

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

# **UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS**



Department  
of Education



# UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS

Navigating school can be a very difficult journey for many neurodivergent students, especially secondary school where the academic, social and emotional demands dramatically increase.

The videos below capture glimpses of the journeys of five different autistic/multiply neurodivergent young adults, all of whom have recent experience in Victorian government secondary schools. Though their individual journeys are unique, they all share a common thread: each of them had champions on campus - teachers, school leaders or key staff - who created an environment of acceptance and understanding.

**NOTE: The following terms will be used throughout this document.**

**Neurodivergent:** Refers to people whose brains diverge significantly from the dominant social standards of 'typical' (neurotypical). Neurodivergence includes, but is not limited to, autism, ADHD, dyslexia and other learning disabilities, mental health conditions and more. For purposes of these resources, the focus will be on autism, ADHD and learning disabilities.

**Multiply neurodivergent:** Refers to people who are neurodivergent in more than one way (e.g. autistic and dyslexic).

# RACHAEL'S STORY

## *Watch the video*

One of the biggest challenges in education is the growing number of students experiencing school attendance difficulties (also known as 'school can't' because the young person's struggles are not by choice). Neurodivergent students are among the most affected.

Helping a neurodivergent student safely re-engage with school involves multiple people working together. The purpose of this video is to assist government school leadership teams and regional implementation teams who are dealing with students experiencing intense levels of disengagement. As Rachael's story conveys, the response doesn't need to be complicated. Rather, the first step is incredibly straightforward: above all else, focus on creating a sense of safety for that learner.

## KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE VIDEO

- Validating that a student is struggling - as opposed to willfully "skipping" school - helps create a foundation of trust and understanding between that student/their family and the school.
- Re-engagement with learning will come once a student feels safe to re-engage with the school environment.

For additional insights and tips, see Connection Is Key tip sheet: Tips 1.1; 1.3; 4.2



# CYLAN'S STORY

## *Watch the video*

Autistic/neurodivergent students have significantly lower rates of Year 12 completion than their neurotypical peers. Having meaningful accommodations in place, including but not limited to special provision for students completing their VCE, can be a game-changer for many learners.

The Victorian Department of Education has a range of senior secondary schooling reform pathways which have had strong input from the autistic/neurodivergent communities. Within the context of these reforms, Cylan's story is intended to motivate senior secondary school teams with providing the necessary VCAA-approved special consideration adjustments to help an autistic/neurodivergent learner to complete Year 12.

## KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE VIDEO

- Many students are multiply-neurodivergent (e.g. autistic and ADHD) and the full extent of their neurodivergence might not be detected until secondary school (or beyond).
- Neurodivergent students might be hesitant to ask for help or recognise that they deserve support, which is why it is so valuable for teachers to proactively check in with them.

For additional insights and tips, see Connection is Key tip sheet: Tips 4.1; 5.3; 8.2.



# ADON'S STORY (ACCOMPANIED BY TEACHER INSIGHTS)

## *Watch the video*

The Victorian Government is committed to the vision of inclusive education promoted by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.

Whilst the Victorian Government respects the choice of parents/carers on which school they choose for their child, there is the aspiration that all schools will become more inclusive to ensure students like Adon can attend their local government school, and feel safe and supported to learn there. Adon's insights can help teachers understand how to form meaningful connections with their non-speaking students before they begin teaching them.

## KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE VIDEO

- Respect for the individual student voice and their right to autonomy is fundamental to creating a safe, inclusive learning environment, especially for those with complex communication and higher support needs. See [Student Voice and Disability Inclusion Toolkit](#).
- Encourage peers to use communication support options to normalise different means of communication.

For additional insights and tips, see Connection is Key tip sheet: Tips 1.1; 1.4; 2.1; 8.2; 9.2



# BANJO'S STORY (ACCOMPANIED BY SCHOOL LEADER INSIGHTS)

## *Watch the video*

Disability inclusion adjustments and differentiation are at the heart of providing a learning environment that gives every student an opportunity to thrive. The purpose of this video is to provide practical advice from a neurodivergent student and a school leader on what adjustments and differentiation can look like, particularly in a secondary school setting, their insights are relevant for teachers and educational support staff in both specialist and mainstream schools. Also see [Reasonable School Adjustments For Disability policy](#) and [Student Voice toolkit](#) linked above.

## KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE VIDEO

- Adjustments can take all forms, including having Year 12 stretched out over more than one year to reduce demands.
- Normalising adjustments and offering of ways for students to showcase their knowledge helps remove/lessen the anxiety that might come from being perceived as 'different'.

For additional insights and tips, see Connection is Key tip sheet: Tips 5.3; 8.2.



# CHRISTIAN'S STORY

## *Watch the video*

Neurodivergent people often see and process the world differently than neurotypical people. Certain aspects of secondary school, including the frequent transitions between different classes and the need for solid executive functioning skills (the suite of skills “needed to get things done”), can make the school experience challenging for many neurodivergent students.

The purpose of this video is to help teachers see secondary school through that neurodivergent student lens. For examples of transition practice in primary schools, please see the case studies in the [Primary to Secondary School Transition](#) resources.

## KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE VIDEO

- Understand that your neurodivergent students might need more time to process change, shift tasks or share their ideas. As much as possible, build in additional processing time.
- Respectful listening, including ensuring that students have time to prepare responses and express their thoughts, helps build a foundation of trust in that teacher-student relationship.

For additional insights and tips, see Connection is Key tip sheet: Tips 3.1, 3.2, 5.3.





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