



## Facilitators Guide – Embracing Neurodiversity Workshop

This workshop was created by a team of kids and youth ministry leaders with input and advice from Suzanne Donnelly – a consultant in disability, trained teacher with a masters in disability studies and is about to complete a graduate certificate in Psychology. Kieran Degan – Associate Pastor at Narrabeen Baptist (with significant kids ministry, high school and primary school SRE experience) presents the video alongside Suzanne. The workshop includes a video, scenarios for discussion and a resource handout.

### Resources:

- Download video from vimeo.
- Print copies of the scenarios page for each group and the tips for facilitators page for you
- We will provide 10 copies of the handout with a QR code attached for people to download additional copies. We recommend letting people know that they will receive the handout at the end of the video as it follows a slightly different structure.

### Setting Up Your Space

- You will need space to watch and discuss the video in small groups. Scenario **activities** can be done in several small groups around the room.

### WORKSHOP OUTLINE (50 MINUTES)

#### Your intro: (2 mins)

- Let participants know this is a workshop about embracing neurodiversity with a particular focus on ADHD and autism. In a workshop like this the advice and ideas will be general and more about a mindset and approach to ministry. Neurodiversity is about diversity so what is helpful in one situation may not be helpful in other situations. It is highly likely someone in this room or one or more of their family members has autism or ADHD.
- Everyone will receive a link to the video to watch it again and share with their team.
- There is a handout you will receive at the end of the video that has detailed notes.

#### Video Intro (2 mins)

[0:00 -1:45] Kieran shares his story of ADHD and his self perception

#### Video (5 mins)

- [1:45-6:12] Suzanne shares definitions and data
- [6:12-7:21] Kieran the story of a mentor and their impact

#### Pause & Chat (max 5mins)

In small groups of up to 4 people discuss the following reflection questions. There is no definitive answer more an opportunity to reflect together about some of the postures and expectations we have that might work against meeting the needs of the children and young people we are ministering with.

- How do our expectations of 'good behaviour' influence our ministry practice?
- Are we creating ministry environments that are truly inclusive or are their processes & structures, (like weekly changing leaders, strong focus on sharing information) that are unintentionally hindering engagement and belonging?

## Video (10 mins)

[7:30-17:00] Practical ideas: Find out more  
Communication  
Physical Space  
Programming and teaching time

## Pause & Chat Scenarios (15mins)

- Form groups with people who serve in a similar ministry space
- Share the handouts between the groups – there is a QR code on the front for people to download additional copies and they will have access to the handout alongside the video.
- Work through the 2 scenarios for your ministry area  
**What do you notice? What steps could you take to work towards increased engagement and a deeper sense of belonging for the child/teen and more empowered leaders/SRE teachers**
- Provide time to discuss and wrap up the session. (5 mins)

# SCENARIOS TO CONSIDER

For each scenario for your ministry area: What do you notice? What steps could you take to work towards increased engagement and a deeper sense of belonging for the child/teen and more empowered leaders/SRE teachers? Use the handout provided for ideas of things to consider.

## **SRE scenario 1 - Tori**

Tori is in year 2. When the class sits on the carpet at the front of the room near the smart board Tori sits just under the first desk at the back of the group. When it's time for singing Tori doesn't sing and rests one ear onto her shoulder or one hand on either side of her head.

## **SRE scenario 2 - Brendan**

Brendan in year 3 always brings a toy to the SRE class. He doesn't keep the toy in his pocket, despite you asking him to. He is constantly fiddling with his shoelaces/ buttons or the zipper on his school jacket.

## **Kids Ministry scenario 1 - Mia (8y)**

Mia is wants to stay with the younger age group in the Sunday kid's ministry program. Mia has ADHD and dyslexia. Mum tells you Mia doesn't feel comfortable moving up to the next age bracket as her literacy skills are so far behind the others. Mia often stands up and walks around the room during the big group story time and is regularly asked to sit down.

## **Kids Ministry scenario 2 - Lucas (10y)**

Lucas has autism. He doesn't want to join in the kids program. He stays in the auditorium with his parents, but he is not participating in the service. From the moment he sits down he is focused on playing games on his iPad.

## **Youth Group scenario 1 - Jeremy (16y)**

Jeremy has recently started coming to youth on a Friday night. Jeremy has ADHD. During games he struggles to regulate his behaviour often becoming overly competitive and loud. Some of the younger teens feel a bit nervous that he will use too much force in the games.

## **Youth Group scenario 2 - Ali (14y)**

Ali has grown up being part of the church, she attends the local Christian school and is a regular attender at Youth group. Ali has found it hard to find friendship. In the small group times Ali is quick with answers to questions posed. Often her answers show a lot of bible knowledge, but are very black and white with little grace or empathy for those who don't know much of the bible or believe in Jesus.

# TIPS FOR SCENARIOS FOR FACILITATOR

## **SRE scenario 1 - Tori**

Consider communication and sensory support

Notes: What does the school recommend?

Since she is close to the group, is it best to let her sit there without drawing attention to her?

Would headphones during the singing help or perhaps giving her more control over the situation by allowing her to press play for the video?

## **SRE scenario 2 - Brendan**

Consider communication and sensory support

Notes: What is it about the toy that he brings to class that makes it an unacceptable fidget

Consider providing a more suitable fidget.

## **Kids Ministry scenario 1 - Mia (8y)**

Consider communication, leader consistency, variety of teaching methods

What reassurance does she need around reading

Ensure all leaders are aware

Does Mia have to move up could she be involved with the younger group in some way as a helper?

## **Kids Ministry scenario 2 - Lucas (10y)**

Communication and responding will be key here

Notes: What contributes to Lucas wanting to avoid the kids program - what the possibilities for addressing those needs?

If he was to continue in the auditorium are there opportunities for him to engage and serve eg training to run AV?

## **Youth Group scenario 1 - Jeremy (16y)**

Consider communication with Jeremy, leaders and the group

Notes: Bystander interventions would be key here. Making sure all the leaders support everyone being involved.

## **Youth Group scenario 2 - Ali (14y)**

Notes: A mentor who comes alongside Ali and can encourage her and help her think about how she communicates in different spaces could be helpful.

Is there an opportunity for joining a small group with other adults?

All of these options will need communication & permission from Ali's parents.



# EMBRACING NEURODIVERGANT KIDS & TEENS

**Neurotypical** describes people with brains that work in the way that society expects. People who have brains that are considered different to most people's brains are described as **neurodivergent**.

Autism and ADHD are forms of neurodivergence.

## AUTISM & ADHD

### ADHD

*(Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)*

A persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.

- Three different presentations: Inattentive, Hyperactivity/Impulsivity and combined.
- 6-8% of children and 3-5% of adults have ADHD
- More commonly diagnosed in males than females, with a ratio of 2:1.

### Autism

A neurological condition that affects how a person thinks, feels, interacts with others and experiences their environment.

- Approximately 1 in 70 Australians are on the autism spectrum.
- Diagnosis is 4 times more common in boys than girls.
- Girls may present differently than boys as they are more likely to engage in masking behaviours. Masking can lead to mental health challenges including anxiety and depression.

## culture and mindset

Imagine if churches and SRE classrooms were spaces of empathy and inclusion. What would it mean for relational discipleship? For connection and an opportunity to both speak out and live out the good news of Jesus?

### seeing

Observe the physical space and activities from the young person's viewpoint.

Identify potential sensory triggers and make necessary adjustments.

See challenging behavior as a form of communication – a way to express needs or discomfort, either to gain or avoid attention, a sensory sensation, or a tangible activity/object.

Movement or lack of eye contact does not always equal a lack of attention or respect.

### welcoming

Create a warm and inviting atmosphere.

Use visual aids and clear instructions to help children understand what to expect.

Learn about each child/teen what are their interests.

### responding

Respond to each child/teen's needs with empathy and support. Go the extra mile.

Be consistent as individuals and as a team in your responses to help children/teens feel secure.

Don't take challenging behaviour personally.

Approach challenging behaviours with curiosity and compassion.

# communication

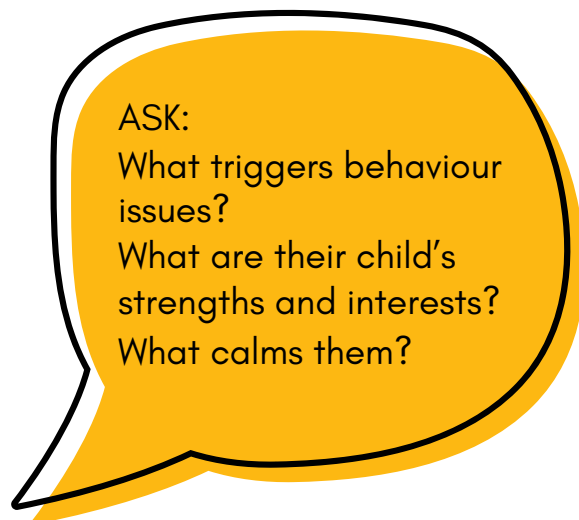
Every person is unique and their neurodivergence is unique. The more we understand what helps and what is a challenge the more we are able to create environments where everyone thrives.

## families

- On registration/permission forms include an open-ended question like "Is there anything else that would be helpful for the leaders to know about your child/teen?"
- Maintain open and regular communication with parents and caregivers.
- Demonstrate that you care about this child/teen.
- Listen to and incorporate parents' insights and suggestions. Parents are the experts.
- Note for SRE teachers: The class teacher or support staff at the school will be able to provide answers to many of your questions about how to best support and engage a particular child.

## neurodivergent kids and youth

- Use clear, simple language and visual supports. Allow the child time to process both verbal and visual information.
- Simplify verbal directions - the shorter the better.
- Make these answers clear: What is happening? What order? What time? What is next? How long?
- Preface personal instructions with their names.
- Be patient and give time to process information.
- Use more literal language and avoid using abstract language such as idioms and sarcasm.
- Encourage children/teens to express themselves in ways that are comfortable for them.



## the whole group

- Talk with all of the kids / young people in your ministry.
- Help them think about the importance of inclusivity and empathy.
- Talk about different ways of doing things for different needs. e.g. some people need to hold something in their hand to help them listen, sometimes people need to have some space to regulate their feelings.

## the team

- Hold regular team meetings to discuss strategies and share experiences.
- Provide training on autism and ADHD to all team members.
- Foster a supportive and collaborative team environment.



## sensory support

Sensory support can help regulate sensory experiences and reduce stress increasing the potential to focus on other things.

### fidgets

Provide fidget toys to help with focus and self-regulation.

- **During activities requiring focus**  
Fidgets can help with concentration during tasks like listening to a story/ talk or participating in a group activity.
- **When feeling anxious or overwhelmed**  
Fidgets can provide a calming effect and help with self-regulation when feeling stressed or anxious.
- **During Transitions**  
Fidgets can help ease the transition between activities and increase engagement.
- **In Quiet Settings**  
When the activity is more of a reflective quiet space, fidgets can help children/teens manage their energy without being disruptive to others.

Ensure fidgets are safe and appropriate for the setting.

Think about the best time for fidgets to be used – will that be for the whole time or only during a specific activity?

## bystanders and buddies

When you are not leading from the front you have an essential role in helping kids and teens engage. Moving to sit/stand alongside them, a whispered reminder of what we are giving our attention to, quietly handing a fidget to them, assisting with a challenging task all help to refocus the child/teen but without drawing everyone's attention to them.

SRE helper authorisation is an option that can provide a consistent support person in the classroom who doesn't teach but helps engage and support kids.

Some churches set up a formal "Buddy Program" to assist consistently with 1 or 2 children. See the "Buddy Program" in further resources below.

### quiet space

- Designate a quiet area where children/teens can go to calm down or take a break.
- Equip the space with calming items like soft cushions and noise-cancelling headphones or weighted lap blankets.
- Consider incorporating acoustic tiles to dampen the sound in rooms where there is a lot of echo/ reverberation of sound.

### lighting and clutter

- Use natural lighting whenever possible.
- Be mindful of sensory sensitivities to lighting and make adjustments as needed.
- Take a good look around the spaces you use how much visual and physical clutter is there a good clean up will make the environment more appealing for everyone.

### other tools

Wobble seats  
Textured mats  
and many more!



# consistency

Structure and routine can reduce stress and the overwhelm of the unknown.

## leaders

- What is the consistency of leadership – are there different people leading every week, do volunteers serve in a block or at random intervals.
- Be consistent in your approach and interactions – work as a team to determine what the boundaries and privileges are.
- Provide clear expectations and follow through on commitments.
- Clear expectations are only effective if we encourage/reinforce these behaviors often (i.e. praise, tangible rewards)



## routines

- Establish and maintain predictable routines or communicate early and clearly when things are going to happen in a different way.
- For children use visual schedules to increase the level of security knowing what will happen and in what order.
- Visual timers can help with knowing how long before a challenging or favourite activity will end, helping with focus and transitions. (Avoid timers with an alarm)
- Give warnings and visual support for transitions.

## variety

- Offer a variety of activities to cater to different interests and needs.
- Include sensory-friendly options and quiet activities.
- Allow some choice – use their “favourite” activities to motivate them. It is often best to use lots of short-term rewards rather than waiting till the end.

## further resources

- **Positive Partnerships:** A government program to support families and schools to learn about autism. Check out the module on understanding sensory processing.
- **Student Wellbeing Hub:** Though created for schools it could be used to complete an environmental audit.
- **Imperfects Podcast:** The Imperfects podcast has a recent episode that explains ADHD.
- **inclusionED:** Strategies and ideas, including on visual supports <https://www.inclusioned.edu.au>
- **Buddy Program:** Creating a more structured buddy program. Check out our resource.

