



HOW TO MAKE A SPACE MORE NEURO-INCLUSIVE

A GUIDE FOR CAREGIVERS



A practical framework to help you assess your neurodivergent child's environment and implement meaningful adjustments. Let's work to remove unnecessary barriers and ensure they are fully supported and comfortable at home and on-the-go.

What is Neuro-Inclusivity?

Neuro-inclusivity is a critical step towards a fully inclusive society

Neurodivergent individuals often face barriers in education, employment, physical spaces, and services. Creating more inclusive policies, practices, and environments begins by considering these challenges from the outset. The first steps toward inclusion are awareness and acceptance. Recognizing that people experience the world differently and embracing these differences as a natural part of human diversity. Together, awareness and acceptance lay the foundation for environments where everyone feels respected, supported, and able to participate.

Equity over equality

Equality means treating everyone the same, which helps ensure basic rights for all. However, equity goes a step further by recognizing that people start from different circumstances. By understanding these differences, we can provide the specific support people need to help create fair outcomes for everyone.

Neuro-inclusivity at home and on-the-go

As parents, we want to ensure our children are set-up for success, comfortable and supported both at home and out in the world. This guide offers some tips to make your home a more welcoming space for your neurodivergent child, as well as how to prepare for outings.

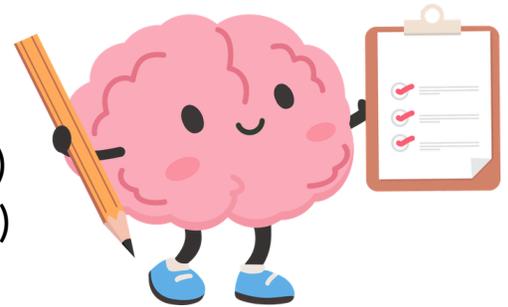
At Home

Create a Regulation Space

In your home, try creating a small, low-stimulation space that your child can access at anytime (not just during times of distress). This space should feel like a choice, not a consequence. A comfortable, relaxing space they can go to in order to regulate.

When building the space consider including:

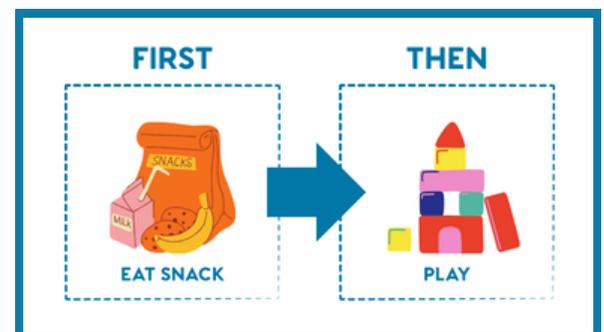
- Soft lighting (lamps instead of overhead lights)
- Comfortable seating (bean bag, floor cushions)
- Weighted blanket or lap pad
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Fidget toys or sensory tools
- Visuals that cue calming (feelings chart, breathing prompt)



Visual supports

Neurodivergent children often thrive with visual structure. Visual tools can help to increase motivation, as well as predictability, which reduces anxiety and cognitive load - especially during transitions.

- Visual daily schedules (morning/evening routines)
- First-Then boards
- Countdown timers for transitions
- Visual chore charts
- Emotion scales (e.g., 1-5 regulation scale)



For tips to develop and introduce a first-then board go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zNKARdPm5I

Sensory vs. Stims

Sensory responses

Every child has a unique sensory profile. Take the time to look for patterns in your child's preferences to various sensory experiences.

Consider:

- Swapping harsh lighting for warm bulbs
- Use blackout curtains if your child is light-sensitive
- Offer clothing without tags or tight seams
- Reduce background noise whenever possible (turn the TV or radio off if it is not in use)
- Provide oral sensory input (such as "chewelry", crunchy snacks)

Automatically maintained behaviours

Automatically maintained behaviours (actions that feel good or 'right' to the child internally, colloquially referred to as 'stims') are distinctly different from reactive responses to the environment.

Stimming examples:

- Movement/Proprioceptive: Rhythmic rocking, jumping in place, spinning, or pacing to feel grounded.
- Tactile: Seeking out specific textures, light scratching, or rubbing fabrics.
- Visual/Auditory: Humming, rhythmic tapping, or waving hands in front of the eyes to create predictable sensory patterns.

Recognizing these behaviours helps to distinguish between a child 'seeking' a sensation they need and 'reacting' to a sensation that is unpreferable.

Regulation and Priming

Build in regulation before expectation

Prioritize nervous system regulation before beginning a task that requires sustained attention. For example, incorporate a brief movement break before sitting down to complete homework. These regulating moments help the body and brain recalibrate, making it easier to transition between activities and prepare for focused engagement.

Priming

Priming is a technique used to prepare individuals for specific tasks by exposing them to relevant information or stimuli beforehand. Prime your child for expectations using visual support tools. Priming and regulation steps may reduce response effort and encourage success.



TIP: parents - don't wait for a meltdown to implement modelling strategies and visual tools!

Shift from crisis management to skill building

Support your child's application of regulating techniques and tools within and outside of the context of the behaviour. Use these techniques both outside of and during periods of escalation, this may help generalize the skills and promote its success in the context of an escalation.

Co-regulation

Co-regulation

Co-regulation is the exchange of calm between two individuals. For adults who have the skills to self regulate or manage their emotions, and children, who are still learning this, this can also mean modelling the skills to regulate our emotions. Kids are little copycats so one of the best ways to teach is to model!

Exemplify co-regulation for your child by following these steps when they're feeling overwhelmed:

- First - check in with yourself and ensure that you are calm when you engage with your child. Be the calm!
- Get on their level - rather than towering over them, crouch down or sit close, and model calm breathing.
- Help them name the emotions they are feeling.
- Change your tone of voice. Lower your voice and infuse it with positivity, maybe whisper.
- Give them a hug or squeeze.
- Guide them through a calming or breathing exercise. Say that it is something that helps you relax when you're feeling upset, they may join you, or they may simply watch. Both can be considered a learning moment!

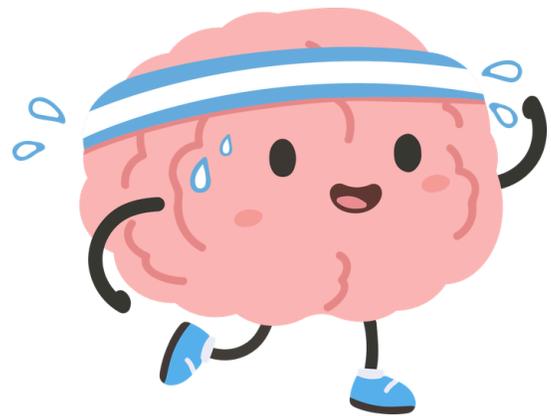
Consider using a visual aide like a task analysis checklist or choice board for co-regulation that is used by both parent and child. This way, adults are modeling calming strategies AND the effective use of tools and visual aides during periods of escalation.

Heavy work

“Heavy Work” Heavy work refers to activities that involve pushing, pulling, lifting, or carrying objects, which stimulate the proprioceptive system. This type of sensory input can help individuals feel grounded and centered, making it particularly beneficial for those with sensory processing difficulties. However it is important to note that these activities aren't universally beneficial. For some, certain heavy work can be over-stimulating rather than calming, leading to increased arousal/escalation.

Heavy work can be any actions that use the muscles and joints using our own body weight as resistance or the weight of an object. Suggestions to explore based on your child's unique sensory profile:

- Pushing/pulling
- Lifting/carrying
- Chewing
- Jumping
- Squeezing
- Climbing
- Pinching



Activities like pushing a ball or a heavy basket, doing wall push-ups, or chair push-ups are examples of “heavy work.” Heavy work involves effort from the muscles and joints and engages the proprioceptive sensory system, which helps the body understand where it is in space.

The resistance created during these activities provides feedback to receptors in the muscles, joints, and ligaments. This feedback helps the brain process movement and body position, which can have a calming and regulating effect because the movements help organize the body and nervous system.

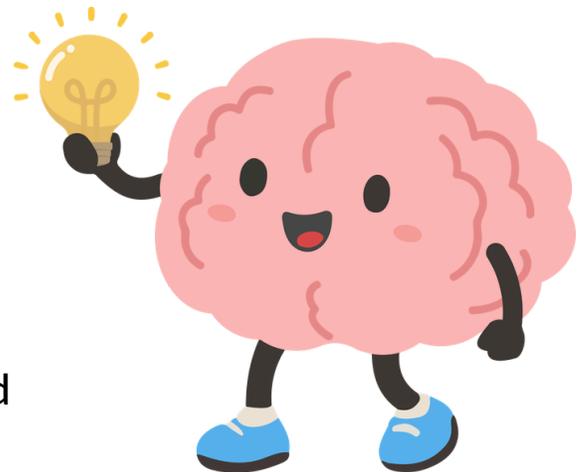
On-the-go

Create a “Regulation Kit”

Like a diaper bag for the newborn days, being prepared with a “Regulation Kit” that is ready to go with the tools and visual supports your child is familiar with from home, can help reduce overwhelm when you’re out and about. Incorporating some predictability in a new place can increase your child’s independence and reduce their cognitive load.

Consider packing:

- Headphones or ear defenders
- 2–3 of their favourite fidgets
- Chewelry or gum (if appropriate)
- Sunglasses or hat
- Snack with protein
- Small visual schedule or transition card



Prepare - priming in action!

The uncertainty or change around a new situation is often more unsettling than the event or place itself. As an example of “priming” as described on page 5, walking your child through what they can expect ahead of event can enhance understanding and set you up for success.

Together, you can look at photos of the location and explain what will happen when you get there (who they’ll see, where they will go, how long you will be there, etc.). Help to set your child’s expectations but make sure that flexibility is built into the day. Identify a space at the location in advance where your child might take a break to regulate (this could be back in the car, a quiet hallway, just outside of the location, whatever works for your needs in the environment).

On-the-go

Example: Attending a birthday party or social event.

Set clear expectations to reduce ambiguity:

“We will stay at the birthday party in the park for 45 minutes.”

Building in flexibility could look like:

- An agreement on a signal if your child is feeling overwhelmed
- Ensuring access to a quiet space
- Permission to leave early if dysregulation reaches a threshold
- A discussion in advance of the event that leaving early is not a “failure”

Account for recovery time

Remember that busy outings will require some recovery time. Try to avoid overscheduling activities for your child or family. If there is already an event for the weekend don't double book if it can be avoided.

Plan for some decompression time after the outing, whether that is the night of or the next day. During this decompression time aim to lower the demands or expectations after high-stimulation events and normalize needing rest.

A meltdown after an outing often reflects the accumulated sensory load from the event, and should not be viewed as a failure.

Advocate confidently

As a parent you want to ensure that you are advocating for whatever your child's needs are in these spaces or events. You can model self-advocacy for your child, as they see you kindly but confidently making the ask for you or your family. Normalizing accommodations rather than framing these asks as an apology or a disruption.

This might look like requesting a quieter table at the restaurant, or early boarding when travelling. Keep the request simple and straight forward such as “my child may need extra time,” “my child may be wearing headphones, this helps them participate,” or “we may leave early if it becomes overwhelming.”

If your child experiences distress or atypical behaviour in a public setting your child is your priority. If others try to jump in or share opinions, aim to maintain short, calm statements in order to reduce escalation and protect your child's dignity. Something like...

- “They're having a hard moment. We're managing.”
- “This is a regulation issue, not a discipline issue.”
- “We've got it handled, thank you.”

Needs are valid.

Accommodation is reasonable.

Information Sources

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