



*Insights* is published by ESS as a service for educational professionals. Each issue highlights an important mental health topic and provides practical applications of the findings for the classroom and the school environment.

## Helping Neurodiverse Students Manage Stress

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the lives of students across the United States and around the world. While all students and their families were affected by numerous school disruptions, some were disproportionately affected, including those who are considered "neurodiverse".

Neurodiversity (ND) refers to non-pathological variations in the human brain regarding social functioning, learning, attention, mood, and other mental capacities. Students with ADHD, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and those who have Tourette's or other tic disorders are just a few who are considered neurodiverse.

Neurologically diverse students tend to struggle in many different areas of their lives. Many have difficulties with communication, social interactions, and restricted interests. They often have a high need for order and stability, engage in repetitive behaviors, exhibit sensitivity to sensory input, and take part in sensation-seeking behaviors. The experience of being ND frequently involves bullying and social isolation and having less input than others due to social and communication deficits. ND students also suffer from increased anxiety and depression, and frequently have lower confidence and self-esteem because of the difficulties associated with navigating the world around them.

School personnel and caregivers are reporting increased mental health symptoms as well as skill regression in many neurodiverse students because of pandemic related stressors. Effective School Solutions (ESS) has developed a 5-pronged approach to supporting neurodiverse students, and we encourage school districts to consider these categories of intervention.

### Strategy 1: Enhancing Understanding and Communication

In times of increased stress, it is helpful for humans to identify and articulate feelings. Teachers can:

- Increase opportunities throughout the day for all students to practice the identification and verbal expression of feelings. Scheduled, semi-structured times can include a review of the day's schedule, practice in communicating feelings, and coaching about how students can advocate for the type of support they need that day.
- Create multiple opportunities for non-verbal self-expression. These might include writing activities, such as a daily classroom newsletter, or individual journaling or scrapbooking. Tapping students' technical interests and skills can also be useful – students can be encouraged to create movies or develop music play lists with songs that represent a full range of human emotions.
- Encourage therapeutic play and self-expression through the visual arts and movement (e.g., dance, yoga, exercise).

### Strategy 2: Developing and Supporting Coping Skills

When confronted with novel or ambiguous situations, individuals need to access and utilize healthy coping strategies. Teachers can encourage students to create their own personal list of coping skills and remind students to use them as needed. Some examples are rocking, deep breathing, listening to music or soothing sounds, engaging in short periods of robust activity (e.g., jumping, spinning), and sensory play (fidgets, etc.).

### Strategy 3: Maintaining and Creating Routines

Neurodiverse individuals cope best when daily routines are consistent. Routines provide increased comfort and can help students tolerate anxiety and worry. Teachers can:

- Create, post, and frequently review daily classroom schedules. Include students in the planning process as much as possible, e.g., "would you like to do math during morning academics or after lunch"?
- Use verbal and visual "countdown" methods to help students transition from one activity to another, e.g., "10 minutes left", "5 minutes left," etc.

### Strategy 4: Promoting Socialization

Positive social support is important for everyone, but some ND individuals may need more concrete assistance to ensure the continuity of social connections. Teachers can schedule daily opportunities for social interaction within the classroom, can connect students with similar social needs within the district, and can formalize regular contact with trusted adults at school.

### Strategy 5: Monitor Behavioral Change

ND students often express their emotions via behavior. Teachers should communicate regularly with caregivers, other school personnel, and treating providers about even the slightest shifts or changes as these may indicate an increase of anxiety or depression.

#### Resources:

[Frontiers | Effects of School Closures Resulting From COVID-19 in Autistic and Neurotypical Children | Education \(frontiersin.org\)](#)

[How Can We Help Kids with Transitions? - Child Mind Institute](#)