



HOW TO MAKE THE CLASSROOM MORE NEURO-INCLUSIVE

A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS



A practical framework to help you assess your teaching environment and implement meaningful adjustments, ensuring neurodiverse groups are fully supported and able to learn without unnecessary barriers.

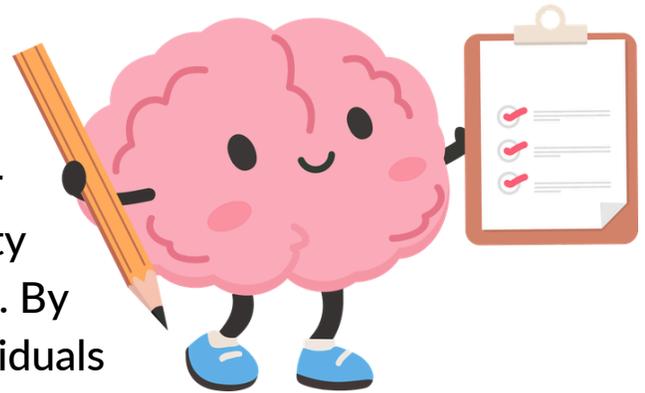
What is Neuro-Inclusivity?

Neuroinclusivity 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.

While equality (the sameness of treatment for all), lays the groundwork for basic rights, equity addresses deeper imbalances that are in place. By recognizing different circumstances that individuals face, teachers can accommodate specific needs in order to achieve fair outcomes.



Only 60% of neurodivergent secondary students continue to post-secondary education, this is 17% less than their neurotypical counterparts (77% of students) in the same period. Where possible, teachers can incorporate small accommodations in their classrooms with the aim of closing this gap in educational continuation. (Government of Canada, 2019)

What is Neuro-Inclusivity?

A systems approach is critical.

Educators play a vital role in ensuring that students with complex needs receive the comprehensive support required to thrive in school. During processes such as Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) meetings and Individual Education Plan (IEP) reviews, educators can strengthen outcomes for students by engaging in thoughtful advocacy alongside families. By collaboratively raising awareness of a student's needs and the limits of classroom-based accommodations alone, educators help create space for broader system supports to be considered.

When appropriate, this advocacy can include recommending the involvement of regional teams and specialized resources that bring additional expertise and capacity. While teachers work diligently to implement accommodations some students benefit from multidisciplinary supports that extend beyond what an educator can reasonably provide on their own. Partnering with families to highlight these needs helps ensure that decisions are informed, collaborative, and focused on securing the most inclusive and supportive learning environment possible.



Instill an Openness to Inclusivity

Welcome inclusivity!

Invite students to share their needs with you. Do your best to create a welcoming space, ensuring that students are aware they can come to you with their experiences and are welcome to share their learning needs.

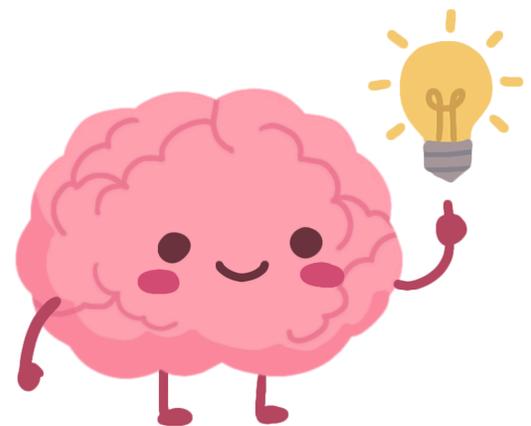
Gender pronouns

Avoid assuming a student's pronouns, as it can easily cause unintended harm, make it clear at the start of the school year that students are welcome to self-identify (or not) with regard to their gender and lived personal pronouns.

- Include your own lived personal pronouns on your course materials along with your contact information and office hours.
- Add your lived personal pronouns to your e-mail signature and to your office hour information on your office door.
- Incorporate more inclusive, non-binary language throughout the year, such as “partner” instead of wife or husband, “folks” instead of guys, etc.

Language is important!

Ensure that the language and terminology you are using when referring to your students and their needs is appropriate, neutral and respectful. Access Kinark's Language Guide to help you prepare for topics of mental health, autism, disabilities, forensic mental health and youth justice, go to www.kinark.on.ca/resources



Lessons in Learning

CAST (Centre for Applied Special Technology) created the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework so that all learning experiences in school, the workplace, and life are thoughtfully designed to elevate strengths.

The latest Universal Design for Learning Guidelines suggest that the learning environment needs to adjust to suit the learner, not the other way around. This can be through the environment, the learning materials themselves, the approach and the expectations.

Different ways of learning

Remember that every brain learns differently, offering one method of taking in the lesson and one method of sharing their work doesn't allow for a true demonstration of their understanding.

- Offer multiple ways to access content (visual, auditory, written, hands-on).
- Provide varied options for demonstrating learning (presentation, written work, video, art, verbal explanation).
- Build in choice wherever possible, and ensure the choices reflect your student's expressed needs.
- Build in processing time. Some students take longer than others to digest information.
- Accept alternative participation (chat responses, sticky notes, shared docs, small groups).

Clear expectations and lesson plans

Ensure that assignment expectations are clear with a written rubric that the student can reference. Don't assume that one verbal explanation is all that is needed.

Lessons in Learning

Methods to support executive functioning

Executive functioning refers to a set of cognitive processes that help individuals plan, organize, initiate, manage time, regulate attention, and complete tasks. There are many strategies to support executive functioning such as environmental adjustments, or tools that help students strengthen these skills so they can better manage their learning process.

These methods can include:

- Reinforcement systems - provide positive feedback or rewards to strengthen desired behaviours, such as a point system, or offering a choice of incentive (student can choose between a reward or break activity when the goal is reached).
- Structuring the environment - use visual schedules or task boards, organize materials into labelled bins or folders, use colour coded lesson plans, and make planners and calendars available to the class.
- Visualizing time and organization - this could mean using visual countdown timers during task completion or digital calendars with reminders, making time management visible rather than relying on the student's memory.
- Breaking down homework or assignments from one large ask into smaller, more manageable tasks, this may mean using checklists for multi-step activities and providing step-by-step instructions.

Accessible Materials

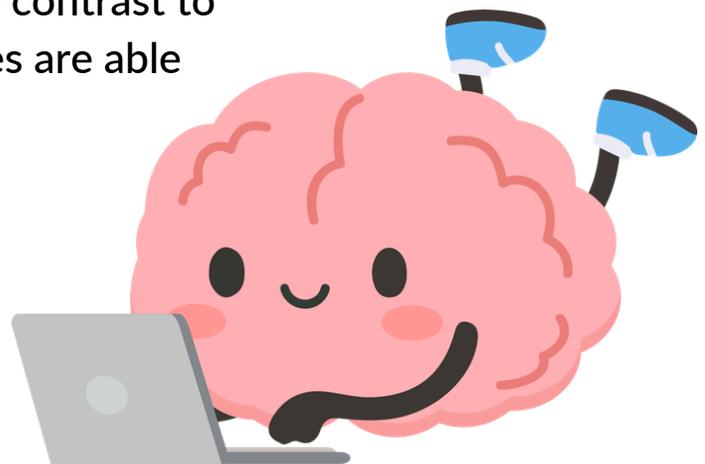
Closed captioning

Always aim to provide closed captioning for videos being shown in class, or being shared to view at home, in order to assist students with processing delays or auditory disabilities. By incorporating closed captioning whenever possible, you are exposing the learner to print alongside auditory representations of language, enhancing their reading skills and learning overall.

Accessible Learning Materials (AODA compliance)

Always prepare accessible instructional materials. You can utilize the [WebAIM accessibility evaluation guide for PowerPoint and Word](#) materials, as well as PDFs, to ensure the documents and presentations you are creating are accessible to all of your students.

You can also access the [WebAIM contrast checker](#) to ensure the colours you are using throughout your learning materials allow for a high enough contrast to ensure that students with visual disabilities are able to perceive the content on the page.



BETTER OUTCOMES. TOGETHER.

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Classroom Design

The overall goal of a neuro-inclusive classroom: to make a space that is calming and not distracting for students. Talk to your neurodivergent students to discuss their needs in each of these areas.

Flexibility

If possible, allow designated spaces for collaboration, as well as a quiet/safe space where students can go to regulate themselves after overstimulation.

Social supports

This could look like peer mentor/buddy programs, lunch bunches (social time at lunch in a safe space), providing reinforcement for learners demonstrating inclusivity, and coaching learners to serve as peer models.

Multi-sensory tools

Teachers should encourage the use of designated sensory tools such as fidget toys. Good classroom fidgets are quiet, discreet, have an interesting texture, and allow for lots of finger and hand movement. We often recommend squeezable/stress shapes, tangle toys or pencil topper fidgets.

Options for seating

If possible offer a range of seating options that students can choose from such as bean bag chairs, standing desks, or sensory seat cushions they can add to their standard chairs.

Nature

Incorporate nature wherever possible such as plant life, allowing views of the outdoors, and access to natural sunlight.



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Creating a Calm Corner

Calm spaces

Having a dedicated calm space where students can go to regulate and recover from the impact of overstimulation. Bonus points if the space is comfortable and includes sensory tools.

When creating your “Calm corner” ensure that it is located away from high-traffic zones. If possible, create a partially enclosed space using room dividers or bookshelves to reduce visual and auditory stimulation.

Involve your students in the process

Ask your neurodivergent students for input on what they would find particularly calming. This not only ensures the space meets their needs but also helps them feel valued and understood, and may garner more interest in the space when ready.

Remember to create and display clear rules for using the space, such as:

- How to request access to the calm corner
- How to determine time limits when using
- How to use each of the tools in the space



Allow for movement

Movement

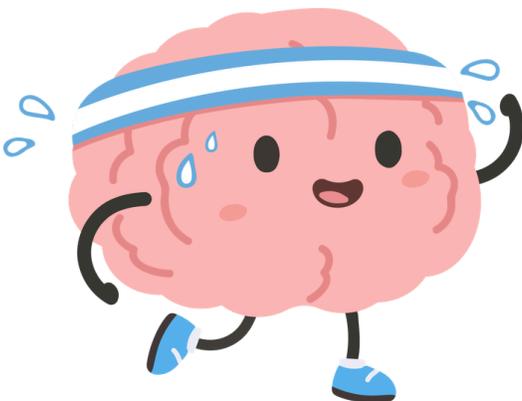
Movement throughout the day is an important support for neurodivergent students because it helps regulate the brain and body systems that influence attention, sensory processing, emotional regulation, and learning readiness. Rather than being a distraction from learning, regular movement can improve engagement, focus, and overall well-being in the classroom.

Research has also shown that incorporating movement into the school day can improve on-task behaviour, classroom engagement, and academic performance. Regular opportunities for movement help reset attention and can enhance memory retention and overall learning outcomes.

This could look like...

- Brief movement breaks,
- Providing wiggle seats,
- Offering fidget items

These movement moments allow for proprioceptive stimulation without classroom disruption. Consider clearing space in the back of the class for students to pace while listening to the day's lesson!



Information Resources

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