

# Neurodivergent Learner Characteristics

Years 9-13



Building a Neuroinclusive School

A neuroinclusive classroom is one where **ALL BRAINS** are noticed, supported + celebrated

## How to use this tool:

We've created this tool to help educators notice, recognise and respond to the unique characteristics of neurodivergent learners in your classrooms. This tool takes a student-centred approach to neuroinclusion - **check out our NEW Strengths and Sticking Points tool to invite students into this process as well.**

## Here's how it works:

- ➔ You might **NOTICE** differences in learning, functioning, what might be happening in a student's 'inner world', and interacting.
- ➔ You might **RECOGNISE** some of the strengths as well as the sticking points that these differences pose, regardless of any identified specific neurodivergence.
- ➔ You might **RESPOND** by trialling some of the tried and tested strategies to respond, or using these strategies to innovate from.

## Learning



	Thinking	Learning	Doing
Recognise	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deep, connected thinking that draws together ideas from across subjects</li> <li>Sees many different possibilities, asks what if, what about, yes but...</li> <li>Strong memory, logic and reasoning</li> <li>Strong visual thinker - draws to represent ideas</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seems stuck in one way of thinking; not able to take a different approach when this is needed</li> <li>Applies creative thinking when logical reasoning is needed or vice versa</li> <li>Doesn't seem able to remember or notice details</li> <li>Is unduly focused on details</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Great ideas in discussion</li> <li>Show specific abilities in some subjects</li> <li>Has specialised knowledge in some subjects</li> <li>Learns quickly and easily and achieves well</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoids written work or written work doesn't match thinking or discussion</li> <li>Has very uneven achievement across or within subjects</li> <li>Not interested in specific subjects</li> <li>Easily bored or rushes through work</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly focused and engaged at times, or in specific hands-on subjects</li> <li>Expresses thinking and learning through creativity, applied skills, or focused activity</li> <li>Able to produce careful or detailed work in hands-on subjects</li> <li>Thrives when actively doing, making or producing</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physically clumsy or awkward</li> <li>Struggles to engage in hands-on or applied activities</li> <li>Doesn't work carefully or safely in hands-on subjects</li> <li>Difficulties working with shapes, maps or games requiring visual or spatial skills</li> </ul>
Respond	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give overarching ideas first then tie details to these</li> <li>Recognise and celebrate different ways of thinking, even if not the one best suited to the task at hand</li> <li>Harness different thinking approaches as they apply to your subject</li> <li>Highlight deeper and more complex thinking for students who relish it</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give different ways for students to show what is known, including using technology</li> <li>Help students tie in their interests or other subjects into your subject</li> <li>Leverage success in other subjects into your subject</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give options of hands-on, artistic, construction, or tech-enabled activities across all learning experiences</li> <li>Proactively, patiently, and repeatedly teach safe applied skills</li> <li>Build movement including bodily awareness into lessons</li> </ul>

## Students' Inner Experiences



	Beliefs About Learning	Emotions
Recognise	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be intensely involved with learning in the moment</li> <li>Keen to achieve well and seems to believe they can</li> <li>Enjoys learning for its own sake</li> <li>Seems to be self-propelling or self-motivated</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perfectionism or frustration showing up as withdrawal or challenging behaviour</li> <li>Fixed and limiting ideas about abilities or potential to achieve</li> <li>Refuses or avoids some tasks</li> <li>May seem lazy or non-compliant</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sensitive to the emotions of others</li> <li>Shows a wide and nuanced emotional range</li> <li>Describes and expresses emotions vividly</li> <li>Strong sense of justice or fairness</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotions seem 'too big' or 'too deep' to be easily regulated</li> <li>Uncomfortable expression of emotions</li> <li>Finds emotionally rich or challenging content distressing or overwhelming</li> <li>Demonstrates an uncomfortable sense of difference</li> </ul>
Respond	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach students to understand themselves as learners - use our NEW Strengths and Sticking Points tool - <a href="http://www.neurodiversity.org.nz/bns">www.neurodiversity.org.nz/bns</a></li> <li>Develop and try out strategies that work together</li> <li>Use successful experiences to promote and teach adaptive, flexible beliefs about abilities and potential</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledge all emotions as valid</li> <li>Invite emotional responses into your subject</li> <li>Teach as well as model a range of ways to express emotions</li> </ul>

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## Interacting

	With Peers	With Teachers	With The Context
Recognise	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social interactions seem friendly and reasonable</li> <li>Strong social awareness</li> <li>Appears to have good friends</li> <li>Seems like a natural leader or organiser of others</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seems unsuccessful in trying to connect with others</li> <li>Doesn't get on with others in expected ways</li> <li>Dominates in conversations</li> <li>Seems isolated or more alone</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presents to teachers as conscientious, amenable and hard-working</li> <li>Gets on with things in a settled way</li> <li>Asks 'the right' questions at 'the right' times</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doesn't seem to engage with, listen to or follow teacher instructions</li> <li>Dominates teacher time through excitement, confusion or frustration</li> <li>Seems confused or distant with teachers</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is very involved with a lot of different things</li> <li>Seems adaptable and flexible</li> <li>Processes information very quickly</li> <li>Takes time to think deeply about ideas</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Big or unexpected responses to sensory context</li> <li>Very uneven pace in thinking, learning and working in classes</li> <li>Loses track of time and things really easily / easily lost</li> <li>Struggles with even seemingly small changes</li> </ul>
Respond	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find out students' social preferences and goals</li> <li>Help them to achieve these through active skills teaching</li> <li>Engineer and support opportunities for students to connect with like minds</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Check in with students individually and regularly</li> <li>Give instructions in multiple ways and in different sized chunks</li> <li>Give students multiple ways to connect with share, eg a quiet conversation, a notebook, a shared doc, or other tech tool</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask students directly about sensory preferences. Check out our sensory tools - <a href="http://www.neurodiversity.org.nz/sensory-friendly-spaces">www.neurodiversity.org.nz/sensory-friendly-spaces</a></li> <li>Have more flexible pacing for all learners</li> <li>Communicate changes in advance</li> </ul>

## Functioning

	Organising	Focus
Recognise	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands or quickly works out what is expected in classes and across subjects</li> <li>Can set and work towards their own goals</li> <li>Makes the most of time</li> <li>Seems well organised and able to stay on-track</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doesn't seem to be aware of time</li> <li>Finds it hard to get started and to keep going with activities</li> <li>Struggles to keep track of their things</li> <li>Finds it hard to understand the expectations of classes or across subjects</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purposeful, intense and sustained focus when interested</li> <li>Has passionate interests</li> <li>Interested in absolutely everything</li> <li>Highly energetic</li> </ul> <p><b>Sticking Points</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It can be hard to 'change gears', or has very scattered focus</li> <li>Interests can be restrictive or limiting</li> <li>Moving, doing or talking all the time</li> <li>Could be seen as lazy and uninterested</li> </ul>
Respond	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give options for simple organisation systems and strategies</li> <li>Give chunked time expectations for tasks</li> <li>Make all expectations clear, explicitly stated, and consistent</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use visual timers and timetables for time management and transitions</li> <li>Deliberately intersperse tighter and looser focus expectations across each lesson</li> <li>Celebrate all interest areas and gently introduce related interest areas</li> </ul>