



Queensland

Guidelines: Recognise and Support Neurodivergent People

OVERVIEW

Surf Life Saving Queensland (SLSQ) is committed to creating a culture of safety and promoting equity, respect and diversity. We have reflected the sentiments of this commitment in our [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2027](#) and [Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2024-2027](#). Whilst we are already committed to the inclusion of people with disability, as demonstrated through existing initiatives led by volunteers, we aim to remove barriers present in our organisation for all people with disability.

PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT

The purpose of this guideline is to provide practical guidance to clubs and volunteers on recognising and supporting neurodivergent people at Surf Life Saving Clubs (SLSC) to access and enjoy the beach environment through our adaptive programs.

The guideline has been created as per the directive of SLSQ Junior Advisory Panel to support age managers and clubs in recognising and supporting neurodivergent children/ Nippers and their families to create a safe inclusive environment that celebrates the diversity of our members. This guideline can also be used to support discussions with other neurodivergent members in our clubs.

Please refer to the following links for more information:

[Inclusive Beaches - Surf Life Saving](#)

[SLSA Online Awareness Course](#)

[SLSA Policy 6.03 Inclusion and Safe Participation](#)

INTRODUCTION

Neurodivergence refers to the diversity in brain function and potential behavioural traits that result in diverse ways of learning, thinking and experiencing the world. These are associated with a range of developmental disabilities and experiences and encompass a number of characteristics, including but not limited to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Down Syndrome and more.

“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?” - Harvey Blume, US writer

Understanding how to **recognise**, **respond to**, and **support** neurodivergent children in a way that is **inclusive** and **respectful** is key to fostering their growth and development.

TERMINOLOGY

Key terms;

- Neurodiverse - Used to describe a group of people with variations in brain types
- Neurodivergent - Used to describe a person with variations in brain type.



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- Neurotypical - Used to describe someone who processes information in ways that is considered 'typical' within their culture.

How to refer to people

SLSQ uses person-first language which focuses on the person rather than their disability. An example of this language is a lifesaver with disability, rather than a disabled lifesaver. We must acknowledge that whilst we utilise person first language, not all people with disability will prefer this language. We recognise that all people with disability are unique and may refer to themselves differently, for example, identity-first language.

Some individuals may prefer specific terms to describe their neurodiversity, such as autistic or neurodivergent. Respecting the preferences of people is important to promote autonomy.

Wherever possible, always defer to the instructions of the person, their primary carer or parent. You should always ask and not assume. Questions that may support you include:

"Do you prefer identity or person first language?"

"What is the best way for me to assist you?"

"Is there anything specific I can do to make you more comfortable?"

If you make a mistake when talking about neurodiversity, don't be disheartened as most neurodivergent people will be happy to have an open and respectful conversation about their preferences and what language to use. Including them in the discussion is most important.

IDENTIFYING NEURODIVERSITY: KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Neurodivergent children may show differences in ways of communicating, behaviours, social interaction and these are often present from an early age.

Key Characteristics:

- **Social Interaction & Communication:**
 - May have challenges in starting or maintaining conversations or may appear withdrawn.
 - May use verbal and non-verbal communication methods which may highlight limited speech, not making eye contact and use of gestures.
 - May experience barriers to understanding social cues like body language and tone of voice.
- **Sensory Processing:**
 - These impact the five senses – hearing, sight, smell, touch or taste
 - May be overresponsive (hyposensitivity) to sensory stimulations like bright lights or loud noises
 - May exhibit excessive movement like running, spinning, jumping or crashing into things



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- May cover eyes or ears to avoid or reduce external stimuli like loud noises and may dislike or seek out sensory stimulations
- **Behaviour:**
 - May exhibit repetitive behaviours or movements like hand-flapping or rocking back and forth and repeating words or phrases
 - May have a strong preference for routines
- **Functioning:**
 - May experience difficulty with organisation, time management and completing tasks.
 - May face challenges with impulse control and attention, especially in environments that require concentration for extended periods.

COMMUNICATION

When communicating with a neurodivergent person, always be **understanding, patient, and open in your communication** with them and their parents / caregivers.

Parents/Carers are most likely well-versed in their child's needs so an empathetic and non-judgmental approach is crucial while communicating with parents/carers.

How to communicate with Parents:

- **Acknowledge with Empathy:** Always approach the conversation with **empathy and respect**. Acknowledge that neurodivergence is a part of who the child is, not something to be "fixed."
Recommendation: *"I noticed that your child has some challenges with [describe behaviour]. I want to work together with you to make sure they feel comfortable and supported in the program and/or club."*
- **Use Simple and Compassionate Language:** Always speak in simple, compassionate terms that the parents can relate to and focus on the **child's strengths** and how to build on them. You can highlight areas where the child shows progress. This helps to foster a positive relationship with parents and shows them that their child's well-being is a priority.
Recommendation: *"Your child has a wonderful ability to focus on [mention interest or strength]. I'd love to explore ways to help them share this with others and/or to keep them engaged."*
- **Offer Support and Collaboration:** Share your support in wanting to work with the parents to support their child's needs and help them feel understood, safe and included. It is important to consider the lived experiences of people to support them best to create an inclusive and safe environment.



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Recommendation: "Let's discuss some things that have worked well for your child in other environments. How can I best support them here? Do they need any adjustments that I can support with?"

- **Respect Confidentiality:** Ensure that any discussion you have about the child's neurodivergence is kept **confidential** and only shared with relevant stakeholders who are directly involved in supporting the child in your club. Communicate this to the parent/carer and thank them for sharing their thoughts and inputs with you.

Recommendation: "I assure you that any discussions we have are confidential and will be used only to support [name of child] in the program/ club."

SUPPORT: CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

Creating a safe and inclusive environment for neurodiverse people is about respecting an individual's unique characteristics and understanding lived experience through respectful communication.

Strategies for Support:

- **Provide Reasonable Adjustments**
 - Neurodiverse people may need reasonable adjustments when participating in programs. Being supportive and flexible to provide that adjustment is recommended. Reasonable adjustments can be offered to all participants (not just those who are neurodiverse) as best practice inclusion.
 - The purpose of a reasonable adjustment is to make it possible for members to participate to their full capability and in a meaningful and dignified way.
 - **Recommendation:** Refer to [SLSA Policy 6.03 Inclusion and Safe Participation](#)
This policy sets the standards and expectations for promoting inclusion and safe participation of people with disability and/or underlying health conditions in all aspects of surf lifesaving activities, including guidelines on the provision of reasonable adjustments and determining fitness to participate.
- **Awareness:**
 - Explore resources designed to support the inclusion and safe participation of people with disability, inclusive communication, and foster a better understanding of disability. Together, we can create a more accessible and inclusive community for everyone.
 - **Recommendation:** Refer to the following resources
[SLSA Understanding disability guide](#)
[SLSA Guide - Communicating with people with disability](#)
[SLSA Language guide for people with disability](#)
- **Develop Clear, Consistent Routines:**



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- Neurodiverse people often thrive in structured environments. Having clearly structured programs, routines and expectations can help reduce anxiety and provide a sense of security.
 - **Recommendation:** Use visual schedules, timers, or countdowns to indicate transitions between activities (e.g. *"We have 10 minutes before it's time for a break"*).
 - **Sensory Breaks and Adaptations:**
 - Inform all participants of sensory-friendly or quiet spaces in the club where children can take a break from overwhelming stimuli (e.g., a quiet room with soft lighting or noise-cancelling headphones). Discuss this with the parent/carer prior to sessions should a need arise.
 - **Recommendation:** "If the noise becomes too loud, you can take a break in the quiet room or you can inform me."
 - **Use Positive Reinforcement:**
 - Focus on rewarding positive behaviours rather than punishing negative ones. Celebrate small successes and the child's strengths.
 - **Recommendation:** "Great job on staying focused during the activity! I noticed that you really enjoyed working on that skill."
 - **Encourage Self-Advocacy and Choice:**
 - Allow neurodivergent children to express their own preferences and advocate for their needs as much as possible.
 - **Recommendation:** "Would you like to do this water based activity or would you prefer to do an activity on the sand? Let me know how you feel most comfortable."
 - **Foster Empathy Among Peers:**
 - Educate other children in the group to be supportive by encouraging them to be understanding. This helps build an inclusive and welcoming environment.
 - **Recommendation:** "Sometimes, we all need a little extra space or quiet time. Let's be kind and help each other feel comfortable."
 - **Adapt Communication:**
 - Adapt your communication style to meet the child's needs by using simple, clear language for children with language delays, or visual aids for children who struggle with verbal communication.
 - **Recommendation:** "I'm going to clearly show you what we're going to do next."
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CREATING A SAFE, WELCOMING AND RESPECTFUL ENVIRONMENT

- **Recognise Neurodiversity as a Strength:**

As leaders it is important for us to acknowledge that neurodiverse people may be unique in their ways of thinking and those characteristics might be valuable in areas such as problem-solving and creativity. Encourage them to feel proud of their unique abilities.

- **Create a Culture of Inclusion:**

Ensure that all people, regardless of neurodivergence, feel respected and included in activities and social interactions and are offered reasonable adjustments to participation. Ensure you address behaviours of bullying or exclusion quickly and effectively.

- **Be an Ally**

Ally is a verb, not an identity. It is active support for underrepresented groups without being a member that group, or supporting those that need it given your position of accomplishments and influence.

You can be an ally by:

- Listening and understanding the lived experiences of people with disability
- Supporting inclusion by normalising conversations around assumptions.
- Acknowledging that inclusion is about understanding diverse perspectives through respectful conversation
- If you think you got it wrong? Acknowledge, apologise, and move on
- If you notice exclusionary comments and behaviours 'Calling In' or 'Calling Out' unacceptable behaviours is important

- **Calling in and Calling Out**



Calling In



Calling Out

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves addressing persons behaviour more privately • You can do this if the person is approachable, and you already have a professional or personal relationship with them • You have a position of influence in that setting • <i>"I'm curious what was your intention when you said that to 'the family or participant' the other day?"</i> • <i>"I wonder if you considered the impact of your words on the person?"</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking up in the moment to address that the behaviour is not acceptable • There is an urgent need to hit "pause" and prevent further harm to others or yourself • You can do this if previous attempts to 'calling in' have failed or if you render calling in unsafe or ineffective to you and others
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>“Thanks for sharing your views but I may have to disagree on that.”</i>• <i>“I’ll have to step in here as those are not the values we stand by and/or culture we are trying to encourage.”</i>
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References:

[Resources | Neurodiversity Celebration Week](#)

[Inclusive Beaches - Surf Life Saving](#)

[Diversity NeuroDiversity Doc.indd](#)

[CFCA Paper No. 64: Supporting children with neurodiversity](#)

[Neurodiversity, neurodivergence & children | Raising Children Network](#)

[How to Support a Neurodivergent Child | Children's Hospital Colorado](#)

[Calling In and Calling Out Guide](#)