SEPTEMBER 2025

Changing the system, not the student

Reframing education to better support neurodivergent students using the social model of disability

Young people **collaborated** on this project

Co-designed with Lily, Youth Advocate

QUEENSLAND Family & Child Commission

Queensland Government

Why the social model of disability matters in education

"If you're not going to participate, you may as well leave."

The words pierced my skin. My stomach dropped. It was a Tuesday. I was in English class, when the teacher announced we'd be reading our speeches to a partner. Three minutes into the activity, the teacher came over. She saw I wasn't speaking aloud and immediately got upset. "Are you going to do it?" she asked.

She knew I didn't speak in class. I couldn't, it was all over my records to allow me to communicate alternatively, yet she still expected me to participate like everyone else. She asked again, then said, "There's no point in being here if you're not going to participate. You're not helping anyone. You may as well leave."

I wasn't being disruptive. I was participating in my own way, but she insisted I leave. Walking out didn't just mean leaving that one class, it felt like I was leaving my chance to belong. No matter how hard I tried, it wasn't good enough unless I did it like everyone else.

Now, imagine if she had understood. If she had known what I was going through, would that situation have played out differently? We can't afford to leave things to chance. Education is the key. If teachers, employers, and medical professionals were trained to understand autism better, the way autistic individuals are treated would shift dramatically. But it doesn't stop there, education needs to reach the wider community too.

- *Lily, Youth Advocate*

Introduction

This insight review identifies key issues affecting the rights and needs of neurodivergent children, young people, and families. It has been developed as part of the Queensland Family and Child Commission's (the Commission) ongoing commitment to listening to and acting on the voices of children, young people, and families to create change.

This insight review is the result of a collaboration with an autistic young person who spoke at the Commission's 2025 Youth Summit to challenge stigma and discrimination by advocating for greater recognition of the social model of disability. It combines Australian research and policy literature with insights from lived expertise of young people to offer practical recommendations aimed at building a more inclusive and equitable education system. Embedding these approaches in policy and practice is a critical step towards removing structural barriers to create environments where all children and young people are valued and supported to thrive.

Neurodivergence and neurodiversity

Neurodivergence is an umbrella term used to describe individuals who process information differently to the majority (neurotypical) population.[1] Neurodivergence is different to neurodiversity, which refers to the natural variations in how people's brains work to process information.

Neurodivergence is not a diagnosis. It is an identity label associated with self-empowerment, pride, and community-building.[2] The choice to identify as neurodivergent is an individual one, rather than being imposed by an authority figure.[3]

It is important to respect and affirm an individual's choice of language to describe neurodivergence.[4] Identity-first language is widely preferred within the neurodiversity movement.[5] For example, "*autistic*" and "*autistic person*" are used to frame autism as a positive and central part of an individual's identity.

In comparison, pathology-first language defines individuals as defective, such as having a "*severe disorder*". Person-first language (ie "*person with autism*") was developed in response to pathology-first language to emphasise that individuals should not be defined by a diagnosis and is still preferred by some people.

The term neurodiversity gained popularity through the work of Judy Singer, an autistic Australian sociologist.[6] Singer's research and advocacy focuses on the autism rights movement which began online in the 1990s. The neurodiversity movement was collectively developed by neurodivergent people and has become widely acknowledged among the broader public.[7]

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[1] Australian Disability Network. (2024). *What is neurodiversity?.* ADN.
[2] Neff. M. A. (2025, May 14). *The Identity Arc Behind Our Neurodivergent Responses*. Psychology Today.
[3] People with Disability Australia. (nd). *What Do I Say? A guide to language about disability.* PWDA.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Dwyer, P. (2022). *Stigma, Incommensurability, or Both? Pathology-First, Person-First, and Identity-First Language and the Challenges of Discourse in Divided Autism Communities*. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 43(2), 111–113.
[6] Autism Awareness Australia. (2020). *In conversation with Judy Singer*. Autism Awareness Australia.
[7] VanDaalen, R. A., Vallefuoco, A. A., Fernandez, M. L., Liu, S. Y., & Lemaire, C. J. (2025). Public Perceptions of the Neurodiversity Movement: A Thematic Analysis**.** *Neurodiversity*, 3.

Characteristics of neurodivergence

People who identify as neurodivergent view and interact with the world differently from the majority of the population based on cognitive, behavioural, and sensory experiences.[8] These differences are unique to each individual and can vary from being mostly unnoticeable to others to being more obvious.

The term neurodivergence emphasises a person's strengths and environmental barriers, rather than focusing on deficit attributes.[9] For example, neurodivergent people are often creative and have communication preferences that differ from the majority population. Differences in executive functioning are also common, which can lead to variations in concentration and a high attention to detail.[10]

Neurodivergence is associated with a range of conditions, such as:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD);
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD);
- Learning differences such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia;
- Neurological disorders such as Tourette's Syndrome (TS), epilepsy, and acquired brain injury.

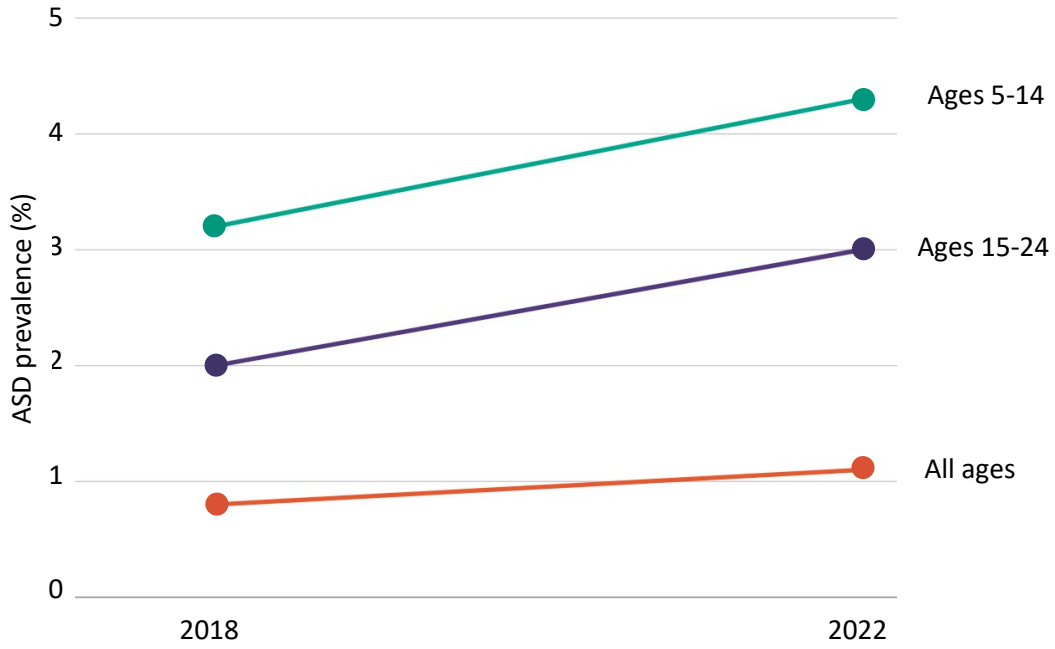
Many neurodivergent people have diagnoses for more than one of these conditions, which is known as 'co-occurrence'.[11] Others do not have any formal diagnoses, which may be due to stigma, a lack of recognition, personal choice, or difficulties accessing diagnostic assessments due to long waitlists and high costs. Self-diagnosis is increasingly common, particularly for people from marginalised backgrounds.[12]

ADHD is the most frequently diagnosed neurodevelopmental disorder in Australia, affecting approximately 8 per cent of children and 2.5 per cent of adults.[13] The number of Australians diagnosed with ADHD continues to grow as awareness of the disorder increases, particularly among women and girls.

Between 2018 and 2022, diagnosed rates of ASD increased from 0.8 per cent to 1.1 per cent across all age groups in Australia.[14] The greatest increases were among children and young people. This includes an increase from 3.2 to 4.3 per cent among 5 to 14 year-olds, and from 2.0 to 3.0 per cent among 15 to 24-year-olds.

[8] Giogi, A. (2025, April 4). *What Does It Mean to Be Neurodivergent?.* Very Well Health.
[9] Australian Disability Network. (2024). *What is neurodiversity?.* ADN.
[10] Giogi, A. (2025, April 4). *What Does It Mean to Be Neurodivergent?.* Very Well Health.
[11] Australian Disability Network. (2024). *What is neurodiversity?.* ADN.
[12] Resnick, A. (2023, November 2). *What Does It Mean to Be Neurodivergent?* Very Well Mind.
[13] The Herald Sun. (2024, August 19). *ADHD diagnoses on the rise as awareness grows.* Australian Psychological Society.
[14] Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024). Autism in Australia, 2022. ABS.

Figure 1: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosed rates in Australia (2018-22)



In 2022, rates of ASD were three times higher among males than females. However, this disparity is reducing as diagnoses among females are increasing faster than among males. Historically, females have been underdiagnosed because ASD assessment tools were only based on presentations in males.[15]

Diagnostic categories often used to categorise neurodivergent people are generally deficit-based. Labels such as 'disorder', 'impairment' and the use of sub-categories to rate functional capacity levels are examples of negative discourse associated with the medical model of disability.[16]

The social model of disability

The neurodivergent movement is closely aligned with the social model of disability, which focuses on removing societal barriers for people with disability.[17] It originated among disability activists in the United Kingdom in the 1970s in response to the medical model of disability.[18]

The medical model frames disability as a 'problem' or deficit within an individual that needs to be fixed.[19] It prioritises the views of professionals over the lived experiences and insights of people with disability.

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Woods, R. (2017). Exploring how the social model of disability can be re-invigorated for autism: in response to Jonathan Levitt. *Disability & Society*, *32*(7), 1090–1095.
[17] VanDaalen, R. A., Vallefuoco, A., Fernandez, M. L., Liu, S. Y., & Lemaire, C. J. (2025). Public Perceptions of the Neurodiversity Movement: A Thematic Analysis. *Neurodiversity*, 3.
[18] Thorneycroft, R. (2024). Screwing the Social Model of Disability. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 26(1), p. 286–299.
[19] People with Disability Australia. (nd). *What Do I Say? A guide to language about disability.* PWDA.

The medical model defines people with disability by what they cannot do and makes them responsible for adapting to society. It can lead to low expectations and a loss of control for people with disability.[20] The medical model can also be used to justify exclusionary or discriminatory practices.

Mainstream education environments reflect the medical model of disability, in that it is assumed that neurotypical ways of learning are 'correct', and students who process information differently have impairments which need to be addressed.[21] Curriculum is based on normative expectations and conformity is valued.[22]

The social model challenges the assumptions that there is something 'wrong' with people with disability. It recognises that most environments were not designed according to the needs of people with disability.[23] Therefore, the social model advocates for society to better accommodate people with disability rather than expecting people with disability to adapt to society.[24]

Accommodations for people with disability involve the removal of institutional, communication, attitudinal, and environmental barriers in society.[25] Institutional barriers include discriminatory policies or practices, such as denying reasonable adjustments. Communication barriers relate to written, verbal, or nonverbal language.

Attitudinal barriers can be the result of fear, stigma, or negative attitudes which lead to other types of barriers. For neurodivergent people, these are based on neurotypical expectations about appropriate ways to think, learn, behave, or communicate. Deficit language enables attitudinal barriers because the words used to describe neurodivergence shapes the way that people think about it.[26]

Environmental barriers consist of physical or structural issues within the built or natural environment. Neurodivergent people may experience environmental barriers due to heightened or reduced sensory sensitivities related to factors such as noise, lighting, temperature, or smell.[27]

Embedding the social model of disability into the education system requires educators to better understand and respond to the barriers neurodivergent students face.[28] Changes to teacher education and school policies are needed to support a cultural shift and transform learning environments.

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[20] Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. (nd). Social Model of Disability**.** AFDO.
[21] Alix, S. (2023). The Neurodiversity Handbook for Teaching Assistants and Learning Support Assistants A Guide for Learning Support Staff, SENCOs and Students. David Fulton Publishers.
[22] Cook, A. (2024). Conceptualisations of neurodiversity and barriers to inclusive pedagogy in schools: A perspective article. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 24, 627–636.
[23] Gu, D., & Dupre, M. E. (2021*).* *Social Model of Disability. In Encyclopedia of Gerontology and Population Aging* (pp. 4589–4589). Springer International Publishing.
[24] People with Disability Australia. (nd). *What Do I Say? A guide to language about disability.* PWDA.
[25] Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. (nd). Social Model of Disability. AFDO.
[26] Gu, D., & Dupre, M. E. (2021*).* *Social Model of Disability. In Encyclopedia of Gerontology and Population Aging* (pp. 4589–4589). Springer International Publishing.
[27] Finnigan, K. A. (2024). *Sensory Responsive Environments: A Qualitative Study on Perceived Relationships between Outdoor Built Environments and Sensory Sensitivities***.** Land, 13(5), 636.
[28] Alix, S. (2023). *The Neurodiversity Handbook for Teaching Assistants and Learning Support Assistants A Guide for Learning Support Staff, SENCOs and Students*. David Fulton Publishers.

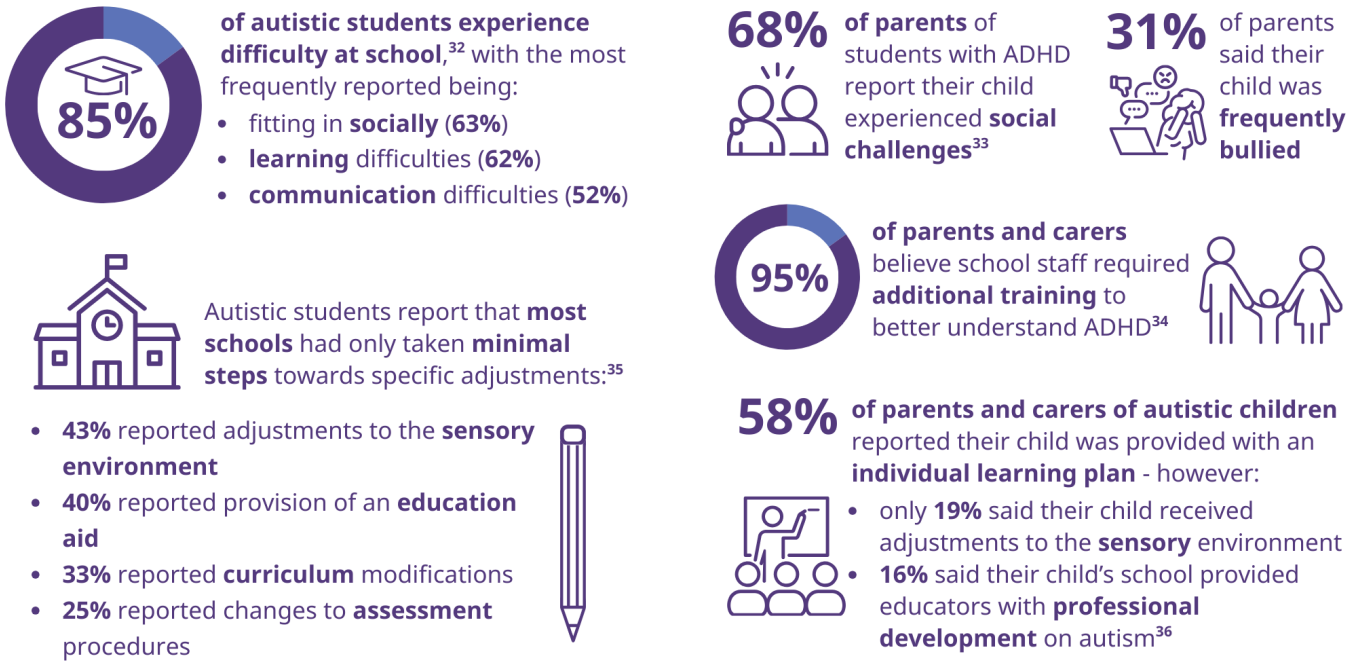
Educational barriers among neurodivergent students

Neurodivergent students in Australia face widespread challenges in mainstream education settings. For example, mainstream teaching often relies on methods which do not meet the needs of students who learn and process information differently. The social demands of school settings can be cognitively and emotionally draining. Finally, the physical environment of schools can be disorienting and unpredictable.[29]

Transitioning between educational settings, such as between primary and secondary school, and from school to adulthood, can be especially challenging for neurodivergent students. These changes may trigger a sense of loss or anxiety about having to leave familiar environments and adjust to new people.[30] In particular, transitioning from school to higher education and employment involves emotionally challenging adjustments in social roles and identity.[31]

The findings illustrated below demonstrate a consistent pattern in Australian research highlighting the educational disadvantage experienced by neurodivergent students.

Figure 2: Challenges experienced by neurodivergent students



[29] Ibid.
[30] Autism Awareness Australia. (ND). Creating a transition plan. Autism Awareness Australia.
[31] White, L. M., Simpson, K., Malone, S., & Adams, D. (2024). Autistic Adults' Reflections on What Supported Their Transitioning from Secondary School. Education Sciences, 14(6), 576.

Impact on educational outcomes

Barriers within mainstream education settings may help explain why neurodivergent students are more likely to experience diminished educational outcomes. These poorer educational outcomes can contribute to a lifetime of disadvantage, including reduced employment opportunities, social exclusion, and lower levels of health.[32]

Autistic students are more frequently absent from school due to medical and therapy appointments, anxiety and school disciplinary absences.[33] One survey identified that 44 per cent of autistic secondary and 19 per cent of primary school students in Australia have changed schools because their school was unable to support their needs.[34]

A large national study identified that students with ADHD had lower NAPLAN scores and were less engaged in school in Year 5.[35] Australian students with ADHD also face disproportionately high rates of school disciplinary absences, including informal exclusions, especially in the early years of schooling.[36]

Compared to their neurotypical peers, autistic students in Australia are more than twice as likely to leave school before completing Year 10 due to negative school experiences, educational restrictions, and lack of support.[37]

Autistic young people are less likely to be employed, with many more working below their potential in low-paid roles. As a result, autistic young people are more likely to be living in poverty, which is a trend that persists throughout adulthood.[38]

These findings highlight the need to remove educational barriers for neurodivergent students to ensure that all children and young people can thrive.

Insights from young people

Four neurodivergent young people have shared their experiences and recommendations for improving the education system for this paper. Their insights reveal how mainstream schooling often creates barriers that undermine learning, limit participation, and negatively affect wellbeing.

An overarching theme throughout the young people's stories is a lack of understanding and support from educators that prevented school from being a safe and inclusive environment. For some young people, this related to not having an appropriate diagnosis during their schooling years. For others, a lack of understanding meant that they were unfairly punished for being unable to conform to expectations which did not accommodate their needs.

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[32] Parliament of Australia. (2016). Access to real learning: the impact of policy, funding and culture on students with disability. Australian Government.
[33] Adams, D. (2022). Child and Parental Mental Health as Correlates of School Non-Attendance and School Refusal in Children on the Autism Spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders,* 52, 3353–3365.
[34] Jones, S., Akram, M., Murphy, N., Myers, P., & Vickers, N. (2018). *Australia's Attitudes & Behaviours towards Autism; and Experiences of Autistic People and their Families*. Research Report for AMAZE.
[35] Zendasrski, N., Guo, S., Sciberras, E., Efron, D., Quach, J., Winter, L., Bisset, M., Middeldorp, C. M., & Coghill, D. (2022). Examining the Educational Gap for Children with ADHD and Subthreshold ADHD. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 26(2), 282–295.
[36] Parents for ADHD Advocacy Australia. (2020). *Parent & carer experiences of ADHD in Australian schools: Critical gaps*. PAAA.
[37] Parliament of Australia. (2022). Select Committee on Autism Services, Support and Life Outcomes for Autistic Australians. Australian Government.
[38] Ibid.

Need for safety and belonging

Each of the young people who have shared their experiences in this paper emphasised the need for schools to be safe and inclusive environments for neurodivergent students. They identified that mainstream education settings can be unwelcoming or even harmful because school structures and expectations are built around norms for learning and behaviour.

Fifteen-year-old Stella explained how students who cannot conform to neurotypical demands in school are marginalised. "These constructs and arbitrary rules are enforcing a neuro-normative way of being and doing. They only exist to support neurotypical expectations and actually stop the neurodivergent students from building a sense of belonging or safety." In this sense, traditional school structures prioritise the wellbeing of neurotypical students at the expense of neurodivergent students.

Fifteen-year-old Lily expressed a desire for educators to move beyond a deficit-focus to critically examine and respond to the challenges that neurodivergent students face. As she explained, "We must stop focusing on what an individual is unable to do, and rather, focus on the societal barriers to participation encountered by individuals with disabilities."

Similarly, Gefion highlighted how neurodivergent students are expected to adapt to neurotypical expectations in order to be accepted, because school structures, and society more broadly, remains largely inflexible.

> *"The issue is those of us on the spectrum are expected to behave in a neurotypical way, to redefine ourselves and our behaviours to fit in and function in a society that does not want to redefine itself to support us." - Gefion*

The expectation to conform creates a constant pressure for neurodivergent students to hide or change core aspects of their identities. Young people involved in a British study reported how 'masking' in school negatively affected their mental health. 'Masking' or 'social camouflaging', refers to deliberate and conscious strategies for self-monitoring behaviour to meet social expectations.[39] Neurodivergent students are more likely to feel safe in expressing themselves authentically in schools that support their identities.

Ameya highlighted the need for schools to be affirming of neurodivergent identities. She also emphasised the need for recognition of the barriers that neurodivergent young people face, stating, "Especially as neurodivergent young people who face increased challenges and have higher needs, we deserve to be affirmed in society." For Ameya, a safe and inclusive school environment is one where neurodivergence is respected.

In describing safe and inclusive school environments, young people underscored the importance of the **social** model of disability. They challenged the expectation for neurodivergent students to conform to environments that do not meet their needs. Instead, they are advocating for change within the education system to better accommodate neurodivergent ways of learning and communicating.

[39] Chapman, L., Rose, K., Hull, L. & Mandy, W. (2022). "I want to fit in… but I don't want to change myself fundamentally": A qualitative exploration of the relationship between masking and mental health for autistic teenagers, *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 99,102069.

Delayed diagnosis

Two young people shared how difficulties in obtaining appropriate diagnoses prevented them from receiving necessary support in school. This worsened their feelings of exclusion because they felt misunderstood by peers and educators.

Gefion is a non-binary young person who has experienced struggles with gender identity, chronic health issues, anxiety and depression, and delays in being diagnosed with autism. They experienced isolation during their schooling years and did not receive adequate social skills education due to a lack of diagnosis. According to Gefion, "Sometimes I didn't understand things as easily as others, like how to make conversation naturally or how to make eye contact."

Gefion describes how they did not receive an autism diagnosis earlier in life because they hid these challenges from others. "The delay in my diagnosis was mainly because of 'masking' a lot of my neurodivergent behaviours and mimicking the behaviours of other more neurotypical people around me." Masking can contribute to delayed or missed diagnosis because autism assessments include behavioural observations.[40]

Ameya is a young person who was diagnosed with autism and ADHD at the age of 19. She explains how her struggle to obtain a diagnosis during her schooling years related to misconceptions about neurodivergence among young women. Ameya was provided with inaccurate and stigma-perpetuating information about neurodiversity in school, which ultimately led to further delays in receiving support.

> *"Going to school as an undiagnosed neurodivergent student presented me with unique challenges and frustrations, and a stereotypical and harmful unit on how neurodivergence is meant to 'look' like ultimately worsened my mental health and discouraged myself and other peers from seeking help." – Ameya*

Ameya's experiences reflect patterns identified in Australian research about autism in girls and young women. In interviews about the diagnosis process, autistic women described intentionally 'unmasking' to reveal attributes they normally hide from others.[41] Another study identified that some parents experienced challenges obtaining an autism diagnosis for their daughters due to a lack of knowledge among practitioners about how autism presents in girls. These parents speculated that their daughters would not have had as many struggles if they had been diagnosed earlier.[42]

When neurodivergent students are misrecognised or undiagnosed, it is often because school structures are built around neurotypical expectations of behaviour and learning. There is a clear need within education systems for greater awareness about how autism may present differently in young women and non-binary young people, but

[40] Pearson A, Rose K. A . (2021). Conceptual Analysis of Autistic Masking: Understanding the Narrative of Stigma and the Illusion of Choice. *Autism Adulthood*, 3(1), 52-60.
[41] Murphy, S., Flower, R. L., & Jellett, R. (2023). Women seeking an autism diagnosis in Australia: A qualitative exploration of factors that help and hinder. *Autism*, *27*(3), 808-821.
[42] Freeman, N. C., & Paradis, P. (2022). Parent experiences of obtaining an autism diagnosis for their daughter: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Autism*, *27*(4), 1068-1078.

awareness alone is not enough. Without meaningful changes to practices and policies, neurodivergent students remain at risk of being unjustly punished.

Unjust punishment

Young people identified many instances of school policies and classroom rules that created barriers to participation for neurodivergent students. They described how a lack of flexibility in school environments often resulted in punitive responses to behaviours that were linked to communication differences and sensory overload.

In reflecting on her early years of schooling, Stella emphasised how normative school practices can inadvertently punish neurodivergent students due to their differing needs. She described how teachers dismissed her need to use sensory tools by instructing her to "put away my toy when it was actually helping me regulate my emotions."

Sensory tools such as fidgets and putty are recommended for neurodivergent students to improve emotional self-regulation and executive functioning.[43] However, without specific training, many teachers do not integrate the use of sensory tools in their classrooms. According to Stella, this is due to negative connotations. "The stigma around self-regulation tools needs to change."

> *"It would have helped me if my teachers didn't hold me back after class for not finishing my work. This meant I either had a bad transition to my next class, or I missed out on regulation time during breaks. It also meant I wouldn't have the opportunities other students had to develop social skills." – Stella*

The practice of holding students back after class for not finishing their work fails to recognise that some neurodivergent students may require additional time to complete tasks.[44] As Stella pointed out, it can also result in unintended consequences that further disempower neurodivergent students.

Punishing neurodivergent students for not conforming to neurotypical expectations is ineffective and harmful, as it fails to recognise the underlying reasons for different behaviours. Lily's experience, described in the introduction section, is an example of this dynamic.

Lily's story describes how a teacher knowingly disregarded her communication needs by asking her to leave class for being unable to verbally deliver a speech. "She knew I didn't speak in class - I couldn't, it was all over my records to allow me to communicate alternatively, yet she still expected me to participate like everyone else." In refusing to acknowledge Lily's accommodations, her teacher denied her equal access to education, which effectively penalised her for being neurodivergent.

[43] Delisio, L. A., Casale-Giannola, D., & Bukaty, C. A. (2023). *Supporting emotion regulation in individuals with ASD, ADHD and bipolar disorder through trauma-informed instruction and self-regulation strategies.* Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 23(2), 136–146.
[44] Alix, S. (2023). *The Neurodiversity Handbook for Teaching Assistants and Learning Support Assistants A Guide for Learning Support Staff, SENCOs and Students*. David Fulton Publishers.

Lily's and Stella's experiences reflect the medical model of disability, which views neurodivergence as a problem within the individual that must be controlled. This approach has been widely identified in Australian studies on the school experiences of autistic students.

In a consultation with Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, autistic students identified that teachers did not always understand or respond to their needs.[45] They expressed a desire to be more involved in developing strategies to ensure their academic success.

Parents have expressed similar concerns. One study involving Australian mothers of autistic children revealed constant battles with schools to gain appropriate accommodations.[46] Parents indicated that their children's needs were not taken seriously and that educators viewed their children as a problem. In another study, Australian parents described instances of understanding and supportive teachers as an exception to the norm.[47]

These findings point to a broader systemic failure to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for neurodivergent students. This is particularly evident during transitions between educational settings.

Navigating transitions

Transitions in education settings often expose the systemic barriers faced by neurodivergent young people, highlighting the need for structural change rather than individual adaptation. Young people described some of the challenges they have faced while navigating educational transitions, including entering and completing school.

Stella's struggle to attend school began in early childhood, when educators dismissed her inability to cope with transitioning to school as something she would grow out of. As Stella explained, "From as early as daycare and kindergarten, I faced separation anxiety despite early literacy, good grades, and strong friendships." Even Stella's parents, who have professional backgrounds in mental health, failed to understand her struggles at first.

> *"Without understanding or support, I believed something was wrong with me. Friends distanced themselves, and I fell into depression. My teachers had no idea how to deal with School Can't. They told me that I was just being a naughty kid. They told me that there was something inherently wrong with me." – Stella*

Stella became increasingly isolated in school as she grew older, which led to a struggle with 'School Can't'. The term 'School Can't' refers to a young person's inability to attend school due to severe levels of distress.[48] Unlike

[45] Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia. (2020). Speaking Out About Autism The views of WA children and young people with autism. Government of Western Australia. https://ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/tdxkcokj/report-speaking-out-about-autism-the-views-of-children-and-young-people-with-autism-july-2020.pdf

[46] Rabba, A. S., Smith, J., Hall, G., Alexander, V., Batty, K., Datta, P., Goodall, E., Heyworth, M., Lamb, S., Lawson, W., Lilley, R., Reid, K., Syeda, N., & Pellicano, E. (2025). 'I'm sick of being the problem': Autistic mothers' experiences of interacting with schools for their autistic children. *Autism : The International Journal of Research and Practice*, *29*(4), 1034–1046.

[47] Thom-Jones, S., Gordon, C. S., & Mizzi, S. (2025). 'I shouldn't have to educate their school about what autism is': Community attitudes and parent reports of autistic primary and secondary school experiences in Australia. *Autism*, *0*(0).

[48] Headspace. (2021). Understanding School Can't. Headspace.

the term ‘school refusal’, which implies choice, ‘School Can’t’ shifts the blame from young people to the underlying barriers they face.

A report following a federal parliamentary inquiry into school refusal identified that neurodivergent students are at heightened risk of experiencing emotional distress leading to withdrawal from school.[49] This risk is greatest for neurodivergent students who are not adequately supported as they transition into kindergarten and between primary and high school.

Similar concerns were identified in a Queensland parliamentary inquiry following proposed changes to home education.[50] An analysis of public submissions revealed that homeschooling is a necessity for many neurodivergent students due to a lack of appropriate accommodations in mainstream school settings.[51]

While alternative schooling options may provide valuable support for some neurodivergent students, there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. After a distance education program proved to be unsuitable for Stella, her mother supported her to enrol in a head start university course that was better suited to her needs. As Stella explained, “Now, I’m on track to finish a bachelor’s degree a year after I was supposed to graduate high school.”

Stella’s experience also highlights the importance of support for neurodivergent students as they transition into higher education. A recent study involving neurodivergent students in Australian universities identified accessibility issues and the need for learning adjustments.[52] However, many participants were unfamiliar with how to access campus support services.

Transitions beyond educational settings can also pose challenges for neurodivergent students. Gefion described this transition as “being a newborn adult”. They explained, “One of the things I struggle with in becoming an adult is establishing routines and a good life balance.” For Gefion, the transition to adulthood involves developing life skills and the confidence to step out of their comfort zone.

According to an Australian study, neurodivergent students benefit from the opportunity to explore multiple post-school options to make informed decisions about their futures.[53] Some participants described receiving guidance from teachers about their next steps, while others felt they were discouraged from pursuing their aspirations. Participants also desired assistance in preparing for the responsibilities of adulthood through life skills development.

Overall, these findings underscore that the distress many neurodivergent students experience during transitions is not inevitable. They reflect a need for systematic change to better accommodate neurodivergence within and beyond school systems.

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[49] Parliament of Australia. (2023). The National Trend of school refusal and related matters. Australian Government.
[50] Queensland Parliament. (2024). Report No. 6, 57TH Parliament – Education (General Provisions) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024. Queensland Government.
[51] English, R. (2025). Familycentric School as a Solution to School Refusal/School Can’t. *Education Sciences*, *15*(7), 864.
[52] Butcher, L., & Lane, S. (2024). Neurodivergent (Autism and ADHD) student experiences of access and inclusion in higher education: an ecological systems theory perspective. *Higher Educa*tion.
[53] White, L. M., Simpson, K., Malone, S., & Adams, D. (2024). Autistic Adults’ Reflections on What Supported Their Transitioning from Secondary School. *Education Sciences*, 14(6), 576.

Conclusion

This insights review amplifies the views of young people who are calling for meaningful reform to create a more inclusive and supportive education system for neurodivergent students. In sharing their experiences, they identify systemic shortcomings and make recommendations for more inclusive and flexible approaches to teaching, learning, and school culture.

Central to these recommendations is the application of the social model of disability, which shifts the focus away from perceived individual deficits and toward the environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers that must be dismantled. The first step towards this change is greater awareness among educators, policymakers, and school communities about how current systems disadvantage neurodivergent students. It also requires concrete action to create learning environments that will enable all students to thrive.

"If teachers, employers, and medical professionals were trained to understand autism better, the way autistic individuals are treated would shift dramatically." – Lily

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Changes recommended by Lily

The following strategies are aimed at improving awareness of neurodivergence within schools:

1. **Mandatory professional development**
   Ensure all educators and school staff receive ongoing, evidence-based training on neurodiversity, inclusive practices, and the social model of disability. Young people should be involved in the development of these trainings to ensure they adequately address key issues.
2. **Listen to neurodivergent students**
   Ensure the voices of neurodivergent students are included in decision-making processes and the development of inclusive school policies. These should not be limited to exam accommodations and reflect the day-to-day needs of neurodivergent students in classrooms and school activities.
3. **Integrate neurodiversity into school culture**
   Incorporate neurodiversity into health, wellbeing, and social-emotional learning programs, and ensure inclusive practices are visible and adhered to in everyday routines. Actively promote relationships between staff, students and the broader school community based on an understanding of,and respect for, different ways of learning.
4. **Host awareness campaigns and events**
   Support student-led initiatives to educate the school community about neurodivergence, challenge stereotypes, and reduce stigma. This might include whole-school participation in existing events such as Autism Awareness Day or Neurodiversity Celebration Week.

Finally, this review has identified that the rights of neurodivergent students are not consistently recognised or upheld. Schools should receive clearer guidance to support full compliance with the following legislation to ensure neurodivergent students are protected from discrimination and able to access education on an equal basis:

- **Disability Discrimination Act 1992[54]:** This federal legislation makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person on the basis of disability in education and other areas of public life. It states that students with disability must not be treated less favourably than other students. It also requires education providers to make reasonable adjustments to enable students with disability to participate on the same basis as others, unless doing so would impose unjustifiable hardship.
- **Disability Standards for Education 2005[55]:** These standards clarify the obligations of education providers under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. They outline the requirements for reasonable adjustments in relation to enrolment, participation, curriculum, student support, and facilities. They require schools to consult with students and their families about making reasonable adjustments and take reasonable steps to eliminate harassment and victimisation on the basis of disability.
- **Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act 1991[56]:** This state legislation prohibits discrimination based on impairment and other protected characteristics in education and other areas of public life.

[54] Australian Government. (1992). Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth).
[55] Australian Government. (2005). Disability Standards for Education 2005 under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.
[56] Queensland Government. (1991). Anti-Discrimination Act 1991 (Qld).

Further resources

This list contains links to further information on reducing educational barriers for neurodivergent students. It includes peer support for young people and families, fact sheets, and training materials for educators.

Educational factsheets for families

- Disability Standards for Education A guide to the rights of students with disabilities, including reasonable adjustments developed by the Australian Government.
- Inclusion Toolkit for Parents A guide for parents on inclusive education developed by the Australian Alliance for Inclusive Education
- CRU Resources - Families For Inclusive Education Fact sheets about inclusive education developed by Community Resource Unit, Ltd.
- Transition to Prep for students with disability fact sheet for families—Prep routines A fact sheet for parents and carers about supporting children with disability to transition to primary school developed by the Queensland Government.
- Transition to secondary school for students with disability fact sheet A fact sheet for parents and carers about how schools can support the transition to secondary school for students with disability developed by the Queensland Government.
- Transition to post-school for students with disability: Fact sheet for students and parents/carers A fact sheet for parents, carers, and students about post-secondary school options for students with disability developed by the Queensland Government.
- School Can't Australia Downloadable resources for parents and carers supporting children who are experiencing School Can't.

Supports for parents and carers

- Autism Connect National helpline offering advice on services, peer support, identity, and autism-friendly events.
- ADHD Foundation National charity offering information and recommendations to people with ADHD and their families, including a volunteer-run helpline.
- Family Support & Social Groups - Autism Queensland Autism Queensland family support and social groups.

Supports for young people

- Next Door Social A weekly group in Brisbane for neurodivergent young people to socialise in a supportive environment.
- Autism Queensland Teen Tech Shed Professionally-led social groups for young people aged 13-17 to connect through shared interests facilitated by Autism Queensland.
- Youth Support Groups - Empower Autism Volunteer-led support groups with social activities for young people ages 14-18 facilitated by Empower Autism.
- How to Transition to Tertiary Education Advice for neurodivergent young people on transitioning to university provided by the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training.

- Accessibility - La Trobe University Advice for neurodivergent university students on managing study produced by La Trobe University.

Tools for educators

- CHILDKIND Best Practice Framework - Anti-Ableist and Neuro-Affirming Practice Guidance for professionals who work with neurodivergent children ages 0-8 to promote evidence-based self-reflective practice.
- Navigating Autism: The Early Years Free online training to support Early Childhood Educators provided by Autism Awareness Australia
- Queensland School Autism Reflection Tool A tool for Queensland state school leaders to plan, implement, and review strategies to support autistic students.
- Guided Functional Behaviour Assessment Tool A tool for Queensland state school educators to understand the reasons for student behaviours and respond proactively.