

Respecting the individual: Neurodivergent young voices



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Welcome...

We'd love you to participate but please use the 'raise hand' facility to ask questions and contribute when others are talking.

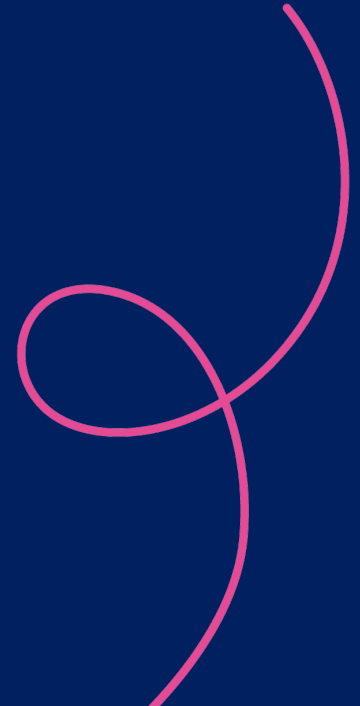
Please be considerate to others – this should be a safe, open and reflective space to learn.

If you need live captions, click on the 3 dots at the top of your screen.

Please do take 2 minutes to provide us with some feedback – we love to hear what you think. The QR code and link will be provided later.

Some of these Practice Week sessions are being recorded for learning purposes. Your presenter will let you know at the start.

Thank you!





What we will cover in this session

What is neurodiversity

Neuro affirming language

What our young people are saying

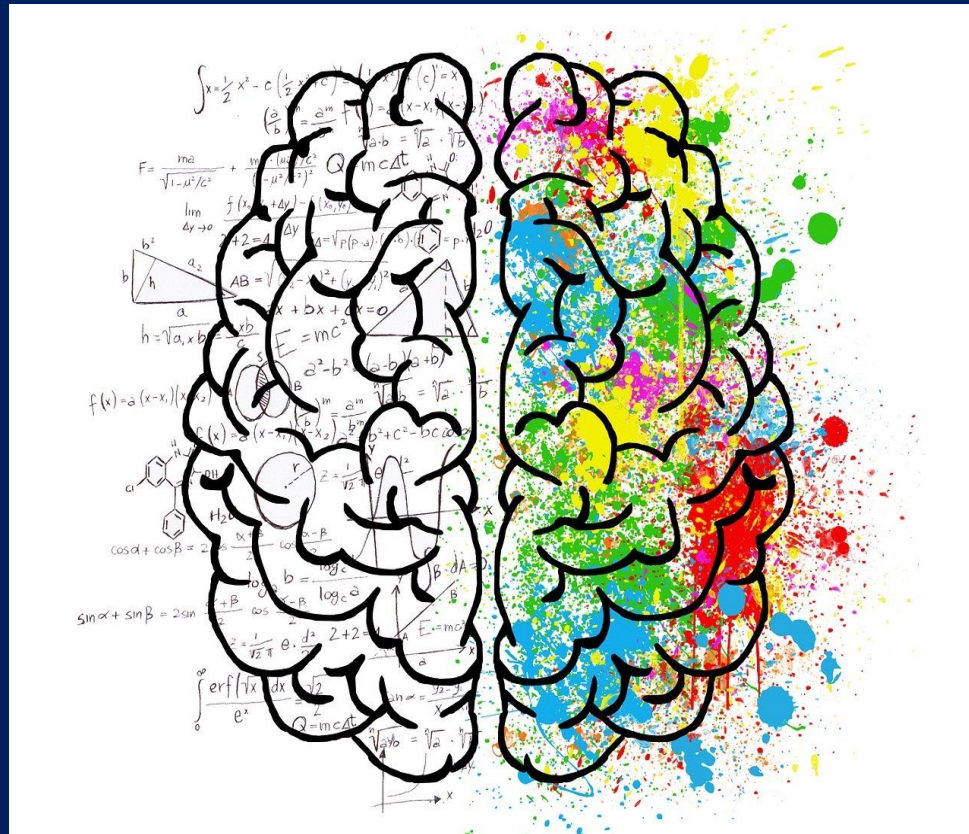
What are the challenges

What support can help

Key themes to consider in our practice.



Defining Neurodiversity



Neurodiversity:

Is the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population.

It was coined by Judy Singer in the 1990s, as a political term to argue for the importance of including all neurotypes for a thriving human society

Everyone's brain is wired differently and has their own unique way of thinking, interacting and experiencing the world. We are all Neurodiverse.

Neurodivergent refers to individuals whose brains function and process information differently than what is considered "typical," encompassing differences like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and others, and is seen as a natural variation in human cognition.

Neurotypical: describes individuals whose brains function in ways that align with what society generally considers "normal" or "typical"

Although the umbrella term of Neurodivergent can be helpful for the individual. We must not understate the challenges that any one identity may have on day-to-day challenges and support needs.

Language Matters:

- **Non-judgemental language** – Focusing on strengths and potential rather than deficits and disorders.

Self-Identification Is VALID:

- Individuals should be respected for how they identify themselves, and it's important to avoid making assumptions about someone's neurotype or neurodivergence.
- **"Traits" vs. "Symptoms"**: Using "traits" or "characteristics" instead of "symptoms" is more neutral and avoids implying that neurodiversity is a problem or something that needs to be fixed.
- Aspergers, high and low functioning language are now generally seen as outdated and not commonly used. Functional labels can oversimplify or dismiss the level of support needed.

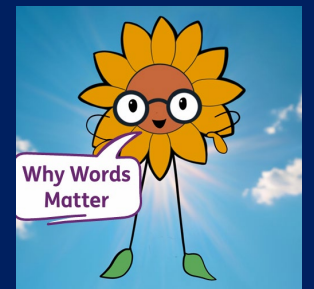
Neuro affirming language:

Neuro-affirmative language is language that celebrates neurodiversity, focusing on strengths and individual differences rather than deficits or impairments, promoting understanding, acceptance, and empowerment for neurodivergent individuals

Focus on strengths: Instead of focusing on challenges or deficits, neuro-affirmative language highlights the unique strengths and abilities of neurodivergent individuals.

Respect for diversity: It recognises and celebrates the wide range of neurological differences and communication styles.

Individualised approach: It emphasises the importance of understanding and respecting individual preferences and needs.





TRUE OR FALSE:

“everyone is a little autistic”

False: Autism affects individuals in different ways – but saying everyone is a little autistic trivialises the challenges and differences faced by those who are autistic.

“Dyslexia is a sign of low intelligence”

False: Dyslexia is a neurological condition that affects how the brain processes language, specifically impacting reading and spelling skills. It does not indicate low intelligence or affect other cognitive abilities

“People with ADHD can focus”

True: People with ADHD can develop strategies that can support them focusing on tasks. Alongside this people with ADHD may experience hyper focus – especially if they are motivated by the topic.

“ADHD is something you grow out of when you reach adulthood”

False: you can't grow out of ADHD, but you can manage your symptoms. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that persists into adulthood. However, symptoms can change over time and vary in severity

“It is estimated 1 in 5 people are neurodivergent”

True: Research indicates that approximately 1 in 5 (20%) people are neurodivergent, including conditions like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia.



Norfolk
County Council

Hearing the voice of children and young people:

- Delivered workshops and informal discussions
- Focused on friendships, anxiety, and sense of self
- Used guided questions and group discussion
- Built trust, helping students share their experiences

Why Young People's Voices Matter

- Neurodiversity-informed practice starts with listening
- Young people are experts in their own experiences
- When voices are ignored, support becomes ineffective
- Respect is felt through everyday interactions, not policies



Practical help can come in all shapes and sizes.

- Predictability, clarity, structure
- Visuals, options to process information differently
- Sensory-aware environments
- Adults who listen instead of assume
- Flexible communication (chat, writing, reduced eye contact, etc.)
- Permission to stim, regulate, move
- Respect for special interests
- Adjusted expectations around time, transitions
- Space to recover from social overwhelm
- Being believed

Ask me what works for me.

Year 4 girl

Give it to me in writing

Year 5 boy

If I know what to expect I can prepare myself.

Year 7 boy

Trust me, I wish people believed me when I say it hurts or its too busy.

Year 8 boy



Sensory and Environmental Help:

When I feel safe,
I'm happier, when
I am listened too
and shown respect
I feel safe.
Year 7 Girl,

I hate bright
lights; I always
want the big light
off. Year 5 girl

Sometimes lots of
people frighten me, I
need my mum to be
near me, I get hot and
stressed, then feel
really tired. Year 8 boy

The sound of paper
ripping is painful to
me, My socks are
annoying me today
Year 6 boy

The world is too fast,
being at home is quiet
and I don't want to go
where its busy
Year 5 boy



Respecting the Individual

Feeling Safe and Respected

“I wish people would give me a chance. When I feel safe, I’m happier. When I am listened to and shown respect, I feel safe.”

Safety is created through relationships, not control.



Adjust for the Individual

Time, Processing and Memory

*“I am never given enough time. If I am given a list, I can check things as I go. That works well for me.
I forget what people tell me to do, and then I get in trouble.”*

Difficulty remembering verbal instructions is not defiance – it is an access need.



Respond to the Individual

One Size Does Not Fit All

“Some things don’t work for me (breathing techniques). I wish people would stop suggesting them. They work for some people – but not me.”

Support works when it is personalised.



Supporting the Individual

Regulation Does Not Always Look Calm or Still

“Having a fiddle toy helps – not a noisy one, that annoys people.

Doodling helps too.

I can concentrate better if I am doing something else at the same time.”

Movement and multitasking can support focus and regulation.



Reassuring the Individual

Anxiety and Self-Belief

“I worry a lot. I think I am rubbish at lots of things, but I just do things differently. I am not wrong.”

Difference is sometimes interpreted as failure.



Trusting the Individual

Trust and Task Initiation

“I wish I was trusted to get things done. Sometimes I don’t want to do it, but often I just have to work up to starting a chore or work at school.”

Starting is often the hardest part – pressure can increase avoidance.



Hearing the Individual

Thinking Differently

“I think differently. I don’t have favourite things. I don’t know what I like or don’t like, especially when I am put on the spot.”

Fast questions favour fast processors.



Seeing the Individual

Quiet Does Not Mean Disengaged

“Just because I am quiet does not mean I have nothing to say. I am often invisible in large groups, especially if I don’t know people.”

Hearing all voices requires space, time and safety.



Things that hinder or make things more difficult:

Forced eye contact

Using “tone of voice” expectations

Punishing sensory-driven behaviour

Misinterpreting shutdown/meltdown as “rude” or “defiant”

Over-verbal instructions

“Just try harder”

Ignoring sensory overload

Rigid behaviour policies

Not providing processing time

Adults speaking *about* them instead of *with* them

Someone telling me to look at them. I just feel sick.

Year 8 girl

I hear what mum says, It makes me feel bad when she says its difficult. I feel bad when she is sad

Year 6 girl

Rushing me and telling me to stop doing something I am enjoying. Its not easy moving onto something else.

Year 5 boy

Listening helps create inclusive environments



Children are the experts in their own experiences



Listening builds trust and strengthens relationships



Feeling listened to supports wellbeing



Support is most effective when shaped with the child



Behaviour is a form of communication about needs



All communication styles are valid

Summary: What young people are telling us:

- Feeling safe comes from being listened to and respected
- Being rushed leads to mistakes and then punishment
- Not all coping strategies work for everyone
- Trust and time reduce anxiety
- Quiet and subtle communication is often missed

What Respecting the Individual Looks Like in Practice

- Offer written or visual instructions
- Allow thinking and processing time
- Accept fidgeting and doodling as focus tools
- Avoid putting young people on the spot
- Respond with curiosity, not consequence
- Trust young people before expecting proof

Advocate for Inclusion:

Are you doing all you can?

As a practitioner?

As a team?

As part of the wider community?

Relating to Everyday Practice

System Lens — “Where are the barriers?”

- Rigid attendance/behaviour rules
- Loud/noisy/waiting environments
- Paperwork or processes inaccessible to ND youth
- Staff misunderstanding of regulation needs
- Lack of co-produced adjustments

Relating to Everyday Practice

Service/Team Lens — “What do we expect?”

- Are our behaviour expectations neurotypical by default?
- Do we allow sensory breaks?
- Do we understand masking & burnout?
- Do we design meetings, appointments, sessions with ND needs in mind?

Relating to Everyday Practice

Individual Lens: “How do I show up?”

- Am I assuming or asking?
- How do I give processing time?
- How do I adapt communication?
- How do I use the young person’s preferred strengths/interests?



Reflection:



What is *one everyday change* we can make to be more neurodiversity-informed in our teams?



One thing I will take forward from today is.....



Please take 2 minutes to
provide us with some feedback

