

Jack's Best Day Ever!

TEACHING NOTES



DISCUSSION POINTS BEFORE AND DURING READING

- What do you think this story might be about, judging from the cover?
- What can you tell about Jack's school from the opening two-page spread?
- How are Jack's sisters different from him?
- When did you first become aware that Jack may be neurodivergent?
- Why do you think Jack likes peanut butter sandwiches so much?
- Are you, or anyone you know, allergic to peanuts? What does this mean for you or them?
- Why do you think Jack likes watching the same movies over and over again?
- When Jack scoffed down the whole plate of peanut butter sandwiches at the birthday party, do you think he meant to be rude? Why do you think he did it?
- Do you think Jack should be invited to the next party? Why?
- What would have made it easier for Jack at the party?
- Why was going to the zoo Jack's best day ever?
- Did you learn anything from Jack about the different animals he saw?
- Do you have a favourite animal? What can you tell us about it that we might not already know?
- What did Jack learn while he was at the zoo?
- What did you learn about neurodivergence from this story?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- Invite an older neurodivergent student to talk to the class about their early school experiences: what was difficult, what helped, and any advice they would give to fellow students as well as their younger self.
- Celebrate **Neurodiversity Celebration Week** in March (see www.neurodiversityweek.com).
- Have children research and create posters on famous and successful people who are neurodivergent, eg animal scientist and author Temple Grandin; Oscar-winning actor Sir Anthony Hopkins; musician and singer Florence Welch; Olympic gold medallist Simone Biles; and climate activist Greta Thunberg.

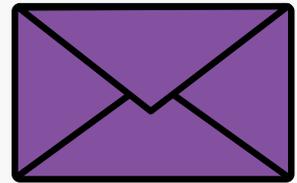
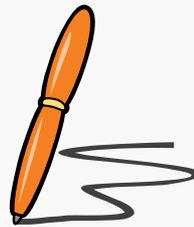


- Invite neurodivergent parents or a neurodivergent member of your local community to speak.
- Encourage neurodivergent students to share their talents.
- Put up ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and dyspraxia fact sheets.
- Hold a neurodiversity-themed school assembly.

AN ACTIVITY THAT PROMOTES INCLUSION AND EMPATHY:

What you need:

- Yellow paper and red paper (or any two pieces of paper that are each a different colour)
- Scissors, glue stick, pen, and an envelope for each group



What to do:

- Give each group a box of the materials above.
- Tell students the group that finishes first will win. Ask them whether they believe this is fair. Students are likely to agree that it is.
- Ask them to do the following:
 - take the yellow paper and cut a circle out of it
 - use the glue stick to glue the yellow circle onto the red paper
 - use the pen to write 'I believe in inclusion' on the yellow circle
 - fold the red paper and place it into an envelope.

- At this stage, give each group, except one, a limitation.
 - For example, two groups can only use one hand and two groups must work with their eyes closed. These groups will struggle to complete the task.
- The group with no limitations will finish first. They should be congratulated for finishing the task first but, inevitably, a frustrated student will state the obvious, ie that the activity was not fair because some groups had limitations/differences that made the activity harder to complete.
- Use this experience as an opportunity to open up a class discussion to explore and ask questions, such as:
 - Are we able to confirm that the winning group is actually the best?
 - How did you feel during the activity?
 - Was it a fair playing field? Was everyone on an equal footing?
 - Would giving the groups with limitations extra time have helped to level the playing field?
 - How might someone feel who has these limitations?
 - What can we learn from this activity?
- Point out that we all have limitations that make some things harder for us and that it is unkind to make fun of someone who is struggling because we do not know what they are experiencing or how hard they are working to overcome their challenges.
- Encourage students to share some of the things they are good at and some of the things they struggle with.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

NEURODIVERSITY, NEURODIVERGENCE AND CHILDREN

Neurodiversity is the idea that there's natural variation in how people's brains work and how people experience, understand, and interact with the world. This means there are natural differences in the way people learn and communicate. The term 'neurodiversity' was coined by Judy Singer, an autistic sociologist, in the 1990s. It refers to the concept that the traits of some conditions such as Autism and ADHD, which may have previously been perceived as deficits, are in fact normal variations in the brain. These variations are often associated with strengths, and although neurodivergent individuals may face challenges in environments designed with the 'neurotypical' majority in mind, when environments are designed with neurodiversity in mind, everyone is able to flourish.

While the term 'neurodiversity' encompasses all of the many and varying ways of thinking, learning and processing information that human brains can achieve, 'neurodivergence' describes a brain that differs from the 'neurotypical' norm. The word 'neurodivergent' commonly refers to people who are Autistic, or those who have ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia or Tourette's Syndrome. Other conditions such as Developmental Language Disorder may also be included.

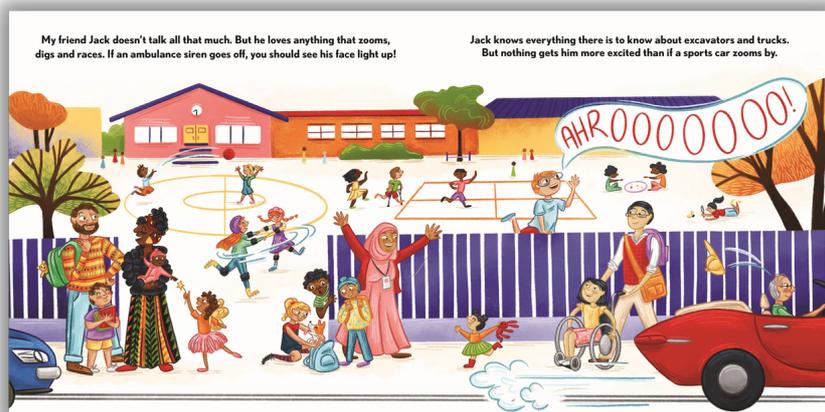
People who are neurodivergent are sometimes described as having learning differences rather than learning disabilities, as these conditions do not impact on IQ but may mean that learning is accessed more easily in ways that are different from more 'typical' learning styles.

EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY

Embracing neurodiversity is about accepting, including, celebrating, and supporting neurodivergent children. Their differences are part of natural variation and don't need to be changed.

Embracing neurodiversity involves:

- acknowledging that neurodivergent children might do things differently from neurotypical children
- adjusting tasks and activities so that neurodivergent children can fully participate
- making the most of neurodivergent children's skills, especially the skills they're proud of
- helping neurodivergent children develop ways of managing everyday tasks and activities that feel natural to them
- not expecting neurodivergent children to change behaviour like stimming, which doesn't interfere with their everyday activities (the term stimming, short for self-stimulating behaviours, refers to repetitive or ritualistic movements or sounds that help an individual self-soothe when stressed or to otherwise cope with their emotions)
- recognising that many people engage in stimming behaviours to some degree, eg someone may twirl their hair when focusing intensely or bite their nails when anxious.



- accepting that while some stimming behaviours may be alarming to outside observers or considered socially unacceptable, stimming is thought to serve an important purpose, especially for people with autism; it helps them to regulate their emotions, cope with feelings of over- or under-stimulation, or better manage physical pain.
- making sure that schools, sports clubs, social groups and community organisations include and support neurodivergent children
- understanding that neurodivergent children can be disabled by noise, light and other things in the environment
- being aware that people's expectations can be disabling too; that it is not up to neurodivergent children to change but rather environments and expectations need to change to better include and embrace neurodivergent children's differences

Why it's important to embrace neurodiversity

- When families and communities embrace neurodiversity, it's good for neurodivergent children's mental health, wellbeing, sense of self and identity.
- Embracing neurodiversity takes away the pressure for neurodivergent children to behave in neurotypical ways, to hide behaviour like stimming, to mask who they are, or to cope with sensory overstimulation. This kind of pressure can be physically and mentally exhausting. And it can make it hard for children to focus on schoolwork and take part in social activities.
- Just like the planet needs a diversity of plants and animals to survive, society needs neurodiversity to thrive. Neurodivergent people bring many strengths to society, including creative, innovative, and analytical thinking and expertise in areas of special interest.
- When children understand more about how neurodivergent children communicate and play, it can encourage all children to interact respectfully and on equal terms. This helps to get rid of the expectation that neurodivergent children should change.

How schools can embrace neurodiversity

- Make changes to the environment for children with sensory sensitivities or high levels of anxiety. For example, perhaps the school could offer quiet spaces, adjust lighting, allow children to use sensory items like squishy balls in class, or permit variations to their uniform policy.
- Use diverse teaching methods to suit diverse learning styles or needs. For example, perhaps allow some children to create video presentations instead of doing class presentations, or to participate in sports day by planning rather than competing. Perhaps teachers could give both written and verbal instructions.
- Provide support for all children to include neurodivergent children in interactions and play. For example, perhaps the school could include lessons on neurodiversity in citizenship lessons or have clubs for all children interested in a game like chess.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT NEURODIVERSITY?

Teaching children to value diversity

helps to:

- support a culture of tolerance, empathy and understanding
- reinforce each individual's sense of identity, positive self-image and self-esteem
- foster a sense of belonging in the school community and wider society.



How to teach about neurodiversity

- A great starting point for teaching about neurodiversity (and diversity in general) is to ensure that the curriculum and resources in your classroom represent a wide range of people and experiences. A 2019 study by Pearson found that 31% of teaching staff felt that children with special educational needs and disabilities were not represented in the resources, topics and materials taught in schools (the 4th highest un-represented group, after non-binary, LGBT+ and disadvantaged pupils).
- Consider how your school or classroom could adapt the curriculum to include neurodiverse voices and perspectives. Use books featuring neurodivergent characters as part of the curriculum, and make them available in classroom and school libraries.
- Weave discussions about neurodiversity into the curriculum. That might be researching significant individuals from the past or present who were/are neurodivergent, across curriculum subjects such as Science, History and Art, or using PDHE lessons to discuss stereotypes and why they should be challenged.
- Offer explicit teaching about neurodiversity, giving young learners the message that everyone is different, and everyone's brains think differently. With younger children, start by talking positively about differences.
- Develop pupils' metacognitive knowledge of how they learn—their knowledge of themselves as a learner, of strategies, and of tasks. As part of these ongoing conversations with the children you teach, discuss how the most useful strategies will be different for different people. Encourage them to reflect on and discuss how they solved a problem or completed a task, and how this might be very different from the way others in the class went about it.



- Normalise different learning styles and learning needs. Whatever age they are, reinforce to your learners that learning and thinking in different ways is normal. Do they like learning times tables by rote, or prefer to use arrays? If they're planning some writing, do they like to use images and create a story map, or do they prefer to make a checklist? Do they find it easier to listen to a book read aloud, or to read it themselves? Does having a fidget toy in their hand when they are listening help them focus, or distract them? Would they rather send a text message or a voice note? Does calming music help them concentrate, or do they prefer silence? There will be times when you need them to use a certain method for a task but if there are opportunities for flexibility, let your learners make their own decisions and see what works best for them. Show your own way of working by modelling tasks but acknowledge that not everyone does the same.
- Teach children that 'fair' doesn't always mean 'the same'. It's important to teach children about the difference between equality and equity, and why some people might need different accommodations, opportunities, or resources in order to reach an equal outcome. Sometimes adjustments given to some pupils, such as being allowed to leave the lesson five minutes early to avoid busy corridors, or having a time out pass that they can use to take a break from the classroom, can feel unfair to others. But once explained most young people can understand the idea that in order to be truly fair, we may need to treat everyone a little differently.
- Ensure that diversity is celebrated across the school. No matter how well a young person understands their own neurodivergence, they are unlikely to feel comfortable with it if it marks them out as different in a school culture that doesn't value diversity. Diverse representation in resources and topics, explicit teaching about difference and diversity, and modelling of and normalising of different needs and learning styles as discussed above, are all essential prerequisites to making sure that being identified as neurodivergent does not feel scary or isolating.

Jack's Best Day Ever

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