also providing flexibility for participants to share their experiences in depth. In total, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted (please refer to the demographics report for full details). Community researchers led the data collection process, drawing on their local knowledge and relationships to facilitate open and meaningful discussions.

Following data collection, community researchers reviewed transcripts and identified initial codes across their interviews. These were developed further during a collaborative analysis workshop with a BVSC researcher, where themes were refined across the full dataset. Themes were then cross checked by experienced researchers to ensure consistency and reduce potential bias.

Findings

The findings are organised around five superordinate themes identified across the interview transcripts. Each theme is supported by more specific subordinate themes drawn directly from participant accounts.

1. The Geography of Safety: 'Safe Havens'

Participants consistently described their sense of safety as being inextricably tied to specific, bounded places and relationships rather than to broader community or civic life. For many, feeling safe was defined as “being at peace with no worries” and having the ability to enjoy life without the constant pressure of performance or sensory management.

1.1 The private sanctuary: Home and the bedroom

The home, and more specifically, the bedroom, emerged as the most frequently cited space that felt safe. Participants described these spaces as a place of refuge, removed from external pressures and expectations, describing bedrooms as a “cocoon” or a “bubble” from the outside world.

A recurring reason given for this related to the increased levels of autonomy and control they provided people with. Bedrooms, in particular, were viewed as spaces where individuals could regulate sensory input and social interaction. This was often linked to a sense of relief from what one participant described as the “exhausting process of being normal”.

This control contributed to a greater sense of predictability, as individuals knew what to expect from their surroundings. In some instances, this was viewed as being due to the literal, physical control it provided.

“My doors got a lock on it... there’s no one, it’s just me”.

However, it is important to note that the sanctuary of the bedroom was not a feeling that was universal across all participants interviewed. Rather, it was acknowledged that the bedroom, and more generally the home, was not always a safe space and that its safety largely depended on other environmental factors. It was noted for example that in unstable home environments, such as homes where there are frequent arguments or domestic violence, the home may instead become a site of trauma that feeds into feelings of unsafety.

“Not all young people feel safe at home if there’s domestic violence or other things going on for them...”

“It’s not always the case... because some family homes are not stable, arguments and that kind of thing”.

It was perceived that this was also the case for children in care, with frequent placement moves and the lack of birth family members contributing to feelings of insecurity.

“... A lot of our students are in care, so they don’t live with their birth families so it’s not a place of safety”.

1.2 Relational safety and trusted people

Safety was also understood as being strongly linked to the presence of specific, trusted individuals. Participants identified a range of people who contributed to feelings of safety, including friends, professionals, and family members.

“If the child is fortunate to have a friendship circle, teenagers tend to kind of feel safer with kind of friends”.

“There’s groups they attend... they feel safe either with people that lead, or the building that’s it’s in, or the community that’s part of it”.

“Relatives houses, people they are familiar with”.

A key reason for this was the sense of familiarity these relationships provided, which in turn contributed to feelings of stability, routine and predictability.

“It’s familiar to them... they’ve got the support of people they live with... they’ve got the everyday routine to make them feel safe”.

“They have somebody there that can help them and knows what’s going on with them... they feel a bit more relaxed”.

This familiarity often translated into trust. Trusted individuals, particularly adults, were seen as important in helping young people regulate their emotions when situations became overwhelming.

“somebody there that can help them and know what’s going on with them”.

Importantly, this support was described as non-judgemental. Trusted individuals were characterised as “considerate” and “empathetic”, creating environments where young people felt understood. As one participant noted, having a “safe person in the school environment” to debrief with is “powerful and significant for maintaining wellbeing”.

1.3 Predictability, structure, and the production of safety

As highlighted in the preceding sections, predictability and familiarity were seen as essential components of feeling safe. Environments that offer routine and a sense of control were more likely to be viewed as safe.

“If they go there regularly and if they have a good person there, a predictable person, a person they know then that helps”.

“Some kind of structure, they know what’s expected of them, they know what to expect”.

This sense of safety was partly underpinned by the presence of clear boundaries. Knowing that there were established rules, support systems, and reliable responses to potential issues contributed to a stronger sense of safety.

“You want to know those boundaries are in place, you want to know if something happens to me, there’s someone I can go to”.

In contrast, unfamiliar situations and disruptions to routine were often viewed as being associated with heightened anxiety and discomfort.

“If they’re in an unfamiliar routine, they really struggle with it”.

Participants described a range of strategies used to reduce this uncertainty and make new environments more predictable. These included approaches such as “travel training” and doing a “walkthrough with a friend”, which helped individuals become familiar with new routes, spaces, and expectations in advance.

“It may be going to a public transport from, from home to school. So, they’re familiar with the route, familiar with going on the bus, what that kind of entails”.

Furthermore, it was noted that spaces can be made to feel safer when they function as ‘bubbles’ where reasonable adjustments are normalised and young people feel genuinely understood. Institutional settings were frequently cited in this regard. For example, university disability departments were described by one participant as “incredible”, offering adjustments such as “special headphones to... reduce the noise”, or allowing students to “leave the lecture anytime you want” if they feel overwhelmed.

Similarly, controlled educational environments contributed to feelings of safety. Schools using systems such as lanyards helped students feel secure because they knew “everyone that’s in the building is supposed to be there”. Specialised social spaces, such as libraries were also identified as safe environments, where “no one gets to judge you” and individuals could connect with peers.

2. Environments and Situations of Risk

Participants identified a range of physical and social contexts where feelings of being unsafe were most acute. These environments were often characterised by a lack of control, high sensory stimulation, or the presence of unpredictable actors.

2.1 Public transport

Public transport, in particular buses and trains, were described as high risk by many participants. The primary reason for this was seen as being due to a combination of confined spaces and the inability to exit the situation easily. This contributed to what one participant described as “quite an overwhelming idea”.

“Once you’re on there, if you bump into someone... there’s no easy escape”.

In addition, public transport was viewed as a space characterised by the presence of unpredictable people. This was particularly a concern when it came to rowdy or intoxicated individuals who created significant levels of anxiety.

“Public transport, people are always kicking off...”

“Even for an adult, that can be quite testing... as an, as a sort of child teenager, it can be overwhelming”.

Importantly, these fears were not only shaped by direct personal experiences. Participants also drew on accounts they had heard, particularly from news stories and from friends, which contributed to perceptions of public transport as unsafe. One young person, for example, described how reports of incidents involving violence on buses and trains influenced their reluctance to use public transport.

“On the BBC news saying that students will fire fireworks at the bus. They were firing fireworks to the bus, after New Year in Liverpool... That was really crazy... It didn’t happen in Birmingham, but it happened in another city... I don’t feel safe taking public transport. But it also happened in a Birmingham train... when there were two guys fighting each other with a machete...”

2.2 Urban spaces: Sensory overload

Urban spaces, such as town centres, shopping centres, and crowded public areas were repeatedly identified as high-risk contexts for participants.

“Shopping centres... towns... colleges when other young people are coming out... they tend to feel unsafe there and a bit anxious”.

“Particularly triggered in shopping centres... public places where a lot of people are around”.

A key reason for this related to the impact of sensory overload. These environments were often described as overwhelming due to high levels of noise, crowding, and constant stimulation. Town centres and colleges were frequently described as “noisy and crowded”, particularly during peak times when large groups of students were leaving.

“In particular when um the colleges are breaking up or schools are breaking up um 3:00 – 4:00, all the young kids can be rowdy. Um that can make them feel unsafe and unsure. Yeah, its noisy and crowded. The local college is right in the town centre so that’s a problem every day, they avoid town at this time”.

“Something about the shopping centre, I think it might be the acoustics, it might just be hyper vigilance, there’s a lot going on”.

Participants also highlighted how these environments could become particularly challenging when communication needs were not recognised or understood. In busy public settings, interactions with unfamiliar others were often unpredictable, and a lack of understanding from others could intensify feelings of anxiety and vulnerability.

“I think out in the community certainly um in the street around strangers where there’s a lot of um a lot of noise, um a lot of stimulation... If the young person isn’t um isn’t kind of understood and their communication and their understanding needs met, I think that can be quite daunting and it’s not always obvious at the time if they’re masking but then it will later transpire when they return to a safer space that they incredibly anxious and it’s taken a lot out of them”

To cope with these environments, many participants recalled adopting “masking” strategies in order to appear comfortable or “normal” to others. While this could enable them to navigate these spaces in the moment it was also described as exhausting, often resulting in a delayed emotional response once they returned to a safer environment.

2.3 Urban spaces: Perceived criminal risk

Alongside sensory overload, fear of crime emerged as a dominant feature that shaped how young people engaged with urban spaces. Participants frequently reference concerns around knife crime, theft and verbal abuse.

“Phone theft, you know, seems to be um a common one. Um Knife crimes as well, that seems to be on the rise. Verbal abuse as well.”

“I think of the knife crime rates in the UK. That’s the first thing I think about. The amount of people who have been stabbed in the park by me... sexual violence as well in the UK. I think about the women that get assaulted on a daily basis”.

For some, crime was not perceived as an abstract risk, but as a normalised and constantly present feature of everyday life.

"It's not a stereotype. It's genuinely a real thing that happens here".

"I don't really think any of it surprises me anymore... it's just the normal now... its incredibly frequent".

This contributed to heightened vigilance and behavioural changes in how participants navigated public space.

"When I go out, I'm definitely a lot more careful... that's increased tenfold"

"Honestly, I worry about my girlfriend the most... I worry about the things that could happen to her".

In some cases, these fears were grounded in direct experiences of violence or threat. Participants recounted being followed, verbally abused, or physically assaulted, with these incidents having lasting impacts on their sense of safety.

"... He started following me, telling me he's going to find my house... he's going to rape me... kidnap my mum..."

"...I was on my way home... he tried to get money off me... I don't know if I'm getting stabbed at that moment... that's terrifying".

Others described how repeated exposure to violence, either directly or indirectly, had created a persistent and underlying sense of fear. This was often described as a constant, low-level anxiety that shaped everyday behaviour, even in the absence of immediate danger.

"I've been jumped at college... It makes me paranoid almost every day I go there now".

"I have like a subconscious fear of going out... I don't know who's going to be out on the streets".

"I just avoid people... don't say anything, don't do anything wrong".

For some participants, this fear led to the avoidance of previously valued spaces. One participant for example described no longer visiting a local canal area they once enjoyed due to the perceived presence of gangs and risk of violence.

“I used to go down my local canal because I’m a bird photographer... I love them, favourite things to see and favourite things to do. I can’t go down there anymore. I physically can’t go down there without putting myself in danger, ignoring all the graffiti, the litter, and all the problems with the area alone, it still was relatively nice to have a nice walk. I used to go with my nan all the time, but neither of us can do that anymore because of all the gangs... you get pushed in the canal and stuff, get robbed down there.”

2.4 The online environment, digital exploitation and vulnerability

The online environment featured prominently in participant responses as a major source of risk, viewed as a space that effectively exists outside of the physical safeguards established in homes and in schools.

“Obviously you can protect people in a small bubble, but the internet is not a small bubble”.

“They have fallen into dangerous parts of the internet, whether it’s they’ve been groomed or whether it’s they’ve become part of a group, of they’ve seen trends online and taken them too literally which has then put them at risk”

One key concern related to exposure to graphic content and misinformation, often due to a perceived lack of effective regulation. Platforms such as TikTok were frequently cited in this regard.

“Things like TikTok that aren’t regulated properly... nothing is censored... they’re then seeing huge war level crime that has an effect on them and their behaviours because being exposed to that it’s then hard to decipher what’s realistically potentially going to happen to you”.

Participants described early and repeated exposure to violent imagery, with one noting they had been “exposed to violence very early because of social media” including access to “pure gore” that is available for “anyone to access”.

“Quite a lot of my learners who may not be involved in gangs or anything, but often sit at home so they will ingest so much media from their phone and then that will make them anxious because everything is hyped up in social media and things that may be not true”.

This susceptibility was also seen as being linked to misinformation. Professionals described instances where students had adopted conspiracy beliefs that contributed to heightened fear and confusion.

“I had to talk to a learner because he felt that pigeons were government spies. They had like cameras in them, and he genuinely believed that... I think they’re probably more easier led”.

Concerns were also raised about online grooming and exploitation. Participants highlighted how young people may form trusting relationships online without recognising potential risks.

“I worry about them being bullied with all this kind of technology... actually this student that I’m working with, extremely clever, he runs a group which is a gaming group, and he was saying that there a lot of groomers coming online and they start to ask how old you are”

“If they were approached by somebody online, they will welcome them as a friend. Now I know a lot of students who have people they would consider to be friends online who, they’re not necessarily bad... but they trust that person implicitly. And unfortunately, there a lot of unscrupulous people out there”

The online environment was also seen as extending into offline risk. Social media was described as facilitating exposure to harmful trends and, in some cases, acting as a gateway into criminal activity. Participants referenced trends such as “red school, blue school” where young people were encouraged to engage in conflict, as well as concerns around county lines recruitment. Professionals noted that criminal groups may exploit vulnerability by offering a sense of belonging, alongside material incentives such as “very expensive coats and very expensive trainers” to draw young people into harmful activities.

2.5 Covid-19 legacy

The pandemic was viewed as having left a lasting psychological impact, creating a ‘Covid-19 legacy’ that has fundamentally altered the social behaviour and wellbeing of young people with SEN or neurodiversity.

Professionals working with the cohort noted that they had observed a big shift in the emotional state of their students following the lockdowns. One participant for example described how many students are now anxious and withdrawn.

“It’s been a big shift in my cohort of learners... probably because of lockdown and stuff... a lot of people are really anxious, and those anxieties may be a bit withdrawn or they can still be upset”.

Family members also noted how the heightened state of anxiety that began in Covid-19 has not gone away and is now permanent. As one carer noted for their household, the anxiety “*got worse during covid and it’s not gone away*”.

One of the reasons for this was noted as being due to the timing of lockdown occurring during what participants described as “crucial years” for the current generation of 16-25 year olds. By being kept inside, it was noted that young people had missed some stages of social development and interaction.

“Because they’re of that generation and in year six, seven and eight, they were kept inside because of lockdown, so they kind of missed some stages”

This had resulted in young people emerging from isolation feeling “*more hesitant to be around people*” and “*lacking certain social skills*”, which compounded together made the transition back into public life an anxiety inducing experience.

This was seen as being partially due to the pandemic effectively compounding existing fears of the outside world. Increased reliance on digital interaction, combined with prolonged time spent at home, was seen as contributing to a shift in where safety was located.

“Post-Covid, it tends to be a level of like isolation... they’re very much programmed to interact, socialise online. And as long as they have devices or a device to do that within the confines of home that’s the safer place for them”

For some, this resulted in increasingly restricted worlds, with young people avoiding public transport, town centres, and other urban environments due to their perceived unpredictability. One participant described how constant exposure to negative news during the pandemic had contributed to an ongoing, underlying sense of fear.

“Even if I want to go out... maybe going to the library, I have like the subconscious fear of going because its like I don’t know whose going to be out on the street”

3. Neurodiversity-Specific Vulnerabilities

The research identified a set of vulnerabilities that are either unique to, or significantly amplified by, neurodivergent conditions. These vulnerabilities manifest across communication, social interaction, and emotional regulation, often leaving young people with SEN or neurodiversity at elevated risks of both social exclusion and targeted exploitation.

3.1 Communication barriers and social misinterpretation

Communication differences were highlighted not simply as social challenges, but as fundamental vulnerabilities that can increase exposure to risk. These barriers were seen to operate in two key ways: first, by limiting young peoples ability to recognise risk, and second, by leading to their own communication styles being misinterpreted by others as confrontational or disrespectful.

Literal interpretation and the banter gap

A primary concern related to literal interpretation and what participants described as a “*banter gap*”. Participants noted difficulties in navigating non-literal communication, such as sarcasm, humour or implied threats.

“British culture, it’s a lot of banter and sarcasm. And I love banter and sarcasm, but I can’t necessarily always read it...”

Many participants emphasised the need for clear, direct communication in order to understand intent, often relying on what one described as “literal stuff”.

“A lot of people with neurodiversity... don’t quite understand like communication as well, unless its very... like the literal stuff, because you can say something and they might take it literally or they might take it in another way that you weren’t intending it to be”

However, this reliance on literal interpretation was also seen as potentially dangerous in unpredictable social environments, Subtle cues, sarcasm, or indirect threats may go unrecognised, increasing vulnerability in interactions with others.

“Someone could be like threatening you or something and you wouldn’t know because they’re saying it in a normal way”

Participants highlighted how this could contribute to experiences of harm, particularly within peer relationships or intimate relationships, where behaviours may not be immediately recognised as abusive.

“...They tend to stay in abusive relationships because they don’t see it as abuse. It could be physical violence or sexual controlling verbally abusive relationships. A lot of young people in the spectrum, it takes some time for them to realise this isn’t a healthy relationship. Even with peers at university sometimes I think what we may think is banter is actually discrimination...”

This issue was also reflected in how safety guidance is communicated. Advice such as “don’t talk to strangers” was seen as potentially confusing when interpreted literally, particularly when young people are expected to carry out everyday tasks that require interaction with unfamiliar people.

Misinterpretation by the public

The research demonstrated that vulnerability is significantly increased when neurodiverse communication styles- such as avoiding eye contact, using repetitive movements, or adopting a specific tone of voice- clash with social norms.

One reason noted for this related to perceived disrespect. Professionals noted that often if a student acts in a way that goes against social expectations, members of the public may misinterpret the situation and potentially perceive it as antagonistic. This was seen as often leading to unnecessary confrontation or arguments, due to the public misreading communication style as a personal slight.

“If they’re doing things that go against the social norms, the other people that are around them who may not understand that may react, they may think they’re doing things to antagonize them, or may not understand this is their way of communicating. So it may cause arguments...”

“Communication differences that others might not understand, and they can be a target because they’re vulnerable”

It was also noted that visible differences in mannerisms may make neurodiverse young people more likely to be targeted. Participants described how young people could be singled out simply for being perceived as different.

“Sometimes they haven’t got the social cues such as eye contact or being overly friendly and some people take it the wrong way especially young people. This could put them at risk”

This had led some young people to adopt certain ‘rules’ to navigate public space, particularly in what was described as rough areas.

“We have to not look at people... you don’t look at people for longer than three seconds because they’ll think you have a problem and they’ll get confrontational and stuff”

These strategies were seen as necessary to avoid negative attention, including mocking and bullying. Several participants reported being targeted due to their mannerisms or ways of speaking, with differences frequently judged at face value.

“Its bullying.. its peoples perception of.. judging someone with SEN on what they’re seeing at face value... a lot of mickey taking and mocking of certain behaviours, or assuming certain things about people with different needs and making jokes about it”

3.2 Susceptibility to criminal and social exploitation

It was revealed that there was a significantly elevated risk of exploitation among neurodiverse young people, spanning sexual, financial and criminal forms of harm. Participants and professionals consistently described this vulnerability as being shaped by a combination of social, cognitive, and relational factors, which together could make young people particularly susceptible to manipulation. In many cases, this vulnerability was not immediately visible, but instead emerged through attempts to build relationships, integrate socially, or establish a sense of belonging.

A key factor underpinning this susceptibility was described as a lack of social cynicism.

“They can be at risk of radicalisation... so safeguarding is probably more important even with students who are very high functioning because they don’t have the cynicism that a lot of us do.”

Compared to their neurotypical peers, neurodiverse young people were often perceived as more trusting and less likely to question the intention of others. This was viewed as having the potential to lead young people to have an implicit trust in strangers or new acquaintances, increasing exposure to potential exploitation.

“I worry for some neurodiverse people that they might see the world in quite an innocent way and quite a naïve way, so that would concern me how people might take advantage of that”

This was seen as being especially concerning in online spaces, where young people may form relationships through gaming or social media and treat these interactions as genuine friendship without recognising associated risks.

This heightened trust was seen as intersecting with a strong desire for social connection. Participants emphasised that many neurodiverse young people experience an intense need for belonging, which can lead them to prioritise acceptance over personal safety. In some cases, this had resulted in individuals mirroring the behaviours of others in order to fit in, even when those behaviours involved risk.

“They’re probably more susceptible... because they’re mirroring what other people are doing to maybe feel more socially accepted... peer pressure to get involved in things that they may have not wanted to really get involved in”

The perceived value of friendship was seen as in some instances outweighing concerns about exploitation, with some young people maintain harmful relationships due to fear of social isolation. This was demonstrated in the case of one individual who had given his personal allowance to a manipulative group over several years.

“This one individual for several years had been systematically giving a group of people his allowance and was being manipulated by them... only when staff noticed that actually, you know, you don’t smell right, you’re not eating, you’re looking malnourished... they could see the physical signs of neglect and poverty kicking in. And what happened was that when that got exposed... he was so angry, he left the service. He said you’ve taken away my friends”

This desire for connection was also seen as being exploited by criminal groups, including postcode gangs and those involved in county lines activity. These groups were described as targeting vulnerable individuals by offering a sense of belonging, alongside material incentives.

“A lot of SEN students are way more at risk from right-wing groups and these post code gangs because they can promise... stability and gifts and things... and I would say unfortunately a lot of the students that I’ve encountered are quite easily led... it can take them onto darker paths”

“They offer relationships and promises and things and expensive gifts... its one of the things I look out for.. all of a sudden these students are wearing I don’t know very expensive coats and very expensive trainers”

It was noted that gifts were utilised as means of building trust and dependency, which could in turn lead to involvement in criminal activities such as drug running.

Vulnerability was also evident within personal and intimate relationships, with participants highlighting difficulties in recognising coercion, understanding boundaries and identifying abusive behaviours.

“I have one young lady who, despite having gone through sexual exploitation, consent training, still thinks if she says yes once it lasts forever... and on the other hand we have young men who again.. don’t understand the notion of withdrawal consent”

3.3 The tension between impulsivity and hyper-vigilance

The findings also identify a significant tension in how neurodiverse young people experience and respond to risk with a tension sitting between two contrasting patterns: impulsivity and risk taking, often associated with ADHD, and hyper vigilance, more commonly observed among young autistic people.

For some young people, particularly those with ADHD, risk was viewed as not always being avoided and instead actively sought out. Participants described how feelings of boredom or disengagement could lead to individuals to pursue stimulation through risky behaviours. This was often due to the draw of excitement or adrenaline that was associated with unsafe situations and linked to difficulties with impulse control where decisions were made quickly without full consideration of consequences.

“I’ve actually got some students with ADHD who purposely don’t keep themselves safe. They like the risk, they like the adrenaline, they like the dopamine and serotonin hits”

“With ADHD a lot of it is impulse control... so it might be just the spur of the moment just wanting that thing and taking it... like a lack of control”

This vulnerability was viewed as being further compounded by challenges in emotional regulation. Participants noted that some young people may struggle to manage intense emotional responses, requiring immediate support to deescalate

situations. Without this support, there was a risk that emotions could escalate quickly and lead to harmful behaviours towards themselves or others.

“One of my brothers who’s got ADHD.. he needs someone who can speak to very often, like straight away. As soon as he’s got a worry, he needs to express that worry... otherwise he will act upon that worry... he will start acting in a very negative way and he will probably harm himself and others”

In some cases, this was also discussed in relation to responding to authority, which could increase the likelihood of conflict or involvement in risky or illegal activities.

“There is also a higher correlation with ADHD and stuff like oppositional defiance disorder, which often gets people into difficulties...”

In contrast, many neurodiverse young people with autism were described as experiencing a persistent state of hyper vigilance. Rather than seeking out risk, these individuals often anticipated it, viewing the world as unpredictable and potentially threatening and making it impossible to feel truly secure.

“We’re constantly analysing like what’s going on in our life and the worst case scenario and how to prevent it even though like its very unlikely its gonna happen. We like hyper fixate on thinking somethings gonna happen and you’re unable to enjoy life because you’re constantly stressing”

4. Behavioural Adaptations and Coping Mechanisms

In the absence of adequate external support, participants shared a range of strategies they had developed independently to manage risk. These adaptations often involved significant sacrifices to their autonomy and social development as they attempted to navigate a world they perceived as fundamentally hostile.

4.1 Avoidance and the shrinking world

The most common strategy identified was avoidance. In response to high levels of anxiety and perceived danger, many participants reported significantly restricting their movements and engagement with public space. This ranged from subtle adaptations to everyday routines through to complete social withdrawal.

“I suffer bad from anxiety so I try to avoid groups”

Participants described various types of environmental avoidance, such as timing trips to avoid busy periods or deliberately avoiding specific locations. Town centres and other crowded environments were often avoided during peak times, particularly when colleges or schools were finishing and crowds were perceived as more rowdy.

“I avoid certain places like say at McDonald’s there’s always groups of kids there...”

Some young people also chose not to go out at night, or avoided particular areas, such as alleyways or parks, where they associated increased risk.

“If my friends tell me lets go out and hang out or something, I’ll say they go out in the morning or afternoon, but not at night, no. At 6am, or 6pm, or 7pm, nah nah nah, nah. I’m not really comfortable going out at night when there’s always accidents every day, new drama, or something”

“Like you wouldn’t walk through an alleyway innit? Like stuff like that”

Public transport was also identified as a key site of avoidance. Many participants reported refusing to use buses or trains altogether.

“A lot of children refuse to use public transport now”

In more severe cases, avoidance extended to a near total withdrawal from the outside world. Participants described for example instances of young people becoming effectively “*bedroom bound*”, refusing to leave their rooms for prolonged periods of time.

While avoidance was seen as effective in the short term, it was highlighted that it often results in a shrinking world, carrying serious consequences for mental health.

“They tend to kind of avoid situations or avoid things... but that’s to the detriment of them really, because the world, all of a sudden becomes very, like, restricted and small”

“It’s really kind of debilitating impact on like the mental health at times... their self worth as well... their world just becomes very small and restrictive... not being in school or not going to college and not being able to find work. All of those then kind of feed into negative thoughts about themselves and their abilities”

4.2 Masking and sensory shields

Masking was identified as a key strategy used by neurodiverse young people to manage risk in public spaces. This involved both the modification of behaviour and the use of physical aids to appear less visibly different and therefore less likely to be targeted.

At a behavioural level, participants described adapting their social presentation to align more closely with perceived social norms. This included suppressing or altering natural mannerisms, adopting more neutral or controlled responses, and consciously managing how they were perceived by others.

“When someone’s being confrontational with me... I change my accent or my tone and my speech changes... I don’t mean to do that... it’s a very robotic reaction”

In addition to behavioural adaptations, young people also made use of physical 'sensory shields' to manage both attention and environmental stimuli. Clothing and accessories were often used as protective barriers, with participants describing wearing large coats and putting hoods up when moving through public space.

"We often see that students... bright young people who can talk to adults and talk to their peers and laugh and be silly and then we'll see them leave our environments and it's almost like they prepare themselves for the outside. So they'll put a big coat on, often they will put hoods up, they will put headphones on to make them look like they're not someone to be interacted with"

Headphones were also repeatedly discussed as a sensory shield.

"So I'll see like a guy approaching me, I um pretend like I have my air pods on full max like as if I can't hear them or I literally just go into somewhere public"

However, such strategies were not without risk. In particular the use of headphones presented a paradox. While they were effective in reducing noise and creating a sense of personal space, they were also described as potentially increasing vulnerability. Being immersed in audio was seen as potentially reducing awareness of surroundings, leaving individuals less able to detect or respond to potential threats in their immediate environment.

"So they don't hear who is coming, they are immersed, they are completely oblivious of any danger"

4.3 Weapons and radical self-protection

The pervasive fear of violence, particularly knife crime, was found to shape how some young people attempted to protect themselves. In a small number of cases this was reported to lead to the consideration of, or engagement in, weapon carrying as a form of self-defence. Participants often framed this not as an act of aggression but instead as a rational, albeit high risk, response to feeling unsafe.

Some participants recalled instances where young people carried knives for protection, or made a conscious decision to risk legal consequences rather than feel unprotected in environments they perceived as dangerous.

"They can retaliate and carry knives for protection or fighting people to protect themselves, doing things they may not want to do because they don't feel like they have any choice"

"We've had children that like can't leave the house without carrying something... knowing the potential consequence, but still feeling it's safer to risk getting in trouble as opposed to being caught without that sort of protection"

In these contexts, carrying a weapon was understood as providing a sense of security or control in situations otherwise characterised by uncertainty and fear.

“I think when people feel unsafe and when young people feel at risk of you know maybe getting hurt, I think it makes them make decisions that are bad, like carrying a knife. Because I feel like they feel a bit more protected with the knife”

In some cases, this was reported as extending beyond knives to other forms of defensive equipment. One participant for example described how a student who felt so threatened by the outside world that he began wearing protective gear, such as a stab vest to school.

“Was it a bulletproof or stab vest? Something because he felt particularly threatened by the outside world...we tried to ensure that it was a safe environment and tried to make him feel like safe in school. Unfortunately he did continue to wear that anyway...”

These strategies illustrate the intensity of perceived risk and the lengths some young people may go to feel safe.

However, it was also recognised that this strategy introduces significant additional risks. Carrying a weapon was described by some as creating a full circle, whereby the presence of a weapon increases the likelihood of escalation or harm.

“If they feel unsafe they’re tending to bring weapons and other things. And then it kind of seems to go full circle... we know that if you’re carrying something and you’re feeling unsafe you might use it, and then its just like a full circle”

5. Systemic Failures and the Need for Support

Participants identified significant and widening gaps in the systems and structures designed to support their safety. The findings suggest that for young people with SEN or neurodiversity, the feeling of vulnerability is often compounded by a sense of systemic abandonment, where the removal of professional scaffolding leaves them to navigate high risk environments without adequate protection.

5.1 Erosion of community infrastructure and outreach

Participants identified the erosion of community infrastructure as a key driver of vulnerability for neurodiverse young people. The findings suggest that the removal of what participants described as “scaffolding or structure” within communities has left many feeling isolated, without consistent support or safe spaces beyond the home.

A recurring theme across interviews was the decline of formal youth provision. Participants reflected on a time when there were more established youth clubs, community groups, and volunteer led activities which provided opportunities for connection, structure and belonging. These were described as having largely disappeared.

“I think in the past here in the UK they used to have youth club communities, volunteers working with young people and I think this disappeared because there are no funds. Theres no encouragement.”

“If they had a community or youth group they could go to that would give them the sense of belonging...”

The absence of such provisions was discussed as being felt particularly strongly by young people with neurodiversity or SEN, who may rely on structured supportive environments to build confidence and social interaction. Without access to suitable groups or activities, many were described as being left isolated, unless they were able to find niche spaces such as gaming or theatre groups that could accommodate their needs.

“I think young people in this country are completely left on their own. Unless they have access to societies or clubs. I have some clients which go to gaming clubs... or clubs where they can do theatre... They are places where they are trying to help people who are socially awkward become accustomed to be in groups”

Alongside this, participants highlighted a broader shift from proactive to reactive forms of support. Participants noted a lack of outreach work and a weakening of coordinated multidisciplinary approaches across services such as health and social care. As a result, support was often viewed as only provided once issues had escalated, rather than being available at earlier stages to prevent harm.

“We have a complete and utter lack of resource or outreach work in many cases for young people... Everybody’s far too pushed, so stuff that would normally have been picked up at an earlier stage and addressed and you’d have like proactive intervention, unfortunately because of resourcing, we wait till something bad happens and then we intervene”

The erosion of services was also experienced as a tangible loss of physical spaces. Participants referred to community organisations and centres that had previously offered outreach, activities, and support for neurodiverse and SEN young people and their families which now are under threat or no longer exist.

“There’s a lovely organisation... they offer outreach and clubs in the summer to families, children and are also looking at setting stuff up for people with lived experience... but they’re possibly going to be chucked out of the building soon and they won’t have anywhere to go. So that service that is helping lots of people to understand their lives... is going to be gone and it won’t be replaced”

In the absence of these structures participants raised concerns that alternative and less safe forms of belonging can emerge. Some participants noted that when formal systems fail to provide connection and support, young people may seek this elsewhere, including with unsafe peer groups or criminal networks.

“Lets say a young teenager that falls out of the education system, they tend to be quite an easy target for like older more sort of sophisticated or entrenched offenders who then groom the child into committing acts... kind of like selling drugs... that process stems from the child not having like relationships or contact elsewhere”

5.2 The absence of authority figures in public spaces

Participants described a strong sense of anxiety linked to the perceived withdrawal of visible authority figures from public life. For many, this absence was experienced as the removal of a vital safety net, leaving them to navigate environments they already perceived as high risk without a clear point of contact for support or intervention.

“I feel like there’s a lack of presence of authority figures or people to ask for help... it doesn’t feel like a particularly safe world at the moment”

Public transport emerged as a key area of concern. Participants reflected on a shift towards more automated and less staffed services, noting that there is often no one available to assist during journeys.

“There is nobody on the train walking... occasionally there’s a ticket man... On the train last week there was no announcement and I got off at the platform and I couldn’t see a sign so I didn’t know where I was... there was no one to ask”

This absence was described as particularly challenging in situations where individuals feel overwhelmed, unsafe or unsure how to respond to the behaviour of others.

“My daughter.. every day on the train. There’s no one, there’s no ticket officer, there’s no one to ask if this guy kicks off that’s drunk and he’s falling. I mean, a number of times she’d come back and say somebody was causing a scene on the train and she was a young woman. I think it was an absence of people on the ground for neurodiverse people”

Concerns were also raised about the decline of visible policing and local authority presence within communities. Participants noted a perceived reduction in neighbourhood policing and the closure of local infrastructure having contributed to a sense that there were fewer consequences for harmful behaviour.

“Theres no police station anymore. What do you do if you need help? If someone’s bikes being nicked, nothings done about it anymore.”

While some acknowledged that emergency services remain active, there was a strong perception that reactive responses are insufficient to create a consistent sense of safety. Participants emphasised that a visible, everyday presence could deter harmful behaviour and also provide reassurance.

“Theres no comeuppance, which I think makes them feel less safe. So maybe if there could be more police on the streets or just floating around or places where you can go...”

In contrast, structured environments such as schools and specialist settings were consistently described as safer due to the presence of trained staff and clear systems of supervision. These environments were seen as offering not only monitoring and support, but also predictability and clear behavioural boundaries. Participants highlighted that this type of consistent human led presence played a crucial role in enabling neurodiverse young people to feel secure.

“In schools... they’ve got the teachers and that there to monitor what’s going on”

5.3 Education and professional training

Professional training

Education was identified by participants as a key unmet need, but also a major opportunity for prevention. The findings highlight the importance of a multilayered approach, targeting professionals, neurotypical peers, and neurodiverse young people, to support the development of a safer and more inclusive community.

Participants expressed a clear need for mandatory neurodiversity training for all professionals, particularly school staff and the police. There was a strong sense that the current system lacks a nuanced understanding of neurodiversity which can prevent professionals from responding appropriately particularly in moments of crisis.

This lack of understanding was reflected in several ways. Participants noted that support for neurodiverse learners is often not tailored well enough to meet specific communication or sensory needs, leaving some young people to their own devices to work things out.

“Things aren’t tailored well enough to be that adaptable, because it is like you are left to your own devices to work it out.”

In addition, a knowledge gap was identified, with one participant observing that those teaching safety in schools may know less about digital platforms and current social trends than the students themselves, leading to disengagement.

“Its not taught very well in schools, because often the people teaching it know less about the platforms and what’s going on than the students they’re teaching it to, so that makes people disengaged”

Peer training

Alongside professional training, participants highlighted the importance of educating neurotypical peers. There was strong support for educating other youth to bridge gaps in understanding and reduce bullying frequently experienced by neurodiverse

young people. Peer led approaches were seen as particularly effective due to a recognition that young people are more likely to listen to and be influenced by others in their own age group rather than by adults.

“Educating other youth, not like young people with neurodiversity, other young people so they can understand how people with neurodiversity can communicate and the additional needs that they have”

Participants called for curriculum changes that normalise difference, including teaching how the brain works differently and explaining why people have certain conditions. By doing this it was suggested that there could be a move away from “othering” and a move towards greater acceptance in public spaces. This was viewed as being particularly important due to shifts in the political arena and an increase in news stories that were particularly damaging for those with neurodiversity.

“If you’d asked me this question about four or five years ago, I would have said we were in a brilliant place. I kind of feel we’re at a cross roads where it could go either way... we’re treading very dangerous water”

“Its not helpful some of the stuff that’s happened in the press around ADHD about alleged overdiagnosis...”

The diagnostic pathway

While education was seen as a key tool for prevention, participants also stressed that its effectiveness is limited by wider systemic issues, particularly within the diagnostic pathway.

It was repeatedly noted that families often face waiting times of multiple years for a formal assessment, with this prolonged period of uncertainty leaving young people alone to navigate the world safely during critical developmental stages.

“The diagnostic pathway is still massively under resolved and poorly, in my view, managed. You know, people are waiting two to three years unnecessarily in some instances”

As a result, there was a strong call for earlier intervention, earlier diagnosis and quicker assessments. Participants argued that without timely support, young people are more likely to disengage from mainstream education and become vulnerable to outcomes such as social withdrawal or criminal exploitation.

“Currently, there’s a culture where, like, there’s a reluctance to diagnose too early.... But that coupled with just these significant waiting times like we have now... you’re inviting things to deteriorate.”

Discussion

The findings paint a consistent picture that neurodivergent children and young people must actively construct their safety—often at personal cost. Their safe spaces are narrow and typically private, while the public environments they must navigate to participate in education, employment, and civic life are experienced as threatening, unpredictable, and poorly adapted to their needs. Moreover, the coping strategies young people have adopted (e.g., social withdrawal, masking, and in some cases carrying weapons), are responses to a perceived absence of formal support. These strategies carry their own risks, and their prevalence suggests that current services are not meeting need.

The data also points to the importance of staff training. Young people described needing professionals (e.g., teachers, police officers, transport staff) who understand neurodivergence and can respond appropriately, both in routine interactions and in crisis situations.

The loss of community infrastructure features prominently in participant accounts. Youth clubs and outreach projects appear to have played an important role in providing safe, supervised social environments. However, when they are not available or removed, the absence leaves a gap that neither families nor schools can fully fill.

Several themes carried relevance for commissioners and policymakers such as the elevated risk of exploitation that is not adequately captured by general safeguarding frameworks, which also may not account for the specific communication profiles and social vulnerabilities of neurodiverse young people. Existing provision should be reviewed to ensure it reaches this population effectively.

Recommendations

Overall, this report outlines several key recommendations and areas for improvement to enhance the safety and well-being of neurodivergent young people and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN). These recommendations span professional training, community infrastructure, and systemic changes:

1. Professional and Peer Education

Mandatory Neurodiversity Training

There is a clear need for compulsory training for all professionals who interact with young people, specifically school staff, the police, and transport personnel. This training should focus on nuanced understandings of neurodiversity to ensure appropriate responses during both routine interactions and crises.

Peer Training and Curriculum Changes:

To reduce bullying and "othering," the report recommends educating neurotypical peers about different communication styles and needs. Integrating lessons on how the brain works differently into the standard curriculum could help normalise neurodivergence in public spaces.

Updated Digital Safety Education:

Safety training in schools regarding online platforms needs to be improved. Currently, students often know more about digital trends than the staff teaching them, leading to disengagement; therefore, education must be up-to-date and relevant to current social media landscapes.

2. Systemic and Diagnostic Improvements

Accelerating Diagnostic Pathways

The report highlights that families often face wait times of two to three years for assessments. Reducing these wait times and providing earlier intervention is crucial to prevent young people from disengaging from education or becoming vulnerable to exploitation during critical developmental stages.

Reviewing Safeguarding Frameworks

Existing safeguarding protocols should be reviewed to ensure they specifically account for the communication profiles and social vulnerabilities unique to neurodiverse young people, which are often missed by general frameworks.

3. Community and Environmental Support

Rebuilding Community Infrastructure

There is a strong call to restore formal youth provision, such as youth clubs and outreach projects. These spaces provide the "scaffolding" and structured environments necessary for neurodivergent young people to build social skills and a sense of belonging safely.

Increasing Visible Authority Figures

To combat anxiety in public spaces, the report suggests a greater presence of staff or authority figures, particularly on public transport and in urban centres. Having a "person on the ground" provides a vital safety net for those who may feel overwhelmed or unsure how to navigate unpredictable social situations.

Transitioning from Reactive to Proactive Support

Systems should move away from waiting for a crisis to occur before intervening. Instead, they should focus on proactive, multidisciplinary outreach that identifies and addresses risks at an earlier stage.

4. Research Methodology (Future Recommendations)

Extended Timelines for Community Research

For future projects commissioned by the Violence Reduction Partnership, the report recommends significantly longer timelines. This is particularly important if the goal is to successfully recruit, train, and provide pastoral support to new, inexperienced young researchers.

Conclusion

This research highlights the complex and often heightened experience of risk, vulnerability, and safety among young people with special educational needs or neurodiversity. Safety is not experienced as a given, but as something that must be

actively created and maintained, often within limited and highly controlled environments. In contrast, many everyday public and online spaces are perceived as unpredictable, overwhelming and insufficiently supportive of neurodiverse needs.

The findings point to clear gaps in current systems, particularly in relation to professional understanding, accessible education, and the availability of structured community support. At the same time, they identify practical opportunities for improvement, including enhanced training for professionals, greater emphasis on peer education, and earlier, more responsible diagnostic pathways.

Overall, the evidence suggests that improving safety for young people with special educational needs or neurodiversity requires a more coordinated and preventative approach that recognises specific needs and works across education, community infrastructure and support services to both reduce vulnerability and promote inclusion