

**CONNECTION IS KEY:  
EMPOWERING NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS  
THROUGH INCLUSIVE PRACTICES**

# **MAKING A DIFFERENCE ON INCLUSION IN YOUR SCHOOL – TIPS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS**

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THANK YOU TO MY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL: TERRY BENNETT

*The tip sheet you are about to read exists because of the role a Victorian government school principal played in my life. I'm a living example of the difference you can make.*

*In 2000 I was an extremely anxious autistic Year 7 student at Wantirna College in outer eastern Melbourne. Fortunately, I had a Year 7 Coordinator, the late Christine Horvath, who saved my life: Mrs Horvath weaved a quiet magic to make my Year 7 transition the safest it could be. She believed leadership was action, not position. Based on Mrs Horvath's example, I created the organisation behind this tip sheet.*

*Importantly, Mrs Horvath was enabled by a Victorian government school principal, Terry Bennett. Mr Bennett gave Mrs Horvath the space to weave her magic.*

*You have the ability to be the difference-maker that Mr Bennett was for hyper-anxious students like me! Giving your staff the necessary time to make impactful changes will create experiences similar to mine.*

Chris Varney,  
Founder & Chief Enabling Officer,  
I CAN Network



*Left (inset):* The late and extraordinary Christine Horvath

*Right:* Chris Varney, Cathy Blackburn and Terry Bennett at the 2022 Victorian Principals' Conference

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## DESIGN OF THIS TIP SHEET

The purpose of this tip sheet is to equip sub-school leaders, assistant principals (AP) and principals with practical tips on supporting neurodivergent students, particularly at secondary schools. These are meant to complement schools' implementation of whole-school programs, such as School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support and Respectful Relationships.

These tips have been designed through two channels: first, with principals and assistant principals during the I CAN workshops at the 2022 Victorian Government Schools Principals' Conference; second, through consultations with autistic secondary teachers, students, parents/carers and former principals.

### STAFF MEETING ACTIVITY: BRINGING THIS TIP SHEET TO LIFE

You might find it helpful to reflect on these tips in conversations with your leadership team, with your Senior Education Improvement Leader, or in your local network.

We would also encourage you to forward this onto your staff, including your Disability Inclusion Coordinator (DI).

## LANGUAGE STATEMENT

Throughout this document, identity-first language ('neurodivergent students') is used as I CAN observes this to be the preference of many members of the neurodivergent community and of many of the students with whom we work. However, the I CAN Network does not advocate this as preferred language for school leaders. We encourage schools to ask the students and their families about their language preferences and honour these. If the students' and carers' preferred language differs, tread carefully and respectfully, student preferences are paramount but we need to ensure we do not alienate carers.

When this tip sheet refers to neurodivergent students, it's referring to students with the most common neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism and ADHD and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs) such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia.

<b>Identity-first language</b>	Autistic/neurodivergent students
<b>Person-first language</b>	Students who are neurodivergent
<b>Reflective language</b>	Asking families what language they're comfortable with and reflecting that back to them

## TIPS TO EQUIP SCHOOL LEADERS WITH DESIGNING SAFE SCHOOLS FOR NEURODIVERGENT STAFF AND STUDENTS

*'Adopting strategies that support neurodivergent students goes beyond inclusivity—it enhances the educational experience for all students. Tailoring educational approaches to the unique challenges of neurodivergent students often proves advantageous for the whole class' (University of Illinois).*

### Important note

This tip sheet should not be viewed as 'yet another initiative'. Instead, schools should use it to help them capitalise on the wonderful work they are already doing in the areas of mental health, student voice, engagement and learning by embedding strategies designed for neurodivergent students into positive classrooms and learning environments.

### TIP 1: PRIORITISE YOUR OWN WELLBEING

Effective school leaders recognise that their own wellbeing is crucial for maintaining a safe and productive school environment. We appreciate that neurodivergent students – and their carers – have unique strengths and struggles in a school environment. These can be challenging to balance with the needs of the rest of the class, and we recognise the complexity this presents for teachers and leaders alike.

A level head and compassion are difficult to maintain when overwhelmed, so monitor your own exhaustion levels and do not model martyrdom. It is important to understand that the tips we provide are 'perfect day' scenarios but, as we know all too well, every day can't be a 'perfect day'. Be kind and compassionate to yourself and your colleagues. Do not berate yourself on the days that things go wrong. Instead, celebrate the days where things go well. Mistakes will happen; see these as learning opportunities.

### TAKE ACTION

Openly discuss your own mistakes with your staff and, in turn, they will feel safe enough to discuss their mistakes with you.

## TIP 2: IDENTIFY AND NURTURE THE CORNERSTONES OF YOUR INCLUSIVE CULTURE

### 2.1. Include a focus on supporting neurodivergent students annually on your professional development calendar

Quality professional development can be highly beneficial for staff.

School staff consistently report that practical strategies that are trauma-informed, combined with real-life stories of neurodivergent students are what make professional learning high quality.

#### TAKE ACTION

Include speakers with lived experience of being neurodivergent in your professional development. This could look as simple as a school leader recording an interview with a neurodivergent student, staff member or parent/carer and sharing it during a planned professional development workshop.

Collaborations with specialist schools in your DE Area can greatly enhance the capacity of teachers in mainstream government schools.

#### TAKE ACTION

Seek out your nearby Inclusion Outreach Coach (IOC) to discuss their insights into professional development. To access an IOC or other whole-school inclusive practice supports, email your regional inclusion inbox:

SEVR: [sevr.inclusion.support@education.vic.gov.au](mailto:sevr.inclusion.support@education.vic.gov.au)

NEVR: [nevr.inclusion.support@education.vic.gov.au](mailto:nevr.inclusion.support@education.vic.gov.au)

NWVR: [nwvr.inclusion.support@education.vic.gov.au](mailto:nwvr.inclusion.support@education.vic.gov.au)

SWVR: [inclusion.connect@education.vic.gov.au](mailto:inclusion.connect@education.vic.gov.au)

Your annual professional development (PD) calendar could also build in time to share and record the reasonable adjustments which school staff are already making across their classes. This can be helpful for supporting the school's preparation for a student support group's Disability Inclusion Profile meeting.

#### STAFF MEETING ACTIVITY: FOR THE END (OR START) OF THE YEAR

Organise a 'speed dating' session at the end of the year during which current teachers pass on key information about neurodivergent students to next year's teachers so they aren't starting from scratch in Term 1. This could be included in the PD calendar for either the end or the start of the year.

## 2.2. Canvass the views of parents/carers, students and school staff on current inclusive practices

### TAKE ACTION: SETTING UP YOUR OWN SURVEY

Gaining an accurate picture of your school's current inclusive practices and identifying areas for improvement can be achieved by tasking your assistant principal or DI Coordinator with developing and implementing an in-house survey which canvasses the views of parents/carers, students and school staff on the following:

- What is being done extremely well?
- What are they proud of?
- What is being done well but could use some tweaking?
- What could be done differently?

The results of a survey like this will help you with your delivery of DI Tier 2 supports. They may also be relevant to your school's annual implementation plan (AIP), should your plan identify inclusion as a key focus.

In addition to conducting surveys, it may be beneficial to organise an evening event for parents/carers which could provide an opportunity to gain insights into the experiences of neurodivergent families within the school environment; insights which might not be captured by a survey. To encourage attendance, it often works to place this at the start of another information evening, such as learning reviews (parent/teacher interviews).

### 2.3 Triangulate your data

Data on your neurodivergent students can then be triangulated with existing datasets (attendance, school completion, Voice and Agency, Attitudes to School, Parent Opinion, School Staff surveys, etc) to see how your inquiry into disabled and neurodivergent students compares with whole-school data. This triangulation will also help your team's implementation of *DI Tier 2 supports*.

## 2.4. Acknowledge existing 'safe people' and 'magnets' and reduce reliance on them

A 'safe person' for a neurodivergent student is someone who provides a supportive, understanding, and accepting environment. The 'safe' person for a student must be chosen by them, not for them.

Many schools report having some staff who can become 'magnets' for neurodivergent students. Whilst a 'magnet' supports the students, there are two risks which must be considered: the risk to the 'magnet' of burnout and the risk to the student if the 'magnet' leaves the school.

*Schools can mitigate these risks by:*

1. Considering the importance of representation by neurodivergent staff when hiring, as government schools already do with gender diversity, cultural and ethnic diversity, and LGBTIQ+.

Practically this involves encouraging conversations on hiring panels about how to recognise and address unconscious biases. This simple encouragement, in the context of DI's strengths-based approach, helps to further normalise disability and acceptance in a school. This in turn helps teachers to form connections with neurodivergent students.

2. Identifying the attributes which make staff 'magnets' and then explicitly teaching these to other staff. This could be included in the school's PD calendar and be facilitated by external providers such as I CAN or by an openly neurodivergent member of staff. These attributes typically include the following:

- A comprehensive understanding of neurodiversity
- Acceptance of the child's unique traits without judgement, and
- Ability to adapt their communication style to meet the child's specific needs.

'Magnets' exhibit patience, provide consistency, and show genuine empathy towards the child's experiences. They also tend to be very comfortable with silence.

### STAFF MEETING ACTIVITY: FAST 5 MINUTES AT STAFF MEETINGS

Dedicate 5 minutes at the start of staff meetings for teachers to stand and share the success stories of their neurodivergent students.

3. Identifying staff members with appropriate strengths, formally recognising their additional responsibilities, and providing them with PD opportunities to enhance their skills.
4. Developing contingency plans for instances when designated safe persons are unavailable, potentially stepping into this role themselves. Furthermore, it is essential to strategically deploy these individuals, such as assigning them to playground duty in order to maximise their positive impact. When addressing potential shortages of suitable safe persons, school administrators should focus on identifying staff with the necessary personal traits, ensuring that the right individuals are assigned to appropriate roles, and implementing a distributed leadership model to support and sustain these critical positions within the school community.
5. Leveraging the *respectful relationships curriculum* to promote a culture which emphasises building the knowledge, skills and understanding to engage in respectful relationships. This helps to give permission to all staff, regardless of 'role', to connect with others, and connect with students<sup>1</sup>. Explicitly outlining this to your staff sends them a signal that inclusion at your school is not just going to be the job of the DI Coordinator and education support staff. It's going to be everyone's focus.

<sup>1</sup> *High Impact Wellbeing Strategies*, Strategy 1: Build relationships with students

## 2.5 Be aware of the challenges of restorative practice for neurodivergent students

This tip sheet welcomes how restorative practice has become commonplace within a school's strategies to combat disruptive behaviours and bullying\*. I CAN has observed that when schools embed an understanding of the common sensitivities of neurodivergent students in their implementation of restorative practice with neurodivergent students, they achieve better outcomes.

To that end, here are some factors to consider about neurodivergent students when implementing restorative practice. Neurodivergent students often:

- Don't like to be put on the spot
- Struggle to rush their emotional processing
- Struggle processing if overwhelmed (time, expectations and people will all contribute to this overwhelm)
- Struggle with inauthenticity

Practically, the above factors can mean that the process to restore relationships can take longer for neurodivergent students because many of them are hypersensitive and need a longer processing time than their neurotypical peers to look at someone differently.

One pitfall to avoid is inauthenticity. You want to avoid a situation where a 'bully' apologises in an inauthentic way and a 'victim' feels obliged to forgive before they're ready. Providing extra time for the restorative process when a neurodivergent student is involved can result in a more lasting resolution.

Above all, being open to altering the school's restorative practice approach for neurodivergent students, specifically in terms of timeline, is what will help you.

\*As a term, 'bullying' can be highly triggering for autistic/neurodivergent students. In-depth discussion of it is beyond the remit of this tip sheet. However, in brief, I CAN has observed that achieving and maintaining an inclusive culture is assisted by appreciating that restorative practice as a conflict resolution strategy<sup>2</sup> can look a bit different for some neurodivergent learners and it is important to consider this when looking at the best approaches to manage conflict at school.

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2 [High Impact Wellbeing Strategies](#), Strategy 2: Facilitate peer relationships

## 2.6 Build upon positive behaviour support and classroom management strategies with a 'positive whisper' around neurodivergent students

When implementing *positive classroom management strategies* it can be helpful to remember that autistic students have different processing styles, and are going to have different reactions and behaviours. For example, some of them might have stims which are more obvious than other learners. On the whole, autistic students are a highly sensitive group of students, which is part of our strengths. We can have a sixth sense of which school staff understand us, are happy to see us, and who accept us. To maximise the impact of positive classroom management strategies on neurodivergent students, it can be helpful to promote, on a consistent basis, a positive whisper around neurodivergent students. Doing so helps to put neurodivergent students in a more equitable position in the perception of teachers and education support staff<sup>3</sup>.

Here are examples of conversations with staff which you could reorient with a positive whisper:

What one of your staff might say to you	What you could say to promote a positive whisper
'I'm just saying this new Year 7 kid could be a lot of work ...'	'We love to be kept on our toes here.'
'This kid just has the weirdest obsessions!'	'It's fantastic! That passion and intensity will make him the next David Attenborough.'
'They're such a worry wart. I hate to say it, but I'm just conscious they could drag other kids down.'	'You're right, she does worry a lot. That must be so hard for her. I wonder what we could do to help her to help both herself and the other kids.'  'But what are the things we can do to make school easier? It would be hard to worry that much, wouldn't it?'
'This family certainly needs a lot of reassurances.'	'They do. Hopefully it won't take too long for them to start to trust us and feel less anxious for their child.'

Promoting a positive whisper is one thing, listening for it is another. It can take a while to see staff adopt the positive language you're using. Identify some spaces in which you can test whether your language is being repeated, such as student support group meetings, staff PD workshops, etc.

### STAFF MEETING ACTIVITY: PROMOTING 'POSITIVE WHISPERS'

You could take the above table and turn it into a school staff activity.

- Step 1 Keep the statements on the left in the table
- Step 2 Leave the column on the right blank
- Step 3 Ask your staff 'What would you say in reply to promote a positive whisper behind that student?'
- Step 4 Put responses in a visible place in the staff room, to help reinforce the attitudes you want to promote throughout your school culture.

<sup>3</sup> *High Impact Wellbeing Strategies*, Strategy 4: Support inclusion and belonging

## TIP 3: BE STRATEGIC WITH HOW YOU COMMUNICATE AND HOW YOU USE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS

### 3.1. Be firm but fair with a growth mindset

Many parents with neurodivergent children often feel their concerns are dismissed by school leaders. Listen to them, validate their experiences but avoid being overly cautious; instead, communicate clearly and directly. Recognise that parents may struggle with strong emotions so respond with compassion whilst remaining firm. Begin by providing support to ensure the physical and emotional safety of all parties and then visibly model to your community that struggles (including meltdowns or confrontations) should not be avoided 'at all costs', but instead viewed as valuable opportunities for growth and reflection.

### 3.2. Using your communications to support mainstream parent/carers understanding and your undiagnosed students

School leaders can make a big impact through the signals they send in school newsletters, assemblies, parent/carers evenings, Open Nights/Expos, etc. You can do a great deal for your current and prospective families when you include in your communications stories of the unique achievements of neurodivergent adults. Inclusions of these stories signal to parents/carers that your school is a safe school for neurodivergent students, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed<sup>4</sup>. It also helps break down the natural fear parents of undiagnosed students may have towards 'labels'.

The best case scenario is you showcase stories from within your school community, such as from a teacher, non-teaching staff member, parent, former student, student or sibling of a student. Ideally the message from the story would be 'I have succeeded because I am neurodivergent, not in spite of it'.

The school can empower its Student Representative Council (SRC) to foster a culture of acceptance and inclusion by actively supporting events like Autism Acceptance Month (April) or Neurodiversity Celebration Week (March). These initiatives provide excellent opportunities to increase understanding and celebrate neurodiversity within the school community. However, it's crucial to approach these events thoughtfully and sensitively. School leaders and the SRC should carefully consider all activities and messaging to avoid unintentional ableism or stereotyping. For example, themes like 'Dress up as a superhero' could inadvertently promote harmful stereotypes about neurodivergent individuals. Instead, focus on activities that genuinely promote understanding, respect and appreciation for neurodivergence by having neurodivergent students in the decision-making process. Activities could include class/assembly presentations by students (verbally or via video/audio) on the positives of being autistic. If you don't have a student who feels safe and ready to do this yet, you could show *The Art of Learning with Autism*: an animated educational video on autism developed by the department and I CAN in which government school students explain what their unique autistic strengths are.

### TAKE ACTION

If you do not have an inside neurodivergent story, you might consider featuring the story of a visiting neurodivergent speaker or promoting neurodivergent authors/advocates or the *The Art of Learning with Autism animation* through school-wide communications.

<sup>4</sup> *High Impact Wellbeing Strategies*, Strategy 4: Support inclusion and belonging

### 3.3. Regular communications around change

Effective communication about change is crucial, especially for neurodivergent students who may process change differently. As a school leader, it's important to embrace necessary changes while also helping these students develop their coping mechanisms. Continue your focus on communicating about significant educational transitions, such as moving to Year 7. However, recognise that general messages may not always effectively reach neurodivergent families. To improve communication, diversify your methods to ensure broader reach by utilising parent/carer portals, digital and print newsletters, emails and in-person debriefs in the schoolyard. By employing multiple communication channels, you increase the likelihood of important information reaching all families, including those with neurodivergent students.

### 3.4 Script to assist your staff with 'planting a seed' with undiagnosed families

Disclaimer: Whilst a diagnosis is not required for the delivery of Tier 2 supports or a student's Disability Inclusion Profile, there is overwhelming evidence that families benefit from the knowledge they gain from having a diagnosis. Whilst it's good to create the authorising environment for school staff and parents/carers to have honest conversations, it's helpful to preface the below script with your staff by saying that they need to have a very trusting relationship with a parent/carer for the conversation to succeed.

#### TAKE ACTION

One way a staff member can keep this very simple, and not share their version of the below, is asking a parent/carer 'this is what we're seeing; have you also noticed that at home?'

Below is an actual script a school staff member could use:

#### SCRIPT

**You will need to adapt this particular script to the student and their parent/carer. This script is based on the scenario of a student who is struggling with writing.**

'It is wonderful having [student] in my class! They have such a vivid imagination and attention to detail. They see things that most of us miss and have such a creative way of looking at things.

When I ask them questions, they show such a depth of knowledge and advanced thinking skills but unfortunately, I am not seeing that same depth in their written tasks and I am concerned that as they progress through the years, this might affect their confidence and pathway.

I have tried X, Y and Z with them and they showed some improvement but I know they can do so much more. I am not sure what to try next and so have asked you in here to get your insights and ideas.

You've mentioned to me before that they find group activities and the unstructured breaks at recess and lunch to be overwhelming and that they have certain sensory sensitivities like light and noise [be specific when you can: this helps parents trust you]. I've noticed those things as well and I can appreciate that when they get overwhelmed, they start to see themselves in a negative light.

You know them better. Do you have any suggestions for how I can better support them in the classroom?

....

Thank you, I will try those things. It would be great to get some more insight into how to help. Has [student] ever seen an allied health professional or doctor that could offer some insight?'



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and receive more information about I CAN Professional Development Workshops  
and the I CAN School® Program.



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