

Working with Neurodiverse Students

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Most often, neurodiversity refers to individuals with autism, ADHD, or other learning or developmental disabilities. However, Harvard Health Publishing defines neurodiversity as “the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one ‘right’ way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits.”

HOW MIGHT I SPOT A NEURODIVERSE STUDENT?

Neurodiversity will look different from person to person, and you cannot “diagnose” someone based on observed behavior alone. The following indicators will help you identify students who might benefit from the tips included on this sheet and address the diverse learning needs of all your mentees.

NEURODIVERSE STUDENTS MIGHT:

- Avoid eye contact.
- Not smile frequently, even if you smile at them.
- Be easily overwhelmed by certain tastes, smells, lighting, or sounds (sometimes called “sensory sensitivities”).
- Fidget or make repetitive movements (often called “stimming”), such as flapping, flicking, or rocking parts of the body.
- Have less awareness of social cues.
- Have and want to share a profound interest in a specific topic or activity.
- Have difficulty with turn-taking, interrupting, excessive talking, impulsivity, or being easily distracted.
- Need very specific instructions or steps to complete a task.

HOW CAN I MAKE MY MENTOR VISITS MORE NEURODIVERSITY-FRIENDLY?

Most of the time, your activities will need few or no changes for neurodiverse students. Many of these suggestions can benefit all students you work with.



FIGURES OF SPEECH: Avoid sarcasm and euphemisms.



CONCISE: Try to be as clear as possible in all verbal and written instructions for activities. Break tasks down into small steps when explaining how to an activity.



USE VISUALS: Add pictures or other visuals to presentations, and use numbered lists, bullet points, and tables on activity sheets to illustrate instructions or learning goals.



AVOID ASSUMPTIONS: Don't assume students are deliberately breaking the rules or being rude if they are avoiding eye contact, interrupting, excessively talking, etc. Ask your teacher for assistance with student behavior.



BE AWARE: Recognize that some students might use tools to accommodate their needs or sensory sensitivities, such as wearing noise-dampening headphones or using fidget toys.



BE SUPPORTIVE: Be supportive by not commenting on harmless behavior such as fidgeting or "stimming". Speak positively or redirect the conversation if another student wants to talk about these behaviors.



SEEK CLARITY: Ask your teacher for insight on working with a specific student if you are struggling to connect with them. Your teacher cannot share information about the student's health or a medical diagnosis, but they can share what strategies they use to reach their students.



BE KIND, PATIENT, AND UNDERSTANDING: Celebrate student wins and don't worry if a student's accommodations or behaviors aren't what you're used to. Showing care and getting to know them will make a bigger impact than you know!