



NEURODIVERSITY

The Intersection of Neurodivergence
& Increased Risk Factors for Youth

We Can Support Neurodiverse Individuals

Effective support systems and resources are essential for addressing co-occurring neurodivergence and substance use disorder. They can include family and community support, online aids, and healthcare professional networks.¹

Family and community support are key in helping neurodivergent individuals who experience a substance use disorder. Families provide emotional backing, stability, and practical assistance. Online and technological aids are crucial resources for people dealing with these issues. Numerous apps and websites offer educational content, self-help tools, and peer support forums. Healthcare professional networks offer specialized and structured support. These networks consist of doctors, therapists, and other healthcare providers trained to address both neurodivergent conditions and substance use disorders.¹

Protective Factors for Neurodivergent Youth²

Positive Development

Young people who experience positive development are generally resilient. Positive development typically involves overcoming challenges in healthy ways, gaining confidence, and achieving milestones that contribute to a strong sense of self and well-being.

Peer Connection

Young people who are engaged and connected with others, particularly those of the same age, are more likely to see mental health benefits. Youth are inherently social beings, and positive friendships can be essential to their mental well-being.

Supportive Relationships

Supportive caregivers and relationships with other family members in the home are equally important to a young person's mental health. Caregivers who support, encourage, and nurture their children are positioning youth for long-term success.

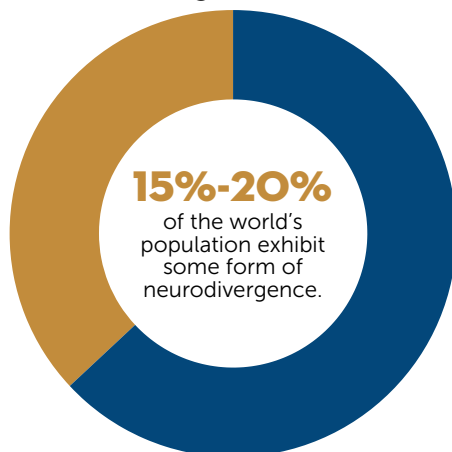
Physical and Psychological Safety

It is important for young people to feel safe and secure, physically and emotionally, in their environments: home, school, their community, and the greater world. Youth who feel like they have access to safe and secure environments, or supportive people they can call on during critical times, are more likely to feel mentally secure.

Understanding Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence refers to the different ways the brain can function, often leading to varied cognitive processes and behaviors. Key areas focus on the particular conditions linked to neurodivergence and the influence of both genetic and environmental factors.¹ Alongside universal needs like nourishment and safety, our neurodivergent friends may require individualized support to navigate sensory sensitivities and social complexities.³

According to research:¹¹



Both genetics and environmental factors influence neurodivergence and substance use. A family history of neurodivergent conditions or substance use disorders increases risk due to inherited traits. Combined, these factors shape the brain's structure and function, contributing to neurodivergence. Understanding these influences is key to developing effective prevention strategies.¹

Neurodiversity Key Terms^{7,8}

Neurodiversity Refers to the diversity of human minds. It is the idea that we all have different brains; we all experience and interact with the world in different ways.

Neurodiverse Describes a group of people with different types of brains. A family, a class, or the cast of characters on a television show can be neurodiverse; an individual cannot.

Neurodivergent Describes a person whose brain works differently than what is considered typical. Neurodivergence can be present from birth or because of a brain-changing event, like a traumatic brain injury. A neurodivergent brain is simply different, not better or worse.

Neurotypical Describes someone whose brain works in a way that is considered the norm, the opposite of neurodivergent. Neurotypical does not mean normal, just that a person thinks and behaves in socially and culturally expected and accepted ways.

Common Neurodivergent Conditions¹⁴

People who identify as neurodivergent typically have one or more of the conditions or disorders listed below. However, since there aren't any medical criteria or definitions of what it means to be neurodivergent, other conditions also can fall under this term. People with these conditions may also choose not to identify themselves as neurodivergent.

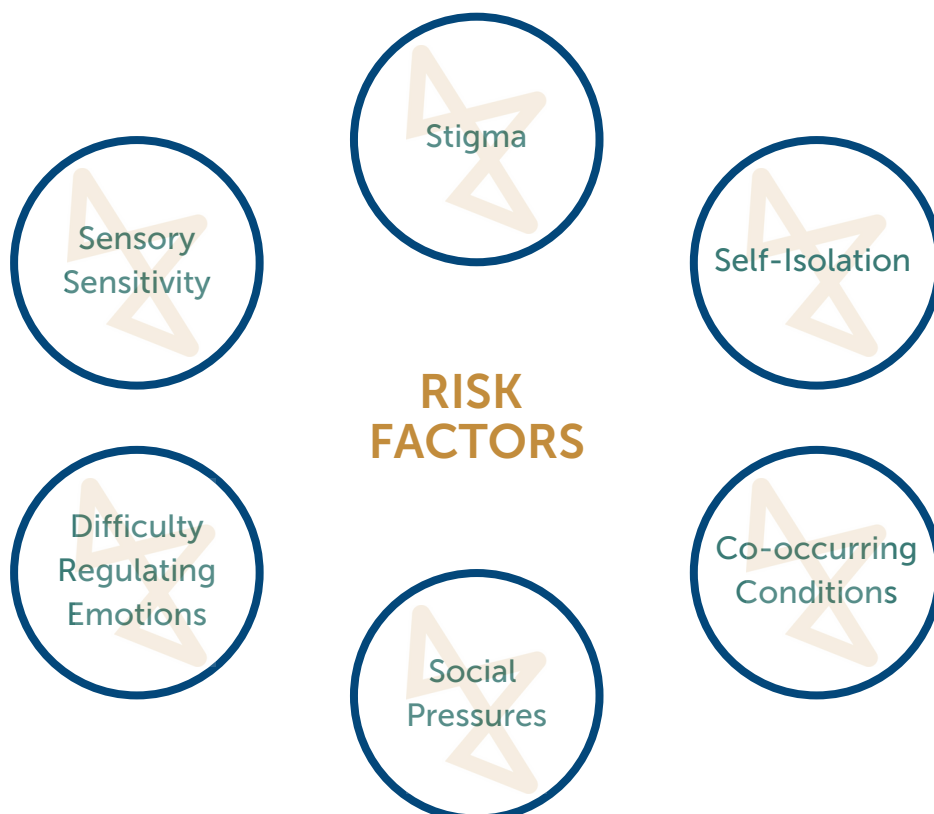
Some of the conditions that are most common among those who describe themselves as neurodivergent include:

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|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Autism | Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) | DiGeorge Syndrome |
| Down Syndrome | Dyscalculia (difficulty with math) | Dysgraphia (difficulty with writing) |
| Dyslexia (difficulty with reading) | Dyspraxia (difficulty with coordination) | Intellectual Disabilities |
| Mental Health Challenges | Prader-Willi Syndrome | Sensory Disorders |
| Social Anxiety | Tourette Syndrome | Williams Syndrome |

The Intersection of Neurodivergence and Substance Use

Neurodivergence, which includes conditions like attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, and others, often co-occurs with substance use disorder (SUD). For example, people with ADHD have a high comorbidity rate with substance use disorders. Research shows that ADHD and SUD share underlying neurobiological factors.

Furthermore, the stress and stigma faced by neurodivergent individuals can increase the likelihood of substance use as a coping mechanism. These factors mutually influence each other, making it challenging to address both conditions separately. SUD can exacerbate symptoms of neurodivergence, while untreated neurodivergence can lead to increased substance use.¹



Supporting Neurodivergent Young People

We know that one of the long-term effects of neurodivergence is a heightened risk for substance use. For example, research has found that youth with an ADHD diagnosis are two to three times more likely to use substances than youth in the general population.⁹ The association is not surprising, given the characteristics of ADHD include trouble focusing, curbing impulsivity, and sitting still. Neurodivergent youth are often not seeking to get high, but curb the symptoms of their diagnosis and often experience the effects of substances more intensely.¹⁰

At home, caregivers can support their neurodivergent child by giving them a safe space to be themselves and meeting their unique needs, whatever that might mean. Give them plenty of time to explore their interests and plan activities that suit their sensory preferences. For example, if you know your young person needs plenty of physical play, designate an area where they can run, jump, spin or wrestle without harming themselves or others. If your young person has sensitivities to light or sound, consider using dimmable lightbulbs or limiting how loudly you play music or the television.

In school or social settings, you might decide to send packed lunches or bring your child's preferred foods so they feel more comfortable. You can also work with your child's teacher to see if your child can use a fidget toy during class to help them concentrate or wear earplugs or headphones to reduce noise.¹²

What Can We Do to Support Youth?

Talk to young people early about substance use¹⁰

Let young people know that having a neurodivergent diagnosis makes them more vulnerable to substance use than their peers without a diagnosis. Help young people understand that the best way to stay safe is to avoid substances altogether.

Do not over-accommodate¹⁰

Some neurodivergent youth may struggle with frustration. Making allowances for them to try to ease their frustration may not be the best strategy. Allowing them to learn healthy stress management skills can lessen the chances of them turning to substances.

Maintain positive communication¹⁰

Neurodivergent youth may not have the effective skills to handle uncomfortable situations. Remaining non-judgmental and fostering a healthy, communicative relationship can help young people stay away from self-regulating with substances.

Foster Self Advocacy Skills¹³

It's amazing how well youth can stand up for themselves when they understand their uniqueness. Caregivers can support youth by teaching them about their neurodivergence, but in a way that makes them feel special, not different.

Encourage Peer Understanding¹³

Fostering understanding among peers can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for neurodivergent youth. Caregivers and teachers can talk about neurodiversity with kids of all backgrounds, emphasizing that everyone's brain works a little differently, and that's okay.

GET IN TOUCH

At Preventions First's Youth Prevention Resource Center, we apply a holistic approach in all that we do, ensuring that youth voices are represented and respected. We invest significant resources to respond to the needs of our youth and support healthy decision-making, for those who work with youth and the youth themselves.



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