

# NEURODIVERSITY: UNDERSTANDING & SUPPORTING NEURODIVERGENT YOUNG PEOPLE

A staff factsheet from Outside the Box Education



Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in how human brains are wired and how people think, learn and experience the world. It is not a disorder or a deficiency — it is **difference**.

The term **neurodivergent** describes people whose brains work differently from what is considered 'typical.' This includes ADHD, Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), dyslexia, dyspraxia (DCD), dyscalculia, Tourette syndrome and more. It is estimated that around **1 in 5 people** is neurodivergent in some way.

Neurodivergent young people are not broken versions of neurotypical people. They are people whose brains are genuinely wired differently — and who navigate a world largely built for a different kind of mind.

## COMMON FORMS OF NEURODIVERGENCE

<b>ADHD</b> Attention, impulse control & emotional regulation	<b>ASC</b> Social communication, sensory processing & routine	<b>Dyslexia</b> Reading, spelling & phonological processing	<b>Dyspraxia (DCD)</b> Motor coordination, planning & spatial awareness
<b>Dyscalculia</b> Number sense, maths & numerical processing	<b>Tourette Syndrome</b> Involuntary tics — motor and/or vocal	<b>PDA</b> Pathological Demand Avoidance — anxiety-driven need for control	<b>Sensory Processing</b> Hyper or hypo sensitivity to sensory input

## THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM: A SHIFT IN THINKING

### The medical model — deficit thinking

The child has a problem that needs to be fixed.  
Focus: diagnosis, treatment, remediation.  
Outcome: the child must change to fit the environment.

### The neurodiversity paradigm — strengths thinking

The environment has a problem that needs to be adjusted.  
Focus: understanding, accommodation, strength-building.  
Outcome: the environment changes to fit the child.

## WHAT NEURODIVERGENT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED MOST

### To be understood, not fixed

The single most important thing any adult can offer a neurodivergent young person is genuine understanding. Not pity, not lowered expectations and not the implication that they are broken. They need adults who take the time to understand how their brain works and who respond to difference with curiosity rather than correction.

### Consistent, predictable adults

Neurodivergent young people — particularly those with ASC, ADHD or anxiety — need to feel safe. Safety comes from predictability: adults who follow through, who say what they mean, who don't change the rules unexpectedly and who respond to dysregulation with calm rather than escalation. One trusted adult can be transformative.

### Environments designed for them

School environments are predominantly designed for neurotypical learners. For neurodivergent young people, this means navigating sensory overload, unpredictable social demands, rapid transitions, abstract instruction and sustained attention — often simultaneously.

Small adjustments make an enormous difference: clear visual information, reduced sensory demands, advance warning of change, movement breaks, flexible seating, and tasks that allow multiple means of expression.

### Strengths recognised and celebrated

Neurodivergent young people frequently have a history of being told what they cannot do. Many have internalised the message that they are less capable, less valuable or more trouble than their peers. Actively naming and celebrating their strengths — in front of them and others — is not just nice to do. It is essential for building the self-belief that will carry them through difficulty.

## PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR STAFF

### → Be explicit, not implicit

State exactly what you want. Avoid sarcasm, idiom and implied instruction. 'Could you sit down?' should become 'Please sit down now.' Clear is kind.

### → Give processing time

Neurodivergent brains often need longer to process questions and instructions. Build in wait time before expecting a response. Silence is not defiance.

### → Reduce transition stress

Warn before changes. Use countdowns. Write transitions on the board. 'In five minutes we will be...' is far more supportive than an abrupt shift.

### → Break tasks into steps

Large, open-ended tasks are overwhelming. Break them into numbered, concrete steps. A checklist the student can tick off transforms an insurmountable task into a manageable sequence.

### → Avoid public correction

Public correction triggers shame and rejection sensitivity acutely in neurodivergent young people. Correct quietly, privately and with warmth. What you say matters less than how safe the student feels.

### → Regulate before you educate

A dysregulated brain cannot learn. If a student is anxious, overwhelmed or in distress, address that first. Reduce demands, offer a quiet space, wait for calm. Learning can come later.

### → Connect before you redirect

Relationship is the foundation of everything. A student who trusts you will accept redirection far more easily than one who doesn't. Invest time in connection before expecting compliance.

### → Presume competence

Never assume that difficulty in one area reflects ability overall. A student who cannot write fluently may be thinking at a far higher level than their written output suggests. Find other ways to access what they know.

## UNDERSTANDING MASKING

**Masking** is the process by which neurodivergent people suppress or camouflage their natural behaviours and responses in order to appear neurotypical. It is exhausting, it is invisible, and it is extremely common — particularly in girls and young women with ADHD or ASC.

A student who appears to be 'coping fine' in school may be using enormous cognitive and emotional energy to hold themselves together. The cost of this is paid at home, in meltdowns, exhaustion and anxiety. If a parent tells you their child is struggling at home despite appearing fine at school, **believe them**. The school experience and the home experience are both real.

Masking is a coping strategy, not evidence that a student doesn't need support. Long-term masking is associated with burnout, anxiety and depression. The goal should be an environment where young people feel safe enough not to need it.

### **The bottom line**

Neurodivergent young people are not failing to be normal. They are succeeding at being themselves in an environment that was not built for them. Every adjustment we make, every assumption we question, every moment of genuine understanding we offer — it all matters.

**The most powerful thing any adult can do is decide to understand first, and judge later. Usually, once you understand, the judging stops entirely.**

### **Outside the Box Education**

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