



Empowering Neurodivergent Girl Scouts

Girl Scouts of Eastern Missouri celebrate the unique strengths and perspectives of girls with diverse neurological experiences.

Our goal is to ensure every Girl Scout feels valued and supported, embracing their individuality while developing their skills and potential. This document shares helpful guidance and strategies for supporting our neurodivergent girls.



Terminology



- **Neurodivergent:** Refers to individuals whose neurological development and functioning differ from what is typically considered “normal” or neurotypical. This term is often used to describe people with diagnoses such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other cognitive or neurological variations.
 - Rather than viewing these differences as deficits or disorders, the concept of neurodiversity, short for neurological diversity, highlights that neurological variations are inherent and should be respected as part of human experience.
- **Neurotypical:** Individuals whose neurological development and functioning align with what is considered typical or standard.
- **Stimming:** Short for self-stimulatory behavior, refers to repetitive actions or movements that are often used by individuals, particularly those who are neurodivergent, to self-soothe, regulate sensory input, or manage emotions.
 - Common forms of stimming include hand-flapping, rocking, spinning, tapping, or repeating certain words or phrases. Stimming can help individuals feel more comfortable in their environment.
- **Intersectionality:** Is a concept that explores how different aspects of a person’s identity—such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and other social categories—intersect and overlap, creating unique experiences of privilege and oppression.
- **Non-verbal communication:** Refers to the ways people convey information, feelings, and meanings without using words. It includes a wide range of behaviors and signals, such as facial expression, posture, gesture and body movement.
- **Spectrum:** Variation in the way a condition affects or shows itself in individuals with that particular difference.
 - Autism is a spectrum condition, meaning that individuals have different traits, to different degrees.

Support Strategies



- **The First Five:** The “first five” is a helpful strategy for both neurodivergent and neurotypical Girl Scouts, as it helps everyone get prepared for the meeting, puts everyone at ease, and creates a calm start to the troop meeting.
 - Spend the first 3-5 minutes walking around and talking to the Girl Scout members, focusing on their personal interests rather than school-related topics.
 - Use this time to build rapport and create a welcoming environment where everyone feels comfortable and included.
 - Use this strategy as a way to connect and soothe overstimulation.
 - Spending the first 3-5 minutes may seem challenging, but it helps neurodivergent individuals feel seen and at ease, setting a positive tone for the meeting.
- **Rule of Three:** This communication strategy involves delivering instructions or information in three steps. First, start by telling the group what you want to happen, second, writing it down or displaying it visually; and third, following up with a one-on-one conversation to reinforce the message.
 - This approach is particularly effective for a neurodiverse group, as it provides clarity, repetition, and personal engagement, helping them better understand and feel comfortable with what is expected.
- **Language Matters:** As we support our neurodiverse Girl Scouts, our communication and language are imperative. The words we choose can significantly impact their comfort and understanding, so it's important to be mindful of how we express ourselves. By being intentional with our language, we can create an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued.
 - Example one: Time constraints. "This should only take ____ minutes to complete," can cause serious anxiety and overstimulation. Instead of giving a time frame, let the Girl Scouts work and go around and check on those who may be struggling.
 - Example two: Avoid describing tasks as "easy." If a Girl Scout finds a task challenging, calling it "easy" might make them feel inadequate. While we may say "easy" to reduce stress, it can actually have the opposite effect for some. Instead, try saying, "This is something we've seen before."

Changing our language takes time, but it can make a big difference.

Support Strategies



- **Movement:** Allowing our girl scouts an opportunity to move their bodies can help them stay engaged and focused during meetings. If a Girl Scout can't settle their body, they might struggle to focus on the activities at hand, so allowing them this movement is key to their success and comfort during meetings.
- Having a conversation with our neurodivergent Girl Scouts at the beginning of the meeting ensures they know they have the freedom to get up and move as needed. If they have the 'wiggles,' creating a communication cue can help both of you understand what's going on.
- Offering fidget toys is a great way to help them channel their energy and maintain focus.
- Incorporating short movement breaks into the meeting agenda, such as stretching or a quick walk, can provide all Girl Scouts with an opportunity to release energy and return to activities with improved concentration.



Things to Remember



- **Wait Time:** Some neurodivergent Girl Scouts might experience a delay in processing language. By extending the wait time to 15-45 seconds after asking a question, you can ease the processing demands on the Girl Scout and give them the time they need to formulate a response.
- **Transitions:** Neurodivergent Girl Scouts often benefit from support during transitions between tasks or activities. Utilizing a visual schedule, establishing a consistent routine, and providing advance notice of upcoming transitions can help them feel more prepared and ease the process.
- **Reducing Sensory Input:** Some neurodivergent 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.
 - When hosting a Girl Scout event, it's beneficial to provide information about any loud noises, flashing/bright lights, or similar sensory elements during check-in. This allows the Girl Scout and their caregivers to plan and prepare as needed.
- **Rephrasing:** The language we use can shape perceptions of neurodiversity.
 - Instead of saying "**high/low functioning**," consider using "**high/low levels of support or needs**." Describing functioning and severity levels can lead to preconceived expectations, whereas focusing on the specific support a child needs emphasizes individualized care.
 - Instead of using the term "**non-compliant**," try saying "**difficulty with [specific skill]**." Our goal isn't for Girl Scouts to follow directions without question, but to identify and support the skills they may need help developing.
 - Instead of referring to "**social difficulties**," try using "**social differences**." Different neurotypes may have unique ways of communicating, but this doesn't mean they are ineffective communicators.

For more information, trainings, accommodations, or accessibility support please contact Dr. Lydia Bullock, Chief of Engagement and Belonging Officer, at lbullock@girlscoutsem.org.