

From Awareness to Action: Youth-Led Research on Allyship to Empower Neurodivergent Students in K-12

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In partnership with: The Arc of King County

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Aadya Garg’s journey into neurodiversity advocacy began in middle school, inspired by her lived experience as a sibling to a neurodivergent student. Her early research, supported by The Arc of King County, explored how to be an ally to neurodivergent individuals by directly taking input from neurodivergent individuals on what they expect from their peers, what helped them and what did not. Her early collaboration with The Arc of King County laid the foundation for exploring [what allyship for neurodiverse individuals looks like in practice](#).

Building on this foundation, Aadya expanded her work into a broader study that gathered practical insights from over 100 participants, including caregivers, educators, peers, and neurodivergent individuals themselves to understand what really helped and what did not during the k-12 journey of neurodivergent individuals, this report highlights actionable strategies, persistent challenges, and the critical importance of intentional allyship in schools. Aadya got selected to present her research insights and learnings at the **Stanford Neurodiversity Summit 2025**, where she deepened her understanding by engaging directly with global subject matter experts on neurodiversity across academia, medical practitioners and neurodiversity advocates from **Poland, Ukraine, Brazil, India, South Korea, Canada, and across the U.S.** This unique exposure brought new layers of insight and reinforced that equity in education is both a local and global imperative, affirming that challenges and opportunities for inclusion transcend geography.

FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION: YOUTH-LED RESEARCH ON ALLYSHIP TO EMPOWER NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS IN K-12

Background

- Neurodivergent students in K-12 have unique strengths yet consistently experience misunderstanding and exclusion from their peers, especially in unstructured settings.
- This project emerged from a student-led research initiative, inspired by lived experience as a sibling to a neurodiverse student, aiming to elevate community voices and drive actionable change in school inclusion practices.



Methods

- **Mixed-methods survey**
- Included neurodivergent students, caregivers, parents, educators, clinicians, and peers across the U.S.
- Thematic analysis of qualitative responses to open-ended questions about support, challenge, and inclusion in school and social life.


Results

What works:

- Proactive inclusion
- Clear communication
- Peer mentorship
- Celebrating strengths
- Adult presence
- Sensory Support

What doesn't work:

- One-size-fits-all solutions
- Lack of training/awareness among adults and peers
- Punitive discipline
- Compliance focus
- Fixed mindsets



Insights from 150+ participants across two surveys

Allyship Recommendations

1. **Build honest communication** across staff and students by learning about each others' differences and practice inclusion.
2. **Create buddy systems** and peer ally programs.
3. **Make allyship visible** - recognize and reward kindness and inclusion, not only academics.
4. **Prioritize support during unstructured times** (lunch, passing period, study hall), they are hotspots for exclusion
5. **Normalize neurodiversity** - utilize storytelling and conversations to reduce stigma and build empathy from a young age.

"Help us identify our strengths, motivate us, and invite us to the community"

"Guide us when we do something wrong -- we may not know ourselves"

Conclusion

- True inclusion equips the whole K-12 community and inspires everyday allyship, not just expecting neurodivergent students to "fit in."
- Small, intentional acts of inclusion can transform school life so neurodivergent students thrive, not just survive

Sample Research Questions



<p>Q1. What approaches are most helpful for identifying and building the strengths of neurodiverse individuals?</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">> 60%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Explaining unspoken Social Rules</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">40-60%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Giving direct positive feedback Preparing them for sudden changes</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">< 40%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Proactively inviting them to participate</td> </tr> </table>	> 60%	Explaining unspoken Social Rules	40-60%	Giving direct positive feedback Preparing them for sudden changes	< 40%	Proactively inviting them to participate	<p>Q2. What helps neurodiverse individuals thrive in unstructured social settings?</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">> 60%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Clear expectation setting before events</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">40-60%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Adult Presence Buddy System / Peer Mentoring</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">< 40%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Encouraging inclusive invitation Quiet / Sensory alternatives</td> </tr> </table>	> 60%	Clear expectation setting before events	40-60%	Adult Presence Buddy System / Peer Mentoring	< 40%	Encouraging inclusive invitation Quiet / Sensory alternatives	<p>Q3. What could motivate other K-12 students to be allies instead of ignoring or bullying their neurodiverse classmates?</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">> 60%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Peer-led allyship programs Lessons on empathy & diversity</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">40-60%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Sharing stories about strengths of neurodiverse students</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #4a2c5a; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">< 40%</td> <td style="padding: 2px;">Award / Recognition of inclusive behavior by peers</td> </tr> </table>	> 60%	Peer-led allyship programs Lessons on empathy & diversity	40-60%	Sharing stories about strengths of neurodiverse students	< 40%	Award / Recognition of inclusive behavior by peers
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Respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers to the research questions

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Acknowledgements
The Arc of King County <https://www.thearc.org/>
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Survey Form	Report
	

Key Learnings and Insights

- **Effective Allyship Practices:** Strength-based strategies such as recognizing talents, offering specific positive feedback, preparing for transitions, and creating sensory-aware environments were consistently cited as most helpful.
- **Harmful Practices:** Over 90% of participants identified one-size-fits-all instruction, punitive discipline, and ignoring feedback as damaging to inclusion.
- **Social and Unstructured Times:** Lunch, recess, and transport emerged as the highest-risk zones for exclusion. Protective factors included adult presence, peer buddy systems, and clear expectations.
- **Roles of Adults and Peers:** Peers foster inclusion through invitations, curiosity, and advocacy, while adults set the tone by modeling kindness, providing supervision, and receiving training.
- **Motivators for Allyship:** Peer-led programs, empathy lessons, recognition of inclusive behaviors, and storytelling proved effective in nurturing allyship.
- **Barriers and Challenges:** Training gaps among adults, rigid school structures, limited staff capacity, and persistent stigma remain key obstacles.



A personal highlight was meeting Dani Bowman, star of Netflix's *Love on the Spectrum*, whose journey in animation exemplifies how strength-based approaches can empower neurodivergent individuals to thrive. Dani Bowman shared: *"When we focus on strengths, we create opportunities not just for inclusion, but for leadership."* This message reinforced the heart of Aadya's research: allyship is not charity, it's empowerment.

Research Context

This second study engaged over 150 participants, including caregivers, educators, neurodiverse students, peers, and community members. The goal was to identify what strategies work, what challenges persist, and how unstructured school settings, like recess, lunch, and transportation, can be

transformed into inclusive spaces. Quantitative data were paired with qualitative narratives to ensure authentic community voices guided the analysis.

Key Learnings and Insights

1. What Works in Allyship

- **Strength-Based Approaches:** Over 80% of respondents emphasized the power of celebrating talents, interests, and strengths. One parent wrote: *“When my child’s teacher recognized her love of drawing and encouraged her to share it with the class, it completely shifted how peers saw her. She went from being the ‘quiet kid’ to the ‘artist’.”*
- **Clear Communication:** Modeling unspoken social rules and setting clear expectations were repeatedly cited. A neurodiverse student reflected: *“Just tell me the rules out loud. Don’t assume I’ll ‘pick it up.’ When you explain them, I feel like I belong instead of guessing wrong.”*
- **Sensory-Aware Environments:** Flexible spaces, quiet corners, and transition preparation helped reduce anxiety. As one caregiver put it: *“It’s not about lowering expectations, it’s about designing the environment so kids can rise to them.”*

2. What Doesn’t Work

- **One-Size-Fits-All Instruction:** Nearly 90% warned against standardized expectations. *“Trying to force everyone to learn and participate the same way is like asking a fish to climb a tree. It breaks confidence instead of building it,”* one participant noted.
- **Punitive Discipline:** Harsh or compliance-driven approaches were described as harmful. *“Negative feedback shuts them down completely. I’ve seen my student give up for the day after just one public reprimand,”* shared an educator.
- **Lack of Support in Social Times:** Respondents highlighted that exclusion most often happens during lunch, recess, and bus rides when adult supervision is limited. *“Unstructured times are when bullying thrives, kids who already feel different are left most vulnerable,”* emphasized a peer.

3. The Crucial Role of Unstructured Times

Over 70% of participants identified unstructured times as high-risk. Challenges included difficulty joining groups, sensory overload, and peer rejection. However, protective factors also emerged:

- **Adult Presence:** *“When staff are present on the playground, not just watching from a distance, conflicts reduce dramatically.”*
- **Peer Allyship:** *“A single friend saying ‘come join us’ can change an entire day,”* wrote one neurodiverse respondent.
- **Preparedness:** Students felt safer when they were told what to expect ahead of transitions.

4. Motivators for Allyship

Respondents highlighted peer-led programs, storytelling, and recognition as motivators. *“Stories shift hearts faster than statistics,”* one educator shared. Another added: *“When kindness is recognized in class, not just grades, students learn that inclusion matters.”*

5. Barriers and Challenges

The most cited barriers included:

- **Training Gaps:** 80%+ noted insufficient preparation for adults. *“Even well-meaning teachers don’t know what to do. Training shouldn’t be optional, it should be foundational,”* one parent wrote.
- **Rigid School Structures:** Fixed routines and rules made flexibility difficult. *“My child was punished for playing alone instead of with a group. That’s not discipline, that’s exclusion.”*
- **Community Stigma:** Parents highlighted the role of peer families. *“Too often, other parents tell their kids to stay away from mine. It’s heartbreaking, and it starts the cycle of exclusion.”*

Recommendations for Schools and Communities

1. **Prioritize Training:** Equip staff, peers, and parents with neurodiversity awareness tools.
2. **Embed Strength-Based Practices:** Celebrate achievements in arts, sports, and social skills alongside academics.
3. **Enhance Adult Presence:** Ensure supervision during lunch, recess, and transport.
4. **Normalize Neurodiversity:** Use storytelling and classroom lessons to reduce stigma.
5. **Recognize Inclusion:** Publicly value allyship behaviors in classrooms and assemblies.
6. **Involve Neurodiverse Voices:** Make students co-creators of policies and inclusion strategies.

Conclusion

This research confirms that authentic allyship requires intentional design, systemic change, and everyday acts of inclusion. The findings highlight a clear truth: allyship is not about “fixing” neurodiverse students but about creating environments where they belong. Schools can act by embedding strength-based support, prioritizing adult training, enhancing supervision during unstructured times, recognizing inclusive behaviors, and elevating neurodiverse voices in policy and practice.

By combining data with lived experiences, Aadya’s work underscores that meaningful change is possible when schools move from awareness to action, transforming education into communities of belonging.

About Aadya Garg



Aadya Garg is a high school sophomore, empathetic changemaker, and passionate advocate for disability inclusion, global health, and sustainability.

Guided by the ethical values of Chinmaya Mission and the discipline gained through her experience in Civil Air Patrol, Aadya approaches every initiative with integrity, empathy, and determination. Through her youth-led research and allyship projects, she works to empower both neurodivergent individuals and their peers, fostering environments where everyone is understood, respected, and able to thrive.

A recognized neurodiversity advocate and speaker at international forums, Aadya was recently selected to present her research at the Stanford Neurodiversity Summit 2025. She believes true change is built on awareness, compassion, and practical action, and is dedicated to building a more inclusive world, one step at a time.