



NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH IN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROGRAMS

**RYCNC – RESTORING YOUTH
COALITION OF NC**

LUNCH & LEARN SERIES 2025

**INFORMATION FROM NEW
SOUTH WALES GOVERNMENT**



NEURODIVERSITY DEFINITION

Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one “right” way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits.

This reframes neurological differences as natural variations rather than disorders.

The word was coined to promote equality and inclusion of “neurological minorities.”

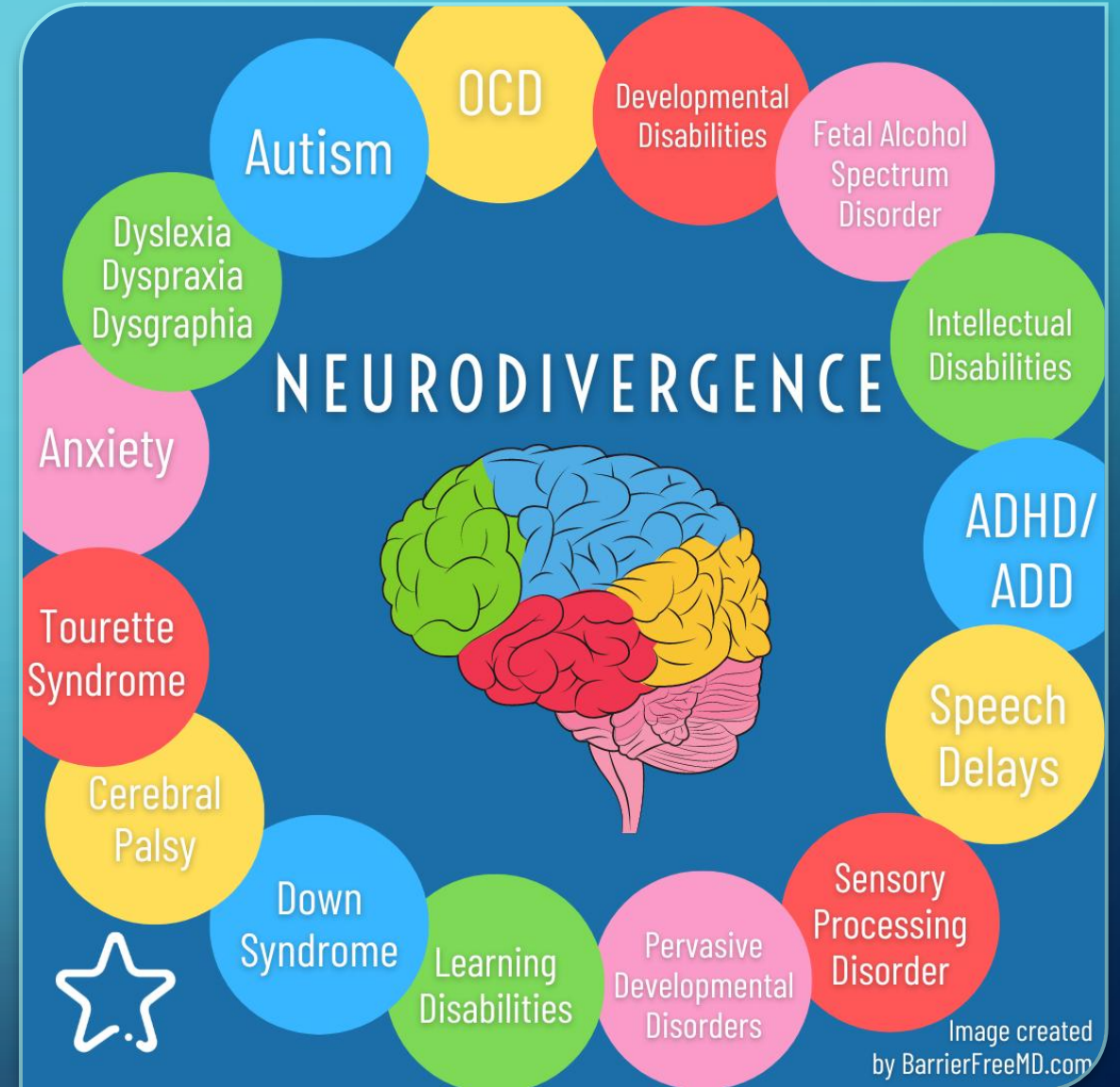
NEURODIVERSITY

15-20% of the world's population experiences some type of neurodivergence.

No two neurodiverse individuals are the same, although some of the difficulties they face may overlap.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPECTRUM OF NEURODIVERSITY

- Neurodiversity is a rich tapestry of cognitive differences



Addressing Barriers for Students with Disabilities



Communication

May include barriers related to expressive language, and/or non-speaking



Cognition

May include barriers related to storytelling, memory and sequencing, understanding of self and others



Behavior

May include barriers related to impulsivity, risky behavior, social skill learning and building relationships



resource

Thorsborne and Burnett 2021

WHAT A NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH EXPERIENCES

[https://www.youtube.com
/watch?v=DgDR_gYk_a8
&t=7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgDR_gYk_a8&t=7s)

On YouTube:

**Autism TMI Virtual
Reality Experience**





HOW TO SUPPORT A NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH

- It is crucial to learn about the wide variety of challenges that ND youth face, and how these struggles can potentially impact their mental health.
- Autistic youth may feel very overstimulated by loud noises and bright florescent school lights and may need a break from class
- A youth with ADHD may struggle with task prioritization and concentration and may require additional explanations or extra time for assignments.

HOW TO SUPPORT A NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH



Understanding and accepting differences are fundamental pillars in creating a supportive environment

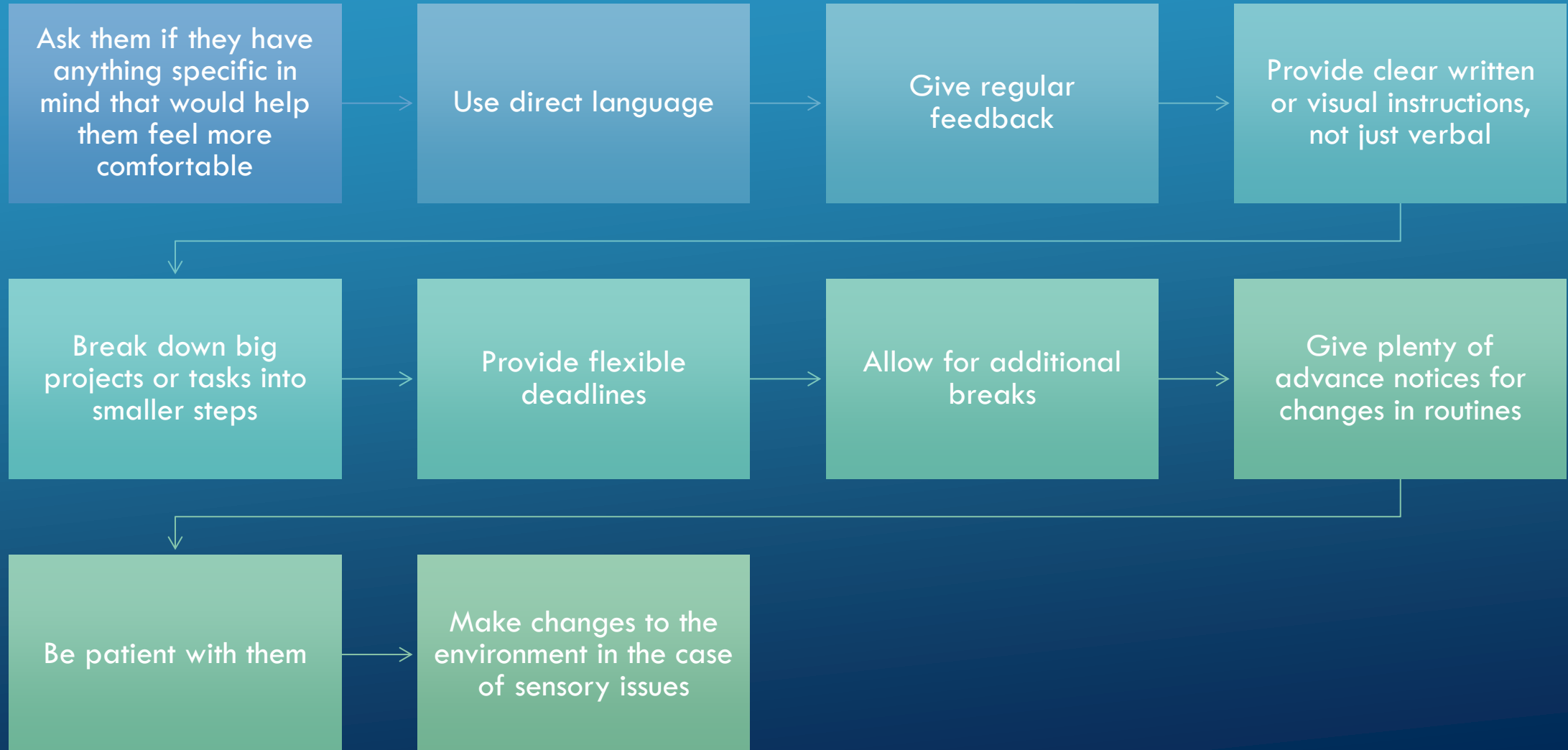


It is about actively embracing and celebrating those differences.



It is imperative that neurotypical adults and peers are not only aware of these differences but are also equipped with the tools to interact effectively and empathetically with their neurodiverse counterparts.

HOW TO SUPPORT A NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH



BENEFICIAL PROGRAMS – SOCIAL SKILLS

Focus on understanding social cues, navigating conversations, and managing interpersonal conflicts.

Group settings are particularly effective for practicing real-world interactions.

Techniques such as role-playing help youth practice responses to common social challenges

BENEFICIAL PROGRAMS – PEER SUPPORT



This can reduce feelings of isolation and provide practical advice for managing challenge



Such groups offer a safe space to discuss coping mechanisms for stress, relationships, and work-life balance.

BENEFICIAL PROGRAMS – ASSISTIVE TECH

Tools such as speech-to-text software, noise-cancelling headphones, and task management apps can help neurodivergent youth stay organized and manage sensory overload.

Example: someone with dyslexia may benefit from software that reads text aloud or helps with spelling and grammar corrections.

BENEFICIAL
PROGRAMS –
**CLEAR
COMMUNICATION**

Providing clear, step-by-step instructions and setting concrete deadlines can help neurodivergent youth to better manage tasks

Regular check-ins and feedback sessions also help maintain focus and performance.

Direct and clear communication as they may have difficulty picking up on social cues, nonverbal communication and sarcasm.



BENEFICIAL PROGRAMS – SELF- ADVOCACY

Learning how to advocate for themselves in social, academic and professional environments

They learn their strengths and challenges, as well as communicating their needs clearly.

For example, asking to work in a quieter area.



BENEFICIAL TOOLS – ENVIRONMENTAL MODIFICATIONS

Adjusting physical environments can significantly reduce distress.

Examples: reducing harsh lighting, minimizing noise levels, creating designated spaces where the youth can retreat to if overwhelmed.

Sensory Tools: Youth can benefit from carrying personal sensory tools that help them manage sensory overload.

Examples: fidget toys, sunglasses to reduce harsh lighting, or earplugs for noisy environments.



THE ROLE OF ADULTS AND PROFESSIONALS

It is a delicate balance of empathy, understanding and patience.

We are entrusted with the responsibility of fostering an environment where neurodivergent individuals feel valued, respected and supported.

One simple principle: KINDNESS; if this is difficult, BE CALM

Acknowledging their talents and accomplishments can foster a sense of belonging.

Listening with genuine empathy and openness is critical.



THE ROLE OF ADULTS AND PROFESSIONALS

Taking the time to understand their perspectives, preferences and needs cultivates trust and strengthens the bond between adults and neurodiverse youth.

In moments of frustration or conflict, it is imperative to approach the situation with compassion and patience. Instead of resorting to punitive measures or harsh criticism, adopting a problem-solving mindset can lead to more constructive outcomes.

A supportive environment involves acceptance, diversity and mutual respect.

Adults benefit from training in de-escalation techniques.

IMPORTANT TIPS: FROM OUR PRESENTER

- **Kids struggle with:**

- **Insecurity**

- **Lack of Confidence**

- **Who they can Trust**

- **In Intake:**

- Get to know them such as their interests, favorite things, foods, if they are auditory or visual, hobbies like music and art
 - What makes them nervous or stressed?
 - Do they like surprises or do they prefer to know what is going on?
 - Do they have a safe place?
 - Give them the Big Picture of what is going to happen, and then go backwards and fill in the details
 - Do they have an IEP or 504?

IMPORTANT TIPS: FROM OUR PRESENTER

- **Pre-staging for success**

- **Give them details ahead of time about the event or place.**
- **Help them to picture it.**
- **Where will they stand?**
- **Will there be lots of people?**
- **Work toward No spur of the moment changes as it may trigger a flight or fight response.**

- **At the event or place**

- **Identify the place/chair/space that will be used as a safe place in case of a meltdown.**
- **Smell overload such as cologne is a large trigger for many.**
- **Bright lights are another trigger.**
- **Behavior modification includes structure and boundaries.**

IMPORTANT TIPS: FROM OUR PRESENTER

- **De-escalation**

- **Stand beside them... come along side, even for a hug**
- **Do not look at them face-to-face**
- **Use a quiet voice and a soft tone of voice**
- **Ease into their space**
- **Have available a safe and quiet place**
- **Giving them markers and paper helps them to work through their experience**



FINALLY

Steer clear of judgment

Just because someone's brain works a bit differently, this does not mean they should be judged.

Try to be understanding and compassionate.

You do not know what it is like to be in their shoes.

Avoid using labels, stigmatizing language and making unkind assumptions or generalizations.

Respect their boundaries. Check what they're comfortable with and do your best to meet their needs. Example, hypersensitivity to physical contact.

RESEARCH-BACKED SUPPORT STRATEGIES



Collaborative Problem-Solving approach – emphasizes collaboration and empathy in addressing challenging behaviors

TOTEM PD – comprehensive training on creating inclusive environments for neurodiverse youth

RBT – Registered Behavior Technician – equips professionals with the skills to implement behavior intervention plans effectively

CBT – Cognitive Behavioral Therapy – cognitive restructuring

EFT – Emotion-Focused Therapy helps individuals process emotions

Psychodynamic therapy – looks at the unconscious processes driving behavior and emotional difficulties

ACT – Acceptance and Commitment Therapy – emphasizes accepting internal experiences (like overwhelming emotions or sensory overload) without judgment and committing to actions that align with one's values.



THANKS FOR
YOUR TIME
TODAY!