

## **Let's Enable Our Allies: Insights for Supporting Neurodivergent Peers**

### **Background & Motivation**

My journey into this research began with my own family. My younger brother is neurodivergent, and growing up together, I've seen both his struggles and unique strengths up close. Three years ago, we moved from the Nordics to the United States. In the Nordics, my school was in a cozy environment: I spent every day with the same 26 classmates for six years. The transition to a fast-paced, competitive U.S. middle school was overwhelming for me, and I worried even more about how my brother would manage such a dramatic change.

What stood out to me in my first year here was that, despite the many accommodations and dedicated teachers, most of us-neurotypical peers didn't really know how to help or be better allies, especially for children with hidden disabilities. I noticed that kids with visible challenges are often easier for others to recognize and support. In contrast, neurodivergent kids whose disabilities are less apparent often face a different struggle. Because their social behavior can sometimes come across as annoying or disruptive, they are not easily understood or helped, which often leads to them being left out or isolated, a true "chicken and egg" problem.

This misunderstanding extends beyond the classroom. Students who acted or communicated differently were often not just misunderstood or excluded by their classmates, but sometimes by their classmates' families as well. Too often, both peers and their families perceived neurodivergent kids as awkward or misbehaved. Instead of encouraging inclusion, they would sometimes suggest that their children keep their distance from such peers. As a result, it was rare to see neurodivergent students invited to birthday parties, play dates, or other community social events.

Unfortunately, I also witnessed firsthand the bullying and social isolation that neurodivergent kids faced, especially during the sensitive middle school and pre-teen years. These experiences can be deeply hurtful and have a lasting impact on their confidence and sense of belonging.

I saw my brother in these kids and realized that while I could understand his behaviors and challenges, most of my peers could not. This gap in understanding and support motivated me to launch this study: to hear directly from neurodivergent individuals about what truly helped them, what they expected from their peers, and what made a lasting difference.

### **Research Approach**

With my parents support and guidance, I partnered with [ARC of King County](#) to conduct this research on what individuals on the spectrum expect from their peers, what made them struggle, and what could have helped them thrive. I was able to approach ARC for outreach and guidance as my parents were already collaborating with the ARC of King County team to settle into the Greater Seattle community with a neurodivergent child. Their support helped me reach a wider audience and gather a broad range of experiences.

The survey was segmented by life stage-from kindergarten through elementary, middle, and high school, to college and adulthood-to capture how needs and expectations change over time. Most responses came from autistic, Asperger's, or ADHD adults sharing first-hand experiences and expectations.

## **Key Insights & Practical Recommendations**

The responses, summarized below and in the slide, are direct from neurodivergent individuals and their families. The themes are clear: simple, genuine acts of kindness and inclusion matter most. Here's what they want peers and allies to know:

- **Complements & Encouragement:** Small positive words can make a big difference.
- **Guide us directly, partner with us, rather than just observing.**
- **Be proactive and ask how you can help.**
- **Guide us when we do something wrong-we may not know ourselves.**
- **Don't judge us if we don't attend social events; invite us/accompany us.**
- **Don't judge us if we seem rude or direct; rather, guide us. Try again if we didn't respond the first time.**
- **We may be very rigid on our interest areas; introduce us to wider perspectives.**
- **If you see us sitting alone or aloof, please don't assume we want to be left out. Invite us to join you-we may want to, but might not be able to ask, or we may have been ignored enough times to lose the courage to reach out ourselves.**
- **Mentor us on relationships (how to get one and keep one).**
- **Guide us with available resources (groups, events, initiatives, therapies, funds).**
- **Check on us occasionally-we need that.**
- **Mention our accomplishments; it's hard to keep going without feedback.**
- **Explain work/role changes clearly and how expectations have changed.**
- **Explain social/politics of meetings/attendees ahead of time.**
- **Coach on navigating work politics and interpersonal team interactions at work.**
- **Be our ally, guide us if you see we are getting in with the wrong company or habits (we may not know).**
- **Try to be a friend/extend a hand-we will not be able to initiate that.**
- **Help us identify our strengths, motivate us, and share with the community/circle.**
- **Include us in your team projects (we may not be aware of any).**
- **Welcome us back after an incident, discuss with us why something was not appropriate and alternatives.**
- **We want to be part of social events and parties, but often don't know how to get invited or what to do to fit in. Please reach out and include us.**

- If we do something “weird” or make a mistake, please give us a second chance and let us know-directly and kindly-how we can do better.
- Be our mentor and ally.
- We don’t have many people in our lives, and those who are there for us can get tired and overwhelmed. We truly love being around people, even if it’s hard for us to express that.

### Why This Matters

It’s not rocket science-what neurodivergent individuals want is simple kindness, clear communication, and genuine inclusion. Many shared that they often don’t realize what they’re doing wrong, so direct feedback is much more helpful than silent judgment or exclusion. Being an ally means offering support, guidance, and friendship-even when it takes a little extra effort.

### Conclusion

Please be an ally and help keep these stars shining bright and not get absorbed in the black hole of isolation. Small, thoughtful actions can help every individual feel valued and included.

*For more information or to participate in ongoing research, please contact Aadya Garg at [aadyagarg1610@gmail.com](mailto:aadyagarg1610@gmail.com).*

### About Aadya Garg



*Aadya Garg is a high school student, an empathetic changemaker, and a passionate advocate for disability inclusion, global health, and sustainability. Committed to addressing the root causes of exclusion and inequality in schools and communities, Aadya focuses on creating lasting change rather than merely responding to symptoms.*

*Guided by the ethical foundation of Chinmaya Mission and the discipline instilled through her experience in Civil Air Patrol, Aadya approaches every project with integrity, empathy, and a strong drive to make a meaningful impact. Through her research and allyship initiatives, she works to empower both neurodivergent individuals and their peers, helping to foster environments where everyone is understood, respected, and able to thrive.*

*Aadya believes that true change is built on awareness, compassion, and practical action—and she is dedicated to building a more inclusive world, one step at a time.*