Part of the Warm Welcome Spaces Inclusion Toolkit

Neurodiversity Awareness Resource

What volunteers need to know to welcome neurodivergent visitors

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Warm Welcome Spaces

"We are open and welcoming to everyone… we've folks from all walks of life… wealthy and homeless, young and old… professional and others with learning disabilities… all the colours of the neurodiverse spectrum, adults and children… all faiths and no faith… there's pancakes and cakes, teas and good coffee for everyone. We don't charge… there's games and crafts and telly and endless talking."
Warm Welcome Spaces Volunteer

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is the idea that human brains naturally work in different ways. Just as we accept that people have different heights, hair colours, and personalities, neurodiversity recognises that neurological differences are a normal part of human variation - not deficits to be fixed.

The term 'neurodivergent' describes people whose brains work differently from what society considers 'typical'. This includes people with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, Tourette's syndrome, and other neurological differences, which could be acquired through brain injuries or strokes.

'Neurotypical' describes people whose brain function is considered standard or typical.

Why this matters for Warm Welcome Spaces:
An estimated 15-20% of people are neurodivergent. That means in any community space, a significant number of visitors will experience the world differently. Understanding this helps us create spaces where everyone can feel comfortable and welcome.

"When spaces understand neurodiversity, I don't have to spend all my energy pretending to be 'normal'. I can just be myself and enjoy being there." *Autistic adult*

"We have recently introduced some sensory music, a fish tank and safe den area to make the area more welcoming for neurodivergent visitors." *Warm Welcome Volunteer*

"Reaching out to various communities and putting on inclusive events and activities. Our libraries are fully inclusive and we each have a Quiet Hour. Where space permits, we have high-backed autism chairs/sofas, reading tents/tee-pees and fidget packs. We have Large Print books, Quick Reads, a Dyslexia Friendly reading collection and Books Beyond Words." *Warm Welcome Space in a library*

Why Neurodiversity Awareness Matters

Many neurodivergent people experience barriers in everyday settings that neurotypical people don't even notice. These barriers can make community spaces feel unwelcoming, exhausting, or even impossible to access.

Common barriers neurodivergent people face

- Sensory overload from noise, lighting, smells, or crowds.
- Anxiety about unwritten social rules and expectations.
- Difficulty with unpredictable environments or last minute changes.
- Challenges with verbal communication or processing spoken information.
- Feeling judged for behaviours that help them cope (like stimming or avoiding eye contact).
- Exhaustion from 'masking' - hiding their differences to fit in.
- Physical environments that don't accommodate their needs.

The impact of getting it right

When spaces make small adjustments to welcome neurodivergent visitors, the benefits are significant:

- People who have been isolated can access community connections.
- Visitors can relax instead of spending energy on masking.
- Families with neurodivergent members feel able to attend together.
- Neurodivergent volunteers can contribute their skills and perspectives.
- Everyone benefits - adjustments for neurodivergent people often help others too.

Understanding Different Neurotypes

Every neurodivergent person is unique. These descriptions are general guides. Always take your lead from the individual in front of you.

Autism

Autism affects how people experience the world, communicate, and interact with others. Autistic people may process sensory information differently, prefer routine, and communicate in ways that differ from neurotypical expectations.

You might notice:

Differences in eye contact or body language; direct communication style; discomfort with small talk; sensitivity to sensory input; preference for routine; deep focus on specific interests; stimming (repetitive movements that help with regulation). There is no specific 'look' to autism. People who are autistic are not always visibly 'disabled' on sight.

What might help:

Clear, direct communication; advance information about what to expect; a quieter space option; patience with different communication styles; acceptance of stimming; not insisting on eye contact. It is helpful to provide video tours of your settings and clearly laid out expectations on your website as to how guests can use the space. Many autistic people heavily research the timetable for what happens at an event before going.

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)

ADHD affects attention, impulse control, and activity levels. People with ADHD often have brilliant creativity and energy, alongside challenges with focus, organisation, and time management, oversharing personal life experiences, and taking turns to talk.

You might notice:

Difficulty sitting still; talking quickly or interrupting; appearing distracted; losing track of time; forgetting things; high energy and enthusiasm; creative thinking; hyperfocus on interesting tasks.

What might help:

Accepting movement and fidgeting; offering fidget tools; breaking information into chunks; understanding if they're late or forget things; valuing their energy and ideas; not taking interruptions personally. Helping with directions by writing them down, rather than expecting people to remember them.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia primarily affects reading, writing, and spelling. People with dyslexia often have strong verbal skills, creative thinking, and problem-solving abilities.

You might notice:

Difficulty reading signs or written information; avoiding form-filling; taking longer with paperwork; strong verbal communication; creative approaches to problems. Forms can be genuine obstacles to involvement, so it's best to check with guests if they are okay filling in forms and offer help.

What might help:

Offering verbal explanations alongside written ones; reading information aloud if helpful; not rushing paperwork; offering help with forms; providing information in accessible formats.

Dyspraxia (DCD)

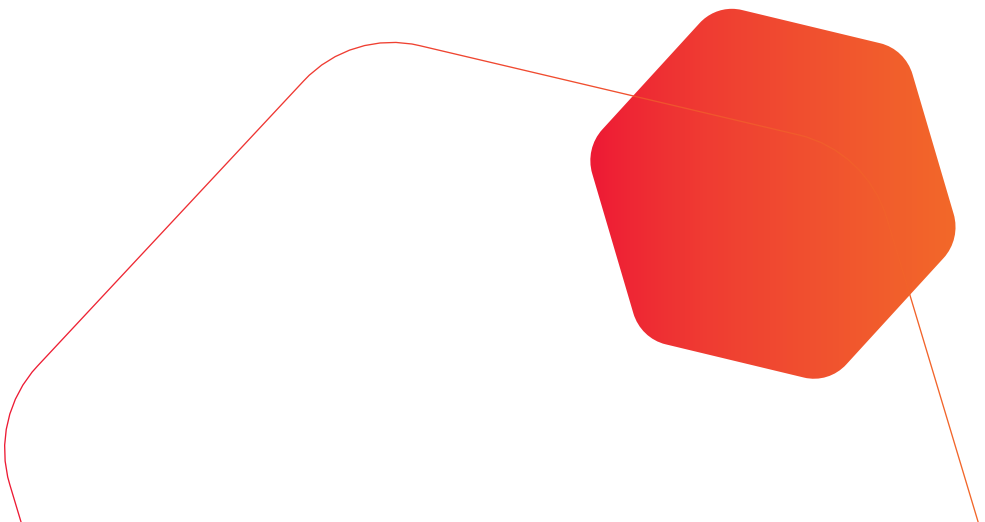
Dyspraxia affects coordination and motor planning. It can impact physical movements, spatial awareness, and organising thoughts and tasks.

You might notice:

Clumsiness or difficulty with physical tasks; challenges with coordination; taking longer to process and respond; difficulty with organisation; tiredness from extra effort required for everyday tasks.

What might help:

Not drawing attention to spills or accidents; allowing extra time; offering practical help matter-of-factly; being patient with processing time; understanding that tasks others find easy may be genuinely difficult.



Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia affects how the brain processes numbers and mathematical concepts. It can impact understanding quantities, time, money, and sequences.

You might notice:

Difficulty with numbers, calculations, or estimating; confusion with time, dates, or scheduling; trouble remembering PINs, phone numbers, or sequences; challenges with money and making change; anxiety around anything number-related.

What might help:

Using visual aids and written information rather than spoken numbers; allowing extra time for anything involving calculations; not putting people on the spot with number questions; offering practical support with money or timings matter-of-factly; using analogue clocks alongside digital where possible.

Tourette's Syndrome

Tourette's causes tics - involuntary movements or sounds. These vary hugely between individuals and can change over time. Stress often makes tics more frequent.

You might notice:

Involuntary movements (motor tics); involuntary sounds (vocal tics); tics may increase when the person is stressed, tired, or trying to suppress them.

What might help:

Ignoring tics completely - don't comment, stare, or draw attention; creating a relaxed atmosphere (stress worsens tics); treating the person normally; understanding they cannot control tics through willpower.

Important: Many people have multiple conditions

It's common for neurodivergent people to have more than one condition (e.g., autism and ADHD, or dyslexia and dyspraxia). Additionally, many neurodivergent people also experience anxiety, depression, or other mental health conditions - sometimes as a result of living in a world not designed for them.

Some people have acquired neurodivergence through traumatic brain injury or stroke, and can experience similar symptoms to the ones described above. Traumatic brain injury and strokes affect everyone very differently, so it would be difficult to describe under one umbrella.

Creating a Sensory-Friendly Environment

Sensory differences are common across many neurodivergent conditions. What feels comfortable to one person may be overwhelming to another. The goal isn't to eliminate all sensory input, but to offer options and reduce unnecessary overwhelm.

Lighting

- Avoid harsh fluorescent lighting where possible - it can flicker imperceptibly and cause headaches.
- Natural light is often preferable, but offer areas away from bright windows too.
- Consider having a dimmer area available for those who need lower light.
- Be aware that some people are sensitive to certain colours of light.

Sound

- Recognise that background noise that's easy for some to filter out can be exhausting for others.
- Offer a quieter area or time for those who find noise difficult.
- Be mindful of sudden loud noises (clattering dishes, scraping chairs).
- Consider soft furnishings and rugs to absorb sound.
- Have ear defenders available to borrow.

Smell

- Avoid strong air fresheners and heavily scented cleaning products.
- Be aware that food smells, perfumes, and even certain flowers can be overwhelming.
- Good ventilation helps manage smells.

Touch and physical space

- Some people are very sensitive to certain textures or unexpected touch.
- Always ask before any physical contact - even a pat on the arm.
- Provide enough space so people don't feel crowded.
- Consider offering fidget toys or sensory items.

Communication Tips

Neurodivergent people may communicate differently. Adapting your communication style slightly can make a big difference to whether someone feels welcome.

General principles

- Be clear and direct - say what you mean without relying on hints or subtext.
- Give people time to process - don't rush responses or fill silences.
- Offer information in multiple formats (verbal, written, visual).
- Check understanding without being patronising.
- Accept different communication styles as valid, not wrong.

Specific adjustments

✓ Do	✗ Don't
Say exactly what you mean.	Rely on hints, sarcasm, or implied meanings.
Tell them exactly what they need to know about the space, whether they need to pay, and what will be happening during the session, and when it's okay to leave, and show them any quiet spaces you have.	Say things like 'Make yourself at home' (they won't know how to use your space) or use sayings like 'just be yourself' (this can be hard for an autistic person to interpret). Instead be more specific and say 'would you like a drink, let me show you around' and explain the rules of the space.
Give processing time before expecting a response.	Fill every silence or repeat yourself immediately.
Offer written information to take away.	Assume verbal instructions will be remembered.
Explain unwritten rules explicitly.	Expect people to 'just know' how things work.
Ask how someone prefers to communicate.	Assume everyone communicates the same way.
Accept if someone prefers not to chat.	Take quietness or directness as rudeness.
Use visual signs and symbols alongside words.	Use only written text for important information.

Eye contact

Many neurodivergent people find eye contact uncomfortable, painful, or simply unnatural. Avoiding eye contact is not a sign of rudeness, dishonesty, or disinterest - it may actually help the person concentrate on what you're saying. Never insist on eye contact or comment on its absence.

Small talk

Small talk can be genuinely difficult for some neurodivergent people. If someone gives short answers or doesn't reciprocate conversational questions, don't take it personally. Some people prefer to move straight to practical matters or discuss specific topics in depth rather than chat about the weather.

Practical Adjustments for Your Space

Information and predictability

- Provide clear information about what to expect before someone visits (on your website, in leaflets).
- Explain how your space works - where to sit, whether to pay, when you can leave.
- Give advance notice of any changes to routine or environment.
- Display a visual timetable or schedule if you run different activities.
- Consider creating a social story or video tour for first-time visitors.

Physical environment

- Create a quiet area or 'chill-out space' away from the main activity.
- Keep layouts consistent - don't rearrange furniture unexpectedly.
- Ensure clear pathways and uncluttered spaces.
- Provide different seating options (some people need to move; others need firm support).
- Consider having a space where someone can take a break if overwhelmed.

Communication tools

- Display clear signs using words AND symbols.
- Consider communication boards with common symbols and phrases.
- Have paper and pens available for those who prefer to write.
- Train volunteers to communicate clearly and check understanding.

Lanyards and badges

Some people use lanyards to communicate information about their needs:

- Sunflower lanyard - indicates a hidden disability; wearer may need extra time, patience, or assistance.
- 'I'm autistic' lanyard - helps staff understand communication differences.
- Coloured lanyards for touch preferences: Red (no touch), Amber (handshakes okay), Green (hugs welcome).
- 'Please offer me a seat' badge - for invisible disabilities.

"A quick way of helping to know who likes talking or who doesn't by introducing red & green mug coasters / red = I need some space & green = open to having a chat." *Warm Space volunteer*

Consider having some lanyards available for visitors to use if helpful. Never require people to wear them - it should always be their choice.

What to Avoid

Even with good intentions, some common responses can be hurtful or unhelpful. Here's what to avoid:

Harmful assumptions

- "You don't look autistic/ADHD" - neurodivergence is invisible. This dismisses someone's reality.
- "Everyone's a bit autistic/ADHD" - no, they're not. This minimises real differences.
- "Have you tried just...?" - simple solutions have usually already been tried.
- "My nephew is autistic and he..." - every neurodivergent person is different.
- Assuming someone can't do things because they're neurodivergent.
- Assuming someone must be good at certain things (not all autistic people are good at maths!).

Unhelpful behaviours

- Touching someone without consent, including 'comforting' touches.
- Insisting on eye contact.
- Speaking louder or more slowly as if someone has hearing difficulties.
- Talking to a companion instead of the person themselves.
- Commenting on stimming or other coping behaviours.
- Drawing attention to differences in front of others.
- Trying to stop or discourage stimming (it serves an important purpose).
- Giving unsolicited advice about treatments or cures.

How to Ask About Needs

You want to be helpful without being intrusive. Here's how to strike the right balance.

Good approaches

- "Is there anything that would make your visit more comfortable?"
- "We have a quieter area if that would help at any point."
- "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."
- "We have ear defenders and fidget toys available if useful."
- Offering adjustments to everyone, not singling people out.

Let people lead

Some people will tell you exactly what they need. Others won't want to discuss it at all. Both are fine. Make adjustments available and visible so people can help themselves without having to ask or explain.

If someone does share that they're neurodivergent, a good response is simply: "Thanks for letting me know. Just let me know if there's anything that would help." Then carry on as normal - don't make it a big deal.

Don't require disclosure:
People should never have to prove or explain their neurodivergence to access adjustments. If someone asks for a quieter space or extra time, just provide it. You don't need to know why.

Supporting Neurodivergent Volunteers

Neurodivergent people can be brilliant volunteers. They may bring focus, attention to detail, creative thinking, honesty, reliability, and specialist knowledge. To help them thrive:

- Be clear about expectations and tasks - don't rely on people 'picking it up'.
- Provide written instructions as well as verbal ones.
- Give advance notice of changes to routine or responsibilities.
- Allow flexibility in how tasks are completed where possible.
- Create a buddy system for questions and support.
- Don't require attendance at noisy social events.
- Offer regular check ins rather than assuming everything is fine.
- Value different working styles - some people work better alone, others in pairs.
- Recognise that social aspects of volunteering may be tiring.

Many neurodivergent people have experienced rejection or failure in workplaces and other settings. A volunteering role where they feel accepted and valued can be genuinely life-changing.

When Someone is Struggling

Sometimes a neurodivergent person may become overwhelmed, distressed, or shut down. This isn't bad behaviour - it's a response to overload. Here's how to help:

Signs someone may be struggling

- Appearing anxious, agitated, or distressed.
- Stimming increases (rocking, hand movements, etc.).
- Becoming very quiet or withdrawn ('shutdown').
- Trying to leave suddenly.
- Covering ears or eyes.
- Becoming tearful or overwhelmed.
- In more severe cases, a 'meltdown' - loss of emotional control (not a tantrum).

How to help

- Stay calm - your calmness helps.
- Reduce sensory input: turn down lights, reduce noise, create space.
- Offer a quiet space to go to.
- Speak slowly and simply - or don't speak at all if that seems better.
- Don't crowd or touch the person.
- Don't ask lots of questions.
- Give time - recovery may take a while.
- Never physically restrain someone unless there's immediate danger.
- Once recovered, don't make a big deal of it.

Resources for Further Learning

Organisations

- National Autistic Society - autism.org.uk
- ADHD UK - adhduk.co.uk
- British Dyslexia Association - bdadyslexia.org.uk
- Dyspraxia Foundation - dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk
- Tourettes Action - tourettes-action.org.uk
- Neurodiversity in Business - neurodiversityinbusiness.org

Training

- Many local authorities offer free neurodiversity awareness training.
- The National Autistic Society offers online courses.
- ADHD Foundation provides workplace training.
- Ask your local Autism Partnership Board about training opportunities.

Quick Reference: Top 10 Things to Remember

1. Neurodiversity is natural variation, not a defect. Neurodivergent people's brains work differently - not wrongly.

2. Every neurodivergent person is unique. Don't assume someone's needs based on their diagnosis.

3. Many barriers are invisible. What seems fine to you may be exhausting or overwhelming for someone else. There is no look to being autistic / ADHD / and disabled.

4. Be clear and direct. Say what you mean. Explain unwritten rules. Don't rely on hints.

5. Sensory environments matter. Lighting, noise, smells, and touch can all be challenging.

6. Don't insist on eye contact. It's not a sign of respect or attention for everyone.

7. Give processing time. Don't rush responses or fill silences.

8. Accept different behaviours. Stimming, avoiding small talk, and directness are valid, not rude.

9. Make adjustments available to all. People shouldn't have to disclose or explain to get help.

10. Ask, don't assume. "Is there anything that would make your visit more comfortable?"

Warm Welcome Spaces

www.warmwelcome.uk
info@warmwelcome.uk

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Registered office: Warm Welcome, The Courtyard, High Street, Ascot, Berkshire SL5 7HP