



# PEER TO PEER

*Autism Peer-to-Peer Series* is a publication of the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA).

NOVEMBER 2021

## Building Inclusive Classrooms with Your Neurodivergent Peers

### What is Neurodiversity?

The term “neurodiversity” has been used to describe how our brains and minds can work differently from one another. Some people may identify as neurodivergent without a specific diagnosis, but here are some diagnoses that could lead someone to consider themselves neurodivergent:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Dyslexia/Dyscalculia
- Intellectual Disabilities
- Mental Health (e.g., obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety)
- And many more



*“Neurodivergence is a strength and an aspect of diversity! I feel that my creativity and general outlook on life come from my neurodivergence and make me into the person I am.”*

-neurodivergent college student

## Importance of Building Community with Your Neurodivergent Peers

Your neurodivergent classmates may choose to tell you about their differences or they may not. Either way, it is important to help build community with all in your classrooms. Classmates may need help staying organized and socializing with other students, or they may just need some patience and understanding.

Neurodivergent students can struggle more than their peers with anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems because environments are not always built to be inclusive or understanding. Studies show that students with autism are more likely to be bullied in school than their peers without a developmental disability (Hebron, 2017), which can contribute to ongoing mental health concerns.

There are things you can do to help. Support from friends and peers can help depressive symptoms lessen over time, and even can keep depressive symptoms from developing in the first place.



## Benefits

Apart from the mental health benefits, there are also social and academic benefits for all students when you provide classroom support. Students with autism and their peers who worked together during the school year noted the following benefits:

- Increased comfort interacting with peers
- Improved social skills
- Improved grades
- Increased inclusion
- More friends in class
- Increased responsibility and patience





## FAQs about How to Support Your Neurodivergent Classmates

**Q: Why does my classmate sometimes make noises or move their arms around? They can't seem to sit still.**

A: Some neurodivergent students, particularly those with autism, may exhibit what are called "repetitive behaviors" or "stimming." This can be different for everyone, but it might look like rocking back and forth, flapping hands, or flicking fingers. These behaviors can sometimes help release energy or calm anxiety while in class. Other students may simply have trouble sitting still for long periods of time. These behaviors are often a reason students are bullied and experience isolation.

*"Stimming can happen when we are stressed or overwhelmed. It focuses stimulation away from the overwhelming outside stimulation. The best way you can help is to leave us alone and let us use it as a coping mechanism. It may be what is helping us stay and experience the social interaction more easily. If it gets really bad, you can ask if we are okay or if we want to go somewhere else."*

*-undergraduate student with autism*

### How you can help:

- Be patient and understanding
- If it becomes increasingly intense, ask if they are okay or need to go somewhere else, but respect if they say no
- If someone else in your class questions this behavior or mocks the student, let them know that is wrong and educate them about repetitive behaviors

**Q: My classmate always wants to talk about Star Wars (or another specific topic) but sometimes I don't want to keep talking about it. What do I do?**

A: Many people have specific and special interests, and these may be even more intense for your neurodivergent classmates (who also may have a harder time reading your body language to know that you are no longer interested). These topics may be more comfortable for them to discuss too when social interactions seem intimidating.

*"It's hard to relate to others when there are so many varied things to talk about. Conversations can seem chaotic with topics shifting randomly and unpredictable social pitfalls to avoid. Focusing on our special interest can help us relate to others while keeping the topic of conversation in a familiar and predictable territory."*

*-undergraduate student with autism*





### How you can help:

- If they are talking about their interest during a lecture or class activity, it is okay to politely remind them to stay on task
- When you do have time to talk with them it can be nice to discuss their interest with them
- As you talk with them more, try to slowly introduce some new but related topics to help you find common interests
  - ex. If they like Pokémon trading cards, maybe shift to another type of trading card, and then regular playing cards

***Q: My classmate sometimes gets distracted and doesn't pay attention in class. It's hard to keep reminding them what the teacher's instructions were. What do I do?***

A: Some students may have trouble staying organized. While helping your peers to pay attention and reminding them of assignments can be helpful, it may be hard for you to remind them every time there is something due. Reminding them of some tools they have can be helpful.

### How you can help:

- Remind them of their tools like a planner or visual schedule they may have or to set a reminder on their phone to complete an assignment
- Remind them to take a picture of the homework assignment or instructions on the board

***Q: I want to talk to my classmate, but they seem shy and don't ever start conversations with me. Do they not want to be friends?***

A: Social interactions can be difficult for some neurodivergent students, and they may feel anxious talking to peers.

### How you can help:

- Even if they struggle with social interaction, don't think they are disinterested – go ahead and start the conversation
- They might need you to lead the conversation and introduce new conversation topics
- Use active listening, be patient, and give them time to talk

***Q: My classmate doesn't understand sometimes when I try to joke with them and when I use sarcasm. Why?***

A: Some neurodivergent students may not pick up on the nuances of language like inflection and tone the same way other students do.



*"I don't always understand some jokes, and I appreciate when you explain it when I say I don't understand. I really enjoy it when you explain it because I feel part of the group and then I can learn from it and apply it to later conversations. Please be gentle, but firm in correcting me."*

*-undergraduate student with autism*

**How you can help:**

- Try to speak literally in most conversations, but it's okay to joke with them - just be patient and explain if they ask you to



***Q: I try to be there to support my classmate, but when I ask what they need they don't tell me. How am I supposed to help if they don't tell me what they need?***

A: Sometimes your classmate may not know what they need or may not know how to explain what they need.

*"I don't always know what I need. It may come to me a bit later than expected so I may not always have an answer for you on the spot. I also think patience is really helpful in learning how to navigate my disability."*

*-neurodivergent student*

**How you can help:**

- Be patient, give them time, and let them know you will be there if they need you
- If your friend is having trouble with their verbal communication:
  - You can try to give them a way to respond nonverbally
  - Here is a link to a TikTok video made by someone with autism demonstrating this kind of interaction:
    - [@emlensage's TikTok Video](#)
  - You can also give them the option of writing out what they are feeling or what they need to say on paper or on the computer or phone

***Q: My classmate covers their ears when we break into groups to discuss things. I want to include them, but how can I talk to them if they're not listening?***

A: Some neurodivergent students experience sensory sensitivity, meaning they may quickly become overwhelmed by sensory input like lots of noise, movement, or bright lights. They may also dislike certain sounds, sights, smells, or textures. Things like lots of people talking can feel extra loud for your neurodivergent peers.

*"My brain is different from yours and perceives things differently. What might seem like a small irritant to you can be screaming to me. Whether it's chattering on the radio, fluorescent lights at the grocery store, the itchy feeling of wool clothing, a slightly spicy taste, a minty scent in the air...each can grow and amplify in my brain until I can only focus on that sensation.*



*You can help by trying to remove the stimulation or removing me from the situation if you have my permission to do so. Sometimes I may be trying to brave the situation and see where my limits are. Sometimes I'm just having too much fun with my friends to see how my body and brain are suffering until it's too late and it's total melt-down time.*

*The most important thing is to listen and pay attention to what I say. If I say I want to stay and push my limits, just be there. It means so much that you are a supportive friend and are willing to help me see how far I can go. If I want to leave, please understand and consider coming with me. Consider what it might be like to be alone in a dark world because the light is painful."*

*-undergraduate student with autism*

## What Your Neurodivergent Peers Want You to Know

"I wish people understood how many different ways learning disabilities can present."

"That we aren't 'weird' but just have extra challenges."

"It means so much to just feel respected in my accommodations and my functionality."

"People don't have to identify as disabled or have a diagnosis to consider themselves neurodivergent."

"Everyone is different, and our society needs to be a place where everyone can function, not just a certain kind of person."

# Learn More About Neurodivergence and Supporting Your Peers from Social Media



- ***TikTokers with Autism:* Learn about ASD from Members of the Autistic Community**

- @soundoftheforest
- @actually\_\_alex
- @emlensage
- @create\_dreamspace
- @evelynjeans
- @chloeshayden
- @paigelayle

- **Read About How People Are Sharing Their Autism Experiences on TikTok:**

- <https://www.verywellhealth.com/individual-autism-experiences-tiktok-5176309>

## Additional Resources

- Autism Society: What is Autism?
  - <https://www.autism-society.org/what-is/>
- Autism Society: Working with Individuals on The Autism Spectrum
  - <https://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/autism-through-the-lifespan/adulthood/employment/tips-working-individuals-autism-spectrum/>



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The work reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education through Grants R324C120006 and R324A180091 awarded to UNC-Chapel Hill. The opinions expressed represent those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Suggested citation: Kennedy, T. & Spitzer, H., (2021) Building Inclusive Classrooms with Your Neurodivergent Peers (Autism Peer-to-Peer Series). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, CSESA Development Team.