

Supporting Neurodivergent Learner's Wellbeing, Regulation and Social Interactions - Years 7 - 10

Vanessa Randall and Nicholas Shimasaki,
Te Paeroa, Cluster 34- Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour,
2026

Karakia Whakamutunga:

*Unuhia te pō,
Te pō whiri marama,
Tomokia te ao,
Te ao whatu tangata,
Tātai ki runga,
Tātai ki raro,
Tātai aho rau,
Haumi e hui e, Tāiki e!*

From confusion comes
understanding,
From understanding comes
unity,
We are interwoven,
We are connected together
as one!



Ko Wai Tāua?



Ko Nick
tōku ingoa



Ko
Vanessa
tōku ingoa



Whakawhanaungatanga:

Pick 4 different coloured jelly beans!





Whakawhanaungatanga:

- **Purple** - What is the scariest thing that you have ever done?
- **Orange** - What is an ongoing challenge for you when supporting learner wellbeing and regulation?
- **Yellow** - What things do you do in the classroom to support positive social interactions between students?
- **Green** - What are your ongoing wonderings regarding neurodivergent learner wellbeing?



Kaupapa:

Karakia, Ko Wai Tāua?, Kaupapa, and Whakawhanaungatanga



What is 'Neurodivergence', 'Neurodiversity', and 'Neurotypicality'?



Key Strategies for Supporting Neurodivergent Ākonga



Leveraging Strengths, Relationships, and Wellbeing

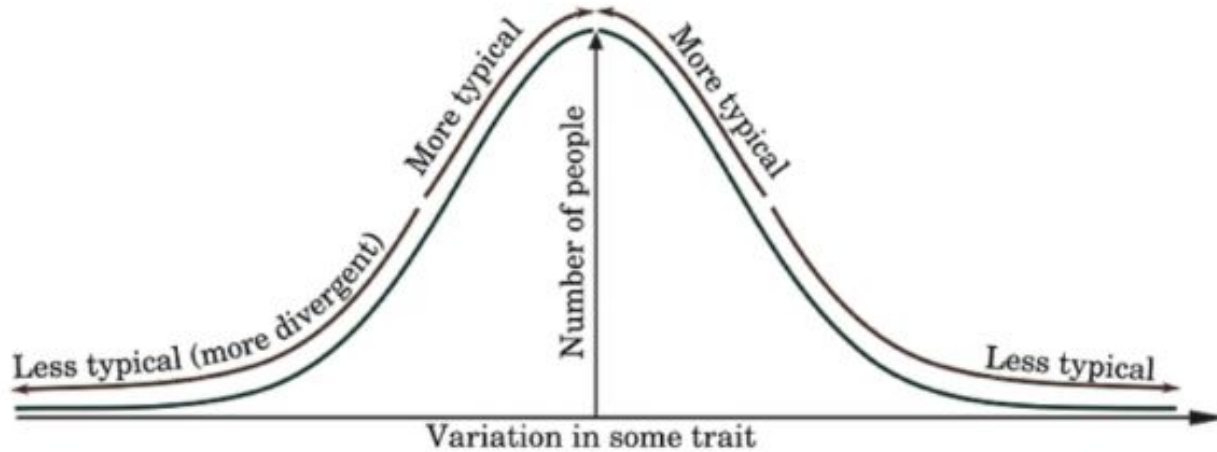


Understanding the Perspectives of Neurodivergent Ākonga





Neurodivergence vs. Neurodiversity



Diverse = Variation among a group

Divergence = Differing from each other or the 'standard'



What is Neurodivergence?

“Neurodivergence is an umbrella phenomenon which describes when an individual’s mind and brain function in a way that differs from normative societal expectations”

McNeill et al. (2025)



Social vs. Health Model

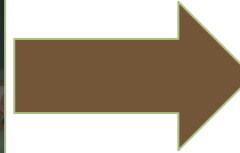
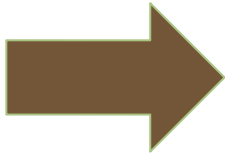
The *Social Model* maintains that “difficulties faced by neurodivergent people are often caused by the way society and infrastructure are designed” Oehme et al. (2023)



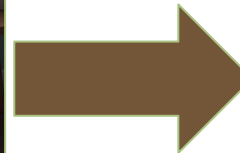


Connection Before Correction

Neurodivergent
Student:
Tapping, calling-out,
moving a lot,
constantly talking



Validate their
Experience



Embrace the
'Double Empathy'
Problem

Ecological and Sensory Accommodations

5 External Senses:

Sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch.



3 Internal Senses:

Proprioception, Vestibular, and Interoception.

Ecological and Sensory Accommodations

Building interoception skills can help mokopuna to:

- self-regulate their emotions and feelings,
- be calm and engage with learning,
- have positive wellbeing and,
- improve their academic performance.

(Education Services Australia Ltd, 2025)

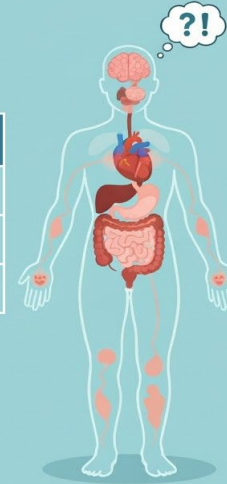


What is Interoception?

Internal Body Awareness – how you feel from the *inside*

Noticing the Signals

Internal Signal	The Feeling
Slow heartbeat	Calm / tired
Empty stomach	Hungry
Tight chest	Overwhelmed



The Benefit = Self Regulation



1. Catch the feelings early
2. Choose a tool
3. Regulate

Learn more at studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/topics/interoception-self-regulation



Ecological and Sensory Accommodations



Ecological and Sensory Accommodations

“Agency starts with what scientists call ‘interoception’, our awareness of our subtle sensory, body-based feelings: the greater that awareness, the greater our potential to control our lives. Knowing what we feel is the first step to knowing why we feel that way”.

(Van Der Kolk, 2014)

**Squeeze your eyes shut and hold
for 10 seconds.**



I wonder what you notice in your eyes.

How do they feel?

**Do you notice sensations in any other
body parts?**

Where/what do you feel?



Co-regulation and Relationships:

Thoughts?

Key
takeaways



Karakia Kai:

*E rongo, e rongo,
Hōmai ngā tipu,
Hei Whakakī te tinana,
Hei oranga,
Au eke, au eke,
Hui ē, Taīki ē!*

Rongo-Mā-Tane,
Share with us your food,
As sustenance for the body,
For life,
Draw together! It is affirmed.



Kai Break!

te paeroa RTLБ



Walking in their Shoes:

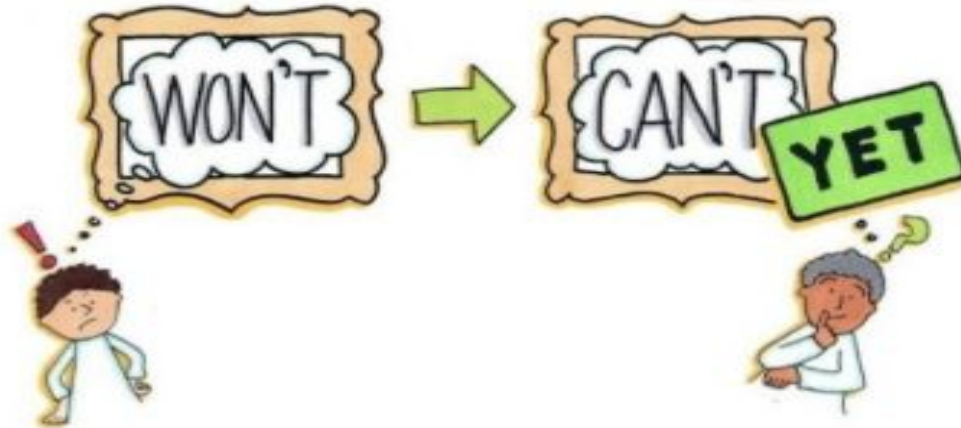




Walking in their Shoes:

REFRAME THE BEHAVIOUR

"KIDS DO WELL IF THEY CAN"
— ROSS GREENE





Understanding the Perspectives of Neurodiverse Ākonga:

When we react to the “above surface” behaviour, behaviour we can see, the behaviour increases...





Understanding the Perspectives of Neurodiverse Ākonga:



Anxiety

Crisis

Sadness

Rejection

Different

Trauma

Fear

Nervous

Embarrassment

Lack of sleep

Need for connection

A person's behaviour is not always what it seems.
Behaviour is communication.

When we respond to and proactively support what is "below the surface", what we cannot see, the behaviour decreases.



Building and Maintaining Relationships:



te paeroa RTL B



The Journey from Co-Regulation to Self-Regulation





The Journey from Co-Regulation to Self-Regulation

1 - Gather information to understand your child's perspective on the problem.

DR. ROSS GREENE'S
**Collaborative &
Proactive Solutions**

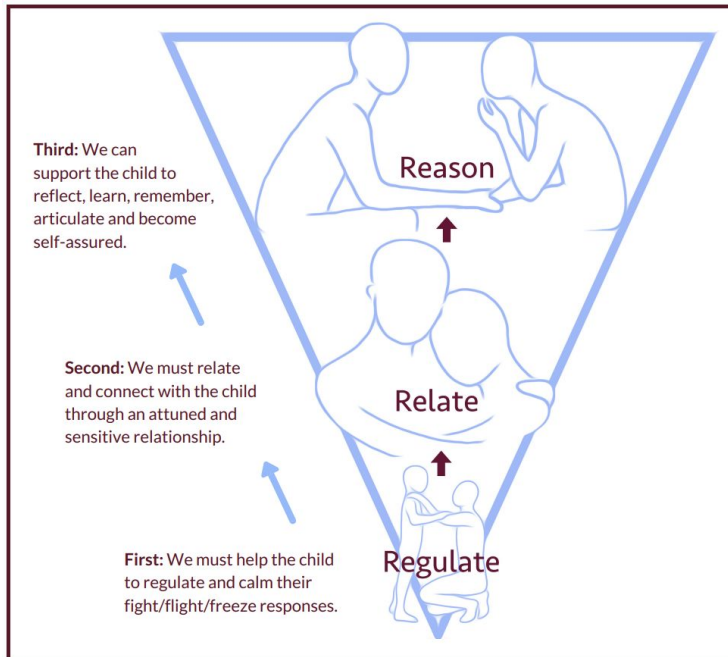
2 - Define your concerns and point of view regarding the problem.

3 - Discuss and agree on a solution that is realistic and addresses the concerns of both parties.





The Journey from Co-Regulation to Self-Regulation



Practical Resources for Support:

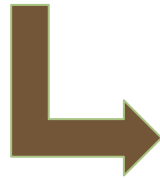




Understanding the Perspectives of Neurodiverse Ākonga - Practical Resources for Support:

“Teens value autonomy and the opportunity to make their own decisions. Tell them they can’t do something and they hear, you’re not an adult who can make choices for yourself”

David Yeager, 2024



10 to 25

The Science of
Motivating Young People



A Groundbreaking Approach
to Leading the Next Generation—
And Making Your Own Life Easier

DAVID YEAGER, PhD



“...The more that you problem solve proactively through a mentor mindset, the more time you save later because the kid feels securely attached”

David Yeager, 2024

Our Koha to You...

Front:

Positive
Affirmations



Back:

Useful
Links

te paeroa RTL B



He kai kei aku ringa
There is food at the end of my hands



*This whakatauki signifies resilience, empowerment and hope.
It refers to one's ability to use the skills and resources they have to create success.
It's about being responsible for the resources and capabilities
one needs to grow and develop.*



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Digital Links to Handouts:

Unlocking the Enormous Potential of Neurodiverse Learners

Closing

Improving the achievement and wellbeing of neurodiverse ōkonga is a critical imperative, and one that is well within our grasp.

This White Paper presents an action plan for the incoming Government - three initiatives able to be implemented straight away that will be the groundwork for the system change required. A new Government has the opportunity to transform the lives of the estimated 20 percent of students who are neurodiverse. This investment will lower the huge social and economic costs of managing the disenfranchised and enable New Zealand to unlock the enormous potential of our neurodiverse young people, as learners, employees, business owners, and contributors to their whānau and communities.

What would it feel like in a supportive education system?

I would feel I belonged. I wouldn't treat the classroom as the inner circle, there would be no time wasted trying to get in.

I wouldn't feel like a burden. I wouldn't be nervous to reach out to teachers about struggling.

I'd feel supported, not ostracised for my perceived 'difficulties' and would have been taught the skills to help me manage areas I found difficult - not taught that they were wrong and I had to fix them.

I'd feel like I had been learning at school. I'd feel that I have so much more to offer and people were valuing that. I would be so much further ahead. I wouldn't have gone years without having been taught anything. I wouldn't have been ignored.

It would make a huge difference if neurodiversity had no stigma associated with it. I think we will always be seen as different and unique, but we are NOT less.

A lot more people would leave high school with their confidence intact and a more clear understanding of what they're capable of and where they would like to go.

Unlocking the Enormous Potential of Neurodiverse Learners

What Does It Feel Like To Be Neurodiverse In Our Education System?

I feel like I am an alien. Sitting in a classroom five periods a day with people who don't really understand me, or how I think.

I feel singled out as different, and not valued. I feel excluded from my school community.

I thought that it was me that was the problem. I thought that I wasn't be trying hard enough, when really I just needed different help.

I feel sad. My family have had to sacrifice a lot to get me the help I needed, right from when I was very distressed 6 year old. We aren't well off and paying for a diagnosis and for schooling that costs \$100 a day is not cheap.

I had been so ashamed all through school of my many 'naives' when I got diagnosed. I realised that they were not diagnosed. I wasn't trying or incompetent at basic human activities but because of a difference in my brain structure, it changed my life.

I feel lost, undervalued and discouraged. I come home from school most days wondering why I even went.

It took me a long time to realise that I wasn't 'dumb', I just learned in ways that are not conventional. In classrooms that provided various ways to learn, I flourished.

I feel frustrated. I am part Maori and Pacific Island and I grew up with domestic violence and alcoholism. By all statistics I should be failing school but in these situations that are holding me back - it's the education system. The only way I can fix my situation is to excel at school, but at every turn I'm told to be average. The next best thing Butlerford is potentially right now sitting in a low-income household in Porirua. Gifted learner's education shouldn't depend on where they live or the circumstances of their parents.

Neurodiversity in Education Coalition

Unlocking the Enormous Potential of Neurodiverse Learners

What Are Some of The Myths and Mindsets Our Champions Grapple With?

It would make a huge difference if neurodiversity had no stigma associated with it. We are different but NOT less.

Everyone just thought I was a disobedient, troubled, rebellious child.

People have a stereotype that all Asians are smart and don't need support at school. Asian neurodivergent students are expected to go so much further without the appropriate level of support from teachers.

Just because I didn't cause a lot of trouble for other people, didn't mean I wasn't struggling. Not all ADHD kids are loud and rambunctious. Some have that energy tucked inward, and because of that, they don't receive proper diagnosis or help.

I truly believe half the reason I wasn't diagnosed until my final year of high school was because I am a gifted learner. People refused to even consider that this gifted kid could also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder!

For a long time, my parents sought to 'cure' my ADHD, which just simply is not a thing you can do.

Many migrant communities despise the use of labels such as ADHD or Autistic because they don't want the person to be even more ostracised than they are already in society.

My family's first response to my struggles was 'everyone struggles with that sometimes'. They dismissed my 'bad behaviour' and ADHD struggles for not having enough willpower.

I am half Samoan and half NZ European and my Samoan Dad has taken a while to fully understand what giftedness and neurodiversity means. This was not explained or considered back in the islands, and he used to think I was dramatic and overreacting.

Digital Links to Handouts:

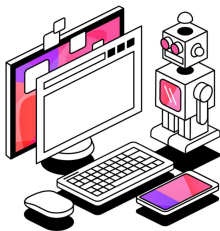
Blogs / Supporting Students

Practical strategies to support neurodivergent students

Ellie, a late diagnosis neurodiverse student, draws from her personal experiences to offer guidance and practical strategies for disability professionals, to help create a more inclusive campus and classroom.

🕒 2 min read 📅 Published: 13 May 2025

👤 Phoebe Hoar



Understanding neurodiversity beyond the label

Ellie's journey includes a late diagnosis of autism at age 16, which, in hindsight, illuminated many of her earlier struggles in school. In addition to autism, Ellie also identifies as having ADHD, dyslexia, OCD, and several comprehension disorders.

Ellie's experience underscores a crucial point: neurodiversity is not a monolithic concept. "It can show up very differently in different people," she emphasizes. While common profiles include autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Tourette's Syndrome, each student presents a unique set of strengths and challenges.

Crucially, Ellie challenges the misconception that neurodiversity is not a disability. "One thing that has always bothered me is when people say that it isn't a disability. For some people, it can feel debilitating," she asserts, advocating for the recognition of the very real challenges neurodivergent students face. This understanding forms the bedrock of effective support.

How to empower neurodivergent students for success

Ultimately, the goal is to empower neurodivergent students to succeed. Ellie's insights point to three key strategies:

1. **Teaching learning strategies:** Ellie notes that she "never got taught how to learn," highlighting a critical gap in many educational settings. Disability professionals can advocate for incorporating explicit instruction in learning strategies into support plans.
2. **Centre work around special interests:** Connecting academic work to a student's passions can significantly increase engagement and motivation.
3. **Fostering open communication:** Creating a safe and supportive environment where students feel comfortable discussing their needs is paramount.

By embracing these strategies and truly listening to the voices of neurodivergent students like Ellie, higher education disability professionals can play a vital role in creating inclusive and equitable learning environments where every student has the opportunity to thrive.

Tips for creating an inclusive learning environment

Ellie offers a range of practical strategies to create a more inclusive learning environment, focusing on sensory considerations, communication, and flexibility:

- **Sensory sensitivity:** Sensory issues can be a major barrier for neurodivergent students. Ellie vividly describes the impact of echoey classrooms, fire drills, and even the buzzing of lights. Disability professionals can advocate for:
 - **Minimizing sensory overload:** This might involve quieter study spaces, alternative lighting (e.g., lamps, dimmable lights), and awareness of potential triggers in classrooms and exam settings.
 - **Allowing sensory aids:** Fidget toys and ear defenders can be invaluable tools for neurodivergent students to manage sensory input and focus.
- **Clear communication:** Vague instructions can be a significant obstacle for neurodivergent learners. Ellie stresses the need for "very, very clear and explicit instructions" and the benefit of providing information in multiple formats (verbal and written).
- **Flexibility and understanding:** Neurodivergent students may experience emotional dysregulation and fluctuations in their ability to engage. Ellie advocates for flexibility with deadlines and classroom expectations. She also highlights the importance of understanding [Pathological Demand Avoidance \(PDA\)](#) and [Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria \(RSD\)](#), which can significantly impact how students respond to requests and feedback.



Digital Links to Handouts:

What is Neurodiversity? A Shift in Perspective

Coined by sociologist Judy Singer in 1998, the term "neurodiversity" challenges the traditional medical model that views conditions like Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, and Dyscalculia as disorders to be cured. Instead, it frames them as natural variations in the human brain. A neurodivergent individual is someone whose brain processes, learns, and/or behaves differently from what is considered "neurotypical."

Embracing this perspective in the classroom means moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach. It requires recognizing that a student who struggles to sit still may not be defiant but may need movement to focus. A student who has difficulty with eye contact might not be disengaged but may be processing information more effectively that way. This paradigm shift is the first and most crucial step toward building a truly inclusive learning space.

The Foundation: Creating a Neuro-Inclusive Classroom Environment

Before implementing specific strategies, it's essential to cultivate an environment that is physically, socially, and emotionally supportive for all learners. This foundation makes all other interventions more effective.

1. Embrace Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning is an educational framework based on providing flexibility in the ways students access material, engage with it, and show what they know. By designing lessons for the widest possible range of learners from the start, you reduce the need for individual accommodations later. Key principles include:

- **Multiple Means of Representation:** Present information in various formats (text, audio, video, hands-on activities).
- **Multiple Means of Action and Expression:** Allow students to demonstrate their learning in different ways (writing, an oral presentation, a video, a project).
- **Multiple Means of Engagement:** Offer choices, make learning relevant to students' interests, and create a safe, collaborative environment.



Digital Links to Handouts:

2. Foster a Culture of Acceptance and Understanding

Explicitly teach and model empathy and respect for differences. Discuss neurodiversity in age-appropriate ways, framing it as a strength. Celebrate the unique talents of all students. When peers understand why a classmate might use fidget tools or need a quiet space, it reduces stigma and prevents bullying. A classroom culture where it's safe to be different is fundamental for the well-being of neurodivergent students.

3. Offer Sensory-Friendly Options

Many neurodivergent students experience sensory sensitivities, meaning they can be over- or under-stimulated by their environment. Small adjustments can make a significant difference:

- **Flexible Seating:** Offer options like wobble stools, standing desks, or floor cushions.
- **Lighting Control:** Use lamps instead of harsh fluorescent overheads or provide covers for lights.
- **Noise Management:** Provide noise-canceling headphones for independent work.
- **Quiet Space:** Designate a calming corner with comfortable seating and sensory tools where students can go to self-regulate.

Actionable Teaching Strategies for Daily Practice

With a supportive environment in place, you can integrate specific teaching strategies that benefit neurodivergent students and often, the entire class.

4. Use Clear, Explicit, and Multi-Modal Instructions

Avoid ambiguity. Break down multi-step tasks into smaller, manageable chunks. Present instructions both verbally and visually (written on the board, on a handout, or with pictures). Check for understanding by asking a student to repeat the instructions in their own words rather than just asking, "Does everyone understand?"

5. Implement Visual Schedules and Timers

Predictability reduces anxiety. A visual schedule of the day's activities helps students know what to expect and eases transitions. Use visual timers (like a Time Timer) to make the abstract concept of time more concrete, helping students manage their work periods and prepare for the next activity.

6. Provide Scaffolds and Graphic Organizers

Executive functioning skills—like organization, planning, and starting tasks—can be challenging for many neurodivergent students. Don't assume students know how to organize a paragraph or plan a project. Provide structured support through:

- **Sentence starters** for writing assignments.
- **Graphic organizers** for brainstorming and structuring ideas.
- **Checklists** to help students track their progress on multi-step assignments.

7. Allow for Movement and Brain Breaks

For many students, especially those with ADHD, movement is essential for learning and regulation. Instead of punishing fidgeting, channel it productively. Integrate short, structured movement breaks into lessons. Allow the use of discreet fidget tools (stress balls, putty, bands on chair legs) to help improve focus.

Tailoring Support for Specific Needs

While universal strategies are powerful, some students benefit from more tailored support.

8. Supporting Students with ADHD

Beyond movement breaks, students with ADHD often thrive with structure and novelty. Seat them away from high-traffic areas to minimize distractions. Use positive reinforcement to acknowledge effort and progress. Keep lessons engaging with a brisk pace and varied activities.

9. Supporting Autistic Students

Routine and predictability are paramount. Give advance warning for any changes to the schedule. Use social stories or direct instruction to teach social cues that may not be intuitive. Leverage their deep interests to engage them in academic content. Be mindful of sensory needs and respect their communication preferences, whether verbal or non-verbal.

10. Supporting Students with Dyslexia

Provide learning materials in multiple formats. Offer audiobooks and text-to-speech software to reduce the cognitive load of decoding, allowing students to focus on comprehension. Use dyslexia-friendly fonts (like OpenDyslexic) and provide ample white space on worksheets. Emphasize phonics-based instruction and praise their creativity and problem-solving skills, which are often strengths.



Conclusion: A Journey of Empathy and Growth

Supporting neurodivergent students is not about having a magic checklist of strategies. It's an ongoing process of observation, empathy, and adaptation. It begins with the belief that every student can succeed when given the right tools and environment. By implementing universal design principles, creating a sensory-friendly space, and using flexible, multi-modal teaching methods, you build a classroom where neurological differences are not just accommodated but celebrated.

Start small. Choose one or two strategies from this guide to implement this week. The journey toward a more inclusive classroom benefits every student, fostering a community of learners who are more compassionate, resilient, and prepared for a diverse world.