



## 5. Executive Functioning

Spotlight on  
Supporting Autistic  
Girls and Gender  
Diverse Students  
at School

**Neuroaffirming tips and strategies** to support autistic girls and autistic gender-diverse students with executive functioning:

- Many autistic students benefit from clear visuals and written instructions to reinforce verbal teaching. Timers (or visual tools that allow the student to 'see' time passing), instructions on the top of worksheets, directions written on the class board (and possibly then photographed by the student on their device), checklists and visual aides can assist students in organisation and understanding instructions.
- Regular scheduled movement, breaks, or access to flexible learning settings (e.g., different types of seating) can help autistic students to stay regulated and focused, which benefits their executive functioning. Movement breaks can also assist autistic students who are in 'hyperfocus mode' to be more aware of their body signals.
- Support autistic students to get organised with visual or organisational prompts, including colour-codes for each subject linked to their timetable, visuals and lists of daily required supplies. Older students might benefit from using organisational apps
- Check in regularly with your autistic students to make sure they are not getting lost or overwhelmed. Be aware that some autistic students may not be able to ask for help when needed. They may also have misunderstood a task or the instructions, especially if they interpret language literally, and may need help to clarify what the expectation is.
- Many autistic students will benefit from understanding the "big picture" first (e.g., what the end result will be). Knowing this first can assist them with both task initiation and completion.



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- Reminder that being 'ready to learn' can look different for everyone. Many autistic students may need to fidget, stim, move or look away, in order to stay focused on learning tasks.
- Breaking work into smaller, more achievable tasks can also help many autistic students to get started, especially if they feel overwhelmed.
- Allow real-time communication tools (e.g., sticky notes or a whiteboard) for neurodivergent students who struggle with impulsivity, or who are afraid that they may forget what they were going to say if they have to 'wait their turn'.
- Procrastination is often the first sign that an autistic student is struggling with planning and prioritising their work and that they have hit overwhelm or 'freeze'. Equally, perfectionism can be a compensation strategy some autistic students use to hide their executive functioning challenges
- Encourage self-awareness and self-advocacy by supporting autistic students to reflect on their executive functioning strengths and challenges. Then support them, without judgement to communicate their needs (including any supports or accommodations) in the way that works from them.
- Practice acceptance and understand that your autistic students are doing the best that they can. Remember that many autistic students can have fluctuating capacity which means that their executive functioning can vary day to day and moment to moment. Some days they may need more support than others.