

EATING DISORDERS



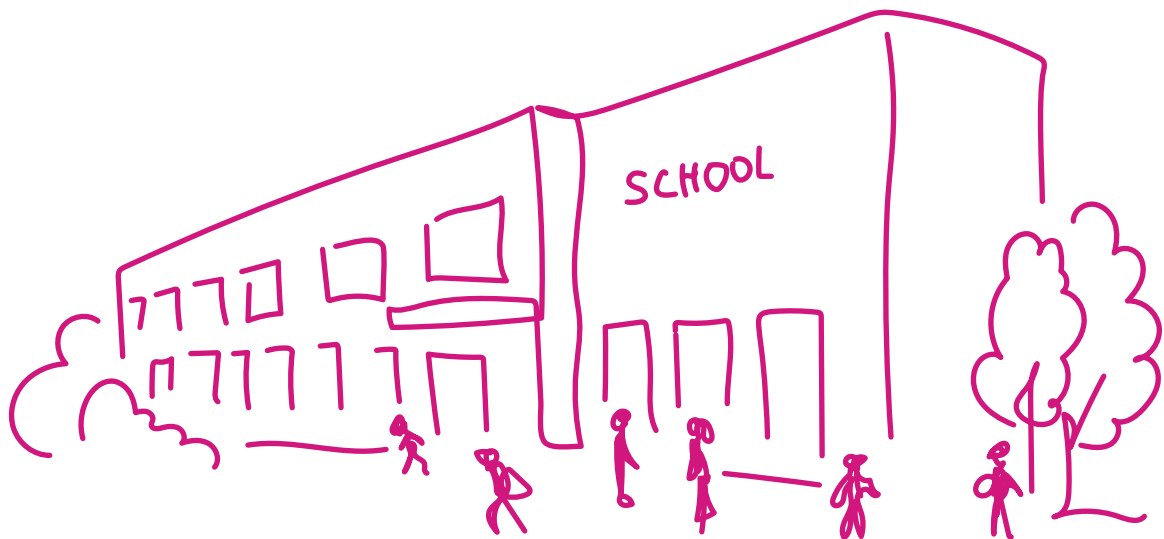
NEURODIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

SCHOOL PERSONNEL



Overview

School personnel have an important role to play in both prevention and early identification of eating disorders. Neurodivergent people are at a high risk of developing eating disorders, and eating disorders may have different underlying factors and manifestations in this population. Support needs related to the eating experiences of neurodivergent students at school may differ from their neurotypical peers. Neurodivergent students' support needs may relate to sensory processing (e.g., aversions or cravings, eating environment) and/or identity (e.g., bullying, masking/camouflaging, gender). Considerations and practical tools to support neurodivergent students' eating experiences at school are offered in this document.



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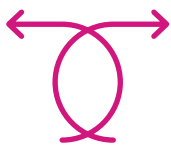


Prevention



Adjust the physical eating environment

While it is essential to consider sensory needs in all school settings to prevent meltdowns and/or shutdowns, including play areas and classrooms, it is especially important to adjust the physical eating environment to reduce sensory overwhelm during mealtimes. For instance, consider creating a quiet corner in the cafeteria or specifically allocating a quiet and dimly lit room for students who may be overwhelmed by environmental stimuli.



Understand and accommodate feeding differences

- **Exteroception (relating to environmental sensory stimuli):**
Recognise that neurodivergent students may have specific exteroceptive profiles that influence food choices (i.e., aversions and cravings). For example, some students might crave or be averse to foods with certain textures, smells, colours, or temperatures. Offering a range of foods with different sensory properties may improve eating experiences of neurodivergent students.
- **Interoception (relating to internal bodily signals):**
Recognise that neurodivergent students may experience difficulties with interoceptive awareness. For example, some students might not feel hungry consistently and/or might feel full after ingesting small amounts of food while others might experience a delay in feeling full. Students who have inconsistent hunger signals and/or feel full after ingesting small amounts may benefit from being allowed to eat meals in several sittings throughout the day rather than in one go while those experiencing delayed satiety may benefit from being offered pre-made meals rather than a buffet.

- **Samefoods:** Samefoods is a term that refers to autistic people's tendency to eat the same foods for prolonged periods of time. For example, an autistic person may want to eat chicken nuggets, chips, or broccoli every day. This is an important self-regulating mechanism as it allows for predictability (same textures, same smells, same tastes) and therefore reduces anxiety around mealtimes. Whenever concerns exist regarding possible nutritional deficiencies, it is best to refer to a trained neurodiversity-affirming dietitian rather than coerce or force the autistic student to eat a wider variety of foods. Coercing or forcing an autistic person to eat certain foods that are experienced as aversive may trigger food-related trauma (!).



Promote neutral language around food, eating, and body shape

- Avoid commenting on neurodivergent individuals' food preferences (sensory aversions and/or cravings, samefoods) and ways of eating (slow, fast, 'clumsy'). For example, neurodivergent individuals may sometimes struggle with motor skills and/or coordination (e.g., dyspraxia, apraxia), which may lead to 'clumsiness' while eating. Therefore, it is important to remain patient and understanding.
- Avoid referring to 'healthy' versus 'unhealthy' foods. Allocating dichotomous moral attributes to food items may be interpreted literally by neurodivergent people, possibly contributing to anxiety, obsessiveness, and restriction (e.g., orthorexia). If concerns exist about the food intake patterns of a neurodivergent student, it is best to refer to a trained neurodiversity-affirming dietitian.
- Avoid making comments about weight or body shape, whether positive or negative. When a positive comment is made about a specific student's body shape, other students whose body was not positively commented on may understand this as a form of exclusion and indirect body shaming. In addition, feeling consistently positive about

one's own body may not be a realistic goal for many neurodivergent people experiencing inherent difficulties with interoception. In this context, promoting body neutrality (neither feeling positive nor negative about one's own body) may be more appropriate.



Promote a positive interpersonal and learning environment

- **Neurodivergent identity:** Lack of self-esteem and issues with self-concept are risk factors for developing eating disorders. Oftentimes, neurodivergent children are victims of interpersonal violence, including bullying, which may lead to thwarted belongingness (feeling different and 'broken') and learned helplessness. As a result, some may engage in masking, also called camouflaging, to hide their neurodivergent traits and avoid being targeted. As masking is associated with negative consequences on one's sense of identity and mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression, burnout, suicidal ideation), it is essential to educate the school community about neurodivergence and ways to foster a safe and welcoming interpersonal environment (2). This could involve workshops and/or informational sessions where teachers and students learn about key aspects of neurodivergence and how to ensure the wellbeing of neurodivergent students or classmates.
- **Gender identity and sexual orientation:** Many neurodivergent people are members of the LGBTQA+ community (3, 4). Gender and/or sexually diverse individuals are at an increased risk of developing eating disorders (5). Therefore, it is essential to make sure that gender and/or sexually diverse neurodivergent students feel safe and welcomed as their authentic selves.
- **Communication and learning:** Neurodivergent students have specific support needs related to communication and learning (e.g., double empathy problem, situational

mutism, dyslexia, dyscalculia). Understanding and accommodating such support needs is essential in creating a safe learning environment and promoting self-esteem. Some examples include:

- ▶ Not shaming or punishing someone for stimming and/or communicating in a direct or blunt manner
- ▶ Providing support around executive functioning challenges (e.g., forgetfulness, distractibility), dyslexia, and dyscalculia rather than automatically attributing such difficulties to 'laziness', lack of interest, and/or lack of potential
- ▶ Offering different learning material types (e.g., written, oral and/or video instructions) to accommodate for different information processing styles
- ▶ Giving access to self-regulatory tools (e.g., allowing the use of noise cancelling headphones, fidget tools, and/or sunglasses in the classroom)
- ▶ Allowing the use of augmentative and alternative communication systems (AAC) in all contexts



Identification

- Understand that neurodivergent people may experience an eating disorder even if they do not appear 'underweight' (e.g., 'atypical' anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder).
- Understand that neurodivergent people may experience an eating disorder even in the absence of body image issues or weight-related distress (e.g., avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, orthorexia, pica).

If you notice any significant changes in food choices (obsessiveness

- around 'healthy' eating), eating patterns (binge eating, restriction, rumination, ingestion of non-edible items), new attitudes towards nutrition that are concerning (calorie or carbohydrate counting), please seek advice from a health professional. A first point of contact can be the student's general practitioner (GP) or the [Butterfly Foundation](#).



Post-identification support

- Neurodivergent students in recovery from an eating disorder are in a particularly vulnerable phase which requires optimal sensory, interpersonal, and learning accommodations to aid with stress management and mitigate the risks of burnout (6).
- Consider reducing the demands and expectations placed upon neurodivergent students while they recover.
- Ensure neurodivergent students recovering from an eating disorder have access to neurodiversity-affirming support services within the school, such as counselling and/or specialised learning plans.

References

- (1) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9597164/>
- (2) <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2022.0115>
- (3) <https://reframingautism.org.au/position-statement-on-autistic-lgbtqia-identity/>
- (4) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19359705.2022.2109119>
- (5) <https://insideoutinstitute.org.au/news/new-research-to-better-understand-the-eating-disorder-experiences-of-the-lgbtqia-community>
- (6) <https://reframingautism.org.au/navigating-autistic-burn-out-self-care-strategies-to-recover-and-recalibrate/>

Further reading

- Neurodiversity-affirmative education: why and how?
<https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/neurodiversity-affirmative-education-why-and-how>
- Unpacking Ableist Language in Schools: Suggestions for School-based Practitioners
<https://osf.io/preprints/osf/73ykq>
- Neuro-Affirmation in the Classroom with Sue Fletcher-Watson
<https://reframingautism.org.au/neuro-affirmation-in-the-classroom-with-sue-fletcher-watson/>
- What does it mean to be neurodiversity affirmative?
<https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/what-does-it-mean-be-neurodiversity-affirmative>
- Sensory eating on campus
<https://www.rdsforneurodiversity.com/blog/sensory-eatingoncampus>
- Neurodiversity as the next frontier: Celebrating “All Kinds of Clever” in higher education
<https://www.latrobe.edu.au/mylatrobe/neurodiversity-as-the-next-frontier-part-1-celebrating-all-kinds-of-clever-in-higher-education/>

- Craving inclusion: a systematic review on the experiences and needs of people with disability eating out
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09638288.2023.2295006>
- Inclusive schooling that supports neurodiverse needs can be hard to find
<https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/inclusive-schooling-neurodiversity-hard-to-find/100899398>
- Working with PDA: Information for education professionals
<https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/working-with-pda-menu/info-for-education-professionals/>
- Eating Disorders and Neurodivergence: A Stepped Care Approach
<https://nedc.com.au/eating-disorders/types/neurodivergence>