

Neurodivergent Children – Information for teachers

Stop trying to change neurodivergent children to fit your (rigid) expectations.

If the routine always leads to resistance, the problem isn't the child. It's the routine. So much of what's labelled as "challenging behaviour" is actually misaligned expectations. Underneath that behaviour, you'll often find:

- overwhelm
- confusion
- unmet needs
- lack of control
- sensory overload
- unclear transitions
- inaccessible language
- tasks that don't match the child's energy, regulation or readiness.

Do you understand deeply why the routine and your expectations aren't working for this child?

Have you considered how long they've already been holding it together, whether they had input in the plan, or if the routine allows for sensory regulation and recovery?

If the routine isn't working, the first thing to change is what you're asking of the child.

Shake your expectations up to match the child, not the other way around.

Dr. Katie Rosanbalm is an associate research professor at Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy and has been the evaluation and research partner for the NCCLR since its inception in 2017. "Two out of three adults have had some sort of adverse event in their life before turning 18. There are a significant number of young people who are experiencing some sort of traumatic or significant stress in their lives," said Dr. Rosanbalm. When children face chronic stress or trauma, it can rewire the brain to operate in survival mode – hypervigilant, reactive, and focused on staying safe rather than engaging in deep thinking or learning. This shift makes it harder for students to regulate their emotions, concentrate, or build relationships in the classroom. "Our brains are malleable—we must change their trajectory. This is especially true in young people. Social-emotional skills are something we need to learn, just as we do to read and write. This is universal intervention."

"Students with learning differences often experience compounding challenges—academic frustration, social isolation, and in some cases, trauma," Rosanbalm added. "Providing differentiated SEL support ensures that these students are not left behind."

This year, the center is scaling up its reach by hiring three new coaches—and the vision is ambitious. “Our hope is to eventually bring this work to all 115 school districts across North Carolina,” said DeKonty. “Our goal is to leave every school that we work with in a place that the work will continue, and we are always here to offer support and guidance. The work is rewarding because the impact can be profound—not only for the students, but for the school staff as well.”