

Identifying and Supporting Neurodivergent (ND) Students in the JJEP Classroom

When teaching classes, it's important for us to recognize potential signs of neurodivergence and know how to support students who might be ND.

1. Observing for Signs of Neurodivergence

While only a qualified professional can diagnose neurodivergence, we can look for certain behaviors that might indicate a student could benefit from additional support. Some common signs include:

Sensory Sensitivities: The student may cover their ears, avoid bright lights, or become overwhelmed in noisy or crowded environments.

Difficulty with Transitions: The student might struggle to move from one activity to another, becoming anxious or upset when routines change.

Social Challenges: The student may have difficulty making friends, understanding social cues, or participating in group activities.

Repetitive Behaviors: The student might engage in repetitive movements or sounds (e.g., rocking, hand-flapping, humming) to self-soothe.

Difficulty with Focus and Attention: The student may struggle to stay on task, be easily distracted, or display signs of hyperactivity.

Avoidance of Tasks: The student may avoid or resist tasks that seem overwhelming, such as reading, writing, or following multi-step instructions.

Strong Interests: The student may have intense interests in specific topics or activities, sometimes to the exclusion of other subjects.

2. Approaching the Student with Empathy and Curiosity

If we suspect a student might be neurodivergent, it's important to approach the situation with empathy and an open mind:

Observe Without Judging: Take note of the student's behaviors without labeling them as "bad" or "problematic." Recognize that these behaviors might be coping mechanisms or ways of expressing needs.

Ask Open-Ended Questions: If appropriate, gently ask the student how they feel about certain activities or environments. For example, "I noticed you seem a little uncomfortable during group work. Is there something that would make it easier for you?"

3. Adapting Teaching Strategies to Support the Student

Once we have identified a student who might be ND, they can make simple adjustments to help the student feel more comfortable and engaged:

Provide Clear Instructions: Break tasks into smaller, manageable steps. Use visual aids or written instructions alongside verbal explanations to help the student understand.

Offer Sensory Breaks: If the student seems overwhelmed, allow them to take short breaks in a quiet area. Providing sensory tools like fidget toys or noise-canceling headphones can also be helpful.

Be Flexible with Participation: If a student is uncomfortable with certain activities (e.g., group work, public speaking), offer alternatives, such as working in pairs or presenting their work in a different format.

Encourage Strengths: Identify and encourage the student's strengths and interests. Incorporating these into lessons can help them stay engaged and motivated.

Use Positive Reinforcement: Reinforce positive behaviors and efforts with praise and encouragement. Focus on what the student is doing well, rather than what they might be struggling with.

4. Communicating with Parents and Guardians

If we notice behaviors that suggest a student might be ND, it's important to communicate with the student's parents or guardians:

Share Observations Thoughtfully: Frame your observations in a positive light, focusing on the student's strengths and areas where they might benefit from additional support.

Ask for Insights: Parents and guardians often have valuable insights into their child's needs and what strategies work best for them. Ask for their input on how to support the student in the classroom.

Respect Privacy: Be mindful of the student's privacy and avoid making assumptions about diagnoses. Approach the conversation with sensitivity and respect for the family's perspective.

5. Continuing Education and Collaboration

We should continue learning about neurodiversity and collaborate with other educators to provide the best possible support:

Attend Training Sessions: Participate in any training offered on neurodiversity, inclusion, and support strategies.

Share Resources: Collaborate with other educators to share strategies, resources, and insights on supporting ND students.

Be Open to Feedback: Encourage feedback from students, parents, and fellow teachers to continuously improve our approach to teaching and support.

We can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students, helping neurodivergent individuals thrive in their own unique ways.

www.jennifersydeski.com/neurodiversity



ChatGPT Accessibility Guide

<https://chatgpt.com/g/g-hfNOja1rX-accessibility-guide>

I am teaching a class to 4th graders where we have two big sheets of paper on the wall and the kids will shout out what is similar about two holidays while one child scribes on one sheet and then they will shout out what is different about the holidays while another child scribes on the other sheet. I have at least two autistic kids in the room, but I don't know a lot about their distinct needs. What are some accommodations I might consider?

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Thank you for being thoughtful about creating an inclusive classroom environment! Here are some accommodations and adjustments you can consider to make this activity more accessible for your autistic students, as well as beneficial for the whole class:

Sensory Accommodations:

1. **Noise Sensitivity**: Shouting can be overwhelming for some students, particularly those who are noise-sensitive. Consider having students raise their hands and speak in a normal tone instead of shouting. Alternatively, you could provide students with small cards they can write on and hold up to share their ideas.
2. **Visual Overwhelm**: The large sheets of paper may look chaotic or overwhelming as more ideas are added. To help, you could break the sheets into sections or use different colors to visually categorize similar and different aspects, making the information easier to process.
3. **Quiet Zones**: Have a quiet corner or noise-reducing headphones available for any student who might need a sensory break during the activity. This is useful for anyone who might feel overwhelmed by the noise or energy of the room.

Communication Accommodations:

1. **Alternative Communication**: Not all students are comfortable shouting out their ideas. Provide other options for contributing, such as writing down their thoughts on sticky notes, drawing pictures, or using communication cards or tablets if that's part of their regular support.
2. **Processing Time**: Some students may need extra time to think of their answers. Encourage all students to take a moment before sharing, or let them know they can add ideas later if they think of something after the initial brainstorm.

Mobility and Physical Accommodations:

1. **Scribing Support**: If scribing is too demanding or overwhelming for some students, rotate scribes more frequently or have a teaching assistant or peer assist. Alternatively, consider using a larger marker for easier writing or adapting the task to another medium like a whiteboard where ideas can be rearranged.

Cognitive and Learning Accommodations:

1. **Visual Supports**: Include visuals, symbols, or pictures on the sheets alongside written words to make it easier for all students to follow the activity. For instance, if the holidays are Christmas and Hanukkah, have simple icons that represent each to help students connect the ideas.
2. **Clear Structure and Expectations**: Clearly outline the rules of the activity beforehand. Use visual or written instructions, and keep the structure predictable. You might use a visual schedule showing what will happen during the activity.

Emotional and Psychological Safety:

1. **Positive Reinforcement**: Reinforce the idea that all contributions are valuable. This helps build confidence and reduces anxiety for students who may be worried about giving the “wrong” answer.
2. **Choice and Consent**: Offer students the choice to participate in ways that feel most comfortable for them. No one should feel pressured to speak or scribe if they don’t want to.

Identity-Affirming:

1. **Respect Differences in Holidays**: Be mindful of how you present information about holidays, ensuring that you’re respectful and inclusive of all cultural and personal identities. Encourage students to think broadly about differences and similarities, including those that may be less obvious.

Technological and Assistive Accommodations:

1. **Use Technology**: If available, consider using a smartboard or a digital scribe tool that allows students to type instead of write. This can help students who have difficulty with fine motor skills or prefer digital interfaces.

Environmental Accommodations:

1. **Manage Physical Space**: Ensure that there is ample space around the sheets so students are not crowded when writing or observing. If possible, organize the room so students can move freely and access different areas without feeling confined.

Implementing a combination of these strategies will help create an activity that’s engaging, inclusive, and accessible for all your students, including those on the autism spectrum. Let me know if you’d like further specifics or additional suggestions!