

# NC Early Care & Education Study: Serving Neurodiverse Children

As early childhood educators, you see firsthand how children are growing, learning and navigating the world around them. Since the pandemic, many of you have noticed a rise in the number of children with special needs in your classrooms. More children are showing developmental delays, struggling with social interactions, or exhibiting behavioral challenges—especially those who didn’t have opportunities to interact with peers during shutdowns.



The Early Years statewide 2023 **Workforce Study**<sup>1</sup>, “**Working in Early Care and Education in North Carolina**,” confirmed what you’ve been seeing: more children need additional support, and we need the resources to provide it. In particular, many of you are working with more children who are neurodiverse, including those on the autism spectrum. Neurodiversity views differences in brain functioning as an overall part of the variation that exists among all people, stressing that differences in cognition should not be viewed in a negative manner, but rather as the way certain individuals perceive and understand the world around them.<sup>2</sup>

## The Challenges We Face

In interviews and focus groups with educators across the state, many have shared the difficulties of meeting children’s special education needs, especially during and after the pandemic.

**“I would say the service of the special needs children during the pandemic was very challenging. A lot of the therapy centers. We’re either doing virtual or you know they weren’t coming out to the centers like they are now. And so we saw a fall back in behind and those kids that need that therapy.”**

-Administrator, rural, 4-star

**“To be frank, a lot of our kids have just been in a bubble, particularly those with special needs, because they may have health issues that the make parents have to literally keep their children in a bubble.”**

-Administrator, rural, 4-star

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Within the context of serving special needs children, ECE professionals in the state have also observed more students who appeared to be on the autism spectrum.

**“We have a backlog of children who need interventions from speech to counseling to autism.”**

-Administrator, rural, 4-star

Supporting teaching staff in serving all children is essential. The 2023 Workforce Study found 27% of teachers and 29% of teacher assistants who are considering leaving the profession in the next three years cited **the need for more support for children with special needs as a key issue**. In some cases, support for children with behavioral challenges are addressed with special education or exceptional children’s services. However, participants revealed that it was difficult to provide these services during the pandemic.

## How We Can Support Neurodiverse Learners

Understanding neurodiversity and adapting teaching strategies can make a world of difference. Here are some approaches that can help:

- **Pair students strategically.** Many neurodiverse children excel in certain areas, like math. Encouraging peer learning in these subjects can build confidence and social skills.<sup>3</sup>
- **Use sensory-friendly teaching methods.** Incorporating games, story-based instruction and hands-on activities can make learning more accessible. Small group or one-on-one instruction can also help meet individual needs.
- **Connect with specialists.** As more children are identified as neurodiverse, it’s essential that connections are provided to service providers who can offer guidance and interventions.

## Moving Forward Together

It’s time to advocate for the tools, funding and partnerships necessary to ensure that every child gets the support they need. Together, we can create inclusive, nurturing environments where all children—regardless of their learning differences—can succeed.

(1) 2023 North Carolina Child Care Workforce Study. [EarlyYearsNC.org/research/2023-North-Carolina-Child-Care-Workforce-Study](https://EarlyYearsNC.org/research/2023-North-Carolina-Child-Care-Workforce-Study)

(2) Vanderbilt Kennedy Center. Promoting Neurodiversity in Early Childhood Services.

(3) Wiley, K. Wesleyan University. 2023. Implementation and Efficacy of Preschool Math Games with Vulnerable Demographic Subgroups. [digitalcollections.wesleyan.edu/flysystem/fedora/2023-07/1668.pdf](https://digitalcollections.wesleyan.edu/flysystem/fedora/2023-07/1668.pdf)