

# Neurodiversity-Affirming Individual Education Plan Goals for Neurodivergent Students

## ***Creating a Safe and Welcoming Space***

Teachers and staff will collaborate with parents and students to create a safe and welcoming school environment. This includes (but is not limited to):

- Respecting and validating sensory processing differences, engaging with the student and family to gain specific information about individual needs, and offering accommodations to minimize sensory input in various environments such as:

- Headphones available during lessons and breaks
- Access to a quiet space during lessons and breaks
- Turning off non-essential lighting
- Removing scented products from the classroom (e.g., reed diffusers, strong-scented cleansers, scented tissues, hand sanitizers)
- Flexible seating to minimize glare, avoid direct air-conditioning, or seat away from noisy areas
- Providing options to opt-out of loud events and having a quiet alternative available - Verbal reinforcement when the student accesses sensory regulation tools, acknowledging their self-awareness

## **Respecting Neurodivergent Learning Styles**

- Understanding that movement aids focus and learning (accommodations include: wobble cushions, chair elastics, fidget tools, fit ball seats, allowing movement around the classroom, standing while learning, movement breaks, jumping or spinning while waiting, and moving during stories or videos).

Verbal reinforcement will be given when the student uses focus tools effectively.

- Recognising that neurodivergent students' abilities fluctuate due to various factors (environment, sensory input, emotional state, regulation, mental energy, health, stress levels, comfort, motivation, instructions).

Accommodations will be provided to ensure continued access to the curriculum and a positive school experience.

### **Modifying Expectations and Providing Support**

- Adjusting expectations when the student struggles, reducing workload, modifying tasks, providing additional scaffolding, incorporating interests into assignments, and presenting modified expectations positively.
- Ensuring the student experiences success and positivity in learning.
- Avoiding punishment or shaming for not meeting original expectations.

### **Communication and Advocacy**

- Encouraging students to communicate their needs, wants, opinions, and ideas. Teachers/staff will respond kindly and empathetically, reinforcing the student's self advocacy efforts.
- Validating and respecting all self-advocacy statements/choices communicated by the student, working collaboratively to address needs, and reinforcing advocacy efforts.
- Respecting the student's discomfort with eye contact, without requesting it, and allowing alternative focus methods.

### **Recognising Neurodivergent Communication Styles**

- Acknowledging the unique communication styles of neurodivergent students (e.g., speaking about deep interests, info-dumping, direct communication, valuing factual information, sharing personal stories for empathy, starting conversations without greetings, unique voice qualities). These differences will be respected and not punished or shamed.
- Providing challenging/extension work first for twice-exceptional students (gifted and neurodivergent), as complexity can be engaging and rewarding.

## **Considering Demand Avoidance and Anxiety**

- Considering the student's demand avoidance profile in all interactions to build trust.
- Reducing anxiety and stress by providing visual signals for help, checking in after tasks begin, not calling on the student unless they indicate willingness, and allowing opt-outs from public speaking.

## **Supporting Executive Function Differences**

- Providing reminders, choices, visuals, explanations, and alternatives when the student has difficulty remembering/following class rules.
- Allowing contact with parents/adults for additional support, responding with empathy, and reinforcing self-advocacy efforts.
- Managing distress by removing demands, making spaces safe, offering calm reassurance, using visual supports, inviting the student to share feelings, and being a calm companion.

## **Exemptions and Task Completion**

- Exempting the student from homework to allow regulation and energy replenishment for the next school day.
- Providing additional support and modified expectations for task completion, without penalizing the student during breaks.
- Ensuring breaks for regulation and focus, and modifying expectations to ensure success and positive school relationships.

## **Emotional Regulation and Support**

- Prioritizing the student's comfort and wellbeing when regulating emotions, reducing demands, limiting instructions, offering quiet time, collaborating on strategies, and supporting without judgment.
- Providing additional support for remembering/following instructions (e.g., simplified instructions, visuals, written tasks, 'chunks' of tasks, flexible modalities).

## **Impulse Control and Problem Solving**

- Offering calm reminders, choices, visuals, and alternatives for impulse control, without punishment or shame.
- Modelling problem-solving steps and collaborating with the student on solutions.

## **Managing Routine Changes**

- Providing notice, details, explanations, empathy, and strategies for easing transitions during routine changes.

## **Uniform Accommodations**

- Allowing uniform modifications to accommodate sensory processing differences, with clear communication to all staff.

## **Respecting Communication Differences**

- Ignoring perceived 'rude' or loud tones, focusing on the words spoken, and not punishing the student for neurodivergent differences.

## **Basic Needs Accessibility**

- Ensuring access to bathroom breaks and water, recognizing interoception differences, and avoiding punishment or shame for these needs.

## **Total Communication System**

- Accepting and supporting the use of a total communication system (AAC, visuals, typing, gesture, vocalization, sign, speech) without expecting verbal speech.

## **No Punishment for Neurodivergent Traits**

Ensuring no punishment for traits inherent to neurodivergent identities, including:

- Avoiding eye contact
- Fidgeting/moving while learning
- Stimming (physical and verbal)
- Direct communication
- Engaging in neurodivergent play
- Expressing joy authentically
- Preferring solitary or parallel play
- Discussing special interests
- Hyper-focusing on tasks
- Asking multiple questions
- Experiencing intense emotions
- Distress in response to sensory input or routine changes
- Meltdowns and shutdowns
- Difficulty with tone/volume modulation
- Struggling with task transitions and completion
- Low interoception cues
- Executive function challenges

## **Goals for Neurodiversity-Affirming Education in Schools**

### *- Developing Understanding:*

Teachers and staff will develop an understanding of the Double Empathy Problem and the harms of masking for neurodivergent students.

### *- Professional Development:*

Teachers and staff will participate in mandatory professional development on neurodiversity-affirming education, with workshops and training led by autistic professionals or associations (such as Ausome Training).



*- Integration of Principles:*

Teachers and staff will integrate neurodiversity-affirming education principles into classrooms and school policies, ensuring an inclusive environment for all students.

*- Collaborative Problem Solving:*

Teachers will explore Dr. Ross Greene's Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) model as an alternative to behaviour charts and reward systems, fostering a more supportive approach to addressing challenges.

## **Social Communication Goals**

*-Addressing Miscommunication:*

When miscommunication occurs between the child and peers, the teacher will engage all parties in a collaborative problem-solving exercise. This includes gathering relevant information from both parties, explaining the mismatch of communication styles, highlighting where and why the miscommunication occurred, and facilitating a strategy for moving forward. The goal is not for the child to change their natural communication style to suit their peers.

*-Encouraging Special Interests:*

The teacher will provide safe opportunities for the child to chat about their special interest, such as during breaks, with staff members, with like-minded peers, or in special interest groups, societies, or clubs.

## **Mental Health and Wellbeing Goals**

*- Positive Identity Development:*

The child will develop a positive autistic/ADHD identity. All teachers and staff will use positive language that aligns with neurodiversity-affirming and inclusive education when speaking about the child. The child will not be punished or shamed publicly (e.g., through behaviour charts/systems) for struggling with executive function skills or for exhibiting autistic/ADHD traits.

*- Safety and Support:*

- The child will have access to essential sensory regulation tools and strategies at all times.
- The child will feel safe expressing their sensory and emotional needs to the teacher.
- The child will attend class if they feel safe, supported, and assured that their needs will be met.
- The child will understand that they do not have to participate in activities, tasks, or events if they find them overwhelming or distressing.
- The child will develop a positive relationship with learning through modified and flexible expectations that they can reliably meet.
- The child will understand that different people have different learning styles, and no one learning style is superior to another.
- The child will not receive the message that “good learning” requires eye contact, a still body, still hands, or silence.
- The child will understand that different people have different communication styles and will develop the ability to self-advocate when miscommunication occurs.

**Analysing Your Child’s IEP Goals**

*- Positive Autistic Identity:*

Does this goal contribute to a positive Autistic identity by supporting authentic social communication styles, interests, natural traits, authentic social connections, access to regulation tools/strategies, and validation of sensory and emotional needs, including stimming?

- If NO, this goal is unacceptable.

*- Avoiding Masking:*

Is this goal teaching masking by aiming to reduce Autistic traits/behaviours and teach Neurotypical traits/behaviours?

- If YES, this goal is unacceptable.

- *Supporting Neurodivergent Learning Styles:*

Does this goal acknowledge and support my child's neurodivergent learning style, such as allowing movement during learning, incorporating special interests, providing choice in tasks/activities, not expecting a specific quantity of work within a specific timeframe, and respecting my child's executive functioning differences without punishing/shaming them?

- If NO, this goal is unacceptable.

- *Realistic Expectations:*

Does this goal aim for consistency (perhaps in percentage form) across days/weeks/terms?

- If YES, this goal is likely unacceptable.

- *Shared Responsibility:*

Does this goal put all the responsibility on my child to fix social issues, friendship issues, or miscommunication between peers?

- If YES, this goal is unacceptable.

- *Avoiding Forced Tolerance:*

Does this goal aim to increase my child's tolerance for something they dislike, such as sensory input, emotional situations, types of play, or certain environments?

- If YES, this goal is unacceptable.

- *Benefit Evaluation:*

Is this goal for the benefit of my child or someone else?

- If for SOMEONE ELSE, this goal is likely unacceptable.



## Specific Responses for Unacceptable IEP Goals

### - *Masking Issues:*

"This goal teaches my child to mask, implying it is not okay to have an Autistic brain or act/communicate in an Autistic way. Masking leads to exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and burnout. The mental health statistics for Autistic adults who mask are horrifying. This goal is unacceptable, and we won't include it in our IEP."

### - *Sensory Processing Differences:*

"This goal dismisses my child's significant sensory processing differences. Subjecting them to [specific sensory input] repeatedly does not increase their tolerance but causes dysregulation and trauma. We wouldn't expect anyone to tolerate extreme discomfort/distress/pain with the goal of 'getting used to it.' This goal is unacceptable and needs to be removed from our IEP."

### - *Executive Function Difficulties:*

"This goal dismisses my child's executive function difficulties, punishing them for traits that are part of their disability and beyond their control. It is unreasonable to punish my child for struggles with executive function (such as impulse control, flexible thinking, problem solving, memory, focusing, analysing, predicting)."

### - *Dynamic Nature of Autism:*

"This goal ignores that Autism is dynamic, with my child's capacity to meet expectations fluctuating due to factors like environment, sensory input, emotional state, and regulation. Expecting consistent performance every day is unreasonable. It is unacceptable to punish my child for variable skills/capacity. Breaks are essential for my child to regulate and access the curriculum like their peers."

### - *Punishing for Being Disabled:*

"This goal disregards my child's executive function difficulties. My child isn't choosing to (call out/forget instructions/ignore classroom rules/be distracted). They are doing their best with a body and brain that can get very overwhelmed and dysregulated. Punishing them for this is punishing them for being disabled."

- *Compliance Over Wellbeing:*

"This goal prioritizes compliance over my child's mental health and wellbeing. My child should not be punished (behaviour charts/systems) for executive function struggles— this is discrimination. It causes significant stress, anxiety, and damages their relationship with school and learning. Accommodations, modified expectations, and empathy are necessary for my child to feel safe and supported at school."

- *Blaming Neurodivergent Differences:*

"This goal blames my child for having a learning style/social communication style different from Neurotypicals."

- *Forcing Neuronormative Expectations:*

"This goal forces neurotypical expectations of play/socializing onto my child. My child's way is not worse or problematic. Staff should teach all kids that being different and having different abilities is not less valid. This goal will not be included in my child's IEP."

- *Movement During Learning:*

"This goal dismisses my child's need to move during learning. ADHD students often need movement to focus. Insisting on stillness removes a key tool for accessing the curriculum. Tools like wriggling, fidgeting, flexible seating, breaks, and doodling are essential accommodations."

- *Eye Contact and Social Communication:*

"This goal dismisses my child's social communication preferences and discomfort with forced eye contact. Forced eye contact reduces their capacity to listen. This goal must be removed from our IEP, respecting my child's neurodivergent differences."

*- Access to Regulation Tools:*

"This goal dismisses my child's sensory processing needs and neurodivergent learning style. My child shouldn't have to 'earn' the right to use regulation tools or take breaks. These tools are essential accommodations and should be available at all times."

*- Trauma and Emotional Processing:*

"This goal dismisses the trauma my child has experienced in formal education. Autistic/ADHD students have significant sensory and emotional processing differences, experiencing emotions and anxiety intensely. Punishing my child for stress responses is counterproductive and harmful. They need a safe and supportive school environment."

*- Emotional Regulation Needs:*

"This goal dismisses my child's significant emotional processing differences. Emotional responses are reactive and not a choice. When my child becomes emotional at school, they need reduced demands, sensory input, regulation strategies, comfort items, breaks, and empathy."

*- Disguising Needs:*

"This goal asks my child to disguise their sensory and emotional needs for others' benefit. My child has the right to have their needs met, and to feel safe, comfortable, and included at school."

*- Authentic Communication:*

"This goal asks my child to change their natural neurodivergent social communication style for others' benefit. My child has the right to communicate authentically and develop real friendships with like-minded peers. Efforts should focus on increasing peer understanding and acceptance."