

Neuro

Diversities

**Exploring the
intersectionality
between neurodiversity
and sexual & gender
diversity:**

A guide for families,
educators, health
professionals and social
services



This guide is a project of



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Introduction - The Project

The Neuro/Diversities project created a space for a group of young, neurodiverse people aged 14 to 30 to discuss their needs and points of view on the topics of sex education, sexual abuse prevention, safe spaces and acceptance of sexual diversity, gender plurality and neurodiversity, among others.

Neurodiversity

The concept of neurodiversity is based on acknowledging and respecting the “diversity of human brains and human minds”¹. Participants in the Neuro/Diversities project identify as autistic, Asperger, or neuroatypical.

Gender and Sexual Diversities

These notions encompass gender identities, gender expression preferences, and sexual and romantic orientations. They include individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transvestite, intersex, queer, asexual, two-spirit, homoromantic, pansexual, non-binary, gender-fluid or gender-neutral.

¹WALKER, Nick (2013). *Neuro-What?* Page consulted on the 15th of august 2017: <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neuro-what/>

Creating safe spaces

No single template exists to create a safe space; rather, it must be designed for and adapted to the specific needs of the individuals who will use it.

Participants raised a number of points concerning this:

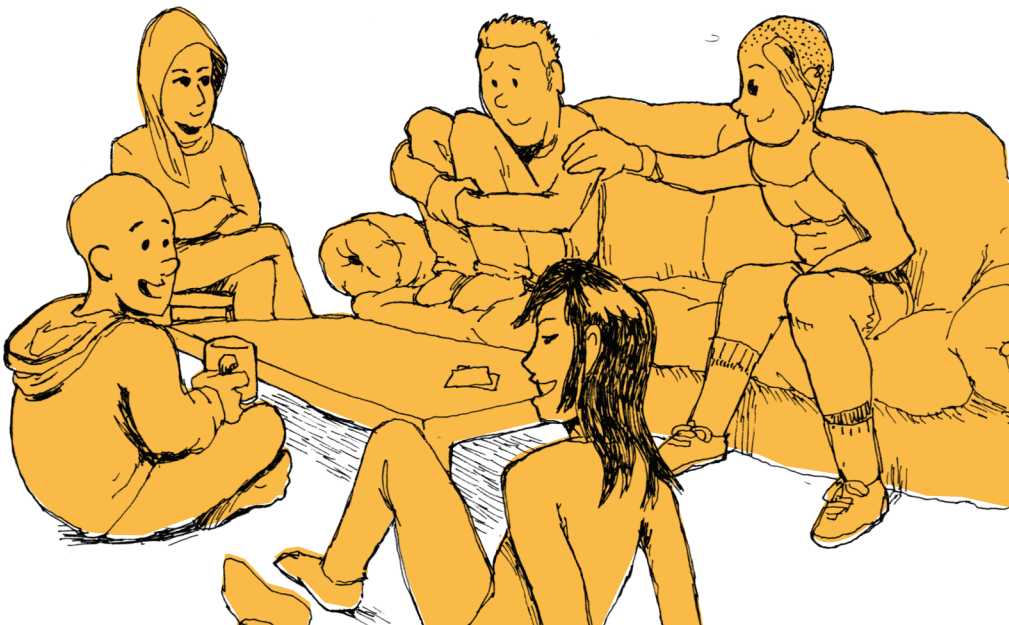
A safe space must be **organized by and for community members**. An individual from outside the community may be brought in as a coordinator. This person must keep in mind that their role is to support members, and not manage them.

A safe space must be made **accessible** to neurodiverse users. Participants pointed out that it is important to find, among other things, clear and precise signage, access ramps, soothing and stimulating objects, and a variety of food offerings. A closed room should be available as a quiet space, and particular care should be taken to reduce stimuli such as irritating sounds, strong odours like perfumes or cleaning products, sudden movements, and fluorescent lighting. Some individuals may need to explore the space and become familiar with it at their own pace, and others might need the support of a trusted person. In addition, when the needs of members are so different that they pose a dilemma, creativity should be used to search for a solution. It is always better to find an alternative which pleases everybody than it is to settle for a hasty compromise.

A safe space must be a **non-violent space**. In no situation should hateful speech or actions be tolerated, all the more as some individuals may be targeted by abuse and not be able to identify or report it. Freedom of speech should never be used to justify hateful communication (including but not limited to, transphobic, ableist, or racist content). As the legitimacy of the members' identities is constantly being challenged by society, this should be avoided in a safe space. Moreover, proactive behaviour is required to prevent triggering and ensure the well-being of all members. This can be done by advising on the subject and content of events beforehand, which allows members who would prefer to prepare for or avoid some activities to do so. This is especially relevant when topics are related to any form of abuse or violence, as a number of participants confided that they had experienced trauma. It is also important to use education and awareness training to deconstruct prejudice.

A safe space is **open**. It allows its members to express themselves on their own terms and welcomes their strengths, differences, challenges, and needs. A diagnosis should not be required to access a safe space, as getting diagnosed can be difficult, both financially and emotionally. Also, members should be free not to follow arbitrary social norms which are often forced on them. In a safe space, members must be free to express their gender, to act (safely) in the ways that they prefer, and to present themselves as they choose, without having to justify their choices. In addition, everyday tasks linked to hygiene can be a challenge for some in the neurodiverse community, and some flexibility should be allowed concerning this aspect.

These recommendations are also applicable, with some adjustment, to safe spaces on social media. Most participants have been victims of or have witnessed harassment, threats, and hateful speech online. Hence, an online safe space should allow its members to communicate anonymously or confidentially in an environment free from abuse. To make this possible, the online environment should be moderated at all times.



Self-Affirmation and Communication

Members shared that they liked to use various means of communication: speech, social network platforms, handwritten notes, pictograms, drawings, etc. Several members mentioned they like to alternate between different means of communication depending on the context, and many prefer platforms that give them time to analyze a situation and think about their reply. For this reason, some delay should be expected before a reply is given, and it is best to inform members about future discussion topics. Also, members stressed that they were often asked to express their needs, only to realize that they were not actually being listened to, or even believed. Care should be taken to be aware of and avoid prejudice and reactions that can trivialize or invalidate what is expressed by a member. In this context, it is essential to be prepared to accept all answers to questions asked.

Members emphasized that learning about the concept of consent depends first and foremost on having their choices and boundaries respected. The message must be coherent at all times: on the one hand, one cannot force someone to accept being touched, in whatever way, and on the other hand, tell them that their body belongs to them. For example, a young person might internalize the fact that it is normal to be a victim of sexual assault if their family does not react when they are forcibly hugged by a relative despite a refusal on their part. It is therefore imperative to obtain permission before approaching or touching someone.



Sometimes, members experience a state of crisis, or meltdown, during which it is impossible to communicate. This state of crisis can take many forms: withdrawal, shouting, crying, hitting one's head, etc. Meltdowns are often caused by sensory overload, intense emotions or overwhelming confusion. Brigitte Harrison and Lise Saint-Charles explain that “when the information received is too complex to manage and organize internally, the autistic structure destabilizes, similarly to an earthquake or an internal storm that manifests in the body”². When this happens, the instructions previously given by the person in crisis should be followed. Generally, it is recommended to talk softly, step back and avoid unsolicited physical contact. Members noted that it may be useful to have a card on them, on which they have written their reactions and needs in a crisis situation.

It is also important, when a crisis situation arises, to take the time to question the real danger that the person in crisis poses to themselves or others before calling emergency services. While sometimes impressive, meltdown behaviours are rarely dangerous, and people who are known and appreciated by the person in crisis are often in the best position to help them calm down. In addition, it must be noted that the intervention of strangers is very stressful for a neurodiverse person, especially when these people speak loudly or use force. The situation can then escalate rapidly, and more so for a person of colour, since they will also have to deal with the systemic racism of institutions. It is therefore advisable to limit the intervention of emergency services to life-threatening situations, and to educate first responders about intervention approaches appropriate for a neurodiverse population.

² HARRISON, Brigitte and Lise SAINT-CHARLES. (2017). *L'autisme expliqué aux non-autistes*, Montréal: Trécarré, 2017.



Sexual Diversity and Gender Plurality

Participants emphasized how important it was that the people around them are educated about and aware of neurodiversity, sexual diversity and gender diversity. It is frustrating to have to explain one's identity each time one meets a new person, and continuously justifying oneself is extremely invalidating. Participants pointed out that sharing their experiences must remain a choice, and never be an obligation.

It is important to recognize that these concepts can be linked, but that this is not a reason to invalidate anyone. Indeed, many members mentioned that they had been scolded for being confused about their gender identity because of their neurodiversity, or using asexuality to mask social difficulties. While it is true that social norms and gender roles are very abstract notions for many neurodiverse people, this should not be an obstacle to self-determination. Rather, neurodiverse individuals should be invited to explain themselves the meaning they give to the terms they use.

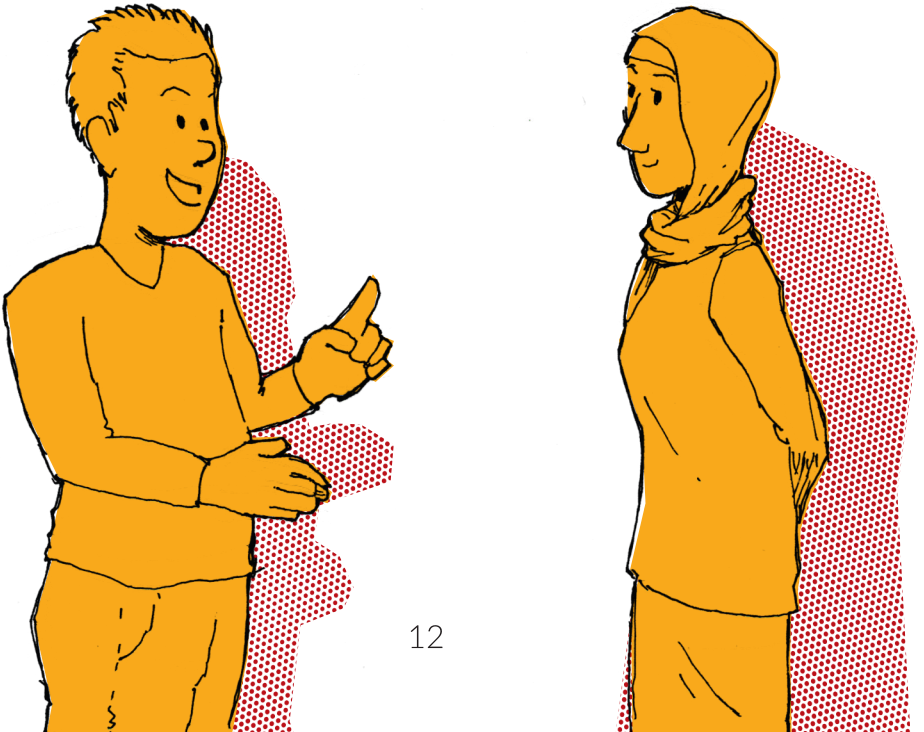
On this matter, participants emphasized the importance of exposing children to the diversity of sexual orientations, romantic orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions that exist. It was mentioned that this should not be restricted to sexual education, but rather be included in everyday conversations. A number of participants explained how they knew their preferences from a very young age, while lacking knowledge of the vocabulary or concepts necessary to explain them, and that this reinforced their feelings of isolation. It is also essential to respect all language created by individuals to define themselves – their own words are valuable tools for self-determination. In addition, members would like to see more neurodiverse adults in the public eye, as models

Often, it was while observing or being victims of discrimination that participants realized the negative social consequences of their differences. For some, this understanding developed over a long period, as neurodiverse individuals do not always realize that they are the victims of abuse, due to their difficulty in understanding the intentions of others or implied meanings. The majority of participants explained that they understood how they (or others) were different since their childhood or early teenage years, but chose not to reveal this knowledge until adulthood out of fear of possible consequences.

Participants said that they felt pressured to conform to predetermined gender roles. Educational tools often carry stereotypes which reinforce the gender binary – for example, by showing a girl dressed in pink choosing pyjamas with floral patterns, while a boy wears blue and pyjamas with a sports theme. Also, these tools are often heteronormative, representing only couples between a cisgender woman and a cisgender man. Individuals who are non-binary, asexual, pansexual or polyamorous, or whose gender expression is unconventional by today's social norms, will not readily recognize themselves in these tools.

Relationships

Participants indicated they would prefer educational tools that take into account the diversity of relationship types. Society values romantic and sexual relationships between two people. However, there are multiple valid and positive relationship types, and these deserve visibility. Hence, some social norms must be deconstructed in order to free individuals to determine their own needs. There is no obligation to be in a couple, to have a romantic or sexual relationship, to be monogamous, to live or sleep with one's partner, etc. Moreover, it is entirely normal that a person's needs might change over time.



Participants indicated they would like to have more tools to help them create and maintain friendships in order to break their isolation. It is often difficult for them to change their daily routine to meet new people, particularly outside of the school context. Participants also mentioned an interest for access to physical or online spaces reserved for socializing. Also, some members indicated that their relationships with their pets were more meaningful than those with other humans. Similarly, many participants talked passionately about their interests, be they specific fields of knowledge or works of fiction. Obviously, such relationships are different from those which can be established with humans, but they nonetheless bring calm, comfort and joy in a world that can seem chaotic.

Additionally, participants pointed out that it is normal to have fears concerning sexuality, regardless of one's gender. Everyone should feel they have the right to make mistakes, go slowly, and ask questions. In addition, no one should be made to feel afraid to talk in a pragmatic way about their needs, boundaries and desires. Euphemisms are not useful, and precise language should be used when referring to human anatomy and sexual practices. An individual must be able to understand their own self to be able to give enlightened consent! It is also important to note that sensory issues experienced by neurodiverse individuals can impact the way they explore sexuality. For example, some might prefer a soft touch while for others, this may be unbearable.

Conclusion

This project gave participants an opportunity for empowerment, to meet others who shared similar experiences, and to showcase their ideas, strengths and creativity. Note that while specific to the needs of project participants and their community, the resulting recommendations could also be beneficial in the population at large. Concerning AlterHéros, a number of other projects are being planned, including social activities and the creation of a web page and forum dedicated to neurodiverse youth.

For more information, visit www.alterheros.com



