

Bridging Gaps in Understanding: Parental Awareness of Sensory Integration Challenges and the Urgent Need for Neuroaffirming Support in Abu Dhabi

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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly evolving landscape of pediatric neurodevelopmental care, sensory integration differences remain widely misunderstood, particularly in the Gulf region where cultural perceptions, educational systems, and healthcare pathways are still catching up with global neurodiversity discourse. For many families in Abu Dhabi, navigating their child’s sensory needs is an isolating experience, social stigma, and inconsistent professional guidance. Method and result summary: This study investigates the current level of parental awareness and understanding of sensory integration challenges among parents of neurodivergent children aged 3-8 years in Abu Dhabi. It also explores how families cope, seek help, and interpret their children’s behaviours in the absence of widespread neuroaffirming support systems. Using a mixed-methods design, the research draws from both survey data and qualitative interviews with parents across varied socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Preliminary findings reveal that while many parents intuitively recognize sensory-related difficulties, there is limited conceptual understanding of what these behaviours signify. The absence of consistent, affirming language and support has left families reliant on fragmented advice or school-based referrals, often after a child’s difficulties have escalated. However, exposure to neuroaffirming and sensory-informed approaches significantly altered parental insight, fostering empathy, acceptance, and proactive caregiving strategies. Conclusion and Implication: The study calls for urgent action: integrating neuroaffirming practices into Abu Dhabi’s healthcare, therapy, and education sectors is not just best practice, it is a human necessity. By shifting from a deficit model to one that validates sensory and neurological differences, professionals can empower parents, reduce stigma, and support neurodivergent children in thriving rather than surviving. This presentation offers a roadmap for change one that begins with understanding, centers lived experience and ends with systemic transformation in support of neurodiversity.