

MAKING VBS NEUROAFFIRMING

SIMPLE WAYS TO SUPPORT EVERY CHILD

Greetings




If you're getting ready for Vacation Bible School (VBS), I know you want kids to feel loved, excited, and connected to God's story. But if you're wondering how to make that experience truly welcoming for neurodivergent kids—kids with autism, ADHD, sensory differences, anxiety, or other unique ways of thinking—you're not alone. The good news? We've got some suggestions to help. Let's walk through some simple ways to make your VBS more neuroaffirming—so every child can show up and feel safe, seen, and included.

1. Set the Stage for Success

Neuroaffirming VBS starts with a predictable, welcoming environment.

Try This:

- Use a visual schedule with pictures of each part of the day (crafts, snacks, worship, story, etc.). Post it on the wall and review it at the start of each day.
- Define spaces clearly using signs, rugs, or cones (e.g., "story circle," "quiet tent," "craft zone").
- Create a sensory-friendly area with beanbags, soft lighting, noise-canceling headphones, fidgets, and calming visuals. Let kids know it's always available.


 **Why it helps:** Kids often feel more secure when they know what's coming and where things happen.

2. Speak Simply, Kindly, and Clearly

The way we speak makes a big difference. Simplicity shows care.

Try This:

- Use plain language: "We're going to do music next. You can clap, sway, or just listen."
- Give choices: "Do you want to sit on a cushion or chair?" "Would you rather paint or glue today?"
- Avoid vague rules like "Be good" or "Be respectful." Instead, say exactly what you mean: "Use your walking feet," "Keep your hands to yourself."


 **Why it helps:** Many kids struggle with interpreting abstract instructions or social cues. Clear communication reduces anxiety.

3. Support Regulation (Not Control)

All kids get overwhelmed sometimes. Some just show it differently. That's not misbehavior—it's a signal.

Try This:

- If a child is upset, lower your voice, get on their level, and say, "I'm here. You're safe."
- Normalize movement. Let kids stand, sway, stretch, or hold a fidget while listening.
 - Respect body autonomy. Ask, "Can I help you with that?" instead of jumping in.
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 **Why it helps:** When kids are dysregulated, they need connection—not correction. Your calm presence helps them find theirs

4. Rethink What Participation Looks Like

Some kids listen best while coloring. Others process by watching first. That's not opting out—it's engaging differently.

Try This:

- Allow parallel play—listening while building with blocks or doodling.
- Don't force group games; offer a quieter alternative nearby.
- Celebrate unique strengths: "You remembered all the song lyrics!" "I love how you helped clean up the markers!"

 **Why it helps:** When we expect every child to learn or worship the same way, we miss out on the diverse ways God works through them.


5. Shift from Managing to Facilitating

It's tempting to assume the role of controlling the lesson, managing the room, and keeping things 'on track.' Yet, when we shift from controlling behavior to facilitating a nurturing environment, we create space for genuine faith formation grounded in trust

Try This:

- Be a Gardener, Not a Gatekeeper: Your role isn't to force growth—it's to tend the soil. What does this room need so that every child can flourish?
- Flexible Structure: Build routines that anchor the day but allow space for sensory needs, emotional responses, and diverse engagement styles.

Facilitate Wonder: Ask open-ended questions. Hold Space for the unexpected by pausing the plan to follow the child's insight.


 **Why it helps:** It nurtures trust by creating a safe space for curiosity, wonder, and engagement, allowing faith to flourish through compassionate understanding.

6. Empower Your Volunteers

You don't need a PhD in child development to make a difference. You just need curiosity, compassion, and a team that's ready to learn together.

Try This:

- Offer Training: Share this list at your volunteer meeting. Walk through real-life scenarios. Talk about what compassion over conformity might look like.
- Debrief: Invite volunteers to reflect: "What went well? What was hard? What can we tweak?" Learning together builds connection and resilience.
- Shift the Mindset: Encourage your team to move from managing behavior to building relationships. That shift opens hearts—and transforms experiences.

 **Why it helps:** Volunteers who feel supported are better able to offer support. A strong, informed team can hold space for all kinds of kids with grace and joy.



Fellow VBS Enthusiast,

Making VBS neuroaffirming isn't about getting it all "right." It's about walking with humility and grace, co-creating a space where kids can encounter the God who already calls them beloved—just as they are.




7. Inclusion is Part of the Gospel Story

This work—this love— isn't a side dish. It's the main course. Inclusion is the heartbeat of Jesus' ministry. It's not about making room at the table— it's about honoring the truth that there's always been a place for everyone here.

Try This:

- *Storytelling*: Choose Bible stories that spotlight welcome and difference— like Jesus blessing the children, the man lowered through the roof, or the Samaritan woman at the well.
- *Speak Belonging*: Say often, “God made you amazing,” or “You are always loved,” and “Here, everyone belongs.” These words plant seeds that grow lifelong roots.
- *Remind the Team*: Inclusion is about belonging—not just attendance. It's about honoring each child's sacred worth.
- *Worship Freely*: Create worship spaces that welcome movement, stillness, stimming, dancing, or quietly observing. Every expression is holy.

 **Why it helps:** When neurodivergent children (and their families) see themselves reflected in the heart of your ministry, they know the truth: they are not just welcome—they are valued members.

Remember



If you're still reading, it means you're already doing the most important work—you care, deeply, and that matters more than any checklist.



Tips for a Neurodiverse-Friendly VBS

1. Set up a calm room where kids can take breaks if they feel overwhelmed.
2. Offer sensory bins with fidget toys, squishies, and other supports to help kids stay regulated and focused.
3. Simplified the schedule. Limit the number of transitions by combining rotations like crafts, snacks, and games.
4. Create a gentle environment by keeping music low. Avoid flashing lights or busy visuals that can cause sensory overload.
5. Consider holding VBS for fewer days or shorter time blocks (2 hours for 2–3 days).
6. Offer Visual Schedules using picture-based daily outlines to support routines and ease transitions.
7. Equip volunteers and staff with basic training and strategies for supporting neurodivergent kids.
8. Consider offering flexible participation. Provide kids options for their comfort level like quiet alternatives to high-energy games.
9. On your registration form, ask about sensory needs and supports that might help their participant focus.
10. Provide opportunities for movement.

Further Reading - Articles & Resources for Inclusive VBS that might be helpful.

- This article from Ministry Spark focuses on training volunteers, using visual aids, and other supports for neurodiverse children during VBS.
<https://ministryspark.com/include-kids-disabilities-vbs/>
- This article focuses on an adaptive VBS experience tailored for autistic children.
<https://www.minnesotaumc.org/newsdetail/adaptive-vbs-gives-autistic-children-inclusive-faith-building-experience-16597936>