

# Neurodivergent Designed & Led Peer Support in Mainstream Secondary Schools

June 2024

## What We Found

*Peer support can offer neurodivergent young people a place to be themselves in an environment where they can relate to each other's experiences. It can help them build relationships with each other, boost their confidence, and feel a greater sense of belonging in school.*

We found that neurodivergent peer support groups in mainstream secondary schools can help neurodivergent students explore and develop their neurodivergent identity in a safe and welcoming environment. The groups can provide opportunities for students to:

- find shared experiences with their peers
- boost self-confidence
- build friendships with one another
- feel a greater sense of belonging in the wider school community.

The groups can also have a positive impact on the ethos within school more generally.

Neurodivergent students can benefit from groups which affirm their neurodivergent identities and enable them to thrive as they are, rather than expecting them to 'fit in' or disguise their true selves.

We also found that delivering groups was feasible and acceptable for teachers in secondary schools. Teachers may experience some challenges, but felt the groups were beneficial and the NEST materials (see below) were useful.

## What We Suggest

*Peer support groups should be student-led and designed thoughtfully to make sure they are inclusive. Staff facilitators can use the guidance laid out in our NEST handbook to get started.*

Creating opportunities for neurodivergent young people to spend time together can be beneficial and schools should consider creating opportunities for peer support.

Teachers wanting to establish peer support models in their school can use the **NEurodivergent peer Support Toolkit (NEST)** – which was co-designed with neurodivergent young people and a neurodiverse group of adults.

The materials provide guidance for mainstream secondary schools to set up and run peer support groups for neurodivergent students. They include guidance on

- whether a NEST group is right for your school
- who might want to join the group
- what you're looking for in a group facilitator
- what the group might spend time doing together

The toolkit has undergone successful pilot testing in mainstream schools and is free to download from our website: <https://salvesen-research.ed.ac.uk/research/nest-neurodivergent-peer-support-toolkit>

We hope the NEST materials will help school staff feel confident to set up neurodivergent peer support groups which are fun, inclusive, and student-led.

## Salvesen Mindroom Policy Briefing

# Neurodivergent Peer Support in Mainstream Secondary Schools

### What We Did

The NEST materials were co-designed with a group of 8 neurodivergent young people and a neurodiverse group of 9 adults who work with neurodivergent young people (e.g., teachers, educational psychologists, parents). Each group were invited to 6 meetings where we discussed the factors which they thought would be most important in a neurodivergent peer support group, including who should facilitate the group, what kinds of activities the group might do, how student-leadership opportunities could be embedded, and what kind of physical space would work best. Based on these discussions, we created the NEST handbook and resource pack<sup>1</sup>.

Four mainstream Scottish secondary schools varying in size, urbanity and affluence then implemented a neurodiversity peer support programme using the NEST resources. The groups ran over several months, and at the end of the academic year, we ran focus groups with students and interviews with school staff to find out what they liked about the groups, what challenges they experienced, and to get their feedback on the NEST handbook and resource pack<sup>2</sup>. We incorporated this feedback into the final version of the materials.

### Why We Did It

While some neurodivergent students thrive in school, many face challenges such as low levels of support from friends, high levels of bullying, and feeling disconnected from their school community. These experiences can lead to lower wellbeing and, sometimes, serious mental health problems.

We know that some neurodivergent people find it helpful to spend time with neurodivergent peers. In some of our previous research<sup>3</sup>, autistic school-leavers told us that neurodivergent peer support could have been beneficial when they were at school. Whilst peer support programmes for other minority groups (e.g., LGBTQ+ students) have helped minimise the negative consequences of marginalisation, we didn't know as much about neurodivergent students' experiences with, and priorities for, peer support.

We wanted to work with neurodivergent young people themselves to find out how to design peer support groups that would work for them and then test their feasibility in schools.

### Thank you

*This research could not have happened without the generosity of all the people who took part, especially the co-design teams and intrepid pilot schools.*

1. Fotheringham, F., Cebula, K., Fletcher-Watson, S., Foley, S., & Crompton, C. J. (2023). Co-designing a neurodivergent student-led peer support programme for neurodivergent young people in mainstream high schools. *Neurodiversity*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330231205770>
2. Crompton, C. J., Fotheringham, F., Cebula, K., Webber, C., Foley, S., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2024, April 25). Neurodivergent-Designed and Neurodivergent-Led Peer Support in School: A feasibility and acceptability study of the Neurodivergent peer Support Toolkit (NEST). <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/6eayd>
3. Crompton C. J., Hallett S., Axbey H., McAuliffe C., Cebula K. (2023). 'Someone like-minded in a big place': Autistic young adults' attitudes towards autistic peer support in mainstream education. *Autism*, 27(1), 76–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221081189>

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