NestCon 9

In a neurodiverse world, actively supporting inclusion is critical–especially in our schools. This intentional choice requires more than just laminated strategies for our autistic learners; it requires a real change in mindset. If we shift to focusing on strengths, committing to the principles of universal design, and celebrating neurodiversity, we can create inclusive environments where all learners can thrive.

Let's challenge ourselves to continue to push the envelope of inclusion:

1

Listen to the True Experts: Autistic Individuals

Look to the autistic community for their expertise, insight, and guidance. Bring in autistic presenters, read books and articles written by autisitc advocates, and look to shift the conversations about autism happening in your school.

💡 Whether you are designing a program or just a single lesson with autistic learners in mind, how can you incorporate the perspectives of autistic experts?

2

Create a Therapeutic Environment

Look again at every space and every corner with new eyes. Reimagine school environments with autistics in mind. Focus on creating less overstimulating spaces that include sensory supports and allow students to stim, move, and self-regulate.

💡 How could a break or quiet area, a place where any student can choose go to go to regulate, re-set, and rejoin the group, help *all* students?

3

Incorporate Interests, Passions and Fascinations

These are not distractions. They are not "perseverations." They are not rewards. Student interests must be meaningfully woven into the school day. These interests can be key to motivation, sources of comfort, and provide genuine opportunities for social connection.

💡 How are you incorporating student interests into the school day rather than defaulting to the trap of only using them as rewards?

4

Teach Students the Way They Learn

This may push you out of your comfort zone! Focus on what the student needs, not your own preferences or how you've done things in the past. Talk to your students and find opportunities to challenge your own assumptions.

💡 Behavior is communication: What is your student actually telling you about what they need to learn, and how are you showing that you are listening?

5

Foster Authentic Social Connections

Social is not about skills. There is not a manual you can follow. Social is personal and nuanced and context-dependent. Find ways for students to build connections in ways that are meaningful to them, and be mindful of any neurotypical bias about what social "should" look like.

💡 What do meaningful social interactions look like for your student and how can we support and encourage these connections across the school day?

6

Encourage Autonomy and Self-advocacy

Empower the individual. Provide opportunities for student choice and be flexible. Show the student that their voice is important and needs to be heard. Be the ally that helps them own their needs, and be the champion as students learn to advocate for themselves.

💡 How can we begin to empower students and give them voice in what they learn, how they engage with content, what they need, and how they demonstrate their own learning?

7

Prioritize Happiness; Scaffold Towards Independence

Focus on compassion, not compliance, and remember that being neurotypical is not the goal. Help each student discover who they are, what makes them happy, and what their next step is on their path towards independence. Accept them, teach them, challenge them, and celebrate their many wins along the way.

💡 Discuss your student's independence as a team and what you hope to see by year's end. What are the small steps along the way that map to that ultimate goal, and how can you support?

8

Collaborate Actively, Meaningfully and Regularly

You are not alone. Connect with other professionals on your team. Work up from informal check-ins in the hallway to regular meetings with an interprofessional team. You'll never feel like you have enough time, but the answer you're looking for might already be in the room.

💡 How can we get more diverse professional perspectives? Can related service providers join monthly grade level meetings to offer insights and help incorporate proactive supports into unit or lesson planning?

9

Create a Culture of Belonging

True inclusion benefits everyone. Build educational spaces where everyone feels understood and accepted. No one needs to earn their place or prove they belong. When we design physical spaces, create learning opportunities, and craft social experiences with everyone in mind, we send a message: "everyone belongs here."

💡 Creating a culture of belonging takes everyone in a school. How can we increase understanding of inclusion and neurodiversity and raise the level of the ocean?