

Suggestions for More Inclusion in Youth Groups

Welcoming Neurodivergent Young People

This checklist is designed to help youth groups create an environment where neurodivergent young people can participate with dignity and experience a genuine sense of belonging.

It is not intended to assume that all neurodivergent people have the same needs. Ask young people themselves what would help them, listen to what they tell you, and make reasonable adjustments wherever possible.

1. Ask, Listen and Plan for Individual Needs

- Ask neurodivergent young people what would help them feel comfortable and included. Ask rather than assume what they might need: "Is there anything we could do to make this session easier for you?"
- Do not assume that a particular diagnosis means a person has a specific set of needs.
- Provide a simple and discreet way for young people or their families to communicate their needs in advance.
- Where possible, identify a designated adult among the leaders who can be contacted about inclusion or support needs. Ideally, this person should also be responsible for liaising with parents when necessary, particularly when young people are under 18.
- Involve neurodivergent young people in decisions about activities, events and how the group operates. Do not make decisions on their behalf without listening to them.
- Regularly check whether the arrangements in place are actually helping.

2. Structure and Predictability

- Provide a written or visual outline of what will happen during each session. Calendars and agendas can be particularly helpful. Clearly communicate start and finish times and, if possible, stick to them. A digital clock can help young people keep track of time.
- Give advance notice of changes to the usual routine. Share information beforehand about unusual activities, outings or changes of venue.
- Use clear signals when moving from one activity to another. For example: "We have finished the ice breaker; now we are moving on to the discussion."

- Avoid sarcasm and ambiguous instructions. Check whether the person has understood without putting them in an uncomfortable position in front of the group.
- Do not assume that a delayed response, silence or lack of eye contact indicates disinterest or disrespect.

3. Welcoming and Orientation

Young people who are unfamiliar with the group may need more time and clearer explanations to understand things that others take for granted.

- Ideally, have someone available to welcome newcomers and explain what will happen during that day's activities.
- Consider sharing photographs or information about the venue before a young person's first visit so they can become familiar with the environment in advance. A simple introductory leaflet or digital guide may also be useful. Where appropriate, include photographs of the key leaders.
- Make information about the group, venue, leaders and what to expect available online where appropriate.
- Show young people where important facilities are located, including toilets, activity rooms, exits and quieter spaces they can use if needed.
- Introduce new young people to the leaders and other group members.
- Explain basic expectations rather than assuming that everyone already knows them.

4. Creating a More Welcoming Environment

Neurodivergent young people may experience sounds, lights, smells, touch and visual information much more intensely.

- Where needed, allow the use of headphones to reduce noise and support self-regulation, without creating unnecessary concern or drawing unwanted attention to their use.
- Allow the use of fidget tools and other sensory aids where needed.
- Provide a quiet space where young people can regulate themselves.
- Reduce background noise wherever possible.
- Avoid flickering lights and lights that change rapidly or unnecessarily. Be aware that certain types of lighting, including some fluorescent lights, may be uncomfortable for some people.
- Give advance warning before sudden loud noises, loud music, flashing lights or other significant sensory changes.

- Give advance notice of activities that may involve unfamiliar or multiple smells. For example, if the youth group is visiting a restaurant where there may be loud music, strong smells or unusual sensory experiences, inform young people beforehand. This allows them to prepare, choose where to sit or decide whether they need an alternative.

5. Flexibility in Participation

Technology can sometimes be a support tool rather than a distraction.

- Where appropriate, allow mobile phones to be used responsibly for self-regulation, such as listening to calming music, using timers or accessing sensory apps.
- Establish clear boundaries about when mobile phones may and may not be used. Distinguish between distracting phone use and purposeful use for self-regulation, and communicate this distinction to the rest of the group.
- Where possible, allow neurodivergent young people to contribute digitally. Online forms, live polling systems and activities using tools such as Mentimeter and Kahoot! can be helpful.
- Allow young people to say “pass” during sharing activities or group discussions.
- Where possible, provide discussion questions or topics in advance.
- Where needed, give neurodivergent young people the opportunity to observe an activity before joining in. Allow them to leave an activity quietly and rejoin later.
- Offer alternative roles, such as keeping score, helping, taking photographs, observing or keeping time.
- Do not assume that someone who is quiet or observing is uninterested. Inclusion does not mean that everyone must participate in exactly the same way.

6. Social Inclusion and Peer Relationships

Some young people may want to be part of the group but may not immediately know how to join a conversation or activity.

- Notice young people who are sitting or standing at the edge of the group. Invite them to join in without putting pressure on them.
- Accept “no” or silence without interpreting it as rudeness or disrespect. Avoid forcing anyone to socialise.
- Use open body language and leave physical space for others to join.

- Help the group understand that eye contact, facial expressions and body language can vary from person to person.
- Address exclusion and bullying rather than expecting neurodivergent young people to deal with these issues or adapt on their own.

7. Behaviour, Boundaries and Discipline

Inclusion does not mean that boundaries are unnecessary. Young people need clear, fair and consistent expectations. The aim is to distinguish between behaviour that reflects differences in communication or self-regulation and behaviour that genuinely causes harm.

Make expectations clear

- When boundaries around behaviour are unclear or have been crossed, explain expectations clearly in relation to:
 - Personal space
 - Physical contact
 - Language
 - Respect
 - Privacy
 - Sexual topics and boundaries
 - Online behaviour
 - Appropriate behaviour during activities
- Do not rely solely on unwritten social rules. Explain expectations in clear, concrete language.
- Where appropriate, explain why important boundaries exist. Boundaries benefit everyone, not just neurotypical people. When boundaries are unclear, neurodivergent people may be vulnerable to various forms of abuse, both within and outside the group.

When behaviour becomes challenging

- First ask, "What is happening?" rather than immediately assuming bad intentions. Consider whether the young person may have misunderstood an expectation.
- Consider whether sensory overload, anxiety, communication difficulties or an unmet need may be contributing to the behaviour.
- If there is a misunderstanding, explain and clarify. If the young person needs support or help with self-regulation, provide support and allow time and space to recover. If harmful behaviour continues despite clear guidance and

support, establish appropriate boundaries and follow the usual disciplinary procedures. Remember that the same behaviour may have more serious consequences if it occurs outside the youth group.

- Do not allow neurodivergence to be used as an excuse for behaviour that harms others.
- At the same time, do not punish differences in communication or self-regulation simply because they appear unusual.
- Where possible, address behaviour calmly and privately. Avoid public humiliation, sarcasm, ridicule or comments that make the person feel ashamed.
- After an incident, make sure the young people involved understand what happened and what is expected of them in the future.

8. Buddy System

A buddy system can make it much easier for a new young person to settle into the group.

- Offer the option of having a trusted person, chosen from among the group members and not necessarily a leader, voluntarily support a neurodivergent young person.
- Make sure the buddy understands that their role is to provide support, not to control or supervise the other person.
- A buddy can help with:
 - Transitions and changes within the group
 - Understanding instructions for activities
 - Finding suitable rooms or spaces
 - Joining in with activities

9. Physical Environment and Orientation

- Provide clear signs for rooms, toilets and activity areas. Keep the physical layout predictable. If the layout changes, explain what has changed. Giving each room a name may help some young people.
- Avoid unnecessary overcrowding.
- Ensure that exits are accessible and that young people do not feel trapped.
- Consider where people who need less noise, movement or visual stimulation can sit.
- Take sensory needs into account when arranging furniture, lighting, music, room temperature and decorations.

11. Games and Activities

Games are often an area where inclusion can either be strengthened or unintentionally undermined.

Choose structured and predictable games

Choose games with clear rules, visible outcomes and as little social ambiguity as possible.

Examples include Uno, Dobble / Spot It!, Connect 4, Jenga and Sushi Go!

Be mindful of:

- Games based on deception or bluffing, such as Mafia, Cheat or Werewolf.
- Games that rely heavily on interpreting facial expressions or hidden intentions.
- Elimination games in which players are left out for long periods.

These games do not necessarily need to be banned. Explain the rules clearly, adapt the game and provide alternatives wherever possible.

18. Safety

For some young people, an individual support plan may be helpful so that leaders know how best to provide support, particularly during periods of stress or anxiety.

- Where appropriate, speak to parents or guardians in advance to understand the young person's key needs and what helps them during episodes of frustration or anxiety.
 - Discuss any known triggers, early signs of difficulty and strategies that usually help.
 - Establish a clear plan identifying whom to contact if a serious concern arises.
 - Keep any necessary personal or medical information confidential and accessible only to those who need to know.
 - Involve the young person in discussions about their needs where appropriate, while respecting their privacy and dignity.
 - If there is an immediate risk to the young person or others, follow the usual emergency procedures. Ideally, an emergency plan should be agreed with the responsible adult from the beginning of the young person's involvement in the group.
 - Following any significant incident, inform the young person and their parent or guardian where appropriate, and review whether any changes to the arrangements are needed.
-

A Simple Checklist for Leaders

Before a session or activity, ask yourself:

1. Does the neurodivergent young person know what will happen today?
2. Do they understand what behaviour is expected of them?
3. Will they have enough information and time to process it?
4. Will they be able to manage the sensory environment?
5. Is there a safe way for them to leave the activity if needed?
6. Can they participate in a way that is meaningful to them?
7. Have I asked what might help them?
8. If something goes wrong, how will my response protect their dignity?

**The aim is not to force neurodivergent young people to adapt to the youth group.
The aim is to make the youth group a place where young people with different
needs can feel that they belong.**