

"the school needs  
to believe me that  
I need what  
I say I need"



Learning resources  
for teachers made by  
the young people from FUSE

Created by: Ash,  
Leighton, Wren, Eliza,  
& Emily and with help  
from Fiona, Frankie &  
Khoi. Art by Leighton.

© intertwine 2024



The FUSE program  
was proudly funded by  
Manningham Council's  
Community Grants.



Disclaimer: Not all of this is accurate for every student, not every person will fit perfectly into these archetypes. If you are unsure, please communicate with your student, communication is key in every situation.

All quotes in this  
booklet were sourced  
from anonymous  
respondents to a survey  
that was published  
on SurveySparrow  
in May 2024 and  
promoted via Facebook  
groups for parents  
of neurodivergent  
teens, transgender  
and queer teens,  
and homeschoolers;  
and shared by young  
people themselves via  
instagram, tumblr and  
discord.

# CONTENTS

message from the managing director .....	4
message from the program coordinator.....	5
some terms .....	6
disabilities.....	6
sexuality & gender.....	7
types of kid.....	9
shy & neurodivergent .....	9
pda .....	10
anger issues .....	10
janus the two-sided .....	10
out and proud .....	10
invisible disabilities .....	11
eds & pots (shadow disabilities) .....	11
situationally mute.....	12
self-aware .....	12
know-it-all.....	13
tourette's, stimming & echolalia .....	13
what makes you feel safer & like you belong? .....	14
what does your dream school look like?.....	16
what helps you cope with school?.....	18





## message from the managing director

I'm so thrilled to be presenting you with this learning resource for teachers that arose from the pilot of the FUSE program run by intertwine. The FUSE program aims to help young people with different genders, sexualities, cultural backgrounds and abilities 'find unity in shared experiences'. As part of the 14-week program, the 15–22 year olds learned about healthy relationships, identity and self-esteem, socio-cultural models of marginalisation and power, and then spent some time identifying an issue that affected their lives and what they could do about it.

The group noted that educational spaces, and especially high-schools, were made for neurotypical straight people. To remedy this, they decided that the best intervention would be creating a resource to help supportive teachers and student teachers understand what queer, trans and disabled teens need for an ideal educational experience.

These young people are inspiring — in the face of bullying, structural discrimination and resulting mental health challenges, they retain hope and have clear and fierce advice to help them achieve their goals. This resource was created in just three weeks. Imagine what they will be able to do with adequate support and more time.

We wish them every success in the future.

— Ro Bersten

## message from the program coordinator



Working on this program with the most incredible group of young people has been one of the most humbling, life affirming experiences ever.

Thank you to everyone who completed the survey, and thank you to those who were interviewed on video. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us of what would make school a safer place for you. Thank you to the school wellbeing counsellors who recommended FUSE as a space that would benefit the young people they support.

Thank you to the parents and guardians, who have supported the young people to come to the weekly programs, and who care for these young people. This program would not have been possible without our incredible peer worker Frankie, and program officer Khoi — thank you for holding space for young people to be authentically themselves each week.

Most importantly, thank you to the young people of FUSE. You 'Fusians' have taught this dinosaur so much about community, about meeting people where they're at, and about the expansive and infinite possibilities of a world where we are safe and supported to be exactly who we are and who we want to be. Thank you.

(Thank you also for introducing Oreo loaded donuts into my life. I'll never be the same.)

— Fiona Vuong

# some terms

## disabilities

**ADHD** Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Sort of what it says on the tin. If unmedicated, attention span can be very short and all over the place. Can also be seen in fidgety kids, ADHD is best managed when movement is allowed.

**Autism** Sometimes known as Autism Spectrum Disorder. A way of thinking that is attracted to logic, cause and effect, categorising. Despite stereotypes, this can show up in people of all genders. In girls and people assigned female at birth, this may show up as interest in categorising toys or interests rather than playing.

**AuDHD** Autism and ADHD combined. Often results in a similar hyperfixating as autistic people but switches due to the ADHD. Hyperfocusing and lack of focus compete.

**EDS** Ehlers Danlos Syndrome. A group of inherited conditions that affect skin, joints and connective tissue, causing pain, fatigue and difficulty carrying out everyday life activities.

**neurodivergent** A person with a differering mental state to the expected norm.

**PDA** Pathological Demand Avoidance – if you give a command or demand, there is a physical and mental response to not do that. This is not controllable. Not to be confused with Public Displays of Affection.



**POTS** Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome. A form of dysautonomia where your automatic nervous system doesn't do what it's supposed to. Your veins don't constrict properly so you don't get blood to your brain. It pools in your feet and your legs. You can also feel nauseous or black out when you stand up.

**Situational mutism** May become mute for any number of reasons, including overwhelm, sensory issues or social setting.

**queer** An umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual and other non-heterosexual attractions. Younger people may use it to replace LGBTIQ+ entirely while older people (over 70) may still experience this as a slur.

**aroace** Aromantic and asexual. Someone who experiences little to no romantic or sexual attraction.

**gender** A social construct traditionally associated with the assumed sex characteristics that an individual possesses. This construct usually consists of dress codes, behaviours and roles in society, assigned interests and presumed ways of thinking and speaking.

**AGAB** Assigned Gender At Birth. The gender assigned by medical staff based on a person's genitals at birth. Often listed under 'Sex' on a person's birth certificate unless they have applied to have it amended.

**AFAB** Assigned Female At Birth. Generally occurs when a baby has an obvious vulva and no testes at birth, but this also occurs when people with intersex characteristics are assigned a binary sex.



## sexuality ≠ gender

# types of kid

**AMAB** Assigned Male At Birth. Generally occurs when a baby has an obvious penis and testes at birth, but this also occurs when people with intersex characteristics are assigned a binary sex.

**intersex** Someone with any of more than 30 intersex variations. For some, this is noticeable when a baby's genitals are neither 'male' nor 'female' but for others, intersex characteristics are not apparent until puberty. Often, medical staff will assign a binary gender at birth and recommend surgeries to create genitals that outwardly 'match' that gender.

Dr. Jonathan Decker (from Cinema Therapy) says "meet people where they're at instead of forcing them to be where you are". It works for therapy and teaching, because both are about understanding. There isn't enough time available to be friends with whoever's teaching you but you still need to bond. Show the kids that you are a person – allowing a variety of expression can help a lot. Just because kids use rude terms or are blunt, doesn't mean they want to offend you. Basically if a kid is being brash, be brash too.

## shy & neurodivergent

These kids are often very quiet, but this isn't something to fix. If it works for them, respect that, don't throw them into situations where they'll have to speak or socialise. Anxiety is a kaiju (giant monster) trying to batter down the door that is their mind; don't unlock that door.

By all means talk to them if they'd like help being more social. If they want that push then go ahead, but make sure it is communicated with them. Being a confidant could also be very useful if something happens and they don't feel they can talk to anyone else.

**trans** Someone who identifies as a different gender from the sex assigned at birth. Binary trans people transition to the opposite gender while others may use the term as an umbrella for all gender-divergent people. It means 'on the opposite side as' in Latin,

**cis** Someone who identifies with their gender assigned at birth and does not wish to change it. It simply means 'on the same side as' in Latin and is not a slur.

**nonbinary** Someone who identifies outside of the gender binary (male or female). They can either have no gender at all or every gender – it is dependent on the person.

**agender** A person who does not identify as having any gender at all.



## pda

Kids with PDA are dealing with responses they can't control. Give them as much space as possible when their PDA flares up – pushing further will make everything worse.



## anger issues

Sometimes a very prominent case of PDA, these kids often need a place to let out their anger, so do your best to give them space and time to calm down on their own. Once they are calm, try to ask if they'd like to set up a system of some kind so that they can release their fury without disrupting anyone else's learning.

## janus the two-sided

These kids may seem shy in the classroom but violent or loud elsewhere; this is usually due to masking. Maybe they need to hide themselves for whatever reason, but ultimately you don't want to take what they say personally,

## out and proud

Kids who are out and proud are very open about their queerness, gender or neurodivergence. Whatever your personal opinion, it's important that you aren't seen to openly criticise their identities or expression. All you will be doing is giving ammunition to bullies.

## invisible disabilities

Some people have disabilities like diabetes, autism, dyslexia or fibromyalgia that are invisible. Some are physical, some are neurodivergences and some are learning difficulties. There's pressure for people with invisible disabilities to mask (hide) their disabilities to fit in. Some may do it so well that you don't know they need help, but this extra effort to pretend they are fine leads to exhaustion and burnout. Talk about disability openly and positively even if you think you have no disabled kids in your class so kids know it's safe to be themselves.

## eds & pots (shadow disabilities)

These kids are often combined with "out and proud" at least in attitude, as they are typically autistic, as well as having EDS and/or POTS, so they are rather blunt and don't bother hiding their potential queerness or neurodiversities from peers. The capacity they have for different kinds of work varies from day to day depending on their pain level. Acknowledge and respect the limitations they tell you about. These kids may also be bullied as a 'shadow disabled' kid (they get "you seem fine now, so you must be faking it" treatment). Be prepared to step in and educate other kids about disabilities with fluctuating impact.



## situationally mute

These kids can be combined with any other type of kid, as situationally mute people can be mute for a number of reasons: maybe overwhelm, maybe they woke up this morning and couldn't really talk, maybe they're working on their mental state right now and just need some time. Whatever it is, you need to respect that they cannot talk. Find other ways to communicate with them, and give them the tools they might need such as paper and pen, a tablet, flash cards if they have any. Maybe when they're verbal again, you can set up a communication system.

## self-aware

These kids often get bored with teacher assistance, since they know how to help themselves. The issue is that they still can't jump through the neurotypical learning hoops to do tasks or coursework 'the expected way'. (If they did you wouldn't notice that they are neurodivergent.)



Some of the best ways to help these kids is to encourage them to lighten the masking, or just let them do their own thing. Try to set aside time to talk with them about how they think you can help them. Compromise where you have to, but meeting them where they have identified they need help is one of the best things you can do.

## know-it-all

This kid has no filter and will often question why other students didn't get to the answer they did or took longer to reach a conclusion. They are highly intelligent or have deep knowledge of a few areas and want everyone to know about the cool things they know. They are strongly driven by teacher praise. Ask them if they would like harder work to challenge them. If you have more than one, they might work well together but might also annoy each other or compete. If you can, set the rest of the class up with work, then make time one-on-one to listen to the knowledge-dump.



## tourette's, stimming & echolalia

Tourette's is actually a type of neurodivergence. Some kids with Tourette's have physical tics and others have verbal tics. Echolalia is repeating words or phrases from other sources. Neither is deliberate so don't take anything personally, especially swearing or sarcastic phrases.

Physical tics and stimming are also needed to reduce anxiety. Never tell a kid to try to 'hold in' a tic or stim. If the tics or stims are distracting other students, see if the person is happy to be at the back of the class to be out of more people's eyeline.

# y& Like you belong?

## TEACHERS AND STUDENTS RESPECTING MY PRONOUNS!!!!!!

— 13yo transgender lesbian, adhd/autistic

*My teachers being accepting, and understanding, and just in general easy to talk with.*

— 16yo queer transgender male, autistic/ADHD

Being safe and having a safe place.

— 25yo straight cis female, autistic/ADHD

having people that i can relate to, and having friends with me

— 15yo transgender lesbian

*When the rules are clear and applicable to everyone. When I was being bullied, and I reported this with witnesses and it resulted in the girl who was bullying me being suspended. Knowing that other people can't just mistreat me without consequences and continue being in places I have to be, too.*

— 19yo cis female lesbian, autistic

open support of all students regardless of gender sexuality etc

— 16yo bisexual transgender female, ADHD

People just accepting me, not as who I'm masking as, but who I am, and not asking questions I have said I don't want to answer.

— 14yo nonbinary person, ADHD

Having teachers who care about me, having friends who care about me, the school showing genuine support for students, pride flags along with regular genuine displays of support for the queer community, teachers not pressuring students and checking in on their mental health.

— 17yo queer trans masc, ADHD/autistic

*I feel safer when I know I can express my opinion and not be told off for having one, whether the opinion is to my friends or to my teachers. I feel like some teachers will really get in your face for sharing an opinion even if it fits entirely within the context of whatever is going on.*

— 15yo genderfluid lesbian, autistic/ADHD

Being acknowledged, being part of the community and not being bullied

— 16yo queer transfem, autistic/ADHD, vision impairment

When teachers and the broader school understand how my brain worked and that my learning wasn't always the same as my peers. i wish teachers had been vocally supportive of queer and neurodivergent students and had been aware of what bullying looked like between girls. i felt most safe when teachers supported the things i was passionate about (like music) and checked in with me when i was having a hard time.

— 21yo, queer & nonbinary with intersex characteristics, autistic/ADHD, uses mobility aids, POTS, hEDS

Quiet, private, secure spaces for me to decompress, and understanding staff who get that sometimes you can't do something, even if it's just sitting in a classroom, or staying awake.

— 21yo nonbinary lesbian, Deaf/hearing impairment, uses mobility aids, dyslexia, chronic fatigue, autistic, ADHD, endometriosis

Staff that I can have a conversation with (librarians are my saviours).

— 15yo queer & agender, uses mobility aids, autistic, ADHD



# what does your dream school look like?

i wish that i could have been supported to learn more about how to live my life, be an adult, manage my mental health, and have healthy relationships.

— 21yo nonbinary with intersex characteristics, uses mobility aids, POTS, hEDS, autistic, ADHD

More resources for people who are at a disadvantage with the current way of learning — one of my friends is dyslexic and the teacher never even knew the textbook had a text-to-speech function, I had to let them know.

— 16yo queer transgender male, autistic/ADHD

Me personally I would appreciate if there were more easy ways to ask the teacher to leave the classroom is getting too overwhelming, but not by needing a specific pass for it, because some people don't need to leave often enough they have to get a pass from wellbeing, just occasionally.

— 16yo queer transgender male, autistic/ADHD

Ability to take a break when needed. A loose schedule.

Access to autonomy - eg toileting and drinking

— 25yo straight cis female, autistic/ADHD

Organised still, with structure, but with a lot more accommodations for people that learn differently than the way it is expected that people learn. For example, more examples of memory strategies for people who learn different ways (auditory, visual, verbal, etc.). Even just simple things like that would improve things drastically.

— 16yo queer transgender male, autistic/ADHD

Pride flags in every classroom, students and teachers who accept you and don't just tolerate you, and celebrating things like trans visibility day, or idahobit.

— 13yo transgender lesbian, adhd/autistic

I think it would be a lot more lax and would have more outside time and activities that don't have me in a chair all day. I find it hard to focus, but I also find the bright fluorescent lights and the general neurotypical school environment to be incredibly overstimulating.

— 17yo nonbinary transgender, multiply ND & learning differences

I would never have to worry about other people, just my actual education.

— 13yo bisexual demigirl, ADHD

My dream experience is a school where I could work at my level without I or my parents having to fight and fight for it. To achieve that, the school needs to believe me that I need what I say I need.

— 16yo bisexual cis female, ADHD/autistic

Teachers would be equal to students, and I think that could partially be achieved through wording - teachers are called mentors and students are called mentees, and it's the mentor's goal to help the mentees achieve things in life, not just force them to memorise something for a test and then forget it.

People can do whatever classes they want, suited to their level rather than their age. Everyone is supportive and mindful of everyone's identities and abilities. Everyone is treated as an individual, as if their education and mental health is the top priority, but everyone also works within the school community to uplift each other so that everyone feels like they belong.

— 17yo queer trans masc, ADHD/autistic

sensory safe. completely and EASILY accessible. supportive teachers. content that is easy to understand and digest.

— 15yo queer & nonbinary, autistic/ADHD, uses mobility aids & other disabilities

where i didn't have to be assessed on my learning and stressed about my grades and could just be genuinely curious and learn about things because i was passionate.

— 21yo nonbinary with intersex characteristics

it would kind of rely a lot more on memory, multiple choice, and lecturing.

— 15yo agender aroace, ADHD/vision impairment

# what has helped you get through to this point, or cope with school?

More self paced options.  
Better teaching of how to study. How to break tasks down. More scaffolding and less concern over uniforms. More education on things that are needed so you can function in the real world.

— 25yo straight cis female, autistic/ADHD

i've missed lots of school because of anxiety, so better ways to help students struggling with anxiety such as flexible classes would help.

— 15yo transgender lesbian

I left school mostly because of COVID, but I have found I thrive so much more outside of school. Doing less and harder work (rather than boring 'busy work') is very satisfying and I feel like I finally know how to learn. Being able to learn while regulated also helps.

— 16yo bisexual cis female, ADHD/autistic

Learning to block out distractions (it's not working).

— 13yo bisexual demigirl, ADHD

The only thing that's helped me stay in school is how, because I'm autistic, structure helps me cope well, and the strict structure that is kept most of the time is really good for me. However, I can see how other people may hate that.

— 16yo queer transgender male, autistic/ADHD

Supportive teachers and parents who praised me for doing good work.

— 17yo queer trans-masc, ADHD/autistic

Psych ward, psychologist, parents, friends, psychiatrist, school counsellor

— 16yo queer transfem, autistic/ADHD, vision impairment

I was able to cope with high school because of my friends. I met the first two members of my friend group because I didn't know where to sit and a peer support leader introduced me to them. I met their friends through them, and wound up with a really great support network that I might never have found by myself. I was also helped by gradually learning how to articulate what I needed from teachers, and through having serious emotional reactions I couldn't hide around them, and having teachers who responded to that by working with my parents and me to figure out how to improve the situation. Sometimes, that was things like going in to do work I was behind on during recess (which sounds like a detention but was really lovely and helpful) or letting me leave the room and calm down.

— 19yo cis female lesbian, autistic

supportive parents, supportive and encouraging teachers who try to help do the work and find ways of doing work that work for me.

— 15yo queer & nonbinary, autistic/ADHD, uses mobility aids & other disabilities

Mostly that it will make my mum sad if I fully give up

— 15yo queer & agender, uses mobility aids, autistic, ADHD

Lovely teachers and support from my family.

— 15yo genderfluid lesbian, autistic/ADHD

it's mostly my friends who help keep me going, and knowing this BS is over once i finish year 12

— 16yo bisexual transgender female, ADHD

not going to school mostly, or being very selective about when i attended classes and what classes i took.

i surrounded myself with people who were like me and focussed on subjects where i felt safe, i moved schools and frequently changed friendship groups. i spent a lot of time with school well-being or holed up in the music department.

— 21yo, queer & nonbinary with intersex characteristics, autistic/ADHD, uses mobility aids, POTS, hEDS

Produced by intertwine as part of  
the FUSE youth leadership program

For more information:

[intertwine.org.au/fuse-2024](https://intertwine.org.au/fuse-2024)

enquiries: [fuse@intertwine.org.au](mailto:fuse@intertwine.org.au)

© intertwine 2024

**FUSE**   
*finding unity in shared experience*