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Autism and Good Friendship: Fostering Healthy Neurodiverse Relationships

prepared for
WI FACETS
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Learning Objectives

- 1 Learn strategies for **fostering neurodiverse friendships** across environments.
- 2 Frame peer education as **social emotional learning** that prevents bullying and **disability harassment**.



What have you tried historically?



How can I create community in a classroom with so many different types of learners?



Respect children's intelligence



What gets lost when we share a message of **"We're all different"**?



What is “neurodiversity”?

A collection of **neurotypes**

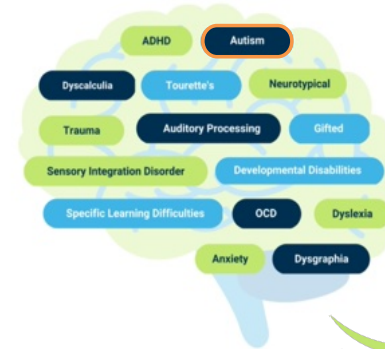
- neuromajority
- neurodivergent

Other associated terms:

- neurotypical
- neurodivergence
- **Neurodiversity** paradigm: a recognition that there is a continuum of neurological experience, and an appreciation for diversity.



Neurodiversity



Why does it matter?



*Shouldn't educators focus on **reading, writing, and arithmetic?***



Importance of peer acceptance

With a Little Help from My Friends

The Importance of Peer Relationships for Social-Emotional Development

“Children without these [age-appropriate social-emotional] skills are often rejected by peers and pushed to the margins of the social group — a position that is maintained through bi-directional negative interactions”

Issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2018)



Culture of kindness, acceptance

"social-emotional programming can boost the social-emotional skills of all children, support individual children who have more intensive social needs and improve their peer relationships, and create peer contexts that are more tolerant and supportive of individual differences."

Issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2018)

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4 types of bullying of autistic victims

verbal /
cyberbullying

physical

experimental

relational /
exclusion

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Resources: PACER

- [Students with Disabilities and Bullying: Top five things for parents, educators, and students to know](#)
 - disability harassment
 - denial of FAPE
- [Kids Against Bullying](#) (Elementary)
- [Teens Against Bullying](#)
- [National Bullying Prevention Center](#): October is National Bullying Prevention Month

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Good Friend, Inc.'s mission:

AWARENESS

- Name it to explain it!
- Use accurate, consistent terminology.

ACCEPTANCE

- awareness ≠ understanding
- acceptance ⇒ accommodations

EMPATHY

- feeling it ⇒ natural support
- Fosters genuine responses.

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Benefits of intervening with peers

- Autism is present in 3% of children. Educating the **neuromajority** level sets the social playing field.
- Speaking openly about neurodiversity gives children **vocabulary to describe themselves**. (progressive conversation)
- **Representation matters**. Showcasing neurodivergent achievers gives learners hope for their future.
- **Decrease in bullying behavior**. Connecting as “we”, not “us” and “them”.

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Five Friendship Fostering Strategies

1. **Model Acceptance**. How you interact with neurodivergent students matters. Are you presuming competence?
2. **Teach that Differences Are Great!** How boring would it be if we all looked, talked, played, and learned the same way?
3. **Get Specific**. It's not enough to say, “We're all different.” Appreciate children's intelligence by explaining *how*.
4. **Get Buy-in**. Never disclose a child's personal information without parent or guardian permission. Ideally, the child should be the one to self-disclose.
5. **Interactive Exercises Build Empathy**. “Step in another's shoes!”

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Resources: Good Friend's student services

- **General Assemblies**: 5K-8th grade students learn about autism and peer acceptance in developmentally-specific groups (prefer no more than three consecutive grade span).
- **Peer Sensitivity Workshops**: Elementary school students may learn about a specific classmate on the spectrum. Great way to build empathy!
- **Individualized Classroom Presentations**: Middle school students get a platform for self-disclosure through a tailored presentation.

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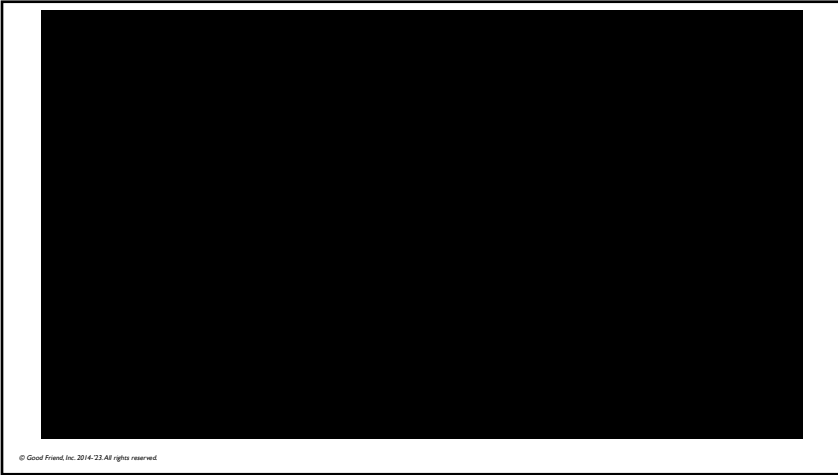


Resource: Peer education film

- K-5th grade (elementary school, ages 5-11)
- Music video by **The Figureheads** with more than **55,000 YouTube views!**



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Resource: Peer education film



- 6th-8th grade (middle school, ages 11-14)
- 20-minute run time



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Tools: Culture of kindness, acceptance *promotes neurodiversity*

Online resources to

- **increase educators' capacity** to
- improve the **social-emotional environment** of their **neurodiverse** classrooms through
- autism awareness, acceptance, and empathy-inspiring **student services**
- **developmentally specific** to K-2nd grade, 3rd-5th grade, and 6th-8th grade

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Talk back

- What's your **biggest takeaway**?
- What **surprised** you?
- What **confirmed** what you already knew?
- What do you want to **learn more** about?
- What **challenges** have you faced?
- Other questions, comments?

