

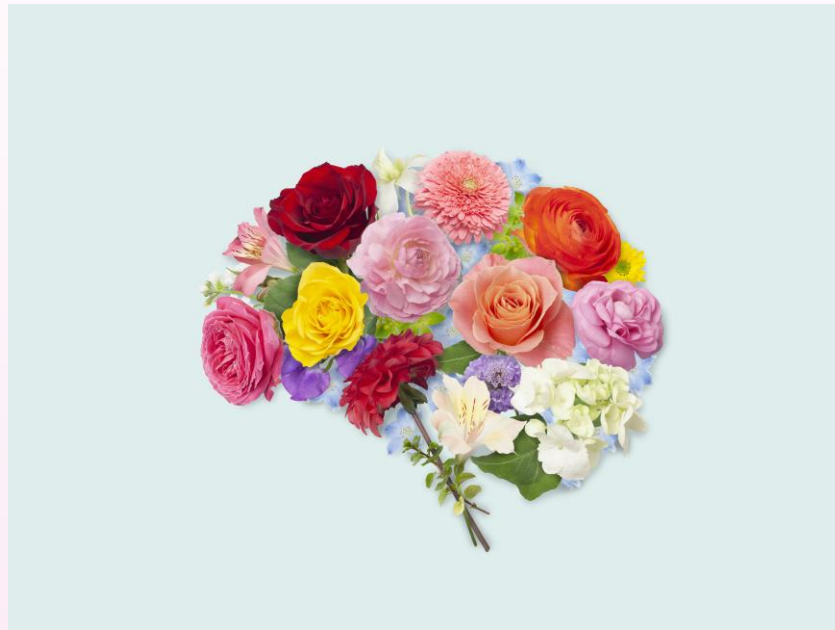


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Neuro-affirming teaching and guidance

**Supporting and engaging neurodivergent students in
everyday study life. Providing clarity, reducing
cognitive load and establishing workable structures.**

This presentation was produced as part of the European IPVET project, which is funded by Erasmus+ and coordinated by WinNova. It draws on webinars delivered by Riikka Seppälä to WinNova staff in 2024–2025 and on the neurodevelopmental (nepsy) training delivered by Terhi Kivikoski in February 2026.



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Why is neurodiversity a concern for vocational teachers and guidance staff in Finland?



10–15 %

of the Finnish population is neurodivergent.



12 %

of vocational education students received special support in 2025 (approx. 39,500 students).



86 %

of students receiving special support studied in a mainstream vocational institution in 2025.



~10 %

of students in initial vocational qualifications discontinued their studies in 2023–2024.

A growing phenomenon: According to Kela statistics, referrals for children and pre-adolescents to rehabilitation are primarily due to neurodevelopmental conditions.

Neurodiversity affects many people, either directly or indirectly. Everyone has their own unique strengths, challenges, and support needs.

Sources: Finnish Association for Autism, ADHD Finland, Statistics Finland, Kela

What does neurodivergent (nepsy) mean?



Neurodivergent

- ✓ It refers to the differences in how the brain functions and is structured that shape how a person perceives and operates in the world.
- ✓ For example, a student may excel in one area but require substantial support in another.
- ✓ Traits do not manifest in the same way in every environment.
- ✓ In Finland, for example, neurodiversity is understood as a continuum on which everyone is located. The terms neurominority (neurodivergent people) and the neuronormative neuromajority (neurotypical people) are commonly used.



The most common diagnoses / neuropsychiatric conditions

- ADHD and ADD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Autism spectrum: distinctive features of interaction, sensory regulation difficulties and sensitivity to stress
- Dyslexia and developmental language disorders
- Dyspraxia, developmental coordination disorder
- Dyscalculia, difficulty with numeracy
- Tourette syndrome and tic disorders

Four perspectives on neurodivergence



Sensory processing

Sensory processing varies from person to person and can differ from the typical pattern. For example, it can manifest as sensory hyper- or hyposensitivity.



Executive function

Difficulties with self-regulation and emotional regulation, and with directing one's own activity.



Social interaction

Differences in social interaction, engagement and communication.



Nervous system load

There is an exceptionally high load on the nervous system and a high susceptibility to stress.

The four areas are interconnected. For example, sensory overload raises stress levels, which weakens executive function and interaction.

Strengths and potential



Information processing: for example, the ability to identify key information from changing material



Managing one's own energy: for example, involves having the ability to multitask appropriately and maintain a good energy level.



Shifting perspective: for example, the ability to approach work from different angles and innovate.



Commitment: for example, having a positive attitude towards study and work, demonstrating a strong work ethic, and adhering to rules and routines.



Creative thinking involves the ability to see connections between seemingly unrelated matters and to find novel, unconventional solutions to problems and challenges.



Productivity and accuracy: for example, the ability to concentrate and remain focused on the task at hand.



Teamwork: the ability to contribute one's own expertise to the team, as well as a commitment to collaborative working.



Remember the strengths! Recognising and acknowledging student's strengths builds and boosts a sense of self-efficacy.

How do neurodivergent traits manifest in everyday study life?

Underlying factors



Executive function difficulties



Emotional and self-regulation difficulties



Sensory and load sensitivity



Social challenges

In everyday practice, challenges may arise in the following areas:

Following instructions

Tolerating change

Interaction

Self-direction

Memory

Asking for help

Demonstrating competence

Working in a group

Transitions

Environmental load

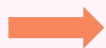
Look beneath the surface - behaviour is a message

Arriving late to class



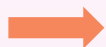
difficulties with time perception and executive function

Constant questions and requests for clarification



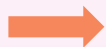
working memory overload

Falling behind, difficulty following instructions



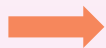
difficulties regulating attention and concentration

Constant movement



a hyperaroused nervous system that regulates concentration through movement and sensory input.

Inappropriate language



impulsivity and difficulties with emotional regulation

The senses and load regulation



Life is a swell of sensations

External senses: taste, hearing, sight, smell, touch, body position and movement

Internal sensations: pain, hunger, thirst, satiety, temperature, heartbeat

Load accumulates unnoticed throughout the day.

Support for load regulation



Assistive tools

e.g. ear defenders, an active cushion, a fidget toy



Quiet working and quiet spaces

The option to withdraw and calm down



Minimise sensory stimuli in the environment

by managing lighting, sound and visual clutter. This includes the visual “noise” of digital environments and overly complex online structures.

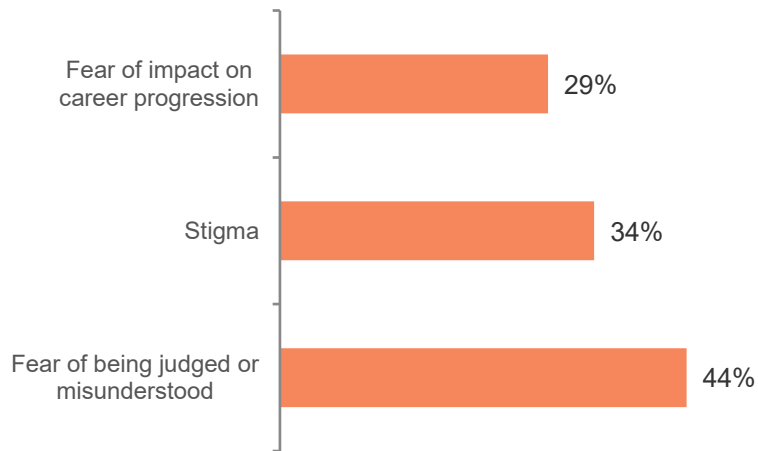


Opportunities for breaks and movement

Regulate alertness through movement.

Stigma, fear of labelling and masking

Why have three in ten not disclosed their diagnosis?



Source: Neurodiversity Index 2024

What makes identification difficult?

Masking

Concealing one's own traits and copying others, driven by a strong need to belong and not stand out.

Uneven ability profile

High proficiency in some areas alongside significant difficulties in others

Behaviour varies by environment

Traits do not appear the same way in every environment

Compensating with strengths

Difficulties are masked by overperforming

Structure provides safety and predictability



Maintain a clear and consistent sequence

Tell students what will happen next and what is expected of them. This will make it easier for them to concentrate.



Define the outcome and the process precisely

What is expected? How should one proceed? What will the finished work look like? Provide unambiguous, clear instructions.



A predictable structure

School days and periods of on-the-job learning follow a familiar, predictable pattern.



Remove distracting stimuli and create a sensory-friendly environment

Calm lessons and learning environments support all learners.



Break things down into steps and visualize them

Use images and visual means to clarify the required actions and instructions.



Routines help

Mnemonics, first–then–next, lists, reminders and categories

Structure does not restrict – it frees up working memory to focus on learning.

Students are supported with clear, step-by-step instructions to help them focus.

One instruction



Pause



Second instruction

Only give two instructions at a time!

Provide instructions through multiple channels: spoken, written and visual.



Repetition, repetition and repetition

Repetition strengthens executive function



Step-by-step instruction

For lessons and assignments, take it one step at a time



Sessions of a suitable length

Attention-sustaining work in blocks of approx. 10–15 min



Individual ways of interacting

Consider each student's unique approach to receiving guidance



Varying postures and places

Changing working posture and location can help to keep the students alert.

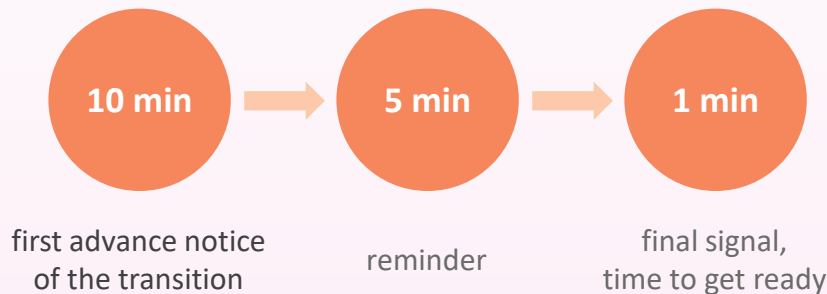


Positive attention and feedback

Successes are more effectively guided by recognition than by prohibitions.

Supporting and anticipating transitions

Signal the transition well in advance:



Tools for managing transitions

include an hourglass or online timer, walking through events in advance and thinking aloud as well as encouraging the student to think aloud and wonder together.

Transitions in everyday institutional life:

- starting and ending lessons, e.g. taking out materials, finishing tasks and moving on to a new task
- moving from one classroom to another
- moving to the lunch break
- special events such as celebrations, visitors and workshops
- ending the day and heading home

On-the-job learning and environments outside the institution require preparation.

Break the day and tasks down into smaller parts – practical tips

Visual daily schedule

1

Using images, colours and symbols helps students to understand the structure of the day. Only show one step at a time.

Clearly defined tasks

2

E.g. “write an essay” would mean: 1) Open your notebook 2) Write the title, 3) Write the first sentence

Give advance instructions before transitions

3

“In five minutes we are going to lunch. Put your books away.”

Short breaks and rewards

4

Taking planned breaks and showing appreciation can help to maintain motivation.

Checklists

5

Create clear tasks, e.g. for end-of-day routines: close your books, pack your bag, check your belongings.

Calm reminders and clear language

6

Short, concrete sentences: “Now we are putting our phones in the box.”

Extra tip: Social stories help students to rehearse new situations in advance. For example, they can be used to talk students through the first day at a workplace step by step.

Supporting motivation and executive function

Area of support	Approaches for teaching and guidance
Initiative	Break tasks into parts and build intrinsic motivation for the work.
Time management	Make the passage of time visible: use alarms, reminders and task lists, plus aids such as a timer, TimeTimer or hourglass.
Materials	Visual clarity in materials, so that content and instructions are easy to find and grasp.
Prioritisation	Make it easier to identify the most important and most urgent item, e.g. a master list plus lists broken into smaller parts.
Concentration	Minimise distractions and guide students to work in shorter blocks. Encourage movement breaks.
Self-reflection	Ask open questions and encourage students to find their own best way of working.

The environment affects how challenges are perceived



Factors that increase challenges

- Distractions in the environment and several things happening at once
- A large group size
- An informal, unpredictable situation
- Complex, lengthy instructions given to the whole group
- Prolonged work requiring sustained effort
- Feedback only after the task is finished
- An expectation to stay still



Factors that ease challenges

- A calm environment with an appropriate level of stimulation
- Working in small groups or one-to-one
- Structured situations with a clear timeframe and an available adult
- Short, individual instructions given one step at a time
- Working in stages in short blocks
- Well-timed, immediate encouraging feedback
- Means of regulating alertness, such as movement, an active cushion or a fidget toy.

Basic needs also matter: fatigue, hunger and nervousness make things more challenging.

Using encouraging feedback as a guidance tool



Immediate, concrete recognition

Genuine, prompt feedback when a student follows instructions, such as a thumbs up or a smile. Even the smallest acknowledgement is important.



Highlight the strengths

"Well done! Which of your strengths did you use? What made this work?"



Avoid using negative messages such as 'no' and 'don't'

They can activate the fight-or-flight response and can push students into a defensive position



Aim to avoid negative remarks

Guide the student with encouraging feedback



Words that empower

"Thank you for telling me."

"You will get through this."

"What would help you take the next step?"

"What do you genuinely think about this?"

"You know what is best for you."

"Do you notice how well it all went?"

Encounter, co-regulation and dialogue



Co-regulation

Through calmness, firmness, kindness and acceptance, the adult influences the student enabling them to experience being seen for all their emotions. This creates an opportunity for learning.

A good connection requires:

- Understanding that the student is not misbehaving on purpose – this is about the brain's alarm state and protective strategies.
- The capacity to remain unruffled: the student's behaviour is not a criticism of the teacher or guidance counsellor.
- The ability to work through one's own emotions without bypassing them.



Connection is built in dialogue

- ✓ Listen in a way that encourages the other person to speak and express themselves.
- ✓ Respond in a way that deepens their understanding.
- ✓ Work together to build shared understanding.
- ✓ Reflect on how the other person's words make you feel.



“The best support comes from adults who understand differences and are genuinely willing to find ways to help. This does not mean that students can behave however they want. Teachers and guidance counsellors must be firm but kind.”



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Empathy is the antidote to shame

Empathy is

- ✓ putting yourself in another person's position
- ✓ accepting differences
- ✓ being non-judgemental
- ✓ recognising emotions
- ✓ Practising self-compassion.



Words for an empathetic encounter

"I'm glad you raised it, thank you for telling me."

"Did I hear correctly – did I understand that..."

"Would you like to share it with me? I would like to understand better."

"What you are experiencing and feeling is deeply human."

"That sounds really hard."

"We will get through this together"

"How could I best help you?"

Self-compassion and wellbeing at work for teachers



Recognise your own reactions

Your own reactions may be shaped by your beliefs and expectations, prejudices, feelings of frustration or inadequacy, energy levels and life situation.

Questions for self-reflection:

- *“Why does this student's behaviour irritate me?”*
- *“Are the rules genuinely fair, and which of them are actually necessary?”*
- *“What does good teaching really look like?”*



Self-compassion sustains you

- Strengthens resilience and the capacity to face difficulties
- Reduces stress and protects against burnout in a helping role
- Helps to set boundaries and has a positive effect on interaction.



“Self-criticism asks whether I am good enough. Self-compassion asks what would be good for me.”

Checklist: seven principles for teaching and guidance

1 Individual needs

Familiarise yourself with each student's strengths, challenges, and learning style.

2 A sensory-accessible environment

A calm, uncluttered space, with controlled lighting and sound, and clear rules and routines.

3 Structured teaching

Clear schedules, step-by-step instructions and helpful tools

4 Flexibility and reasonable adjustment

Extra time, alternative ways to demonstrate competence and a variety of materials.

5 Positive reinforcement

Focus on strengths and successes. The value of this approach is immeasurable.

6 Collaboration and support

Work alongside colleagues, special needs teachers, student welfare services and guardians..

7 Empathy and patience

Try to understand the student's perspective and offer constructive support. Remember to be self-compassionate.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

Every encounter provides an opportunity to create experiences that bolster a student's resources.

Sources: Riikka Seppälä, Neurodiversity expertise for vocational teaching – webinars, WinNova, parts 1–3 (2024–2025) · Statistics Finland · Kela · Neurodiversity Index 2024 · Terhi Kivikoski, Neurodivergent students in the classroom – clarity, lighter load and clear structures, training delivered to WinNova staff in 02/2026.

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