



# 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.

