

Transform Your Classroom

Tips for Creating a Neuro-Affirming
Learning Environment



Created by educators,
for educators.

AutismONTARIO

What is a neuro-affirming classroom?

A neuro-affirming classroom is one in which every student is a valued member of the community. No student is seen as “broken” or needing to be fixed. By thoughtfully designing your space, instruction, assessment, and routines, you can create an environment that supports and benefits all learners.

In today's classrooms, variability is the rule, not the exception. Neurodiversity means that students are diverse in their minds the same as they are diverse in gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Neuro-affirming classrooms support and appreciate that every student's brain functions and learns differently. Our job as educators is to recognize, value, and embrace what makes each of our students who they are and do our absolute best to make school a place where every student feels seen, valued, and heard. As you work towards creating a neuro-affirming classroom, consider these key elements to start building a more inclusive and understanding learning environment.

Know your learners: Relationship before expectation

When educators know their learners, they can easily talk about their strengths, barriers, and special interests. When you know your learner, you will be aware of their stressors and what helps them regulate, enabling you to create a learning space that is safe, supportive, and responsive.



Collect data from observations, conversations with families, and team members.



Set purposeful goals for the student, using the collected information.



Invest time building relationships with students.

- What is amazing about them?
- What motivates them?
- What brings them joy and makes them feel safe?



Build a classroom culture where it is okay for students to need different supports. Make these supports readily available.



Classroom environment: Set up for success

Neuro-affirming classrooms offer safe, accessible ways for students to seek out sensory input (movement breaks, music, tactile activities) or reduce their sensory input (e.g., noise-cancelling headphones, soft lighting, quiet, less stimulating areas). Making sure that the sensory needs of our students are safely met means students can regulate and focus on learning.

- **Create** zones for students who need a quiet area, options for movement, and flexible seating.
- **Design** your space to be visually calming and well-organized, making it easy to navigate and focus.
- **Identify** what equipment will be important in meeting the diverse needs in your classroom.

Instructional Strategies: One Size Does Not Fit All

Each of our students learns in their own unique way, at their own pace, and in their own time. Creating a neuro-affirming classroom means believing that all students can learn if they are provided with the right strategies and supports. If our students are struggling, we need to change our practices — it is not the students who need to change!

Student supports:

Students should not have to earn or prove they deserve the supports that help them learn.

- 1 **Take note** of the barriers to student success. There are many simple adjustments you can make to reduce barriers in your classroom:

- Offer technology
- Let the student stand while they work
- Allow students to move or fidget

- 2 **Ensure** all materials are accessible. For example, you can:

- Record instructions so students can listen again
- Provide visuals to build comprehension
- Offer students various ways to engage with learning, such as building, drawing, or conversing

- 3 **Be purposeful** in how your lessons are delivered.

- Provide clear and concise instructions
- Chunk information
- Incorporate special interests



Assessment strategies: Choice empowers!

The purpose of assessment is to improve student learning. It is about finding out what students know or can do and using this information to plan your next instructional steps. When assessing students' knowledge and skills, teachers must keep the purpose in mind. What do you want to know about the student's skills or knowledge?

Showcasing skills:

Providing multiple ways for students to showcase their skills fosters success and removes barriers.



Provide choice in how students demonstrate their skills and knowledge:

- Allow options for students to choose from.
- Ask students to suggest ways that might work for them.



Assess often and informally. This will help you understand:

- If the student is on the right track
- What supports they might need
- What you can do to help them



Consider when you are assessing:

- Is right after recess the best time?
- When is the student most focused and regulated?

Communication strategies: All communication is valued

Communication is a two-way street. In a neuro-affirming classroom, the teacher is conscious of their communication to students; the length of their instructions, the tone of their voice, their gestures, and their body language.

They are also aware of honouring the multiple means of communication in the class and work to involve students in all classroom activities. Every student's voice, no matter how it is shared, is important!

Valuing Voices:

Adapt your communication to embrace diverse methods and give every student time to be heard.

Communication strategies: All communication is valued



Give time for students to:

- Think and to process
- Find their words
- Use their communication tools



Involve the class in modelling and learning communication strategies with alternative communication methods (high and low tech).



Incorporate visuals to increase students' understanding. Anything you find yourself saying more than once could be an inspiration for a visual.



Learn to effectively use alternative or augmentative communication methods by seeking out resources and support, as this is essential for valuing each student's voice.

Routines: Create a classroom culture of safety and consistency

Classroom routines let students know what to expect, what is coming next, and create a sense of safety and predictability. All students thrive when routines are consistent; they know what success looks like and how to achieve it. Achieving consistent classroom routines takes time, practice, and a lot of reinforcement.



Implement a visual schedule by tracking tasks and involving students. Consider personal schedules for those who need them.

Build flexibility into your plans to accommodate students' varying needs.

Teach that changes to the schedule are acceptable.

Inform students of changes as early as possible.

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References:

1. Polain, M. (2024, August 1). Understanding neurodiversity. Therapy Focus. <https://therapyfocus.org.au/on-the-blog/understanding-neurodiversity/>
2. Miller, C. (2024, March 8). What is neurodiversity?. Child Mind Institute.