

Teacher Resource: Supporting Neurodivergent Young People

This resource was created following the 2025 **Banyule Youth Summit**, where young people shared their experiences and ideas for creating more inclusive, safe, and respectful school environments for neurodivergent students.



Banyule Youth Services



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Neurodivergence is a broad umbrella that includes autism, ADHD, and specific learning difficulties (SLDs) such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia. This resource focuses primarily on autism, ADHD, and SLDs, as these are among the most commonly diagnosed neurodivergent conditions in young people.

The following statistics highlight how neurodivergent young people are currently experiencing Australia's education system, and why inclusive practice matters.

Statistics

In Australia, it is estimated that around 15–20% of children and young people are neurodivergent.

44% of neurodivergent Year 12 students report high psychological distress, compared to 30% of non-neurodivergent students.

Two-thirds of neurodivergent students fear being labelled or stereotyped if they ask for support.

About 60% of autistic students finish Year 12, but only 8.1% complete a bachelor's degree or higher, highlighting ongoing barriers in education.

Around 10% of the population experience specific learning difficulties, with dyslexia accounting for approximately 80% of diagnosed SLDs.

Statistics from ADCET, Federation University, Torrens University, and Generation Survey's 'Youth Mental Health and Neurodiversity in Year 12' analysis.

Read the full analysis here:



Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in how people think, learn, and process information, and includes both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. Neurodivergent students may have diagnoses such as autism, ADHD, or specific learning difficulties, and may engage with learning differently.

Understanding neurodiversity is not about deficits, but about recognising strengths, support needs, and the role learning environments play in access and wellbeing.

Understanding Neurodivergence in Learning Environments

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference present from birth that can affect sensory processing, communication, executive functioning, and social interaction. No two autistic people experience autism in the same way.

In learning environments, autistic students may experience:

- Sensory overload (noise, lighting, busy spaces)
- Differences in communication and interpreting social cues
- A strong need for predictability, routine, and clear expectations
- Stress or fatigue that may not be outwardly visible

Autism is a spectrum, not a scale from “high” to “low.” Support needs vary, and focusing on individual strengths, access needs, and environmental barriers is more useful than labels or perceived functioning.

Autism across the gender spectrum

Due to social and gendered expectations, autistic traits can present differently across the gender spectrum. Challenges may be masked or internalised, making them less visible in school settings and contributing to later or missed identification.

ADHD and Autism Combined (AuDHD)

AuDHD is an informal term describing the co-occurrence of autism and ADHD. Traits are often experienced as interwoven and, at times, conflicting.

In learning environments, this may look like:

- a tension between novelty-seeking and the need for routine
- intense focus alongside difficulty with task initiation or transitions
- high creativity paired with rapid overload or exhaustion
- variability in engagement depending on context, energy, or support

This variability reflects how autism and ADHD can overlap, and is not a sign of poor effort or lack of motivation. Flexible, individualised support is most effective.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects attention regulation, executive functioning, emotional regulation, and impulse control. It is often misunderstood and incorrectly framed as poor behaviour or lack of effort.

In learning environments, ADHD may impact:

- Starting, sustaining, or completing tasks
- Organisation, time management, and working memory
- Emotional regulation, frustration, or overwhelm
- Variable performance across tasks, days, or environments

ADHD presentations vary. Some students show outward hyperactivity or impulsivity, while others experience primarily inattentive traits such as daydreaming, mental fatigue, or quiet disengagement.

ADHD across the gender spectrum

Much like autism, ADHD may be overlooked when traits do not align with common stereotypes. Due to social and gendered expectations, some students may mask difficulties or appear to be coping in class while experiencing significant internal challenges, increasing the risk of later identification and academic burnout.

Specific Learning Difficulties (SLDs)

Specific Learning Difficulties are neurodevelopmental differences that affect particular areas of learning, such as reading, writing and numeracy. They do not reflect intelligence, and can affect how students demonstrate learning, even when understanding is strong.

Common learning difficulties include:

Dyslexia: differences in reading, spelling, and phonological processing

Dyscalculia: differences in number sense and mathematical processing

Dysgraphia: differences in handwriting and written expression

Learning difficulties frequently co-occur with ADHD and Autism. In educational settings, focusing on access, task design, and strengths is more effective than focusing on deficits.

Supporting Neurodivergent Students in Classrooms

Inclusive practices that support neurodivergent students often benefit all learners by reducing barriers and increasing access.

Quick supports for Everyday Classrooms

- ✓ Use clear routines and expectations
- ✓ Break tasks into smaller steps
- ✓ Provide instructions in more than one format
- ✓ Offer quiet or low-stimulus spaces
- ✓ Allow flexible seating or movement
- ✓ Allow flexibility in how learning is demonstrated

Supporting Regulation and Focus

- Use visual schedules, timers, or movement breaks
- Reduce sensory load where possible (lighting, noise)
- Allow noise-cancelling headphones
- Provide access to quiet spaces when needed
- Allow or provide sensory tools for all students (reduces stigma)

Making Learning More Accessible

- Break tasks into clear, sequential steps
- Use visual and written supports alongside verbal instructions
- Allow use of laptops or tablets for organisation and writing

Flexibility and Respect

- Offer choice in seating, task order, or task format
- Recognise that engagement may vary across days
- Respect neurodivergent traits rather than trying to “correct” them
- Use accurate, non-judgemental language

Further Learning

ReachOut Schools – Understanding and supporting neurodivergent students
schools.au.reachout.com

Neurodiversity Hub – Teacher resources
<https://www.neurodiversityhub.org/teachers>

