

Supporting Neurodivergent Girl Scouts

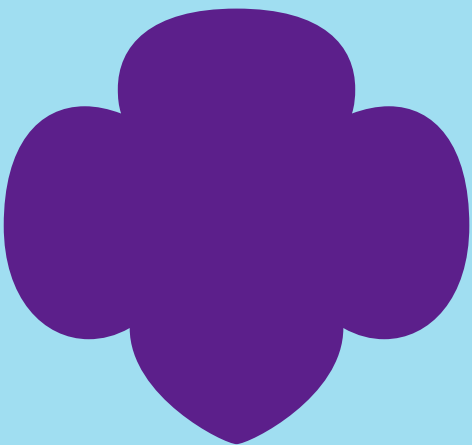


What is Neurodiversity?

If you know a Girl Scout who is neurodivergent, you might be wondering what exactly neurodivergence means and how you can best support them in your troop.

Neurodiversity is short for “neurological diversity”. Neurodiversity is differences in brain function.

This document shares helpful insight and tips for supporting our neurodivergent Girl Scouts.



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TERMINOLOGY

- ▶ **Neurodivergent (ND):** is a person whose brain functions differently from what society considers to be the norm.
 - ▶ There are many diagnoses that fall under the category of neurodivergent including but not limited to Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Tourette's, and OCD.
- ▶ **Neurotypical:** is a person whose brain functions in what is considered to be the typical way.
- ▶ **Allistic:** is a person that is not on the Autism Spectrum.
- ▶ **Masking:** is when a neurodivergent person hides their true selves and traits to appear more neurotypical. This often occurs to fit in, to follow the rules, for safety, and to please others. Many jobs, schools, and social standards expect neurodivergent people to do this.
 - ▶ Masking can result in higher stress and anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts, feelings of not fitting in, exhaustion (burnout), and loss of identity.
 - ▶ Masking does not make the need for supports go away, yet children who mask are less likely to receive supports because they are deemed too "high functioning" or "low support needs".
 - ▶ Masking is important to understand because you might not 'see' someone's disability, but it doesn't mean that it's not there. This is also referred to as an invisible disability.

SUPPORT TIPS

- ▶ **Eye Contact:** Eye contact is a societal standard. In the US, people often associate lack of eye contact with lying, nervousness, being rude, and not listening.
 - ▶ Many neurodivergent Girl Scouts have difficulty making eye contact. They may find it uncomfortable, distracting, or even painful.
 - ▶ It can be even more distracting for some Girl Scouts to have to focus on, which impacts their ability to listen.
 - ▶ Eye contact is not necessary to communicate. Many neurodivergent Girl Scouts can communicate more effectively when they are not forced to make eye contact.
 - ▶ You may try and make eye contact but remember that you may not get it back from that Girl Scout and that is okay.



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SUPPORT TIPS (continued)

- ▶ **Wait time:** Some neurodivergent Girl Scouts could have a delay in language processing. Extending the wait time after you ask a question to 15-45 seconds can reduce processing demands placed on the Girl Scout and allows them time to formulate a response.
- ▶ **Transitions:** Neurodivergent Girl Scouts often need support when transitioning from one task or situation to another. Using a visual schedule, setting a routine, and giving advanced notice about a transition will help them feel prepared and make the transition smoother.
- ▶ **Reducing Sensory Input:** Some ND Girl Scouts may be hypersensitive to sensory input. Offering a quiet space and noise cancelling headphones is an easy way to help reduce some sensory input.
 - ▶ If you are hosting a Girl Scout event, it is helpful to share information about loud noises, flashing/bright lights, etc. at check in so the Girl Scout and their caregiver can have time to plan and prep accordingly.
 - ▶ For Girl Scout events, you may also want to create a sensory space available for girls to have a space to step out of an activity/event if they need a quiet and calm place to regulate themselves.
- ▶ **Stimming:** Stimming is a self-regulatory, self-stimulatory, and at times an automatic behavior. Some examples of stimming are spinning, tapping, vocal noises, repeating sounds, or hair twirling.
 - ▶ Stimming can help soothe, regulate, and be an expression of emotions. Unless it is harmful to themselves or others, it can be helpful and should be accepted.
 - ▶ Our goal is not to change Girl Scouts to fit our needs and comfort level. It's to be supportive of their needs and accepting of their differences.
 - ▶ Providing sensory or fidget toys and a safe place for neurodivergent Girl Scouts to take a break and stim is an easy way to support neurodiversity in our organization.
- ▶ **Communication:** We often tend to use indirect language while speaking with others, but it is more helpful to use direct language when speaking with our neurodivergent Girl Scouts.
 - ▶ **Indirect language:** is when someone talks about something without actually saying it. For example, if you see friends playing a game, you might say “wow that looks really fun.” You are indirectly letting someone know you want to play.
 - ▶ **Direct language:** is when someone says exactly what they mean or are thinking. For example, if you see your friends playing a game you might say “I want to play” or “Can I play?”



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SUPPORT TIPS (continued)

- ▶ **Tone of Voice:** Many neurodivergent people have difficulty understanding and regulating their tone of voice. When we communicate with our neurodiverse Girl Scouts it is important that we listen to the words we say instead of focusing on the tone of voice they are using.
- ▶ **Rephrasing:** the terminology we use can make a difference in how neurodiversity is viewed
 - ▶ Instead of **'High/low functioning'** try to use **'High/low level of supports or needs'**. When we use functioning and severity levels, people often place expectations in their head instead of focusing on what the individual child needs for supports.
 - ▶ Instead of **'non-compliant'** try to use **'Difficulty with ___ skill'**. Our goal shouldn't be for girls to blindly do what another person asks them to. Instead, we can focus on the skills that the girl needs more support in.
 - ▶ Instead of **'social difficulties'** try to use **'social differences'**. People of different neurotypes may communicate differently, but that does not mean they are ineffective communicators.
- ▶ **Symbolism:** The majority of the autistic community does not support the puzzle piece symbol. Instead, they prefer a gold or rainbow infinity symbol, or the ∞ symbol (gold) from the periodic table.

Questions? Contact: reghelp@girlscoutsaz.org

