PARENT CHILD PRESCHOOLS ORGANIZATION

# NAVIGATING NEURODIVERSITY IN THE PRESCHOOL YEARS

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## What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity recognizes that people think, learn, and experience the world in a wide variety of ways, and that these differences are natural rather than deficits. While the term applies to everyone, it's most often used when talking about conditions like autism, ADHD, and learning differences. These differences are simply part of what makes each person unique. The neurodiversity movement, which began in the 1990s, seeks to promote acceptance, inclusion, and appreciation of all kinds of minds.[1]




## What can Neurodiversity look like?

Preschool and elementary school is a time of rapid development, but also one that has a large variation of how and when skills are acquired. Children are learning foundational skills by watching and imitating what is in their environment. Teachers play a key role in guiding children to learn how to respond and process information in preschool. However, children who are stressed, overwhelmed, anxious, scared, frustrated, and those who can not understand, nor communicate their needs, may not be able to participate like other children in school.

## The impact of stress

The most important thing to keep in mind, is that those who are neurodiverse, are likely working harder than most other children. The stress this creates can overwhelm a young child and compromise their ability to regulate. That stress can be internalized via a child isolating and engaging in self directed behavior. Alternatively, depending on the child's temperament and diagnosis, the stress can be externalized via reactive behaviors.

## Internalized Stress can look like

- Difficulty sitting still
- Difficulty following direction
- Difficulty with transitions or when things change unexpectedly
- Difficulty processing high emotional states
- Difficulty engaging socially or in a group
- Reacting negatively to redirection

## Externalized Stress can look like

- Emotional Dysregulation
- Non-Compliance
- Difficulty with sharing or losing at games
- Lack of Eye Contact
- Not imitating
- No Interest in other children or group activities
- No Parallel Play or Imaginary Play
- Sensory Behaviors of seeking/avoiding
- Self Direction-not following general routines

## How this stress effects children with neurodiversity

For many children with neurodiversity, the brain's fight, flight, freeze, or flood response is triggered frequently—sometimes many times a day—because everything can feel like danger: a look, a tone, a sound, even a smell or piece of clothing. When this stress response takes over, access to logic, regulation, and impulse control is blocked. Recognizing this helps us understand that many behaviors are not choices, but reactions to feeling unsafe.

## Some Strategies to Help

- Create predictable routines and use visuals to support understanding when listening is difficult
- Use concise language, and use gestures or visuals to support verbal interaction via 'talking to the eyes'
- Provide choices instead of open-ended questions
- Use familiar songs, visual timers or countdowns to support transitions





# Let's talk Inclusion

## Inclusion in the classroom

When a child is demonstrating challenging behaviors, it's communicating they need help. They need to feel safe and accepted. We need to scaffold their processing and present things in a way that they can understand without constantly having to work so hard.
To help children become more accepting of those who act or behave differently, we can emphasize that everyone has their own strengths and areas where they need support. When children understand this, it fosters a more inclusive and compassionate classroom culture. If a child is seeking attention through challenging or aggressive behavior, try giving them a leadership role or highlighting one of their strengths—this helps them feel valued, seen, and connected to the group.

## Inclusion as a community

Research shows that parents of neurodiverse children, often experience higher levels of stress than parents of children with other conditions. This stress can begin even before a diagnosis—often around preschool age—when differences in development start to appear. The challenges can grow when a child struggles at school, isn't included in play, or feels left out. Many families describe feeling very alone during this time, which is why kindness, inclusion, and simple gestures like birthday invitations can mean so much. Even one friendship can greatly boost a child's social growth. Building a supportive community—a true village—can make all the difference for both children and parents. Which makes cooperative preschools the perfect place to practice inclusion for both children and their families!

I. MEd, N. B. M. (2021, November 23). What is neurodiversity? Harvard Health. https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/what-is-neurodiversity-202111232645

### Resources to Learn More

"The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind" by Daniel J. Siegel

"Poppy and the Overactive Amygdala" by Holly Rae Provan

Amazing Things Can Happen - Video

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