

Integrating Neurodivergent K-12 Students and Staff Into School Emergency Management Planning

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Taking an inclusive and equitable approach to emergency management planning means considering the needs of all populations, and neurodivergent individuals¹ are entitled to the same emergency services as neurotypical individuals. This is not only a best practice and planning principle in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(School Guide\)](#) but also is supported by multiple federal laws, including the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#), the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), and [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 \(Section 504\)](#). Working toward an equitable approach to emergency management planning does not have to be a daunting or costly task. It simply requires administrators and educators to consider the entire school community, from students and staff members to visitors and volunteers, and then take the appropriate actions to ensure the safety of all.

Before implementing an [equitable approach](#) to emergency management planning for neurodivergent individuals, core planning teams must understand some basic terms and traits related to neurodiversity. “Neurodiversity” is a term used to recognize differences in the way individual brains function. The idea is that there is no “correct” way for the brain to work. Instead, there is a wide range of ways that people perceive and respond to the world, and these differences are to be embraced and encouraged. A neurotypical person is someone who has a brain that functions similarly to most others.

¹ For the purposes of this document, the term “neurodivergent individuals” includes children with disabilities who are eligible for special education and related services under the IDEA and students with disabilities who are eligible under Section 504.

Common Forms of Neurodivergence

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—neurodevelopment disorder that affects attention span, decision making, energy management, and self-control
- Autism Spectrum Disorder—neurodevelopment disorder that impacts the nervous system in a way that creates communication and social difficulties, repetitive behaviors, and obsessive interests
- Dyscalculia—disability that affects a person’s ability to understand math and number-based information
- Dyslexia—learning disability that affects a person’s ability to process language
- Dyspraxia—developmental disorder that impacts movement and coordination
- Dysgraphia—neurological condition that impacts a person’s ability to turn thoughts into written language
- Misophonia—disorder in which trigger noises cause strong emotions or reactions
- Meares-Irlen Syndrome—visual processing disorder that leads to difficulties with fine vision tasks such as reading
- Synesthesia—neurological condition where the stimulation of one sense leads to involuntary experience of a second sense (e.g., seeing shapes when smelling certain scents)
- Tourette’s Syndrome—nervous system condition involving unwanted tics (repetitive movements or sounds) that are not easy to control.

While increased research and understanding of neurodiversity is shifting language away from “disability,” the fact remains that neurodivergent individuals experience unique challenges while living within a neurotypical world. Many neurodivergent individuals are high-functioning and adept at “masking” their neurodivergent traits. Masking can lead to burnout, emotional overload, and other stress factors for neurodivergent individuals. The core planning team should [team up with disability specialists, parents and guardians, and Individualized Education Program or Section 504 teams familiar with the student’s needs](#) to adjust the school emergency operations plan (EOP) so that it is ready to accommodate a range of neurodivergences in a variety of settings. This fact sheet contains suggested strategies for core planning teams as they engage in school EOP development.

Identify Neurodivergent Needs

Neurodivergent experiences differ even across diagnoses. Core planning teams should base their planning on individualized needs rather than on assumptions or stereotypes. To avoid stereotyping, it will be important for core planning teams to directly involve neurodivergent staff, faculty, and students and their families in EOP development. During Step 2 ([Understand the Situation](#)) in the planning process outlined in the *School Guide*, the core planning team collects data from a variety of sources. This information should include a confidential roster that identifies neurodivergent students, staff, and faculty and lists their teachers, classrooms, offices, daily schedules, and potential needs during an emergency. The roster may also include any relevant strategies that have enabled neurodivergent individuals to participate successfully in general school activities. The core planning team can work with other school building partners, such as those providing special education services or Section 504 accommodations, to confirm whether a roster already exists that can be used as a foundation. During this process, schools must remain in compliance with the privacy, consent, and disclosure mandates outlined in the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#) and [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996](#).

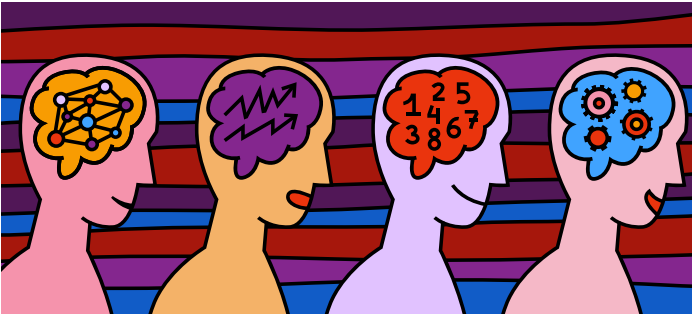
Common Needs of Neurodivergent Individuals

- Literal communication
- Support in blocking out distractions
- Environmental adjustment to avoid sensory overload
- Extended timeframes to complete or understand tasks
- Mnemonic aids
- Permission for self-soothing actions (such as rocking or hand movement)
- Flexibility in means for communication and completing activities
- Understanding communication differences (e.g., some neurodivergent individuals have difficulty making eye contact and will find it easier to listen if permitted to look away from the speaker)

The core planning team should educate all interested parties—including educators and school personnel, students, community partners, and parents—about the inclusion of neurodivergent students in the school EOP. The core planning team should also invite community partners (e.g., emergency medical services [EMS] personnel) to conduct special training sessions to familiarize neurodivergent students and staff with emergency processes and equipment. Everyone should keep in mind that there might be any number of undiagnosed and/or “masked” neurodivergent members of their school population. This can help promote understanding and exposure for all.

Consider Communication and Sensory Needs During Trainings and Actual Emergencies

Neurodivergent needs are based on neurological experience, not intelligence, physical age, or developmental factors and are often context and communication based. To be successful, students and staff must achieve emotional, relational, and sensory understanding with emergency protocols. This can only be achieved through practice and



repetition of procedures outside of the high stress of drills and emergency incidents. Whenever possible, neurodivergent students and their families should be alerted in advance of a planned drill. The dignity of neurodivergent students should also be considered in drill and training situations. Additional practice sessions, for instance, could be held during a lunch period, summer training session, or a similar discrete time that will avoid undue differentiation from their peers.

- **Provide preparedness instruction in multiple forms.** Written, audio, verbal, and pictorial instruction can help ensure safety before, during, and after an emergency. Videos, social stories, picture cards, sensory materials, assistive technology, and activities that encourage learning by doing can also help prepare neurodivergent students for emergencies.
- **Use literal language.** Individuals with autism and other neurodivergent conditions may struggle to apprehend metaphors, idioms, or sarcasm. During emergencies, students need to know exactly what steps to take and take them quickly.
- **Include sensory equipment in [emergency supply kits](#).** Noise canceling headphones or earplugs, comfort objects, fidget toys, peppermints, and other sensory supplies are important for many neurodivergent individuals, who may need additional support in blocking out distractions to avoid sensory overload.
- **Be mindful of physical contact.** While physical contact may be calming, helpful, and essential for some neurodivergent students during emergencies, the same stimuli can cause heightened stress for others. Educate faculty, staff, and community partners in advance about the needs of your students and do not take lack of touch or eye contact personally.

- **Set up a sensory-friendly space.** Anticipate that students may require unique supports after an event has occurred, especially with transitioning back to a typical school day. While individual student needs should be considered, schools can create a quiet, sensory-safe room in which neurodivergent students can recover from the stimulus of the emergency.
- **Provide many opportunities for practice.** Training is an important part of the “before” timeframe of emergencies. It holds increased importance when considering neurodivergent populations. Familiarizing neurodivergent individuals with emergency protocols and safe exposure to stimuli (e.g., the scent of smoke and the sounds and lights of alarms and intercom systems) will increase comfort and understanding with procedures prior to emergency situations. It may also be helpful to break practice sessions into small chunks to work on specific objectives. For example, use one evacuation drill to work on silence and another to work on walking with purpose before requiring students to perform the complete drill with both objectives in place. Repeated practice also allows increased opportunities for positive personal interactions with community partners. Some individuals may need additional awareness to EMS responders before their neurological systems will allow consistent and prompt response during the stress of emergency situations.


Conclusion

Every neurodivergent individual’s needs are unique; what works for one student or school may not work for another. Parents and guardians are likely to know how their student will react under pressure, having guided their student through past emergency situations outside of school. Their insight may increase efficiency and save lives. Families can also practice courses of action with children at home. By respecting and accommodating the needs of neurodivergent individuals, schools can fulfill their obligation to provide safe and supportive learning environments for all.

Resources

- [Design for Neurodiverse Learners](#), Web page (Association for Talent Development)
- [Disaster Response Resources](#), Web page (Office of Special Education Programs)
- [Emergency Evacuations: Planning for the Whole School Community](#), Webinar (REMS TA Center)
- [Ensuring Access and Functional Needs Are Met Before, During, and After Emergency Incidents](#), Resource page (REMS TA Center)
- [How Schools Can Support Neurodiverse Students: Giving Kids Tools to Thrive Academically and Socially](#), Publication (Child Mind Institute)
- [Understanding the Role of School Psychologists in Supporting School Safety Before, During, and After an Emergency](#), Webinar (REMS TA Center)



 (855) 781-REMS (7367)

 info@remstacenter.org

 @remstacenter

 <https://rem.ed.gov>