



Strategies to support neurocognitive functioning for neurodivergent children

Defining neurodivergence

Neurodiversity means that everyone has a unique way of thinking, feeling and functioning. Neurodivergent people think, feel and function in ways that are considered less common than people who are neurotypical. Neurodivergent brains are different, not better or worse.

Neurocognitive functioning in neurodivergent children

Neurocognitive functioning refers to the mental actions and processes that allow us to make sense of and interact with the world around us, including:

Maintaining focus and shifting attention

Evaluating, prioritising and processing information

Adapting to changing circumstances and transitional periods

Learning in response to change or feedback

Controlling and monitoring behaviour, thoughts and emotions

Organising, planning and initiating actions to achieve a goal.

Neurocognitive functioning develops and changes throughout childhood and adolescence. Strong neurocognitive functioning supports learning, better mental health and wellbeing.

Neurodivergent children may have different support needs than neurotypical children. It is important to understand these needs to give neurodivergent children a safe and productive space for learning how to flourish in a world that is not designed for them.

Adults should take a strengths-based approach when working with neurodivergent children. It is important to actively avoid perpetuating misconceptions that there is something wrong with neurodivergent children. This means working alongside children to understand their strengths, interests, challenging areas and how they could be better supported.

A strengths-based approach also defies assumptions that neurodivergence means there is something wrong with a person, both for the child you are supporting and for others around them.

Did you know?

Certain situations, time periods or environments may enhance or challenge neurocognitive functioning. For example, a child may find it easier to concentrate at home than at school, or vice versa.



The following strategies aim to support children's neurocognitive functioning by providing clear communication and structure in interactions and activities. They are likely to benefit neurodivergent and neurotypical children.

Simplify adult-child interactions

- Use simple language.
- Break requests into small steps.
- Provide step-by-step instructions.
- Complete one task before starting another.
- Use visual supports where possible.
- Give clear feedback.
- Explicitly state your expectations before starting an activity.

Tip

Adults can help children understand expectations by asking them questions that prompt thinking about thinking. For example, 'I'll read you a story. See if you can notice what Amir does to feel better.'

Create a structured environment

- Minimise visual and verbal distractions.
- Provide regular movement, sensory and breathing breaks.
- Provide verbal, visual and auditory reminders of the beginning and end of tasks. This might include alarms or visible schedules.
- Mark shifts in focus using transition tasks, objects, sounds or songs – for example, putting on a hat to go from the classroom to lunchtime or singing a song at bedtime.

Anticipate and manage change

- Anticipate changes to routines and give children notice of the change. Remind them again before the change occurs.
- Model change and help children practice changes ahead of time.
- Identify ways to maintain a sense of familiarity and routine in times of change.

Support capacity building

- Reinforce on-task behaviour and effort, rather than focusing on changing behaviours or outcomes.
- Incorporate a child's interests into learning activities they find difficult.
- Teach and model positive self-talk and reflective self-talk.
- Try activities and programs that teach children about flexible thinking.

This content was developed for use by community mental health practitioners. It is based on an AIFS publication and webinar, and further consultation with community mental health practitioners who support neurodivergent children. For more information and to learn about supporting neurodivergent children, visit our website: aifs.gov.au/research_programs/child-family-community-australia/supporting-neurodivergent-children-young-people or follow the QR code.

