

Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach to Elopement at School:

1. Identify the reason the student is wandering

- a. Brain driven
 - i. Is the child curious or seeking sensory input? Are they bored? Do they want to explore? Are they expressing a need for autonomy or independence? Are they seeking something of interest? Are they trying to follow a routine?
 - ii. Communication challenges may prevent them from asking an adult
- b. Body (nervous system) driven
 - i. Is the child stressed or overwhelmed? Are they dysregulated? Is the environment too loud? Have too many demands been placed on the child?
 - ii. Often this sort of wandering is a stress response, and the child is in fight-or-flight
 - iii. Eloping/bolting → result of cumulative stress, child is pushed beyond their window of tolerance

2. Wandering as a stress response (fight or flight)

- a. Child is overwhelmed/dysregulated and wandering behavior is led by stress
 - i. Escaping a situation due to overwhelm, sensory overload, dysregulation (or fight-or-flight response)
 1. Running out of the classroom
 2. Hitting, biting, running away (all similar body-led behaviors)
- b. When eloping is a stress response, it's generally not deliberate or pre-planned; it's the body's response to feeling completely overwhelmed
 - i. Instead of seeing elopement as a problem behavior, we can shift to seeing it as a behavior telling us there is a problem
 1. the student needs help and support, the student is *having* a problem (or having a hard time)
 - ii. Could be due to:
 1. Demands without supports
 - a. Examples: worksheet requiring focus, but no noise canceling headphones or sensory supports, an assignment given without offering the student sentence starters or

breaking down the assignment into steps, asking a student to transition suddenly without letting them know a transition was coming

2. An overwhelming environment (noise, expectations, change in routine, anxiety)
 3. Feeling misunderstood or feeling a lack of understanding from a support person or teacher
 4. Confusing or unclear expectations with no way to ask for help/to communicate
 5. Interoception difficulties (not realizing they are hungry, being exhausted and having trouble thinking clearly, feeling sick but not able to label or identify what is wrong)
- iii. Be curious
1. What is making the current environment (classroom, lunch room, recess) too much for the child?
- iv. *Remember: kids don't go to school with the intention of melting down or bolting out of the room - they run out of the room because they are having a hard time*
1. An environment that feels safe and comfortable to another student can still feel unsafe or uncomfortable to a student with autism
- v. Goal: set up an environment that supports the student's well being and prevents them from becoming overwhelmed

3. Kids with autism are more vulnerable to emotional dysregulation

- a. Sensitive sensory system, sensitive nervous system
 - i. Kids with autism may have less reliable ways to communicate
- b. Kids with autism face greater pressures, demands, and expectations at school because school is set up to work for neurotypical kids
 - i. Kids with autism face higher demands at school than neurotypical kids because they are held to neurotypical expectations when they are not neurotypical and have different needs and strengths
 1. Pressure to keep their bodies still, navigate constantly changing sensory environments, understand unwritten rules and unspoken

- expectations, learn in the same way as neurotypical peers (despite processing information differently), cope with constant changes in the environment, and manage many transitions each day
- 2. Constantly being asked to do things that aren't intuitive to how they think or process the world can be overwhelming
- 3. = high demands without proper supports or accommodations
- c. Expectations to stay regulated (sensory/emotional) when they are in an overwhelming environment
 - i. Kids may feel that escape is the only way to get out of uncomfortable situations (or may need to regulate)

4. Keeping students well-regulated:

- a. Offer adequate supports for assignments and activities
 - i. double-check with your student - do they have the resources they need, the skills they need, etc. to complete the assignment?
 - ii. Were they able to take in the main points of what was communicated to them orally?
 - iii. Do they understand the instructions they were given?
 - iv. Were they able to focus on what was just said, or was the environment (or something else) distracting?
 - v. Do they have a question but struggle to communicate it?
 - vi. Do they need the instructions broken down into several steps?
 - vii. Do they need a visual or other support to accompany the written instruction?
 - viii. Do they need a model to get started?
 - ix. Do they need extra time to observe other students modeling an activity before they feel ready to try it?
 - x. Are they regulated and able to learn and work right now?
- b. Understand and support the whole student
 - i. What are their strengths?
 - ii. How do they learn?
 - iii. What are they interested in?
 - iv. How can you alter the assignment to fit these interests and strengths?

1. Can they participate in a different way?
2. Can their role be changed in the activity?
3. Can the assignment be tailored to their interests?
4. Can the topic be tied to something they are interested in?
5. Can you tie the information to something they have learned about before?
6. Can you add a tactile component to the activity or assignment?
7. Can you create routines around learning each class?
8. Can you offer pictures, diagrams and charts?

5. Proactively teach regulation skills and tools (when the child is regulated)

- a. Teach regulation skills and tools (sensory calming strategies) when the child is relaxed, calm, and regulated → practice, practice, practice!
- b. Teach and model regulation strategies
- c. Encourage student to practice these strategies (individualized strategies that work for them)
 - i. Create visuals for strategies so they are tangible (breathing visuals, deep pressure options, animal crawl picture cards)
 - ii. *When a student is dysregulated, they may not be able to choose a tool or strategy in that moment that works for them → offer help and support
- d. Regulation strategies can be viewed in terms of energy
 - i. Being regulated means having the appropriate energy level needed to engage in the activity or task at hand
 - ii. do they have too much energy to participate in the task or activity?
 - iii. Is their energy level too low? Do they need more energy to be able to focus or participate?
 - iv. Regulation strategies can be activities that increase energy level and affect, or activities that decrease energy level or reduce anxiety
 - v. Student should identify (with support) strategies for when energy is too low and when energy is too high
 1. Energy level can be easier to identify than emotion words
 - a. Kids can either identify their energy level, or they can work to identify emotion related words

- i. High energy → over-stimulated, anxious, antsy, overwhelmed, frantic, chaotic, heart-racing, angry, frustrated
- ii. Low energy →

2. High energy, just right, low energy

e. Some examples of regulation strategies:

- i. Fidgets, music on headphones (fast, slow, loud, soft), white noise on headphones, yoga poses or stretches, animal crawls, wall sits, deep breathing/blowing, swinging, spinning, squeezing something/squeezing hands, hugging a stuffed animal, asking for a tight squeeze/hug, heavy work / carrying something heavy, jumping, drawing, talking to a safe person, eating something crunchy, chewing gum, drawing, running, rolling or bouncing on a yoga ball, lying down
- ii. Work with kids to figure out which strategies bring them up and which strategies ground and calm them

6. Ensure access to communication

- a. AAC/alternative communication should always be available to the child (with them, on their desk)
- b. Create/offer communication supports that enable the child to say “I need a break,” “I am stressed,” “I am overwhelmed” etc. (these are important self-advocacy expression)
- c. Break card on their desk at all times
 - i. “Touch break card”
- d. A way to communicate discomfort or need for support
 - i. I need help
 - ii. I don’t understand
 - iii. No
 - iv. Help
 - v. Break
 - vi. Too hard
- e. Total communication

- i. even if they have an AAC device and use it, gestures, vocalizations, and any other form of communication should be respected (without the pressure to HAVE to answer with AAC device)

7. Create a safe and supportive environment

- a. Adjust the environment to make the space more supportive to the student (environmental adaptations)
 - i. Provide sensory supports and tools to help the child feel comfortable and regulated
 - ii. Create a safe space in the room, or a safe location to take a break (as needed/freedom to take breaks)
 - iii. Create a sensory friendly classroom (lights, sounds, location in the room, etc.)
 - iv. Allow the student to put their head down or close their eyes as needed
 - v. Create a reliable way to check in the student regularly (and a way for the student to check in with you as needed) - a notecard, a regular check-in before or after class, a post it note
- b. Adjust assignments, make accommodations and modifications to make learning accessible for the student
- c. Ensure access to breaks (without needing to be earned)
- d. Unmet needs
 - i. Determine if the child is missing important skills that could make life easier or more accessible, such as coping mechanisms, a form of communication, dysregulation support tools, or sensory tools

8. Reduce demands and stress load on the student

- a. Often at school neurodivergent/autistic kids can be in a state of survival mode
- b. Not necessarily one demand at school that makes someone wander, rather, a build up of experiences (sensory input, dysregulation, demands without adequate supports)
- c. Make adjustments and accommodations (or modifications) rather than pushing kids to work through extreme discomfort

- d. Priority is safety and staying well regulated - regulation comes before specific school demands / assignments
 - i. Kids need to be regulated to learn and to participate
- e. Support the person as a whole person - a behavior is one surface level component of who they are and what sort of supports they will need

9. Students' wellbeing is more important than academic performance (in moments of distress)

- a. Eloping out of the classroom is a signal that the student is in distress and needs compassionate support, rather than punishment
- b. Connection > compliance , build trust
- c. If the child is eloping frequently, they are likely becoming dysregulated frequently
 - i. This suggests that school demands, the environment, or the approach to the child's behavior should be adjusted
- d. Prioritize the child's sensory and emotional state over academic demands to create a less stressful and more supportive environment
- e. Their safety (emotional and sensory safety) = priority (over the school work or demands)
- f. If a student elopes, avoid putting them back in the exact situation they just ran from
 - i. Avoid presenting them with the same assignment they were working on
 - ii. Bring them to a different space first to regulate and to show them that you care and are concerned
 - iii. Pay attention to what may have been going on before they eloped (with the caveat that generally it may have been a build up of stressors that caused them to become dysregulated)
 - iv. Work with them to figure out what could have helped them stay in the classroom
 - 1. Safe ways to express when they are overwhelmed, accommodations for assignments that cause stress or are inaccessible, and ways to move their body as needed in the classroom are essential
 - 2. Provide communication supports, especially to request breaks or express needs

3. Build trusting, caring relationships with autistic students so they feel safe expressing their needs and feel supported and understood (this will lead to them feeling safer in their bodies and in the classroom)