

The Handbook of **Neurodiversity & Inclusion**

*Making Public Events
More Accessible to
Neurodiverse People*

by Matteo Musso



The Handbook of
**Neurodiversity
& Inclusion**

*Making Public Events More Accessible
to Neurodiverse People*

An Eagle Scout Project
by Matteo Musso
2022

Dedication

This handbook is dedicated to my G'ma and Papa who encouraged me to join Scouts, to Chris Carrano, Trex Donovan and Shawn Streeter, my patient and inclusive Scoutmasters, as well as my fellow scouts in Troop 939, past and present. Thank you for your friendships and teachings. Scouting has enhanced my life immeasurably.

Also, a special thanks goes out to Jason Pillon for his many hours spent doing design work for this project. This handbook is beautiful because of him.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Survey Findings.	5
3	What Neurodiversity May Look Like	9
4	Common Challenges with Solution Ideas	11
5	Accommodations to Consider for Events	15
6	Conclusion.	19
7	Resources for Neurodiversity Training.	21

*“Neurodiversity may
be every bit as crucial
for the human race
as biodiversity is for
life in general.”*

~ Harvey Blume, Journalist

1 | Introduction

Welcome to *The Handbook of Neurodiversity & Inclusion*.

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways our brains are wired to process information and stimuli. Examples of neurodiverse conditions include ADHD, Autism, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, and Tourette's syndrome.

A **neurodivergent person** is someone who thinks and sometimes acts differently from the way the majority of neurotypical people expect.

Being neurodivergent encompasses gifts as well as specific challenges. While public awareness of autism and other neurological conditions (neurodiversity) has increased, awareness alone is not enough. Action needs to be taken because words and awareness alone add very limited value to the life of the neurodiverse person.

This handbook contains specific ideas on ways to encourage inclusion of neurodiverse people in civic events, community group settings and activities.

What This Handbook Provides

- Insight into the lives of neurodiverse people
- Specific and helpful ways neurotypical people can include us in community and group settings
- Encouragement to leaders of community groups and businesses to open up their events and organizations to all people by sharing first-hand autism experience from a limited-verbal autistic Boy Scout (me!) and other autists/neurodivergent people and their parents
- Honest and heartfelt examples of the challenges faced by two different groups of people—members of the neurodiverse community and their parents/guardians

How This Handbook Was Written

You may think I just sat down and typed thoughts from my head, but there is much more that went into creating this handbook.

I am a minimally-speaking 18-year-old with autism. To convey my thoughts, I point at letters on an alphabet board one at a time while a communication partner takes dictation. I have included not only my own thoughts, challenges and solution ideas, but thoughts of other neurodiverse people and those who care for them.

To gather this information, four surveys were created and sent to the following groups:

- 1. Neurodiverse people**
- 2. Caregivers of neurodiverse people**
- 3. Hosts of public events**
- 4. Therapists and teachers who serve the neurodiverse population**

I received responses from 58 people. The information from the surveys was analyzed and then organized into the handbook you are now reading.

*“I want to be included
with neurotypicals
and to be given the
same opportunities as
them.”*

~ Anonymous young adult autistic, CA

2 | Survey Findings

The vast majority (78%) of neurodiverse families surveyed would attend more community events if accommodations were made to make them more comfortable or tolerable for their neurodiverse loved ones.

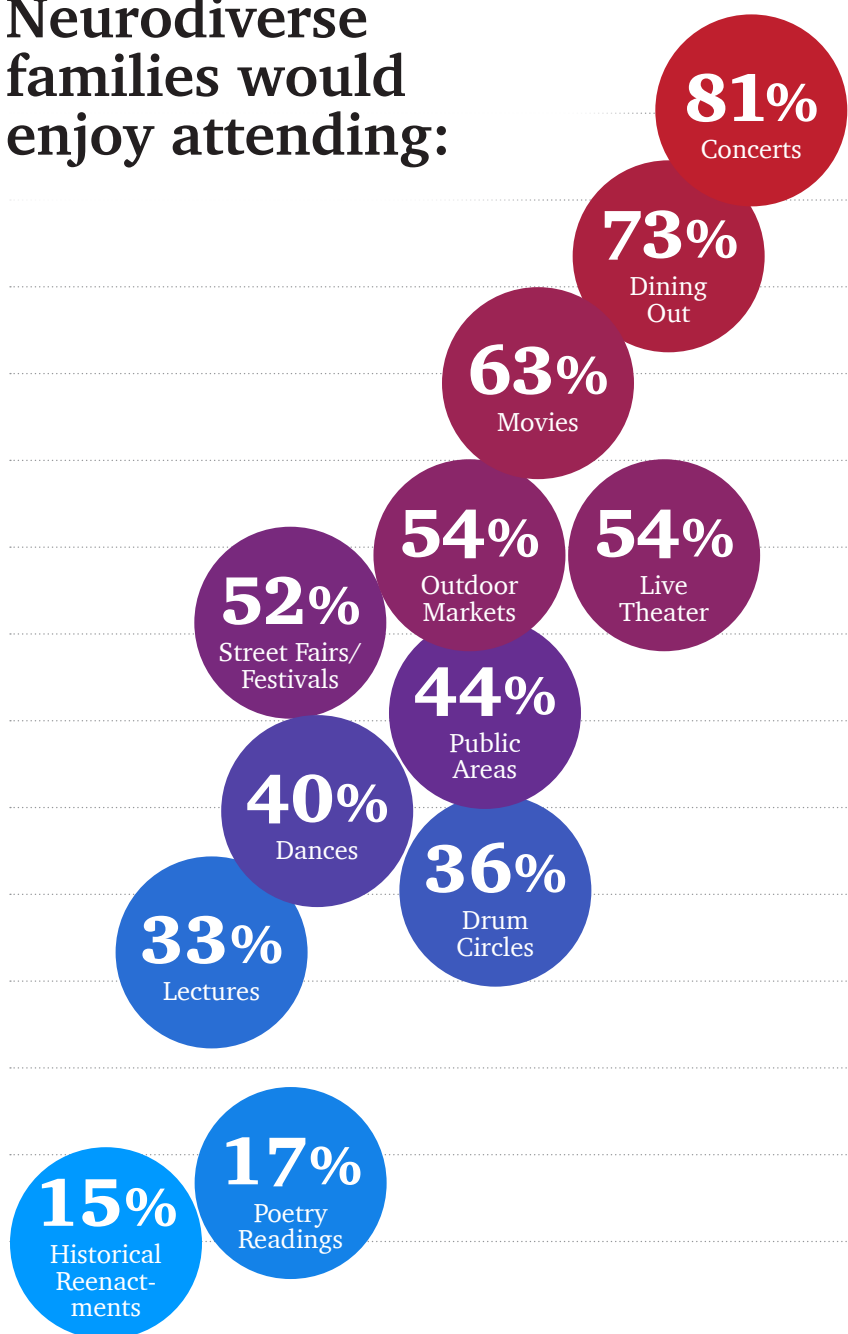
Of the neurodiverse people surveyed:

- Two-thirds said that they feel excluded and/or unwelcome at public events
- The public event they most wanted to attend was a live performance of varying types

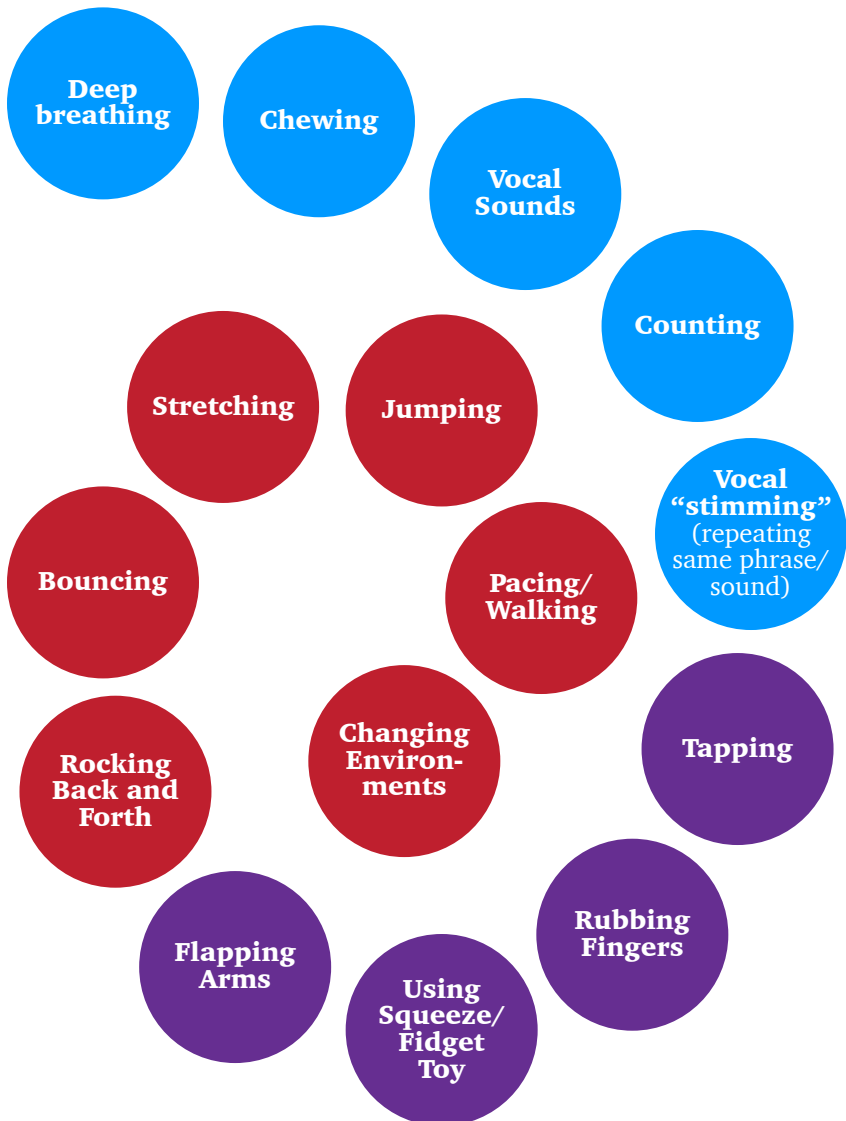
The most common reasons neurodiverse families gave for not attending community events:

- Fear that their neurodiverse loved one would disturb others
- Safety concerns
- Too overstimulating
- Stares and judgment from the public cause anxiety for everyone in the family
- The requirement to sit quietly can be very challenging

Neurodiverse families would enjoy attending:



Ways neurodiverse people calm themselves when under stress:



*Although we look the
same we are all very
different inside. We
need understanding,
compassion and
community acceptance.*

~ Neurodiverse teen, CA

3 | What Neurodiversity May Look Like

Signs of neurodiversity can look different for everyone and some people may show no outward signs at all. Here are a few of the more common signs you might see in a neurodiverse person:

- Covering ears with hands
- Pacing back and forth
- Rocking entire body back and forth, standing or sitting
- Walking the perimeter of a room alone
- Having arm wrapped around head, covering eyes and ears
- Appear to be talking to themselves (e.g. repeating a phrase or uttering “nonsense” syllables)
- Making squeaky sounds or yelling
- Flapping fingers or hands in front of eyes or in peripheral vision
- Squeezing head between hands
- Staring off into space
- Laughing to themselves
- Avoiding eye contact
- Not responding to a question or greeting
- Repeating one motion over and over (e.g. stacking or spinning things)
- Hesitancy to enter new environments because they need time to adjust and transition

*“Adjustments we are
asking for may make
it easier for everyone
to navigate events,
not just us.”*

~ Anonymous autistic young adult

4 | Common Challenges with Solution Ideas

The neurodiverse population faces challenges most people never think about. Here are the most common ones and ways your event could be more “user-friendly” to neurodivergent attendees.

Rest area/Quiet area needed to “escape” for a few minutes when overwhelmed.

Provide a designated Chill-Out area with shade and comfortable seating that is as quiet and unstimulating as possible. See page 17 for details.

Lights and noise can be too overwhelming for neurodiverse sensory systems.


Provide headphones to borrow or “check out.”

It’s hard to socialize or “fit in.”

Have greeters at your event who are sure to welcome neurodiverse individuals - address them personally even if it appears like they’re not paying attention.

Swinging calms many neurodiverse people in stressful situations.

Provide an area for neurodiverse people to “chill-out,” where people won’t stare or comment.
Place a swing in the Chill-Out (pg. 17) area if possible.

Too far to walk for those with low muscle tone.	Designate some neurodiverse parking spaces close to the entrance.
Fear of the inability to cope in the event's environment causes anxiety.	Provide details of neurodiverse accommodations on all your social media and your website.
Waiting in line is difficult and causes anxiety.	Have a system in place so people don't have to stand in line for long (e.g. designated return time, pagers, text notifications, etc.).
Judgment from others unfamiliar with vocal sounds or bodily actions common to autism.	Display our poster at the entrance. Contact Annette Musso at 925-784-1537 for posters. 
Not able to move around or stim (e.g. flap hands) in "serious" environments.	Reserve some seats where these actions would be the least disruptive to other patrons, such as in the back row and close to exits if they need to leave early.
Unable to get aisle seats (reduces proximity to strangers).	Reserve some aisle seats for ND patrons. When possible, provide an area (when indoors) where seats are farther apart.
Inadequate food choices.	Provide gluten-free, non-dairy, sugar-free and preservative-free options.
Inflexible refund/discount policies if we need to leave early.	Provide "re-entry" options if one needs to leave early and come back, or give a partial refund.

Too expensive if an assistant is necessary for the neurodiverse person to attend an event.	Provide free entry or a substantial discount to a personal assistant of the neurodiverse person.
Sounds of crying children or barking dogs can cause anxiety.	Provide headphones to borrow.
Expectation of sitting still and being quiet is stressful and not always possible.	Allow pacing behind the back row if the event is in an auditorium.
Entering and exiting an event, especially with lots of people at once, is very stressful.	Allow neurodiverse families early entrance to events. Post this on website along with a special person to contact and make arrangements.
Not knowing where high sensory stimuli areas are located at the event (e.g. bands, loud activities).	Provide a “sensory map” of the event at the entrance or Welcome Booth.
Staff doesn’t understand the needs of neurodiverse people.	Train staff to be patient and empathetically listen to the needs of patrons. A request may seem small or odd, but could make all the difference for the neurodiverse person’s tolerance and enjoyment.

*“Take time to get to
know people. First
impressions are not
necessarily accurate.”*

~ Neurodiverse person, CA

5 | **Top-10 Accommodations to Consider for Events**

The following is a list of suggestions to make your event more welcoming to neurodiverse people and their families.

1. Provide a Welcome Area or Welcome Booth

- Trained staff to greet and assist neurodiverse visitors
- Headphones (use credit card to borrow or rent them)
- A map of the event, including estimated noise levels (from 1–10) and location of the Chill-Out area

2. Create a designated Chill-Out area

A designated Chill-Out area would provide sensory relief for neurodiverse individuals and could include some of the following:

- Quiet location, away from odors (food, garbage)
- Privacy (so people won't stare)
- Covered or out of the direct sun
- Comfortable seating (bean bag chairs, cushy pillows)
- Comfortable chairs for family members/companions
- Soft mats on the ground to lie on
- Squishy and fidget toys to borrow
- Headphones to borrow
- Swinging chair
- Mini trampoline with bar to hold
- Compassionate staff with neurodiversity training

3. Easy entry for neurodiverse patrons and their families/caregivers

- Granting early access to the event
- Allowing entrance through a back door (if possible) when requested by a family in advance

4. Clearly state the accommodations you provide for neurodiverse families on your social media and website

- Provide contact information for the person in your organization who is in charge of neurodiversity and inclusion
- This person should be available to answer questions and, if possible, arrange special accommodations for neurodiverse families

5. Provide neurodiversity, equity and inclusion training for employees and volunteers (pages 21–22)

6. Display signage at your business or event entrance

Display our poster at the entrance. Contact Annette Musso at 925-784-1537 for posters.

7. Rename the “Kids Menu” section

Snack bars and restaurants can remove the child-like stigma so everyone feels comfortable ordering these items (e.g.: *Simple Choice*, *Familiar Picks*, *Takin’ It Easy*, *Easy Pickin’s*, *No Fuss*, *Back to Basics*)

8. Create an entrance option with limited or no wait times

- Offering remote notification of a designated entry time via pager or text message
- Allowing neurodiverse patrons and their party to skip the line and enter immediately

9. Provide neurodiverse-friendly entry fees/tickets

- Free or reduced entrance fee for a personal assistant who accompanies a neurodiverse person to an event
- Partial/full refund of the entry/ticket price if they have to leave early due to anxiety or stress

10. Parade accommodations

- Designate a block on the parade route as a “Sensory-Friendly Area” where noisy floats, or those with flashing lights, and emergency vehicles are as quiet as possible
- Display banners designating this area at the site and notify parade participants of the expectations in this section of the parade route

*“We are very
appreciative of your
efforts to make our
lives and those of our
loved ones more
enjoyable and less
restricted.”*

~ Anonymous

6 | Conclusion

Thank you for reading this handbook, absorbing the information, and being willing to learn about the challenges some of us face attending public events. I hope you have been enlightened and are inspired, as hosts, to implement some of these ideas. Doing so could greatly enhance the lives of people who are too often isolated from the community and judged as being “off, strange, rude, uncaring and unsocial” by a community that doesn’t understand them.

When we welcome neurodiverse individuals to participate in public events, they will begin to see us as valuable members of their communities. We have challenges, but we also bring advantages:

- Neurodiversity challenges the “norms” in society
- Thinking differently provides different perspectives and leads to innovation
- Neurodivergent people often address challenges in unique ways
- Neurodivergent people often have specialized skills in which they excel
- Neurodiverse people are often extremely creative
- Neurodiversity provides benefits for all of society—we cannot progress with sameness

*“The more people that
are understanding at
an event, the more
we’ll feel accepted for
who we are. Doesn’t
everyone want that?”*

~ Matteo Musso

7 | Resources for Neurodiversity Training

Please refer to the following resources for neurodiversity training for your staff and volunteers. Sharing specific knowledge about the challenges neurodivergent people live with as they strive to be part of a society that doesn't understand them, promotes understanding, compassion and empathy. These are essential elements which I feel will inspire the changes necessary for ALL members of society to enjoy life and community!

1. The National Autistic Society

www.autism.org.uk

2. What it's Like Being Autistic: Sensory Overload (Video)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPknwW8mPAM

This amazing and impactful 3 minute video shows the viewer what it can be like as an autistic person navigating their way through everyday experiences in society.

3. Autistic Self Advocacy Network

www.autisticadvocacy.org

Provides complete, succinct information about what autism is, explains that there is "not 'one way' to be autistic," and lists some commonalities among autistic people.

4. Autism Career Pathways

www.autismcareerpathways.org
info@autismcareerpathways.org

Northern California organization that is focused on inclusivity of neurodivergent people in the workplace as well as in the community. Provides inclusivity and awareness training in northern California.

They just launched an incredible program, *Better Community Project: Autism Inclusivity Business Certification* (<https://forms.gle/wm1jvu6EnA5Li8829>).

5. Better Community Resource: Community Experiences of an Autistic Mom with her Autistic Family Members (Video)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=K07tUjuegEU

An autistic Grandma/Mom shares her family challenges during community outings, the reasons going out is difficult for an autistic person and suggestions for businesses.

6. Annette Musso

Founder/Director of Creative Autism Solutions Team
(and mother of Matteo Musso, author of this handbook)
Livermore, CA

Contact with any questions or for more information on how to make your event/business more accessible to ALL members of the community. Call 925-784-1537 or email annettemusso2@gmail.com

7. Neuro Advantage

www.neuroadvantage.com.au

chris@neuroadvantage.com

This is a company in the UK that is “Making Neurodiversity Inclusion Simple,” for any size organization through “engaging and relatable training that excites interest and motivates change.” Fill out the contact form on their website for more information.

8. Teo’s Tasty Adventures (PDF)

www.tinyurl.com/2p9e9k9b

Matteo Musso describes his challenges about dining in a restaurant and offers ideas to restaurant owners.

*“Inclusion benefits
everyone!”*

~ Anonymous

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Livermore Community Arts Council for making inclusion and diversity a priority in 2021. You are my inspiration for this handbook and I am proud to have you as the beneficiary of my Eagle Scout project. Together we can positively impact the lives of many neurodivergent people who would love to be accepted for who they are, appreciated for their “out of the box” thinking, and respected for the way they process emotional and environmental information that often causes anxiety and can be overwhelming.

I’d also like to express my thanks to the following businesses and community groups for their support in making this project possible:

The Harvey Family Dealership Group

- Tracy Honda, Tracy Mazda
- Dublin Honda, Dublin Mazda
- San Leandro Mazda
- Hayward Honda

The Rotary Club of Livermore, California

Madison Street Press, Oakland, California

With appreciation,

Matteo Musso

Troop 939, Livermore, CA

Praise from the Neurodiverse Community

This is an excellent project! Would be great for museums, aquariums, public transportation, Lyft/Uber, Target, grocery stores, tourist attractions, schools, employment locations, etc. The sky is the limit!

Thank you for your work to make more events possible for our loved ones. Too many people, especially adults with differences, never get the chance to attend community events. The arts can bring joy to everyone.

We are very appreciative of your efforts to make our lives and those of our loved ones more enjoyable and less restricted.

It's important that people realize that we all have issues with certain sensory things. Some of us just have a different tolerance level.

I LOVE your idea to help expand inclusion! Keep up the great work, Matteo!

Use of this Handbook will make such a positive impact on so many lives!

Thank you Matteo, for taking on this much needed project!

Inclusion benefits everyone!

