



**Understanding Distress Signals:
When Words Come from Overwhelm,
Not Intent.**

We've all had moments with our Neurodivergent young ones where their words cut deeply – expressions like "I hate you," "I want to disappear," or other phrases that feel like a punch to the heart.

Some children may not even use words at all. Instead, you might hear shouting, crying, laughing at unexpected times, or repeated sounds and phrases that seem completely out of place.

It can feel bewildering, even frightening, to witness.



**But there's something really important to understand:
these aren't well-thought-out sentences.**

**These are what we call distress signals – raw, unfiltered
expressions coming straight from the emotional centre of the
brain. In these moments, your child isn't choosing to say hurtful
things.**

**Their brain has essentially flipped into survival mode, bypassing
their logical thinking and relying on fast, automatic reactions.**

**These vocal outbursts and behaviours happen because they're
overwhelmed – not because they're trying to hurt anyone.**



What's Happening Beneath the Surface?

When a child feels safe and settled, they can communicate calmly and clearly. But when their brain senses danger – whether from sensory overload, emotional upset, or internal anxiety – their nervous system kicks into gear faster than conscious thought.

This is thanks to something called neuroception: the brain's constant scanning of the environment to decide if we're safe.

Even when there's no visible threat, the brain of a Neurodivergent child might perceive otherwise harmless situations as overwhelming.



In these heightened states, children may show one of several natural stress responses:

Fight – Hyperaroused (Sympathetic): shouting, aggressive words, meltdowns.

Flight – Hyperaroused (Sympathetic): running away, avoiding.

Freeze or Shutdown – Dorsal Vagal: becoming non-verbal, withdrawn.

Safe & Connected – Ventral Vagal: calm, social, engaged.

Understanding that these are protective mechanisms – not choices – can shift how we respond. Instead of reacting with frustration or fear, we can lean into compassion and curiosity.



The Brain's Emotional Control Room

Deep inside our brains is a powerful network of structures working to keep us safe, known as the limbic system.

Think of it as the control room for our emotions.

When things feel too much, this system fires up and starts sending out distress signals.



Some key players in this process:

Amygdala: Spots danger and triggers that fast emotional response.

Hypothalamus: Gets the body ready to respond (faster heartbeat, quicker breathing).

Hippocampus: Pulls up memories to figure out if the situation feels familiar or threatening.

Thalamus: Sorts incoming information and decides what to focus on. In stressful moments, this system acts instantly, leaving no time for careful words or thoughtful actions.

That's why a child's outburst might sound harsh – they're communicating from instinct, not intent. "Distress signals are your child's hidden language."



Why Neurodivergent Families Need Gentle Understanding

For Neurodivergent children, the world often feels overwhelming. Everyday experiences – bright lights, loud sounds, complex social situations – can build up into sensory and emotional overload.

Added to this, many Neurodivergent young people carry layers of past stress. Experiences of misunderstanding, exclusion, or unmet needs can train their brains to expect threat more frequently.

This ongoing tension can contribute to anxiety, burnout, and emotional exhaustion.



At GRANN, we recognise that families need support that sees the whole picture.

Neurodivergent kids aren't "difficult" – they're often doing their very best in a world that isn't always designed with their needs in mind.

And parents and carers aren't failing when these moments arise.

In fact, your care and curiosity are crucial. "Meltdowns are messages, not misbehaviour."



How We Walk This Journey Together

In our work supporting families, we focus on creating spaces of safety and trust. Our approach is about building understanding first – helping families decode these distress signals, so they feel less confronting and more like a natural part of communication.

Together, we work to:

Understand each child's unique triggers and needs.

Build strategies that reduce overwhelm.

Support emotional healing after meltdowns.

Empower individuals with tools and confidence.

Healing and connection are possible, especially when families & individuals feel equipped to respond with calmness, compassion & curiosity.



Meeting Distress with Compassion

When your child expresses distress through alarming words or behaviours, remember:

They're not rejecting you. They're reaching out the only way their brain can manage in that moment.

With time, patience, and the right support, both you and your child can build a toolkit for these tough times.

At GRANN, we're here to walk alongside you – through the storms and the sunshine – helping you better understand you & your child's hidden language and celebrate unique ways of experiencing the world.

"You're not failing as a parent – your care and curiosity are crucial."

