

NAVIGATING NEURODIVERSITY



**A Handbook for Supporting
Neurodivergent Young People**



ENGAGE!



BanyuleYouthServices

Acknowledgment

Banyule Youth Services are proud to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land as the Wurundjeri Won-Wurrung people and we pay respect to all Aboriginal Elders, past, present and emerging, who have resided in the area and have been an integral part of the region's history.



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Helpful Hints!



Throughout this book, you'll find tips and tricks to help you work with young people - making things smoother and more inclusive for everyone.

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide was created to provide clear, accessible information about neurodiversity and disabilities, helping you create a more inclusive and supportive space for young people.

Whether you're a support worker, teacher or youth worker this guide will assist you to better understand the unique ways young people living with disability experience the world – and **how we can best support and empower them.**

By recognising the strengths and abilities of every young person, we can provide safe spaces where young people feel respected and are encouraged to be themselves.

This guide offers practical tools and strategies to ensure consistent, effective support that puts the needs of the young person first and advocates for their rights.

This guide offers an understanding of the best environment and tools available to support each young person's successful engagement in your community.

Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is the idea that every brain is unique.

Just as people come in all shapes, sizes, and personalities, our brains also work in different ways. These differences in how we think, process information, and respond to sensory input are what make us uniquely diverse.

The brain and nervous system help us sense and react to the world around us by sending signals between the brain, body, and senses. These important signals allow us to interpret and respond to what we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell, guiding how we navigate and interact with our environment every day.

Some people sense and experience the world differently, as their brains process information in unique ways. This is called neurodivergence.

People who are neurodivergent may experience the world in ways that differ from what is considered 'typical'. Embracing these differences allows us to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone!



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong developmental condition that affects social interaction, communication, interests, behaviour and sensory experiences.

Autistic individuals have unique strengths, challenges and ways of experiencing the world. This is why we call it a 'spectrum' because every person's experience is different and each journey is one of a kind.



Supporting Autistic Young People

Some autistic young people may find busy or loud environments overwhelming or draining. Social interaction can take a lot of energy – just like physical exercise.

Making time to rest and recharge is important. Providing calming, low-demand spaces can make a big difference. These spaces let young people step back and reset.



A quiet 'beanbag corner' is a good option for a young person who may feel overwhelmed in a social group. This can allow the young person to stay connected, while still being included in conversation and providing them with the the ability to rejoin when they feel comfortable.

Offering regular breaks during activities helps prevent overload. Breaks might be for a drink, some quiet time or just to move our bodies! Let young people know it's okay to take a break when they need to. You might notice signs that a young person needs space – this can look like irritability, withdrawal, anxiety or physically covering their ears.

Support young people in these moments without judgement. A calm, predictable response builds trust.

Sensory Sensitivities

Many autistic people are more sensitive to sensory input such as sounds, lighting, smells, textures, and /or touch. For some, loud noises, bright lights or certain fabrics can feel painful and or overwhelming.



Giving young people a **heads-up** about upcoming activities helps them anticipate what they might experience – allowing them to prepare and feel more comfortable.

"Hey! This next activity might have some noise, so if you need a quiet moment, that's totally okay!"

Stimming

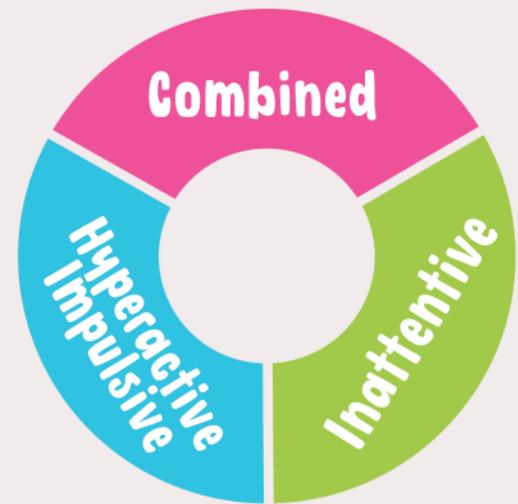
Stimming (short for self-stimulatory behaviour) is something many autistic people do to help regulate emotions, focus, or feel calm. It might look like hand-flapping, rocking, repeating words, or fidgeting with objects.

Stimming is a helpful way to manage stress or express excitement, and it shouldn't be stopped—unless it's unsafe or causing distress. In those cases, support the young person to find safer ways to meet their needs.. This could be listening to music or using a fidget.

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting both children and adults. It involves differences in attention, focus, impulse control and energy. While people with ADHD often show creativity and high energy, they may find it challenging to maintain focus or regulate their behaviour.

Each young person with ADHD experiences it in their own way. Some may find it difficult to stay focused, while others may become deeply engaged in activities they enjoy. ADHD varies and symptoms can differ for each person.



The types of ADHD

Inattentive: Trouble focusing and concentrating, easily distracted, forgetful or losing track of belongings, missing important details or information or not finishing tasks. Time blind.

Hyperactive-impulsive: Fidgety, restless, easily bored, impulsive, trouble regulating emotions, excessive talking or talking over the top of others.

Combined: A person has a mixture of symptoms including inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity.

Support Strategies

Because ADHD looks different for everyone, it's important to use a range of tools and strategies that can support each young person's unique needs, strengths and ways of engaging with the world.

MOVEMENT BREAKS

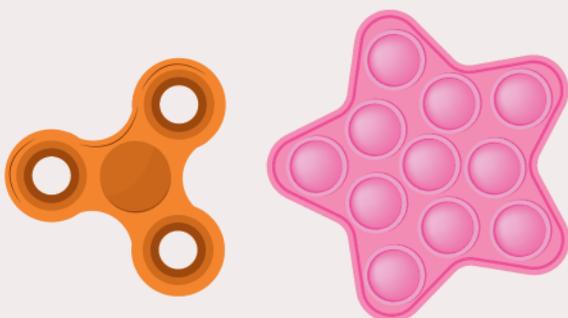
It can be hard to sit still.
Try regular movement breaks.
Stretch, walk or shake it out!

INSTRUCTIONS

Keep instructions short and clear.
Break things down into small steps.
Pictures and Checklists can help!

USE FIDGET TOOLS

Fidget toys like pop-its, fidget spinners or putty can help with focus – they give hands something to do and help release extra energy.



TRANSITION WARNINGS

Changing activities can be tricky. Give a 5-minute heads-up or use a timer so there is some lead-in before change is implemented.

BREAK TASKS INTO CHUNKS

Big tasks can feel overwhelming. Split them into smaller parts. Celebrate little wins along the way!

POSITIVE FEEDBACK!

Praise effort, not just the result. Saying things like "You worked really hard on that!" builds confidence!

CALM SPACES

Encouraging breaks in a quiet space to chill and regroup.



AuDHD

Some people are both autistic and have ADHD — a combination often called AuDHD. These individuals tend to experience the world in a uniquely rich and dynamic way.

Having both can mean your brain likes things to be planned and spontaneous, which can feel a bit like a tug-of-war sometimes.

Autism Can look like

- Needs routine
- Struggles with change
- Needs alone time to recharge
- Likes order and tidiness
- Planner
- Organised
- Thinks through decisions
- Good memory for facts

ADHD Can look like

- Spontaneous
- Craves new things and experiences
- Busy and chatty with others
- Impulsive
- Disorganised
- Time blindness
- Preoccupied with creative thoughts
- Focus shifts between topics

Both at the same time → AuDHD

Other types of Neurodiversity

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a common neurodivergent condition which affects abilities with reading, writing, and spelling.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is a neurodivergent condition that affects how the brain processes numbers and math concepts.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is a neurodivergent condition that affects coordination, movement, and how the brain plans physical actions.

Tourette's Syndrome

Tourette's Syndrome is a neurodivergent condition that causes involuntary tics—sudden twitches, movements, or sounds that individuals repeatedly perform.

Receptive Language Disorder

Receptive language disorder is a neurodivergent condition that affects understanding spoken or written language. It can impact learning, social interactions, and overall communication skills.

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE NEURODIVERGENT?



GET TO KNOW THEM

Take the time to listen to their experience. Every neurodivergent person is unique and it's important to approach each person with curiosity, respect, and an open mind!

CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Creating a safe, warm, and welcoming space helps all young people feel supported and valued. They should be free to be themselves, feel understood and have their contributions recognised and appreciated.



STRUCTURE AND CONSISTENCY

Neurodivergent young people may feel more comfortable with routines and predictability. Clear and consistent expectations can help reduce anxiety and create a sense of security. However, it's important to remain flexible when needed.

PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Neurodivergent young people may experience strong emotions or navigate social situations differently. It is important we approach them with patience and empathy and validate their feelings and experiences.



COLLABORATE WITH FAMILIES AND SUPPORT WORKERS

Building a comprehensive support network is essential. Work closely with families, caregivers and professionals who understand the young person's specific needs and can offer valuable insights. Together, you can create a more effective and personalised support plan.

PROMOTE SELF-ADVOCACY AND INDEPENDANCE

Our job is so special because we get to support some incredible neurodivergent young people as they develop self-awareness and self-advocacy skills.

By encouraging young people to express their needs we are empowering them to take control of their neurodivergence and helping them to build confidence and independence.



SUPPORTING NEURODIVERGENT YOUNG PEOPLE IN GROUPS

When working with neurodivergent young people in groups, it's important to create a structured, inclusive environment where everyone can participate in their own way. By creating a safe, flexible and understanding space, you can help all young people thrive in group settings.

Visual Schedules

Provides structure and helps with transitions.

Offer Reset Time

Let young people know they can take a break if they need!

Direct Communication

Provide clear instructions and time for processing information.

Establish Group Norms

Create clear expectations for behaviour, communication, and participation.

Monitor The Group

Watch how the group interacts. Step in if needed to encourage positive interactions.

Adjust The Space

Consider sensory needs (noise, lighting ect).



Inclusive Language

The words we choose shape how people are seen and how they see themselves. Using inclusive, neuro-affirming language helps create safe, respectful and empowering environments for neurodivergent young people.

Neuro-affirming language is respectful, inclusive language which:

- Validates and celebrates neurodivergent experiences
- Avoids harmful stereotypes and labels
- Focuses on strengths and support – not deficits

It helps reduce stigma, promotes belonging and supports the wellbeing and development of everyone.

Avoiding Harmful Language

Avoid calling neurotypical people 'normal' as it suggests that neurodivergent people are not.

Instead of saying 'high functioning' or 'low functioning' describe the individuals needs and how we can support them!

Avoid saying someone is 'suffering from' a condition – this kind of language reinforces negative stereotypes and focuses only on challenges, not strengths or support needs.

Some neurodivergent people identify as disabled and some don't. **It's best practice to ask how each person describes themselves.** Avoid using terms like 'special needs' or 'differently abled', which can feel patronising.

SUPPORTING SELF REGULATION

Helping young people learn to recognise their emotions, manage, reactions and feel more in control when things get overwhelming is a key part of promoting and empowering the young persons own control over their own self-regulating abilities.



Using a visuals can help young people identify and name the emotion they are feeling

Model self-regulation strategies yourself — like saying, “I’m feeling a bit stressed so I’m going to take a few deep breaths.”

Encourage and schedule regular breaks!



Provide safe spaces or quiet zones where young people can go when they need a break or time to reset

Help young people learn to notice their body cues (like tight muscles, fidgeting, or feeling hot) so they can spot when they’re starting to feel overwhelmed



Grounding and breathing exercises can help bring them back down

Break down tasks into smaller steps and give clear instructions to reduce stress and help with focus

Remain positive and empathetic!



EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Emotional regulation is how we manage our feelings and reactions, especially when we're stressed, upset, or overwhelmed. For some neurodivergent young people, big emotions can make it really hard to think clearly, explain how they're feeling, or take in what others are saying.

Some common behaviours and consequences associated with young people experiencing difficulties regulating their emotions are:

Difficulty expressing emotions in a safe way

Impulsive behaviour

Difficulty returning to a calm state

Frequent mood swings

Trouble making decisions

A persistent negative mood

Inability to manage behaviour

Avoidance, withdrawal and isolation

Overly intense emotions

Sometimes when situations become too much and young people start to feel overwhelmed, they might experience:

Sensory Overload – when there's too much happening around them (like loud noises, bright lights, or lots of movement) and it becomes hard for their brain to take it all in.

Emotional Overload – when emotions build up really fast or feel too big, and it gets hard to make sense of what they're feeling or how to cope.



An effective low sensory space can include:

- Soft lighting, minimal noise, neutral colors, and comforting furniture, creating a soothing atmosphere
- Fidget tools for focus and calm
- Egg chairs and beanbags for comfort and rest
- Dim lighting and fairy lights for visual sensitivities

CONSIDERING SENSORY NEEDS IN PHYSICAL SPACES

LIGHTING

Harsh, bright lighting can be overstimulating for some neurodivergent individuals. Using soft or dimmed lighting can create a warmer and calming atmosphere.



NOISE CONTROL

Loud or unexpected noises can cause stress and distraction. To help manage this, offer quiet areas or use noise cancelling headphones.



SMELLS

Strong scents, whether from perfumes, cleaning products or food, can be overwhelming for some neurodivergent young people. Opting for fragrance free products, providing good ventilation and a heads up about smells can help create a more comfortable environment.

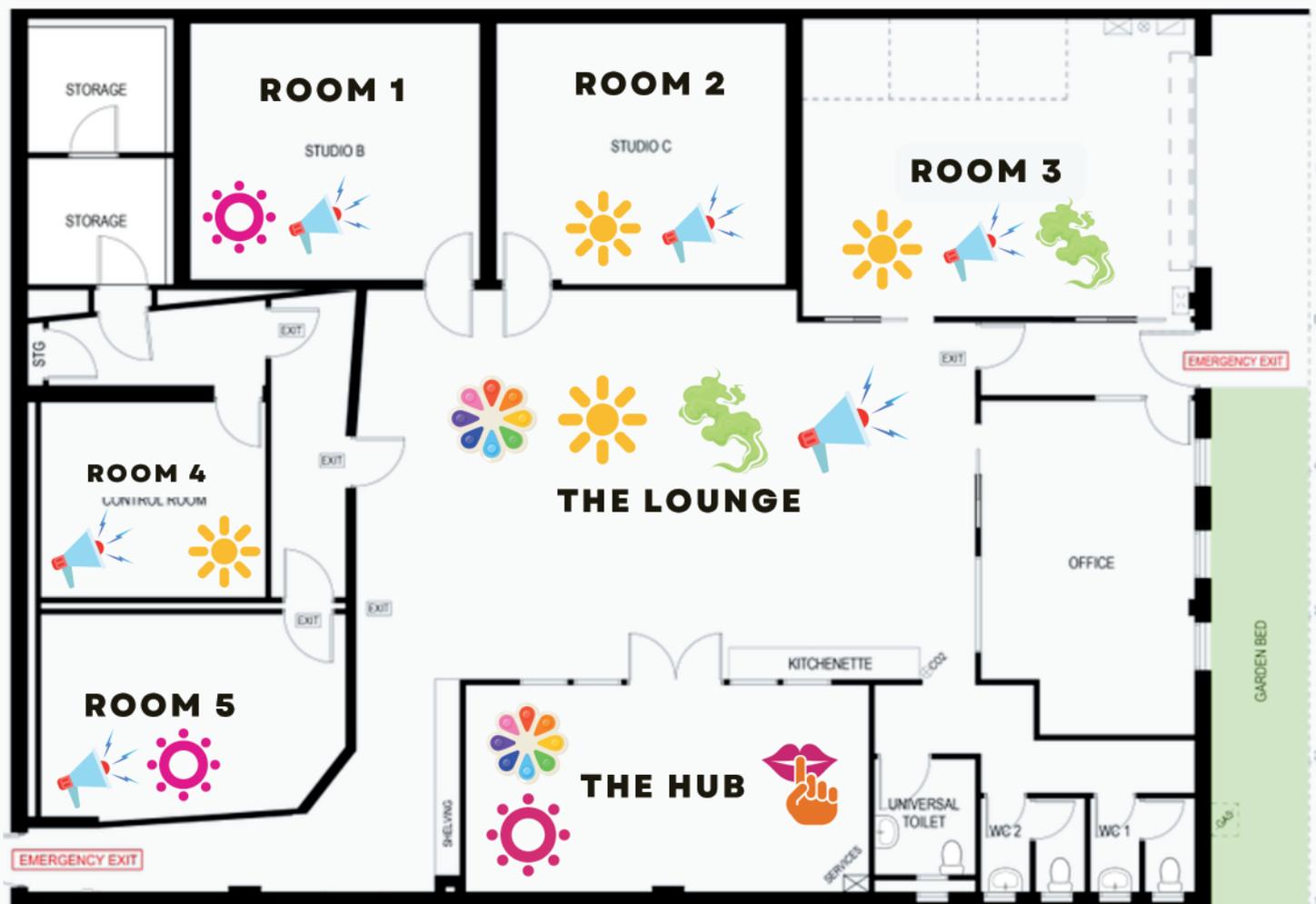


TEXTURES AND TOUCH

Certain fabrics, textures, or physical contact can be overwhelming or uncomfortable for some neurodivergent young people. Offering choices and respecting personal space helps create a comfortable and supportive environment.



SENSORY MAPPING



Loud



Dim Light



Bright Light



Quiet



Sensory Tools



Smelly

ROOM 1,2,3,4,5 THE LOUNGE

Loud spaces, staff & young people taking part in activities, loud talking & singing.

THE LOUNGE

Young people & staff hanging out. People talking loudly, smells from cooking and eating. Lots of energy and movement.

ROOM 3

People talking, listening to loud music, big roller door opening & closing. Industrial smells from the business next door.

THE HUB

Low sensory zone. This is a quiet space. Soft and tactile furnishings. Low lighting. Fidgets and sensory tools available.



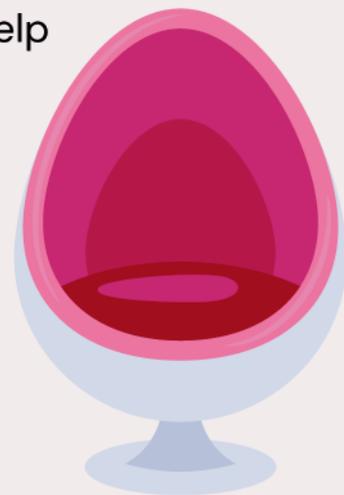
It's important to note that all groups use facilities in different ways, so encourage young people to speak with staff if they need a quiet or low sensory space especially if quiet spaces are not available.

Sensory Tools

Fidgets!



Encouraging the use of fidgets can help with emotional regulation, focus, and creating a sense of calm. Having a fidget basket in common areas for young people to access can be helpful.



Egg Chairs

Egg chairs provide a sound reducing calm space where a young person can 'egg out' and take a breather!



Noise Cancelling Headsets

Noise cancelling headsets are a great tool for young people who may find busy or loud environments overwhelming. Headsets can help reduce background noise and can support feeling more comfortable.



Communication Badges

Communication badges can support young people to express their needs without having to speak or talk – a badge might let others know they have low-energy, need space, or are open to chatting.

Please respect my personal space

I AM NON VERBAL TODAY

Minimal eye contact today please!

Low Sensory Spaces

Low sensory spaces support:

Reduction of overstimulation and sensory overwhelm

Support regulation and calming bodies and emotions.

A quiet space to rest to regulate before rejoining a busy setting.

Inclusion accommodations are welcoming!



Support For Young People

REACH OUT AUSTRALIA

An online mental health organisation providing information, support and resources for young people with mental health.

au.reachout.com

AUTISM SPECTRUM AUSTRALIA (ASPECT)

Aspect offers a range of services to support people living with Autism & their support people - therapy, community connection and assessment & diagnosis.

aspect.org.au

HEADSPACE

Headspace is a national youth mental health foundation providing support for young people aged 12-25. They offer services related to mental health and wellbeing.

headspace.org.au

KIDS HELPLINE

A 24/7 counselling service for young people in Australia. Kids Helpline offers support & information on a range of needs.

Hotline: 1800 55 1800

kidshelpline.com.au

YOUTH SUPPORT & ADVOCACY SERVICE (YSAS)

YSAS offers a range of services, including counselling, support, and education programs, specifically designed for young people living with disabilities.

ysas.org.au

BANYULE YOUTH SERVICES

Banyule Youth Services are part of the Banyule Council. We provide programs activities and individual support to young people aged 12-25 years who are living going to school, working or socialising in the Banyule Community.

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