



VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER

Neurodiversity in School Age Populations



This toolkit is intended for educators and school teams who want to promote neurodiversity. This could include teachers, school staff, administrators, paraeducators, school psychologists, and others working with autistic students and students with developmental disabilities.

Identity-first language is used throughout this pamphlet. For more information visit: triad.vumc.org/identity-language.

Introduction

“Neurodiversity refers to the virtually infinite neuro-cognitive variability within Earth’s human population. It points to the fact that every human has a unique nervous system with a unique combination of abilities and needs.” (Singer, n.d.)

Many terms related to neurodiversity are similar and can be confusing, yet they are distinct. The following definitions provide common language that will be used throughout this toolkit (Walker, 2014).

Neurodiversity: the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species

Neurodivergent: an individual or group of individuals that diverge from the dominant societal standards of “normal neurocognitive functioning”

Neurodiverse: a group of people where one or more members of the group differ substantially from other members, in terms of their neurocognitive functioning

A more detailed review of this material and additional resources can be found in the interactive online toolkit, which can be accessed by registering for a free account at triad.vkclearning.org and accessing the information in the **School-Age Services** folder.

❑ **Who is considered neurodivergent?**

Individuals with developmental disabilities including autism, intellectual disability, and ADHD; individuals with psychiatric disabilities including anxiety, and depression; and individuals with learning disabilities including dyslexia (specific learning disorder).

Challenges that emerge for individuals are seen as incompatibility between their needs and the environment. As many neurodivergent people come to find out, the world was designed with neurotypical people in mind. Examples: school days lasting 7-8 hours with the general expectation that students sit for most of the day; anticipated school events are often loud and overstimulating (pep rally, talent shows).

❑ **Why is neurodiversity important for school teams?**

Understanding neurodiversity can create more inclusive school environments where differences are considered normal and contribute value to the community. Unfortunately, students with developmental differences, specifically autism, experience higher rates of teasing and bullying than their neurotypical peers (Cappadocia et al., 2012). In environments where the word **difference** aligns more with words like **deficit** or **weird**, students are more likely to have negative experiences. Inclusive communities are less amenable to widespread overt bullying behavior. Truly inclusive environments provide modifications that allow individuals to feel belonging and make important contributions.

Educators can serve as models for students regarding how to talk about differences or disabilities. A school community that values neurodiversity prioritizes respect for everyone and works to foster true inclusion (i.e., deeper than surface level attempts), where staff create meaningful connections with neurodivergent and neurotypical students.

Whole School Strategies

Promoting neurodiversity at the schoolwide level is a step toward building and maintaining an inclusive school community. Inclusive communities are intentionally created and cultivated and can benefit all community members. For something new to be adopted schoolwide, the participation of staff at all levels is critical. The following strategies consider all educator and community groups' involvement in building an inclusive school (i.e., school staff, administrators, students, parents).

❑ **Gather Feedback**

An important step is to gather feedback from neurodivergent individuals to help guide this work; there are many approaches to this.

- Neurodivergent professionals and/or former students could be invited to share their experiences navigating school with a disability.
- Current neurodivergent students are also important stakeholders, so providing them with an opportunity to share honestly about their experiences at school.
- Starting a book club that includes works authored by neurodiverse individuals is a great way to learn more and start critical discussions.

❑ **Provide Information to All Faculty and Staff**

Content related to neurodiversity can be presented to staff in professional development sessions. Information should include descriptions of evidence-based practices for inclusion. Administrators are well positioned to communicate the importance of neurodiversity to their staff by dedicating work time for information sharing and discussions. It is important that paraeducators are also included, especially since they often work with students receiving specialized supports. See some practical suggestions below to introduce the concept to staff and encourage them to take ownership of the application in their respective contexts.

Provide staff with several opportunities to become familiar with neurodiversity and to support students who are neurodivergent. Instead of a one-time professional development session, try sending monthly quick tip emails to regularly engage staff in building inclusive communities.

Integrating neurodiversity in already existing committees may be a way for staff to take ownership and increase the sustainability of inclusive practices. Consider giving

guided questions to different school teams (e.g., grade-level teams, or school-wide behavior teams) so that they can discuss ways that they could support students with differing needs. Staff can brainstorm accommodations to support students during routine or non-routine school events. For example, provide opportunities for students to self-select out of sensory stimulating events (e.g., pep rally). This would entail discussing how to let students know that opting out of certain events is an option and finding supervision for these students.

❑ **Consider Mission or Diversity Statement**

Most schools have a mission or diversity statement (or something similar), where common values are identified. Consider the addition of language about inclusion and/or appreciation of differences.

❑ **Make Families Aware**

Families should also be made aware of the school's commitment to neurodiversity, so that they can discuss and reinforce concepts at home.

❑ **Expect Mistakes**

As with anything new, expect everyone to make mistakes. Normalize this! Sometimes school staff and students will say or do things that are inconsiderate, misinformed, disrespectful, or even rude. It is important to provide feedback to colleagues who use insensitive language by modeling neurodiversity-friendly language and addressing when student challenges are talked about in a disrespectful way. Instead of ignoring these instances or punishing students, provide skill-building opportunities for students so they can interact differently next time. It is important to distinguish teasing or bullying from an unintentional or uninformed offensive comment. Imagine the following scenario:

Scenario: A student regularly displays hand flapping in the hallway and students from another class stare. The teacher overhears classmates say, "oh, that's just Ben being weird."

Possible Response: Explain that we all express feelings in different ways and when some students move their bodies a certain way (like flapping), it's usually because they feel happy, excited, or frustrated. Ask students how others can tell when they are happy, excited, or frustrated.

Representation of neurodivergent individuals is critical. All students need to be able to see themselves represented in groups that are elevated or highlighted by the school.

How to Improve Representation

When scheduling speakers for assemblies, class presentations, or panels, be intentional about including neurodivergent participants.

School staff often select students for various opportunities (e.g., school committees, referrals to outside enrichment, 'student of the week/month'). It can be easy to select one kind of student for these opportunities; teachers can be encouraged to be inclusive related to their decision making.

Engagement in extracurricular activities at school is a great way to interact and socialize with similar-age peers. Participating can also increase feelings of belongingness. Encourage all students to become involved in school activities. Broad offerings increase the likelihood that all students can find a good fit.

Consider variety such as:

- Time of day of activity
- Small vs. large group
- Highly interactive (e.g., theater) or more independent in nature (e.g., art club)
- Online or in-person activities
- Activities with high (e.g., band) vs. low noise (e.g., photography club) level
- More physical (e.g., karate club) vs. less physical (e.g., Lego club)

Classroom Strategies

Teachers are in a great position to make their classrooms safe environments where students feel comfortable. They also must be prepared to respond to students with varying "strengths, readiness, and learning profiles" (Hall et al., 2003, p. 3). Everyone can benefit when teachers recognize student needs and are thoughtful about supporting them at the classroom level. Flexibility is key!

"Knowing positive attributes exist and designing classrooms where they flourish are two different things." (Rentenbach et al., 2017)

❑ **Differentiated Student Responses**

As we prepare to support students in the classroom, it is important to normalize the spectrum of needs and abilities that exist. This approach is different because it emphasizes that differentiation should be the norm for all students. Often access to differentiation and modifications occurs only for students with IEPs or after a student fails. Even students without formalized goals may have variations that require some level of support; there is no guarantee that teachers know every student who is neurodivergent. Structuring a supportive environment that provides opportunities for all students to access what they need to be successful positively impacts student school experiences. See the suggestions for teachers box below.

❑ **Incorporating Student Strengths and Interests**

Be on the lookout for opportunities for students to showcase interests in a socially appropriate manner. Students with strong interests or passions can take on the role of expert as they present to their classmates (e.g., student with interest in dates is selected to present a timeline that's relevant to a certain topic; student with interest in civil war facts invited to share during a relevant discussion). Teachers can use these opportunities to highlight the collective knowledge that enhances the class community.

Consider ways to integrate student interests into classroom privileges or jobs. A student who has a passion for vacuum cleaners may really enjoy contributing to the classroom by being assigned the vacuuming job periodically; this would also serve as a movement opportunity. A student with an interest in door stoppers might be the designated student to place them in the door when students transition out of the classroom.

Teachers will quickly come to learn student interests. This information can be used to maximize student engagement. Practice problems, questions, and worksheet information can be customized to reflect interests of classroom members. A student with autism with a passion for dragons will likely feel more motivated to write a short story if it can be from the dragon's perspective.

❑ **Differentiated Opportunities for Engagement**

To support varying needs and abilities, teachers can take small steps to differentiate their instruction. With differentiation, teachers provide instruction to learners with varying needs by tailoring their approach. As a result, students access instruction that best meets their needs.

Suggestions for Teachers

Offer students choices about how to showcase their knowledge using written or oral responses, completing a project, and creating visual art (e.g., art, video, other media, Hall et al., 2003).

Provide multiple formats for students to ask questions in whatever way feels most comfortable (e.g., raising hands to ask questions, written questions, opportunity to ask in a 1:1 setting).

Be intentional about ensuring opportunities for different students to work together (e.g., member compilation for group projects, seating arrangements).

Include clear expectations and roles for group members to set students up for success with group work.

Students will feel more comfortable trying things they have not yet mastered when the classroom environment is a place where mistakes are expected (Dweck, 2015). Teachers can provide behavior specific praise focused on effort (e.g., I can see how carefully you are thinking through that tricky math problem. Great job giving it your best effort!) Teachers may even share when they make minor mistakes to further normalize this for the class.

The following strategies can be used to set up students for success (CAST, 2008).

- Visual supports
- Task analysis
- Graphic Organizers
- Technology (e.g., speech-to-text, typing assignments, using textbooks with a read aloud feature)
- Additional think time for individual and choral responding
- Flexible seating (e.g., wobble chair, standing desk, sitting appropriately on the floor)
- Opportunities for movement (e.g., classroom errands)
- Adjusted demands and expectations (e.g., complete odd items on a worksheet)

Evaluation and IEP Process

The special education evaluation process can serve an important role in shaping the perspectives of team members, parents, and students about disabilities and differences. There are several ways that neurodiversity could be considered throughout the school-based evaluation process.

After a referral is made, parents must provide consent before proceeding. It is important to clearly communicate with families about what to expect related to the evaluation process, so that they can make an informed decision. Consider using terms like **challenges** and **characteristics** or **differences** instead of **deficits**. The language we use holds tremendous power and can set the tone for the way parents understand their children. Since the evaluation process is inherently focused on identifying a student's needs and challenges, communicating about student strengths upfront during the referral process allows the team to see the whole student and not just the student's presenting challenges.

❑ Considerations for Direct Assessment

The evaluation and IEP process is centered around individual students, so it makes sense to be thoughtful about the messaging they receive. A student being evaluated will likely be pulled from class a few times to work with adults with whom they are not as familiar. They might notice someone observing in their classes or on the playground. Depending on their age, students may be differentially aware of their challenges and the perception of others. Sometimes, parents or caregivers tell their child about the upcoming evaluation and explain the purpose, but this is not something that always happens. The way that

students learn about the evaluation can impact additional feelings of stress and anxiety. Here are some ideas for starting this conversation.

- Elementary School Student – “We are going to do some activities that will help us learn more about you, how your brain works, and how we can make learning and school easier.”

Based on referral concerns, school psychologists can create a testing environment that helps set students up for success. See the following checklist for considerations for students when autism is suspected.

Considerations for Students When Autism is Suspected

- Select appropriate assessment tools, carefully considering the limitations of verbally loaded cognitive assessments.
- Use visual supports. These could be used to track completed and remaining activities (e.g., first-then, visual schedule, timer).
- Use reinforcement strategies to motivate students (e.g., praise student effort, offer time for a brief fun activity after activities are completed).
- Provide frequent breaks.
- Minimize distractions (e.g., sit student with their back to a door or window).
- Keep directions clear and simple.
- Provide additional teaching examples, when able.

Note: It is important to remain standardized. Referencing standardization guidelines in examiner's manuals can help avoid deviations that break standardized practice.

❑ Considerations for Observations

School-based autism evaluations require observations in a variety of settings. Observations across settings help us determine what is happening in the environment that helps

a child be more or less successful. See the following types of observation opportunities.

- **Structured setting vs. unstructured setting:** Observing how a student responds to teacher instructions in a classroom setting is as important as seeing them on the playground or at lunch. Note what students gravitate towards for additional information about interests and strengths.
- **Adult vs. student directed:** Students may behave quite differently when activities are teacher facilitated (e.g., whole group instruction) or student facilitated (e.g., working on a group project).
- **Highly preferred activity vs. non-preferred activity:** Plan to catch students during a time of the day or activity that they really enjoy, in addition to times or activities they do not enjoy.

❑ Considerations for Interviews

An important part of the evaluation process is learning a student's history from those that know them best—parents, other caregivers, and teachers. In addition to purposeful questioning about a student's development, academic performance, behavior, and social-emotional functioning, the interview is an opportunity to learn about student strengths and interests. Neurodivergent students often have areas of special interest and profound strengths. While interviews often target parent and teacher concerns about student challenges, creating space to talk about strengths is a good way to set the tone for an interview.

Asking About Student Strengths

Begin parent and teacher interviews with talking about student strengths. This may require some follow-up questions to gather the most meaningful information. Frustrated teachers or parents often need more specific probes to reflect on at least one thing going well. Some examples include:

- What does this student enjoy doing?
- What does the student do well independently?
- What activities does the student gravitate towards?

Rephrasing how we describe autism characteristics (e.g., asking about a child's **special interests** instead of **intense unusual interests**) may help parents see how autism criteria aligns with their child's strengths as well as challenges.

❑ Report Writing

Report writing occurs at the end of the evaluation process but is critical for understanding student needs and recommendations. School psychologists can include language in their report templates that is more strengths-based and disability affirming. This does not have to happen overnight but can be a process. A clinician's report writing evolves over time, just as the way society talks about disabilities has and will continue to evolve. Consult colleagues about how they tweak language towards being more affirming. Try to engage in continuous self-reflection regarding report writing. Consider the following questions:

- How would this report read as a parent or caregiver?
- How would this read as the student?
- How will this report read in ten years, when we might talk and write about disabilities slightly differently?

Mention strengths first. This is an important way of seeing the student beyond the lens of current difficulties. These strengths should be built upon in the recommendations.

Certain language commonly seen in reports could also be considered judgment-laden. Because some words are used so frequently, it can be easy to become less sensitive and forget we are talking about someone's child.

Consider substituting more respectful words or terminology that communicates the same intent (TRIAD Advisory Committee, 2022).

More Respectful Words

Deficit → Challenge; described as needing additional support

Disorder → Disability, diagnosis, or difference

Special needs → say child's specific diagnosis, needs, or use **disabilities**

Impairment → Differences

Severity → Intensity

Severe → Clinically Significant or Clear

High/low functioning → level of support needed; areas of strengths and weaknesses

□ Sharing Feedback

Clearly communicating evaluation results to parents and other team members is paramount. A good feedback session occurs when a family feels like the school team understands their child more fully. Employing a strengths-based approach in feedback sessions and/or IEP meetings can positively shift the way team members conceptualize disability and difference.

Facilitating Strengths-based Meetings

Talk about general student strengths upfront. Be explicit in the recommendations about how a teacher may integrate student strengths and interests into classroom tasks and activities.

Focus on the big picture when talking about assessment results. It is easy to get into the weeds by overexplaining numbers, which can be overwhelming and less meaningful for parents. Make sure parents understand what various scores mean (e.g., standard score, percentile) and zoom out to explain what the profile means in the larger context. Talk about what a student did well and what was harder for them.

Sharing cognitive, behavior, and adaptive assessment scores is a nice time to highlight personal and normative areas of strength and areas of need. This is often more meaningful than talking about categories (e.g., referring to mild intellectual disabilities) or speaking in generalities about a disability.

Depending on their age, neurodivergent students may be involved in meetings. All students should be involved in the process in an age-appropriate way. We can communicate to the student and team that disabilities and differences do not mean that anything is wrong. Instead, a label gives us information about the types of things that may be hard and supports that may be beneficial.

For more information about autism evaluations in schools, visit: tipsheets.vkcsites.org/schools-autism-eligibility-process/.

We hope readers feel empowered with additional knowledge on how to integrate neurodiversity affirming practices into the school community, support neurodivergent school age students, and use a neurodiversity lens when communicating with students, families, and staff.

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