



Neuro-affirming Classroom Strategies



Although truly inclusive education requires system-level changes, there are individual-level actions that can support all students. One action is to create **neuro-affirming** classrooms, where neurodiversity is validated and supported, rather than viewing neurodivergence as a deficit, something that needs to be fixed or changed.

A multitude of diverse minds exists in every classroom, yet some can go unnoticed. Implementing neuro-affirming practices can add to a richer and engaging learning experience for everyone.

Here are some neuro-affirming strategies that can be used and adapted for all K-12 students.

The first five minutes: Build relationships and community connection

Spend the first five minutes of each day talking to students and asking them about anything not related to school (e.g., their day, local events, games they are playing).

Start with a mindfulness activity

Start class with a breathing or mindfulness activity. Taking time to ground bodies and minds and check in with what we might need to start the day can help all students, particularly those who are anxious.

Spending five minutes focused on a mindfulness exercise can also work well after lunch break or a physical education class.

Offer movement

At the beginning of the year, you may wish to have a conversation with your class about movement breaks, so that all students know they have the option to move as needed.

Planned movement breaks, using wobble chairs, exercise balls or fidget toys, can help relieve student anxiety while reducing disruption for other students.

Get organized

Some students struggle with executive function, and that can make organization difficult. Consider having a class organizing time for everyone. Clean out desks, lockers and bags together to build skills and routine and so that students who struggle with these skills do not feel singled out or overwhelmed by the task at hand.

For more strategies, check out Resource 4: Executive Functioning.

Words matter

Take a close look at the language you use every day in class. The common phrase, "This should only take ____ minutes to complete," can be unrealistic for some students and create anxiety if it takes them longer than the set time.

Avoid describing tasks as "easy.". If a student struggles, they may feel bad about themselves because it was supposed to be easy. Instead, consider saying something like, "This is something we have seen before."

Refrain from labelling students in any setting as "lazy," "sensitive," "attention-seeking," "needy" or "challenging." These behaviours are often due to unmet needs that should be met with a curiosity mindset, validated and addressed.

Rule of three

For each classroom activity, consider following the "rule of three" to help address the diversity of learning needs and preferences in the classroom. Create three touch points: oral, written and visual. Tell students what you want to happen, write down on the board what you want to happen, and show students an example of what you will be doing.

Create predictable environments and routines

- Create predictable environments to help support regulation, communication differences, executive function, and well-being – visual supports are one way we can do this (see Resource 4: Executive Functioning for more information)
- Have noise-canceling headphones available
- Having a "safe" person who the child knows they can go to (e.g., a favorite teacher, counselor, nurse.) when they feel overwhelmed, angry, or upset

Validate different ways of playing, socializing, communicating and learning

Encourage and model the different ways in which someone may play, build friendships, communicate and learn. Avoid suggesting that one way of being is better than another. Reflect on which social skills, communication skills and learning activities you are teaching, and whether they reinforce neuro-normative standards or are neuro-affirming.

Incorporate universal design for learning into your classroom and practice

Universal design for learning (UDL) principles support and promote a more inclusive and accessible learning environment for all students by reducing barriers and increasing accessibility and flexibility in the ways in which learning is represented, expressed and engaged with.

See Resource 6: Universal Design for Learning for more information.