

Including & Engaging Neurodiverse Kids

Children with neurodiversity need a foundation of faith that teaches them they are made in the image of God and have value, worth, and purpose. Their identity can be in Christ even over their identity as a neurodiverse person.

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioral traits that are regarded as part of normal variation in the human population.

19%

of U.S. respondents in a 2024 study said they were neurodivergent, with Gen Z and Gen Alpha identifying at higher rates.

Diagnoses include

Autism (3 levels) ADHD

Dyslexia, dyscalculia & other learning disabilities Tourette's

Trauma and PTSD Traumatic brain injury

OCD & other mental health conditions

Sensory & auditory processing disorders

Executive function deficits

Oppositional defiant disorder & pathological demand avoidance

Common characteristics

- Self-regulation and impulse control challenges
- Executive function deficits (following multiple directions)
- Immature social skills
- Verbal and nonverbal working memory deficits (remembering their Bible when they leave)
- Specific areas of interest
- Rigid behaviors and inflexibility
- May lack empathy or be overwhelmed by the emotions of others

What we know about families affected

- 1 Parents don't always consider their kids to have disabilities or special needs.
- 2 There is sometimes a genetic component.
- 3 They consistently hear more bad news than good news.
- 4 They feel discouraged and isolated.
- 5 They are less likely to attend church than a typical family and more likely to have had negative past experiences.

The good news is...

- 1 These kids can often be successful with a few changes.
- 2 Serving them well can make huge, positive changes for the entire family.
- 3 The mission field of families is ripe and ready for the hope of the gospel.

How should Christians view the neurodiversity movement?

Acknowledge

God as our creator and designer

Psalms 139:14

Accept

that disabilities and differences occur

Exodus 4:11

Affirm

that God cares for each person

Ephesians 2:10

Advocate

for accessibility and inclusion

Matthew 21:14

Avoid

neurodiversity as a paradigm or social justice movement

1 Peter 2:9

Communicating with parents

Add a question like this to your intake form:

"Our church cares for the success and safety of each participant in our children's ministry. Does your child have any allergies, medical conditions, learning differences, special needs, behavioral diagnosis, or disabilities we should be aware of?"

If yes, plan a follow-up conversation or detailed intake form (sample at lifeway.com/specialneeds). **Remember, this is a vulnerable conversation for them.**

CHOOSING THE RIGHT FIT

Ask: **Where can this child best hear, understand, and respond to the gospel?**

8 opportunities for support

1 Regulating the nervous system

Hyperarousal
ready for action

Window of tolerance
calm and stable

Hypoarousal
overwhelmed

Outside the window of tolerance, a child may not be choosing negative behavior but responding to protect themselves from something overwhelming.

2 Offering sensory support

93–96% of autistic individuals have sensory differences (vs. 13–16% of neurotypical kids), and kids may be seekers, avoiders, or both. Post a predictable structure, allow breaks, limit distractions, and offer tools like headphones and fidgets.

3 Understanding interoception

Interoception senses inner signals like pain, temperature, hunger, and the urge to use the bathroom. Neurodivergent kids often notice these only when urgent, so keep a predictable schedule and clearly explain restroom, drink, and snack steps.

4 Communicating clearly

Kids may be unaware of social cues, so avoid sarcasm, vague instructions, and unspoken expectations. Be ready for special interests, and don't force group work: allow small group, paired, or individual engagement.

5 Supporting executive function

Give one direction at a time in simple, concrete language. Break tasks into smaller steps and model what you want. Use visual organizers, note sheets, and a visual timer ("You have 3 minutes left").

6 Modifying expectations

For participation, think about the minimum requirement for compliance. Are we asking kids to change more than we're willing to adapt? If so, adjust expectations and remember the goal: the gospel.

7 Building learning readiness

Motivation grows when sensory needs are met, kids feel safe, the pace is steady, and executive function is supported. Kids may be motivated by **projects, people, praise and prizes**, or **power**, so connect the lesson to their interests.

8 Encouraging positive behavior choices

A Antecedent
What happened before?

B Behavior
What was the behavior?

C Consequence
What happened after?

You can change the antecedent or the consequence. The student changes the behavior.