

WELCOMING ALL YOUTH: NEURODIVERGENCE

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by Rachel Oh

About the Author:

Rachel Oh worked as a research assistant with ACT for Youth from 2024 through 2026 while studying Human Development, Health Policy, and Business at Cornell University to gain a holistic understanding of how people interact with and are shaped by the systems around them. Her interest in neurodiversity is rooted in her close relationship with an autistic cousin. Rachel saw firsthand how environments, supports, and perceptions can profoundly influence a person's life trajectory. "I was especially drawn to his unique strengths, like mastering complex subway systems and guiding me through routes, which shaped how I view neurodivergence," Rachel said. Her perspective sparked her interest in researching and writing about neurodiversity for ACT for Youth's **Welcoming All Youth** initiative. It continues to guide her commitment to more inclusive, strengths-based environments.

What does it mean to be Neurodivergent?

"I hated myself since I was 5... I was really sad all the time. I was angry. I couldn't control my anger... When I was in high school [I] started therapy because my anxiety was really bad."

-Chris, an autistic, non-binary young adult reflecting on their childhood experiences of peer rejection, internalized stigma, and long-term mental health challenges.

The term neurodivergent describes people whose brains function differently from what society considers "typical." This includes conditions such as autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and other neurological differences that affect how individuals think, learn, communicate, and experience the world.

The neurodiversity framework recognizes these variations as a natural part of human diversity, not deficits. However, many environments, especially schools and youth programs, are designed around neurotypical expectations. When youth feel pressure to hide or “mask” their differences to fit in, it can lead to stress, confusion about identity, and feelings of isolation.

The “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition” (DSM-5) provides the primary diagnostic framework used in psychology and psychiatry which encompasses neurodivergence. Published in 2013 by the American Psychiatric Association with a text revision update in 2022, the 1,120 page manual plays an important role in helping youth access services and accommodations. However, its diagnostic criteria have largely been shaped by earlier clinical models that emphasized deficits and focused heavily on boys with ADHD and autism, contributing to underdiagnosis and misunderstanding among girls and youth with different presentations. This makes it especially important for youth-serving professionals to focus on supporting individual needs and experiences rather than relying solely on diagnoses.

Social Exclusion and the Everyday Experiences of Neurodivergent Youth

“This is something I’m worried about personally since I’m starting again in September... it’s new people. And I may not be able to figure out new people, so they may not like [me].”

-Autistic youth anticipating a transition to a new school environment and expressing anxiety about social communication and peer acceptance.

Many neurodivergent youth experience persistent social exclusion and bullying, which shapes how they approach relationships, school environments, and other activities. The “Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders” indicates that nearly half of autistic youth report recent bullying and estimates that up to 94% experience bullying annually. Similarly, youth with ADHD experience high rates of victimization. However, statistics alone do not capture the lived experience.

Negative and stressful encounters often contribute to mental health challenges. Neurodivergent youth report elevated rates of anxiety and depression, often linked to repeated experiences of judgment, misinterpretation, and rejection from peers. Anxiety may lead youth to avoid social situations or community activities, limiting opportunities for connection and engagement. In some cases, repeated bullying leads youth to interpret even neutral interactions as potential threats. This heightened vigilance can increase anxiety and contribute to disengagement from social spaces that might otherwise provide important opportunities for growth and connection.

Stigma and stereotypes also play a major role in daily interactions. Youth are often labeled as “difficult to work with,” “attention-seeking,” or the “odd one out” because differences in communication styles or behavior are misinterpreted. Over time, not only can societal stigma hinder access to resources, it also erodes confidence and reduces perceived competence, making youth less likely to participate in activities where they fear judgment.

When Systems Aren’t Designed for Everyone: Structural and Environmental Barriers

“I actually tried to reach out to teachers and was told I was ‘too smart’ to have ADHD or autism... it really sent me into a state of depression thinking I just wasn’t like everyone else and it was a bad thing.”

- Neurodivergent secondary school-aged youth describing being misunderstood by educators when seeking support due to stereotypes about intelligence and diagnosis.

Many challenges faced by neurodivergent youth are not caused by the youth themselves but by environments designed primarily for neurotypical ways of thinking, learning, and interacting. Traditional educational and youth program models often follow a one-size-fits-all approach that emphasizes deficits rather than strengths. When youth are consistently defined by what they struggle with rather than what they do well, expectations may be lowered and they may begin to internalize negative beliefs about their abilities. This reinforces their feelings of “I don’t belong” and contributes to poor mental health.

Environmental and sensory factors can also create barriers. Loud noises, bright lights, unclear transitions, and rigid schedules can make participation difficult for youth who experience sensory sensitivities. When the environment does not accommodate these needs, youth may feel incompetent and overwhelmed, causing them to withdraw.

Many educators and instructors also report limited training in inclusive practices. Without guidance on how to support neurodivergent communication styles, sensory needs, or learning differences, adults may unintentionally reinforce assumptions and barriers to participation.

Intersectionality adds another layer to these challenges. Family socioeconomic status can influence access to early diagnosis, support services, and educational resources. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how youth from marginalized racial, cultural, or social backgrounds may face compounded barriers due to discrimination or historical inequities that limit access to services.

“I Don’t Have to Hide Anymore”: Identity, Belonging, and Neurodivergent Self-Understanding

“Those kids were like me. That was really awesome. That was the first time that I had seen a conglomerate of classmates that had similar characteristics. And then I kind of realized, wow, I don’t have to cover up anymore... I don’t have to wear a mask.”

– Saoirse, autistic young adult female reflecting on finding peer belonging and identity acceptance in a specialized school setting with other neurodivergent students.

Identity development is an important milestone to help neurodivergent youth thrive. Many neurodivergent youth spend years trying to hide or “mask” their differences in order to fit into environments shaped by neurotypical expectations. Cultivating an environment where individuals are encouraged to see their differences not as flaws to fix but as part of who they are is critical in helping them reach their full potential.

Receiving a diagnosis can be a turning point in this process. For many youth, looking at past experiences through the lens of their neurodivergent condition allows them to better understand themselves and various interactions. This fresh introspection can help them to combat internalized stigma, advocate for their needs, and embrace their strengths and challenges with resilience. When diagnosis is approached through a neurodiversity-affirming perspective, it can foster a positive sense of identity, reduce feelings of shame or confusion, and improve academic performance.

Supportive and welcoming environments also play a key role in identity development. Youth who participate in peer communities where neurodivergence is understood and accepted often report higher self-esteem, stronger resilience, and a greater sense of belonging.

Friendships and inclusive peer networks can buffer against the effects of bullying and rejection and give neurodivergent youth a sense of relief in learning they are not alone. Participating in community activities that align with their interests, such as music, sports, or creative hobbies, can also strengthen confidence and well-being.

Creating Spaces Where Neurodivergent Youth Can Thrive

“I felt very claustrophobic trying to hide who I was. Almost like you were trying to physically stuff me into a literal desk drawer at times.”

- Shirley, an autistic young adult female reflecting on being corrected, removed, and pressured to conform to behavioral expectations in classroom settings.

One of the most important steps is shifting from a deficit-based perspective to a strengths-based approach. Evaluating assumptions is critical: rather than focusing solely on challenges and shortcomings, educators and youth professionals can highlight competencies, talents, and unique ways of engaging with the world. Recognizing and celebrating strengths help build a positive sense of self and reinforces the message that youth are capable and valued.

Inclusive practices can also make programs more accessible. Strategies such as breaking instructions into smaller steps, using visual supports, incorporating flexible learning environments, and applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles can help reduce cognitive and sensory overload.

Programs can further support youth by providing spaces for peer connection, such as mentoring programs or structured social groups. Positive relationships with adults such as teachers, mentors, coaches, and youth workers are particularly important. When adults show warmth, encouragement, and belief in youth's abilities, they can significantly improve emotional regulation, engagement, and mental health outcomes. When program designing, involving team members with lived neurodivergent experience offers meaningful insights to further promote inclusive environments.

Family support also plays a key role where parental encouragement and warmth build self-confidence, emotional coping skills, and social integration. Encouragement and open communication between families and youth professionals can help create consistent environments where youth feel supported both at home and in community spaces.

A critical developmental milestone for neurodivergent youth is developing a sense of personal agency and independence in their behavior and learning. A strength-based approach offers flexible assignment options that let kids pursue their interest and choose how they demonstrate their learning. By recognizing neurodiversity as a natural form of human variation and designing programs with flexibility and inclusion in mind, youth professionals can help ensure that all young people feel welcomed and able to participate fully.

Conclusion

“I don't want to be fixed. I want to be understood and supported.”

- Neurodivergent youth reflecting on experiences within systems that prioritize correction over understanding including clinical, educational, and social environments.

The experiences shared by neurodivergent youth make clear that many of the challenges they face stem not from their differences, but from environments that are not designed with those differences in mind. When youth are supported in inclusive and affirming environments, they are more likely to develop confidence, resilience, and a strong sense of belonging. Creating welcoming spaces begins with listening to the voices and lived experiences of neurodivergent youth and reflecting on how programs, expectations, and language may unintentionally reinforce exclusion.

This is at the heart of ACT for Youth's Welcoming All Youth initiative: helping the world better understand the diverse experiences so we can move beyond stereotypes and create environments where every youth feels valued and included. By shifting toward strengths-based approaches, designing flexible and inclusive programs, and fostering supportive relationships with peers, families, and trusted adults, youth professionals can help ensure that neurodivergent youth are not asked to hide who they are, but instead are recognized for their unique perspectives and empowered to fully engage and thrive.

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