

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

BECOMING A CHAMPION FOR YOUR NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS



Department
of Education



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In its *Framework for Improving Student Outcomes 2.0*, Victoria's public education system emphasizes that learning and wellbeing are inherently linked and sit at the core of the school improvement cycle. The following tips and insights reflect the voices of neurodivergent government school students and recent school leavers, including *Disability Inclusion* ambassadors, complemented by the perspectives of neurodivergent government school teachers and parents/carers.

They have been designed to assist school teaching teams with the culture change opportunity offered through the *Disability Inclusion Reform* and directly assist government schools to activate the learning and wellbeing pillars of the *Autism Education Strategy*. These tips are predominantly geared toward secondary school, but many will be relevant to combined, primary, and specialist schools as well.

Every young person deserves a champion. We neurodivergent learners have a sixth sense about who understands us, who accepts us, and who believes in us. When we feel safe to be ourselves, we are more able to ask for help, build skills, take risks and create connections.

Chris Varney, Founder/CEO, I CAN Network



A CHAMPION FOR NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS...

UNDERSTANDS THAT CONNECTION IS KEY.

Navigating school can be a very difficult journey for many neurodivergent students, regardless of diagnosis. One of the strongest protective factors we can experience is having adults on campus who are able to create a safe and inclusive environment for us by understanding, advocating and accepting us for who we are.

You don't have to have all the answers to make a difference. Your warmth, caring, curiosity and willingness to listen will go a long way in building a foundation of trust and safety.

SEES US AS INDIVIDUALS.

Often in an effort to support our learning and development, people will think of us as an entity ("autistic people don't make eye contact") rather than as individuals. Regardless of any shared neurology, we each have our own unique set of strengths and needs.

A champion is interested in who we are, both inside and outside their classroom. They provide enough space and time so our relationship becomes one of understanding and respect.

CARES ABOUT THE MESSAGES WE RECEIVE.

The societal narrative on neurodivergent young people (and adults) is still overwhelmingly deficit-based and negative. We are often made to feel like we are burdens, or that the onus is on us to change in order to "fit in", or that we are only acceptable if we are achieving exceptional things. These messages deeply impact how we see ourselves and in turn can dictate how others will see us.

A champion thinks we're cool and inherently worthy just as we are. When a teacher like you believes in us, it helps us accept ourselves. This can open the door to better wellbeing and engagement in school.

APPRECIATES THAT OUR PROCESSING IS DIFFERENT.

Most students in your classroom (that is, neurotypical students) will process facts and figures through the logical part of their brain. We neurodivergent students process through both the emotional part of our brain and the logical part. Our style of processing can be either a disadvantage or advantage, depending on our environment and how content is presented.

You can help foster our engagement by using explicit instruction and creating an environment that is predictable, low sensory (e.g. minimal clutter/visual distractions, ability to dim lights), calm and one which always presumes the competence of every student. It is also crucial that every topic is introduced with the "why" before delving into the "how" because this reduces the uncertainty that can lead to overwhelm.



TAKES A NON-JUDGMENTAL ATTITUDE TOWARD OUR OVERWHELM.

By the time we are in front of you as your students, it is likely that we have already internalised the messages from the world that we are “too sensitive” “too blunt” “too emotional” or “too much”, with the common retorts of “please calm down”, “don’t make a big deal of it” and “build resilience”.

Creating a sense of safety entails looking through our overwhelm down to the sensory, emotional or physiological causes. A champion appreciates that we aren’t intending to give them a hard time - we are having a hard time.

Your understanding and giving us the space and time to feel safe enough to share will alleviate much of this stress.

AMPLIFIES OUR VOICES.

Often in an effort to support us, adults will talk to each other about our needs (even in our presence) rather than talking to us. A champion cares about our perspectives and actively involves us in determining what supports and adjustments will work best for us. This strengthens our sense of agency and makes us feel like our voices matter.

DOESN'T REQUIRE A DIAGNOSIS TO PRACTISE DISABILITY INCLUSION.

Not all of us have a diagnosis. In fact, the more marginalised we are, the less likely we may be to have one. Beyond the systemic barriers, there are other reasons we might not have a diagnosis: including but not limited to: parent/carer reluctance to have “labels” put on us, cultural stigma around neurodivergence/disability, reliance on stereotypes, and our ability to hide by being a high achiever, too compliant or “*masking*” our neurodivergent traits.

A champion places our wellbeing at the centre of any considerations. A champion doesn’t act as a diagnostician or make judgements. They gently help families understand how having a fuller picture of their young person can support their learning and wellbeing.

A champion believes families who say that their young person is struggling, even if that student appears to be “coping” in the classroom. A champion uses disability inclusion practices for their students in need, with or without a formal diagnosis.



PUTTING “CHAMPION” MINDSETS INTO ACTION: PRACTICAL TIPS FOR THE CLASSROOM

The tips that follow reflect a universal truth: Strategies for engaging neurodivergent learners benefit all learners. Incorporating the needs and strengths of your neurodivergent learners into the planning for your differentiated teaching of the Victorian Curriculum will support all students¹.

TIP 1: CREATE THAT CONNECTION

1.1 Take any opportunity to create a micro-connection.

You don't have to do anything elaborate to connect with us (in fact, many of us might find elaborate efforts overwhelming). Instead, look for those little moments of connection because they all add up in building trust-based relationships².

1.2 Invite us to share a few key things we'd like every teacher to know about us.

Some of us will relish the opportunity to share a 1-page “*About Me*” profile with our teachers. For some of us, it might feel like an additional demand. If we don't feel comfortable creating a profile ourselves, it still would be very helpful for every teacher working with us - including relief teachers - to know a few key details, including: our chosen name/pronouns (especially important if these differ from our official records), interests and strategies for helping us regulate.

ACTION

1.3 Meet with the people who care about & know us the best.

Adopt a very collaborative approach to supporting us from the get go. This is especially critical if we are at *risk of disengagement*. In addition to prioritising our input about what we need, be sure to meet with our care team (that might be a parent or a carer, or it might include others such as therapists) and develop a plan on how you will work together. Doing so might be more feasible in a primary school setting. If you're in a large and busy secondary school, you could ask your Disability Inclusion Coordinator for information on the adjustments in place to support that learner.

1.4 Appreciate our intersectional identities.

Having a neurodivergent brain shapes how we see, experience and engage with the world around us, including our time at school. But there can be other very significant aspects of our identity that need to be appreciated in order to support our wellbeing, especially when we come from groups that have been historically marginalised. For example, we might also be LGBTIQ+, Koorie learners, from ethnic minority groups, non-speaking and/or have co-occurring disabilities. It is very important that all aspects of our profile are respected and supported.

¹ *High Impact Teaching Strategies*, Strategy 10: Differentiated teaching

² *Refer to High Impact Wellbeing Strategies*: Strategy 1 Build relationships with students

TIP 2: ENGAGE LEARNERS BY EMBRACING INTERESTS³

2.1 Embrace our interests.

Our deep interests aren't just hobbies - for so many of us, they are an essential part of who we are: a constant source of joy, comfort and connection. There might be instances where you can leverage a student's interests as a hook for fostering deeper engagement with the Victorian Curriculum, but there won't always be. Showing a genuine interest in our passions, even with a simple question or comment - "If I'm new to listening to Taylor Swift, which album should I start with?" - helps build that connection.

2.2 Embrace your interests.

When adults are willing to geek out over the things they love, it makes us feel like it's okay to do the same! "The best way that a teacher built a connection with me was sharing their interests and hobbies. I had a maths teacher whose birthday was on Star Wars Day, and she was a huge Star Wars fan, which might sound nerdy, but it helped us feel so much more connected to her."

TIP 3: MODEL A POSITIVE FIRST REACTION

3.1. Appreciate different processing styles.

We neurodivergent students may have a very different processing style to our peers and accordingly, are likely to approach assessment tasks and problem-solving differently in class. Often, we may pick up things that have gone unnoticed and design innovative solutions.

3.2. Scripts to verbalise a positive first reaction.

Our interpretation of a question or your instruction might not align with what you had in mind. This is likely due to communication differences - we aren't on each other's wavelength in this instance! It's important that our genuine interpretations of your questions or instructions are always viewed positively, so that we don't lose confidence to ask for help or feel embarrassed to contribute.

Scripts you could use to show a positive first reaction include 'Wow, I hadn't thought about the task that way' or 'you've made me think about this differently.'

Using scripts like these carry the extra bonus of modelling to our peers how they can respond to a neurodivergent classmate's contribution to group work, should that contribution seem very unusual or different in the first place.

³ Refer to *High Impact Wellbeing Strategies*: Strategy 6 Engage students

TIP 4: KEEP AN EYE ON HOW WE'RE GOING

4.1: Check in with us because we might not check in with you.

Even with a teacher's invitation to 'Come talk to me about any issues', we still might find it hard to initiate conversation or proactively reach out to an adult. This is why it's so important to seek moments to quietly check in with a student and ask ('Hey, what's going well right now? What is a bit trickier for you?').

4.2. Exercise non-judgement.

Don't dismiss or brush off a student's explanation or parent/carer's confession of the cause behind their young person's anxiety. When we aren't taken seriously or when we keep things bottled up, that's when we might catastrophize. Also be open-minded to how we can change in our secondary years: 'Please don't let one behaviour we exhibited in Year 7 be held against us for five more years of my schooling'⁴.

⁴ Testimony from a 20-year-old non-speaking autistic student who graduated from a large Victorian government secondary school

TIP 5: MITIGATE SOME OF OUR MOST COMMON CLASSROOM STRESSORS

ACTION

5.1 Help us get started...and show us what “finished” looks like.

One of the areas where many of us struggle is with our executive functioning - that is, the suite of skills needed to “get stuff done” (like task initiation, organisation, time management, working through perfectionism and more). For more context, you can refer to our lived experience tips on supporting *executive functioning* and ‘*getting stuff done*’. Providing us with a finished example can really hone our very creative problem-solving to exactly what you’re expecting⁵.

5.2 Reduce the angst around group presentations.

Whilst some of us thrive with individual/group presentations that allow us to showcase our knowledge, many of us find these assignments to be incredibly stressful - especially group projects.

ACTION

We know what it feels like to be picked last or to be blamed when communication issues arise on the team. You can reduce the stress that is likely to lead to our overwhelm by factoring in the set-up of safe pairs in group work and ensuring extra prompts are available for some neurodivergent learners so they don’t become lost in the dynamics of classroom groups delegating work amongst each other⁶.

5.3 Implement and model neuro-friendly classroom practices.

Because of the negative messaging from society, we might be very self-conscious about being ‘singled-out’ for accommodations. You can help by implementing neuro-inclusive classroom practices that benefit all students, such as movement breaks, not insisting on eye contact, providing greater processing time for responses, and giving us flexibility in how we share projects (for example, making a video instead of a live presentation).

Normalise accommodations by openly talking about the support you need to stay regulated or accomplish certain tasks (e.g. deep breathing, making lists, breaking down tasks into smaller parts). Through modelling, scaffolding and explicit instruction, you can help us develop metacognitive strategies to support our own learning.

⁵ [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#), Strategy 4: Worked Examples

⁶ [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#), Strategy 5: Collaborative Learning

TIP 6: SUPPORT EXPLICIT TEACHING WITH VISUALS/WRITTEN PROMPTS

OPTIONS TO SUPPORT VISUAL LEARNERS

Many of us neurodivergent students can be strong visual learners. In addition to being visual learners, many of us like to know 'what's coming next'. When key details are unclear or unknown, this can contribute to our anxiety. Visual aids are very common in Victorian primary school classrooms, but understandably less common in Victorian secondary schools as teachers move around multiple classrooms. However, there are ways secondary teachers can keep visual prompts very quick and simple, to support explicit teaching for all students, including neurodivergent students⁷.

6.1. Write a quick structure of the lesson on the whiteboard.

In addition to writing the learning intention on your whiteboard, add a simple list of activities to help students know what's coming next. The key thing is indicating what the finish line of the lesson or the task is.

6.2. Add sentence starters to support initiation and a students' sequencing of their questions.

Some instructions can go right over the heads of neurodivergent students and as a result they can ask a teacher blankly 'so, what are we doing?' Written prompts can do an enormous amount to support the participation and contributions of neurodivergent learners. It can be useful to take around to your multiple secondary classrooms a laminated set of prompts that give secondary neurodivergent students a sentence starter, especially with seeking help. Examples of sentence starters for your mobile laminated A4 visual can include:

- 'Can I repeat back?'
- 'Can I double check?'
- 'I understand that part, but I don't understand this part'
- 'Here's where I'm lost'
- 'Can you break that down into steps?'

⁷ *High Impact Teaching Strategies*, Strategy 3: Explicit Teaching

TIP 7: GIVE US LITTLE RESPONSIBILITIES

7.1. Give us a sense of purpose.

One of the ways you can bring down our anxiety levels is to give us little responsibilities in the design of your lesson plan. What this does is it gives us a strong sense of purpose in your class: a specific focus which we can latch onto. When we have a task we can control, we are more regulated. Having something to control can also distract us from any overthinking or worrying we might be doing from before-school, recess or lunch, and engage with class⁸.

ACTION

7.2. Examples of little responsibilities.

These little responsibilities could range from being an assistant, crossing off items on a written schedule on a whiteboard, timekeeping, scoring in a sports event we don't like, being a photographer on an excursion we might be really anxious about, gardening at recess or lunch if we struggle with this unstructured time, etc. Be creative with it!

TIP 8: MAKE IT EASIER FOR OTHER TEACHERS TO UNDERSTAND & SUPPORT US

Especially in secondary school, where we have so many different teachers, it's important to bring everyone in the loop on the adjustments and support we are receiving. Your vantage point as a teacher who can see the impact of adjustments is really valuable.

8.1 If you have built a very strong relationship with us, help other teachers do the same.

If you are 'that teacher' for a neurodivergent student, you can help make our school journey smoother by passing along your 'pearls of wisdom' to the next set of teachers who will be working with us.

This knowledge transfer can be hard to do amidst the busyness of a big government secondary school, especially when there are staff shortages. One alternative is equipping your school's Disability Inclusion Coordinator/or equivalent and Year Level Coordinator/or equivalent with the wisdom you have gained so that they can socialise it with the handful of teachers who will be working with us.

8.2 Speak to our school's Disability Inclusion Coordinator about how the adjustments you're making can become embedded in our support plans.

This includes exploring how these adjustments can be translated into our student support group meetings and any *Disability Inclusion Profiles*.

⁸ *High Impact Teaching Strategies*, Strategy 9: Metacognitive Strategies

TIP 9: BE A CHAMPION FOR OUR FAMILIES, TOO

9.1 Take into account that our parents/carers might be neurodivergent as well.

Many neurodivergencies tend to run in families, Knowing this can provide some useful context to help you process any written or verbal reactions from our parents/carers that might seem overly 'blunt', 'dramatic' or 'rude'. Whilst abusive language is never appropriate, it can be helpful to see the high anxiety levels first and foremost before escalating a written/verbal interaction that our parent/carer might regret once they have a relationship with you.

9.2 Help our parents/carers feel more comfortable navigating the school journey with us.

As neurodivergent learners, our journeys at school can be more complicated than those of our neurotypical peers. Our parents/carers might be sensitive to being labelled 'a helicopter parent' or 'difficult' when they are trying to advocate for us. Keeping the lines of communication open and presuming their good intentions will help foster that sense of trust and comfort, not just for us, but for our families too. Thank you for being a champion.





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