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How safe do/did you feel growing up?

**By Jorn Bettin**

April 23, 2024












Initial results from a survey on psychological safety and mental wellbeing indicate that the biggest fears of Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+, and Disabled children – and especially those who also belong to cultural minorities, relate to classmates, parents, and teachers. 97% indicate often or always having anxiety, and 80% indicate often or always feeling depressed. We are committed to gathering further data from as many geographies as possible. The data and lived experience reports will flow into our education courses for teachers, and will inform our advocacy work.

The results from our **Feeling Safe Growing Up** survey highlight that neurodivergent and intersectionally marginalised children grow up in a highly traumatising environment, and often don't seem to have any genuinely safe and trustworthy relationships. The numbers are so staggering that they leave me speechless, they speak louder than words. And yet, they are in many ways consistent with my own childhood experience. Even the limited initial results are worthwhile sharing to encourage wide circulation of the survey.

This article presents **participatory research** data in a visual format, and provides context in terms of the demographics covered.



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1. How safe do intersectionally marginalised students feel?
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How safe do intersectionally marginalised students feel?

The vast majority of education professionals are ignorant not only about Autistic culture and Autistic ways of being, they are also ignorant about the prevalence of complex trauma amongst intersectionally marginalised people, including both students and their colleagues.

The data and anonymous lived experience reports on psychological safety during childhood presented in this article are the initial results from an ongoing survey.

Especially if you are part of a minority group, you can greatly assist our ongoing efforts by contributing your childhood experiences to our anonymous survey **Feeling Safe Growing Up**.

The results presented relate to all the responses received from marginalised population segments, 36 responses so far, with an emphasis on lived experiences in education settings.

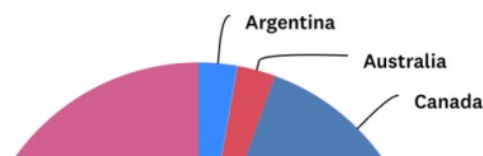
If you are part of a minority group, you can also assist our ongoing efforts by contributing your lived experiences to our anonymous survey **Feeling Safe**.

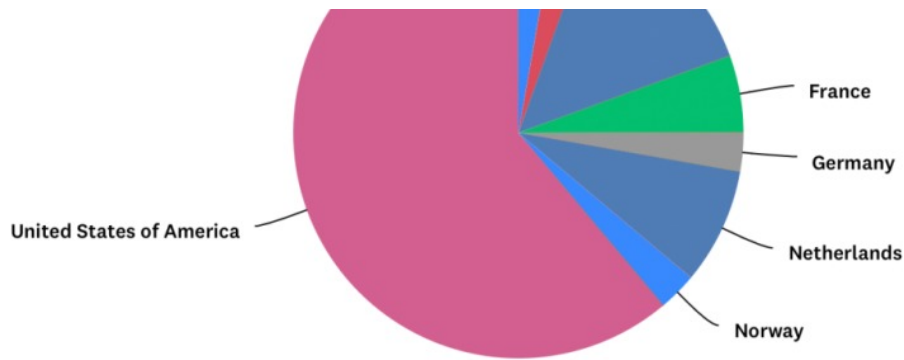
Demographics

Geography

In what country do you live?

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



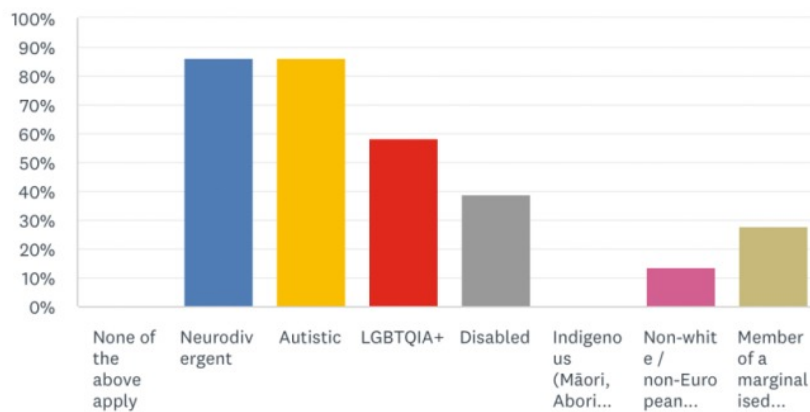


Whilst so far most of the responses received are from the US, an analysis of the the data set reveals that responses from other countries are very much consistent with the US results. It seems childhood experiences are very similar across Western societies, underscoring **the hypernormalising effects of the global mono-cult**. In this article we therefore only explore the aggregate numbers across all geographies.

Intersectionality of Autistic communities

Social categories you identify with

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0

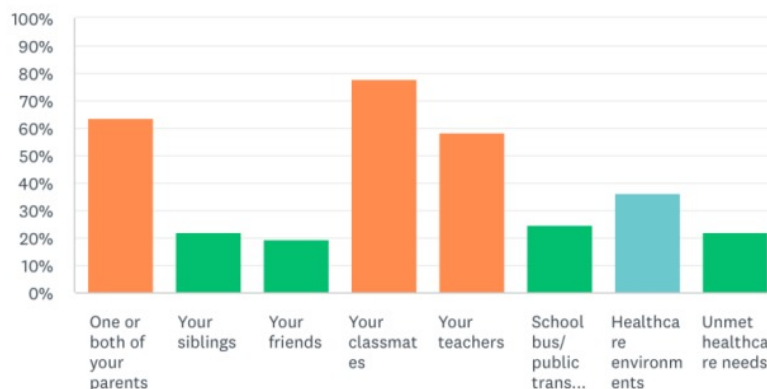


The level of intersectionality visualised in this graph is consistent with the larger dataset from our survey **Feeling Safe** that covers the lived experiences of adults within their families and in other social spheres.

(Un)safety in different social spheres

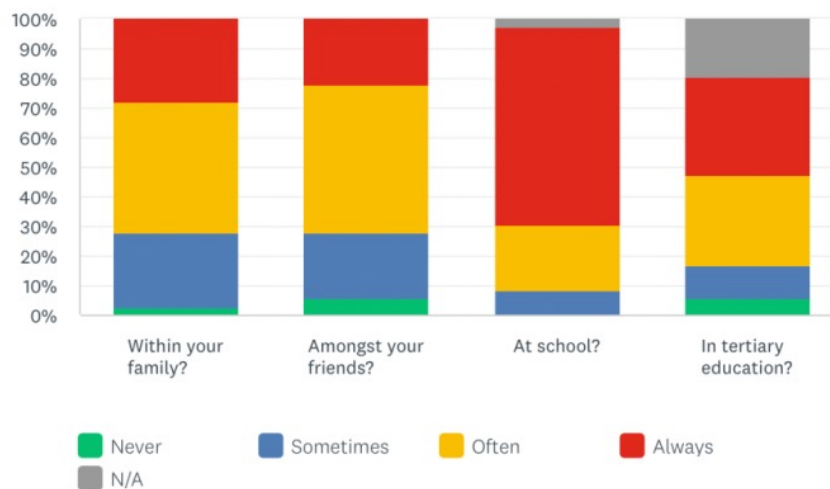
The biggest fears you experience(d) are/were mostly due to ...

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



Are/were you afraid to be your authentic self

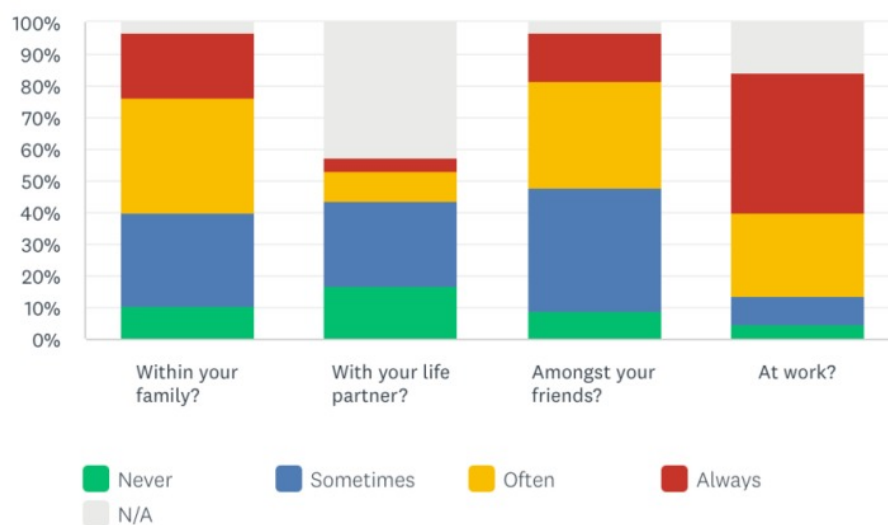
Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



These numbers need no commentary. Answers to similar questions related to adult lived experiences are visualised in the graph below.

Are you afraid to be your authentic self

Answered: 132 Skipped: 0

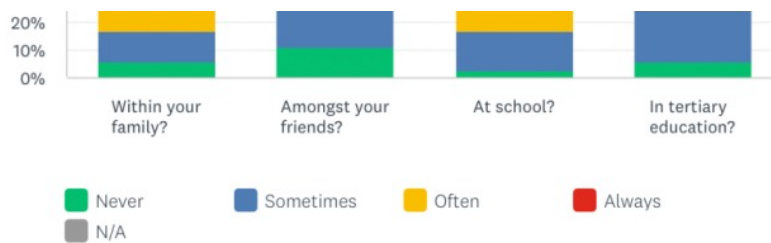


The answers from students below should be alarming for all educators and teachers, raising serious questions about typical classroom experiences, and what if anything is being learnt.

Are/were you afraid of making mistakes and sharing lessons

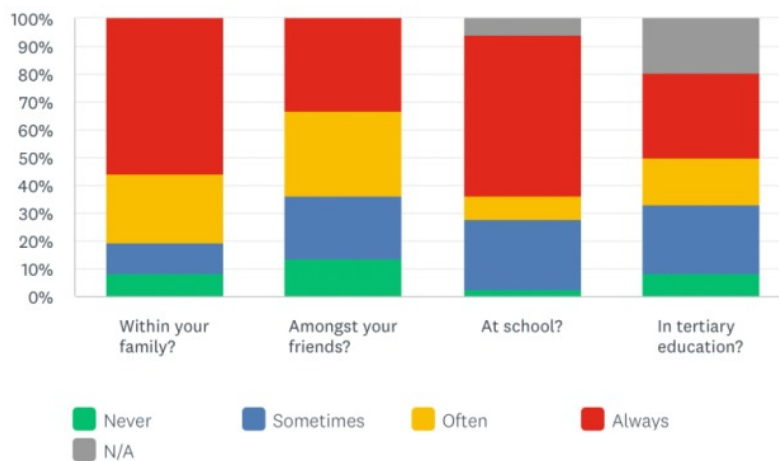
Answered: 36 Skipped: 0





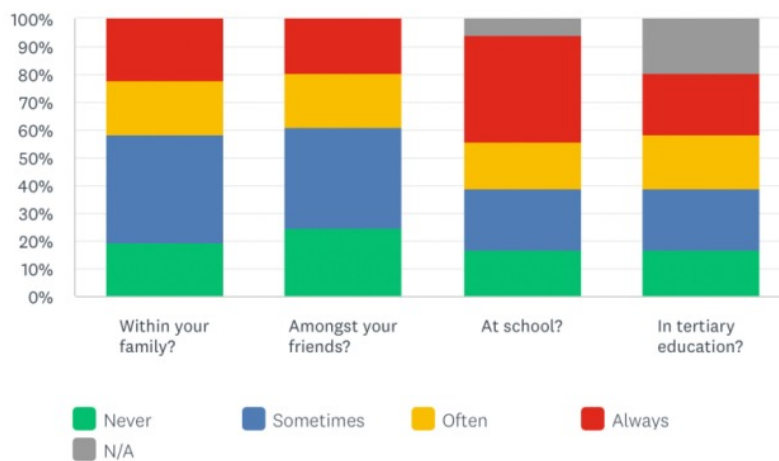
Are/were you afraid of raising problems

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



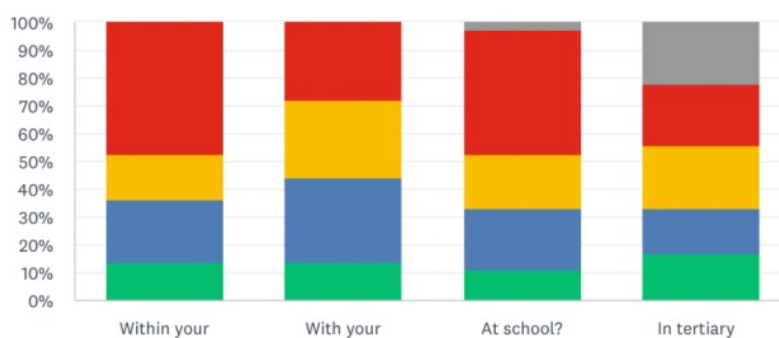
Are/were you afraid of asking questions

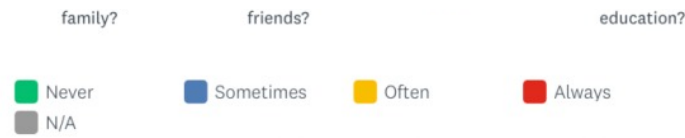
Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



Are/were you afraid to disagree

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0

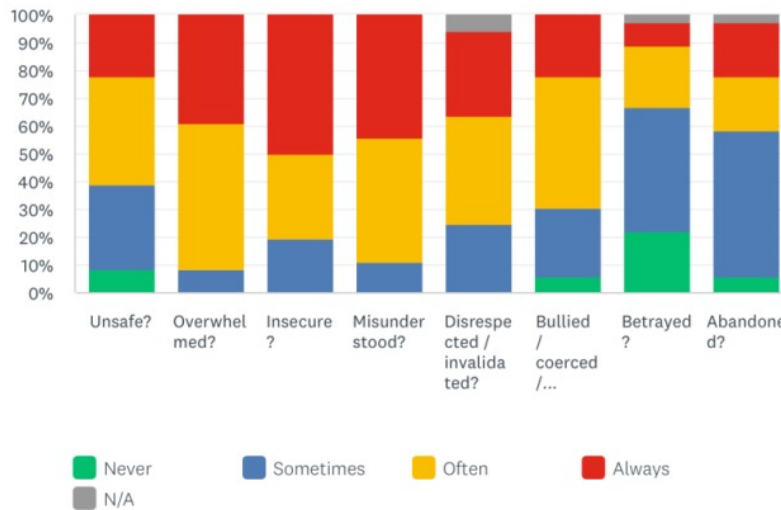




How feeling unsafe is experienced

Negative feelings. How often do/did you feel ...

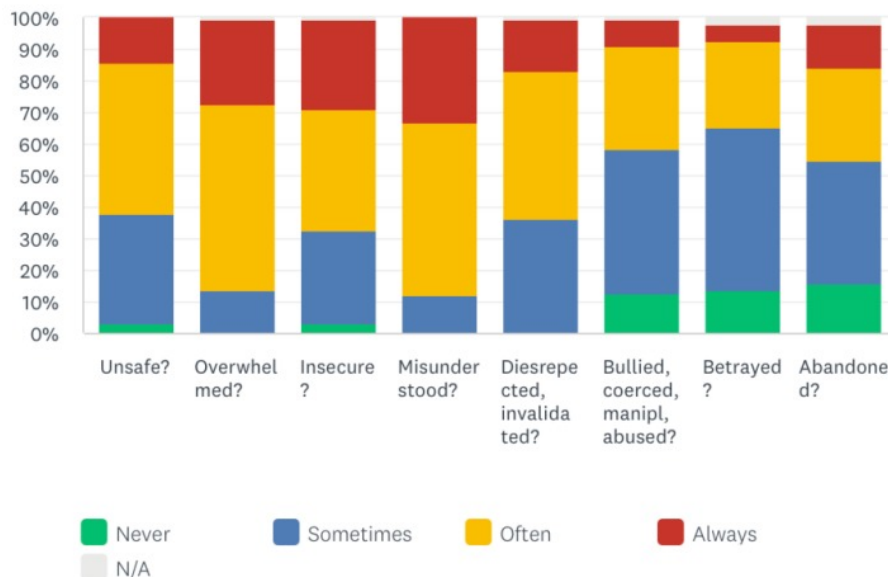
Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



Again, the numbers above are noticeably more disturbing than numbers relating to the experiences from the lives of adults (in the graph below).

Negative feelings. How often do you feel ...

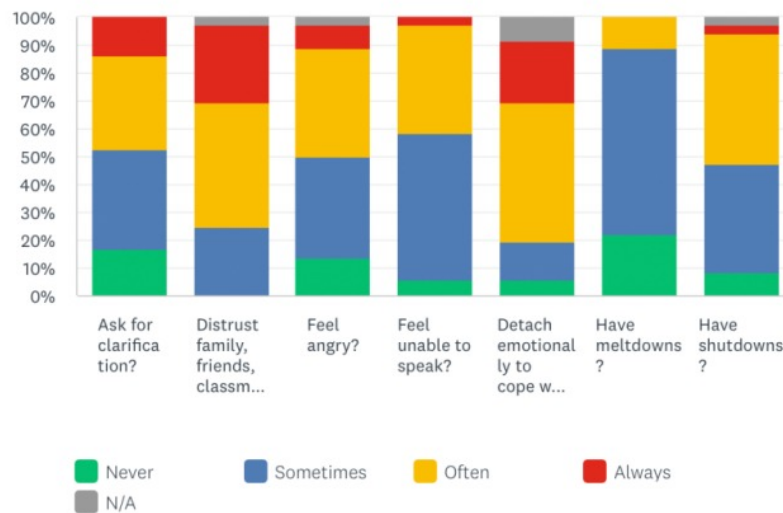
Answered: 132 Skipped: 0



Back to the way in which neurodivergent and intersectionally marginalised students are experiencing / have experienced their childhood:

Learned coping strategies and trauma responses. How often do/did you ...

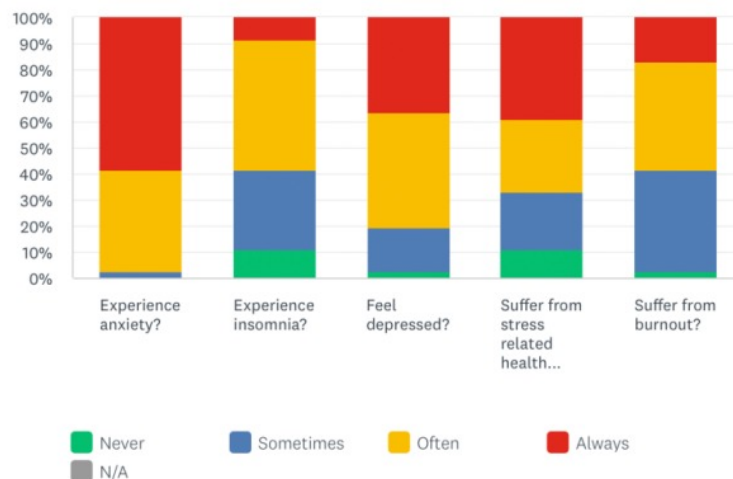
Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



The numbers speak louder than any words:

Symptoms of trauma and chronic stress. How often do/did you ...

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



Lived experiences from school and educational environments

This section only features a small number of examples from our growing **database of participatory research**.

What are the most important things you wished your teachers to know, respect, and do, when engaging with you?

Just because I was quiet and got good grades didn't mean I was doing okay. I was horribly bullied and abused by classmates, and no one did anything about it. And I didn't feel like I could speak up. I didn't even know that was an option.

I wish there was more awareness and compassion towards mental health problems and what "high functioning" neurodivergence looks like. I wish teachers had bothered to ask about my home life and mental health rather than comparing my academic performance to other students' and questioning why I wasn't applying myself.

I wish my teachers had understood that I was not attempting to be disruptive when asking

questions or raising issues. I wish they had treated me as a more genuine person, and as a person at all, instead of an obstacle.

I honestly wish teachers and professors knew that I may not always be able to reach out for help. I wish they would react to signs of struggle sooner if even at all.

I wished I had been identified as Autistic in school and had received help then. I wished I had someone recognize I was being abused at home and helped me.

Saying "so much potential" doesn't help unleash potential in any way. Forcing us to do repetitive work (multiplication tables in grade 9 math, for a real example) is intellectually stifling. When a child is performing poorly in school, and they test as very intelligent, consider whether it might not be the child at fault, but rather an educational system designed to teach by rote and not by understanding. Don't incarcerate a child for giving literal answers. Don't assume a child giving literal answers is trying to talk back. That might be an autistic attempt at complete honesty. (Unfortunately the police who need to know this are unlikely to understand.) It's hard to overstate how much damage is done by criminalizing a child for autistic behaviour.

Abuse isn't teaching. Asking for clarification isn't insolence. Not wanting to engage isn't 'acting out'.

Just because the teaching and learning method you know is what you teach doesn't mean it's going to work for me and saying it louder and more often doesn't change that.

I wish my teachers understood my needs when I was younger, and even now. Even when I go out of my way to tell them about my conditions, which is already draining enough, they refuse to adjust, despite it being *documented* that it helps me.

Understanding how seriously damaging the bullying was and the double empathy problem.

I listen best when I don't look at them. I need protection from bullies.

I was overperforming (using anxiety to get good grades and gain approval) and did not have a happy home life. I needed extra support with executive functioning and making friends. Just because I was quiet and "good" didn't mean I wasn't struggling.

I wish all professionals, whether teachers or medical, would accept the neurodiversity paradigm and stop pathologizing the existence of so-called "invisible minorities". While LGBTQIA+ is a bit further ahead in acceptance than Autism, there are still so many problems there as well.

Be patient, and don't yell at me or mock me. Don't tell me "rules" that don't actually apply to everyone because I will follow them forever at great personal cost. Intervene when you see bullying rather than expecting children to fight it out themselves. Don't force speech.

I was a curious, inquisitive kid, and I asked a lot of questions. Sometimes teachers didn't have time for to answer those, or they just didn't have answers. That's fine. Just say so. Sometimes they gave me non-answers, or were otherwise dismissive of the substance of my questions. That would really piss me off, and would result in conflict that was serious enough to make teachers quit teaching. So don't do that. Just say you don't know, or don't have time to answer my question at this time. If you're going to demand that I accept something, solely on the basis of your authority as a teacher, pupils like me will buck, and everyone will be worse off for it.

Have you had any traumatising experiences in school and other education settings that no one should ever experience? Please outline.

in grade school (middle school especially) i was constantly a victim of bullying which the teachers/administration did nothing to prevent. multiple times staff turned it around and asked if i had done anything to _provoke_ the bullying (once when i complained of bullying they even asked if i had been having sex with the bully, which was absolutely an inappropriate question and completely unfounded), and multiple times they told me they could either do nothing or suspend both me and the bully (usually i took this option, because it seemed better than nothing, and when i returned from suspension sometimes students/other teachers would ask why i had been away, and i could say i had been unjustly suspended and use that as a conversation starter to try to point out the systematic issues, although nothing ever seemed to come of that).

the trauma was more pervasive rather than any one incident. more the environment generally, especially the expectation to chase grades destroying long term motivation to learn

Yes. My bullies would torment me daily, making fun of me and various aspects of how I look or who I am. I was in survival mode all of my school years. Home was the only place I felt safe.

*My baby sitter convinced me to stand up and tell my teacher I was being bullied. The bully's teacher made me apologize for a *fake accusation* because "oh she would never have done that!" The accusation wasn't fake. Trust broken. Completely.*

I was assaulted on a school bus which was cheered and applauded by peers and ignored by the bus driver. I had sat in my normal seat, which someone standing in the aisle had apparently planned to sit in. I refused to move, and she attempted to force me. I was accused of plagiarism on my reading log by a teacher due to my extensive reading record. My physical appearance was publicly mocked by a teacher. I was in gym, so in the mandatory gym uniform, and another teacher came in and made fun of my legs, I believe something akin to "Now I know why you don't wear shorts." I'm sure there are others i'm forgetting at the moment.

Yes. "School" below refers to K-12. I was scapegoated and shunned in school. I do not use those terms lightly. Elementary school, teacher-led scapegoating ended after a couple of years but I remained a pariah through high school. Those traumatized me more than physical violence. I did not have a chance to develop socially until my 20s, when it was much much harder (probably because it was after neural pruning). At school, I was under constant, unending risk of violence from classmates. I was almost expelled for refusing to ever shower after gym class, but the walls and floor were concrete, and I was justifiably afraid of concussion and rape. I was the fastest one to get changed, too, because adults also avoided the change rooms, making them especially dangerous zones. At school, I was violently sexually abused (punched in the crotch). "Stand with your arms at your sides or go to detention" meant I went to detention instead of unclasping my hands, which I clasped firmly over my genitals for protection. At school, i was consistently told that my poor performance was my fault. For context, I tested several standard deviations above average intellectually, I was writing software in grade 3, reading before kindergarten, and reading at a university level by grade 7. School was prison, torture. Again, not terms used lightly. And being intellectually quashed was deprivation. It's illegal to keep a child in a house's basement, denying them stimulus, refusing to speak in their presence; it shouldn't be acceptable to do so in a school basement. It is a quiet killing, a destruction of the future of that child.

Regular physical and non-stop mental abuse.

Often abandoned when asking for clarification or accommodations. "Figure it out what I meant or get an F. No I will not help clarify" – Ridicule and mocking from both peers and teachers when not understanding social contexts or apparently cultural touch points such as movies TV shows or

books that I have not yet experienced or was not aware of. – Being grouped with people that are known for harassing autistic kids in the school.

My peers eventually bullied me enough, to the point i was both hospitalised for risk of harming myself, and then pulled out of the school. i don't typically remember much, but i remember that night vividly. i'm still in distance education, and i don't plan on changing.

I was emotionally and physically bullied to the point where I was having flashbacks by second grade and had all the symptoms of CPTSD by middle school.

One time i was asked to resolve a math problem that i did not understand in front of the classroom and the teacher made fun of me. It took 30 minutes before the teacher let it go, but he never explained. My classmates stood by my side though. Later i perfectly understood the math problem, it was the teaching method that wasn't right for me.

I believe being unseen because of being quiet and a "good girl" was traumatizing. Especially in difficult subjects like math (I have identified as an adult that I have dyscalculia) taught by an unaware man who had no sense of how to handle children, very unaware of my struggles. I suffered in silence. I marked above that I was never angry and never had meltdowns and it's important to note that's because I wasn't ALLOWED to be that way. I had to be good, and that was heavily encouraged by society, parents, teachers, and adults. It was the only way I could receive positive attention and not receive negative attention.

Being grabbed by classmates and having grass clippings shoved down the front of my shirt. Being unable to use the washrooms at school due to the sensory environment and danger of being attacked by other students and developing severe constipation for 6 years as a result; being too afraid of my teachers to ask to go to the washroom during class time in the early grades.

I shouldn't have been mocked and othered for just being myself and getting excited over the things I liked.

Safety of work environments in the education sector

Our survey data on the safety of work environments is from an ongoing survey across all sectors of the economy, across a population of more than 329 workers, of which more than 10% identify as Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and/or Disabled, and of which 177 work in the education sector.

You can greatly assist our ongoing efforts by contributing your lived experiences to our anonymous survey **Psychological Safety**. We would love to expand our dataset to be able to compare differences between various sectors in the economy and between the lived experiences in different geographies.

Demographics

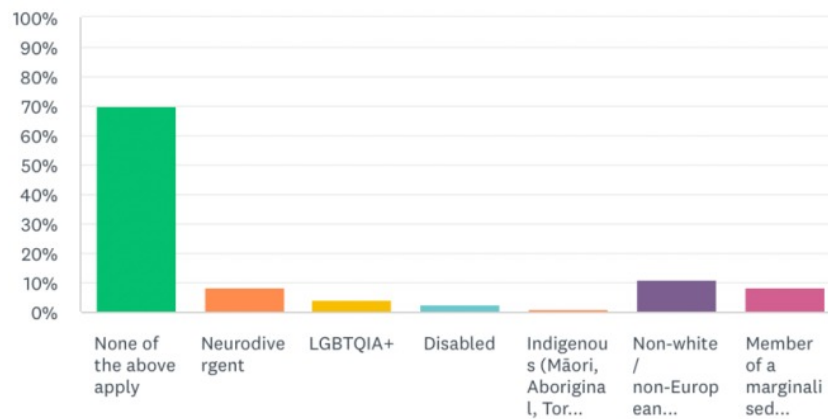
Baseline across all education professionals

The demographics of marginalising categories across education professionals within our database:

Social categories you identify with

Social categories you identify with

Answered: 120 Skipped: 57

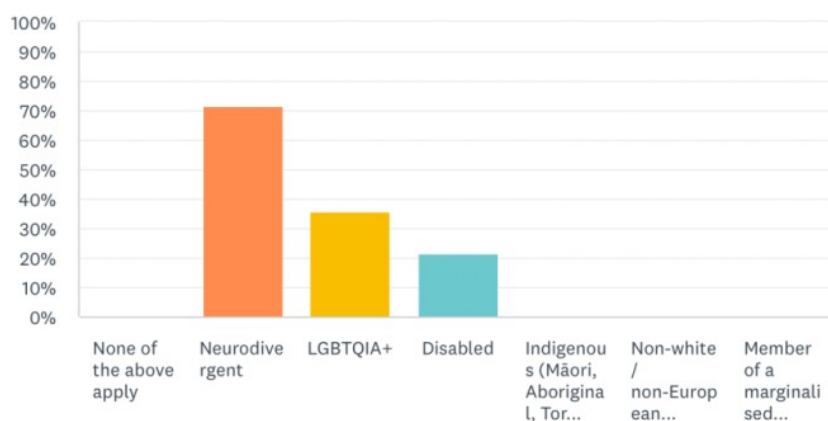


Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled education professionals

The intersectionality of marginalising categories amongst Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled people across the education professionals within our database:

Social categories you identify with

Answered: 14 Skipped: 0

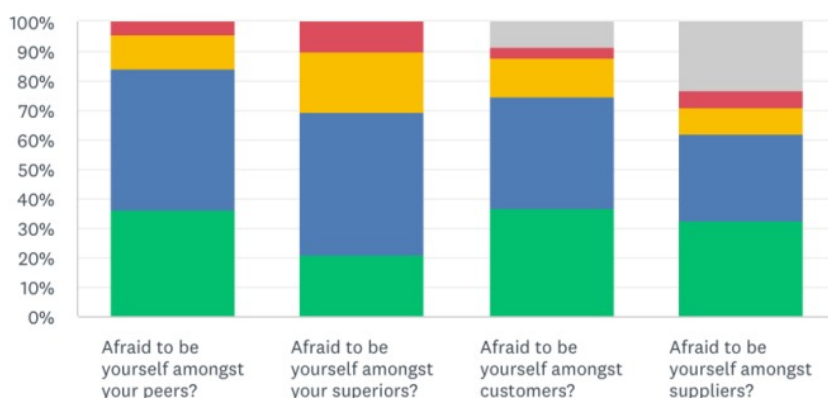


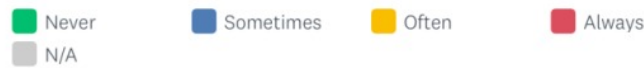
How safe do educators feel at work?

Baseline across all education professionals

Afraid to be your authentic self

Answered: 177 Skipped: 0



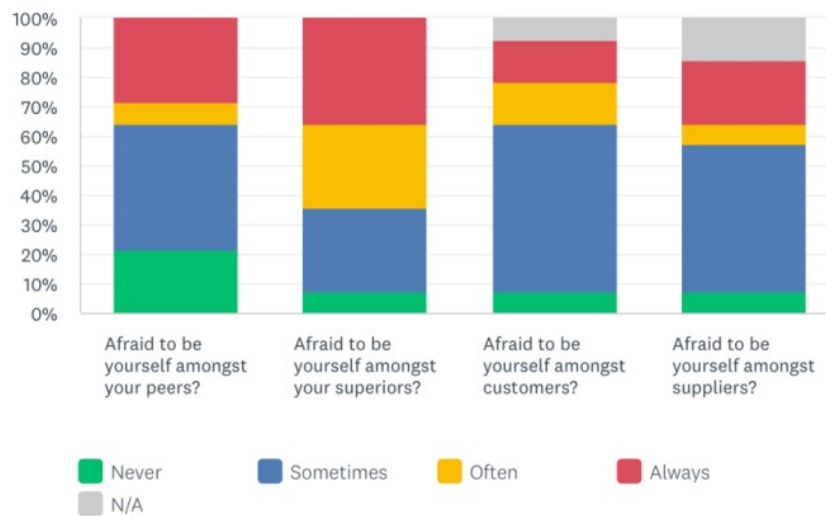


Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled education professionals

The lack of psychological safety of Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled educators underscores the lived experience reports from students. If teachers bully and mistreat colleagues from minority groups, what are the chances that students from minority groups will have positive experiences at school?

Afraid to be your authentic self

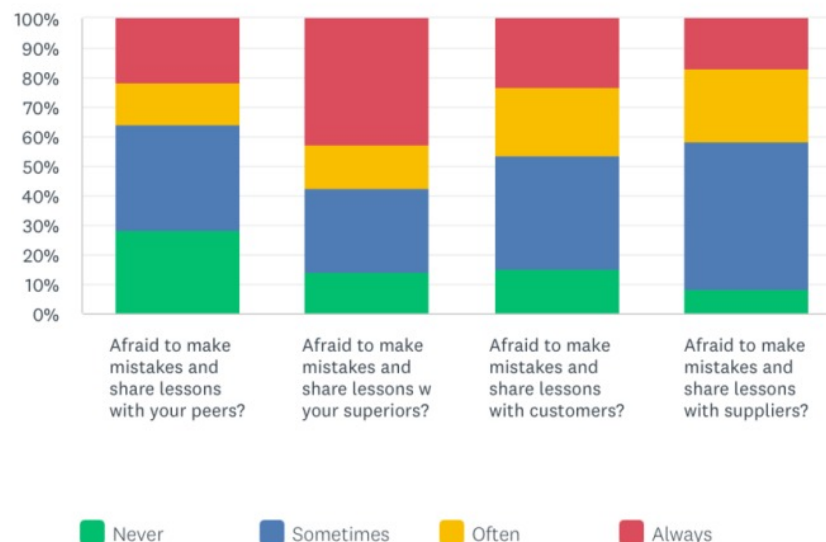
Answered: 14 Skipped: 0



Further answers from Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled educators. These numbers are consistent with the datasets from Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled workers in other sectors:

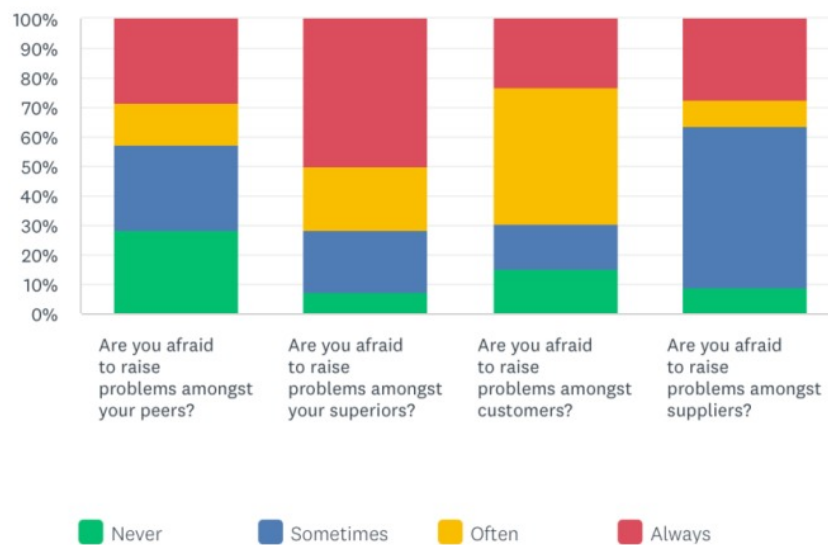
Afraid to make mistakes

Answered: 14 Skipped: 0



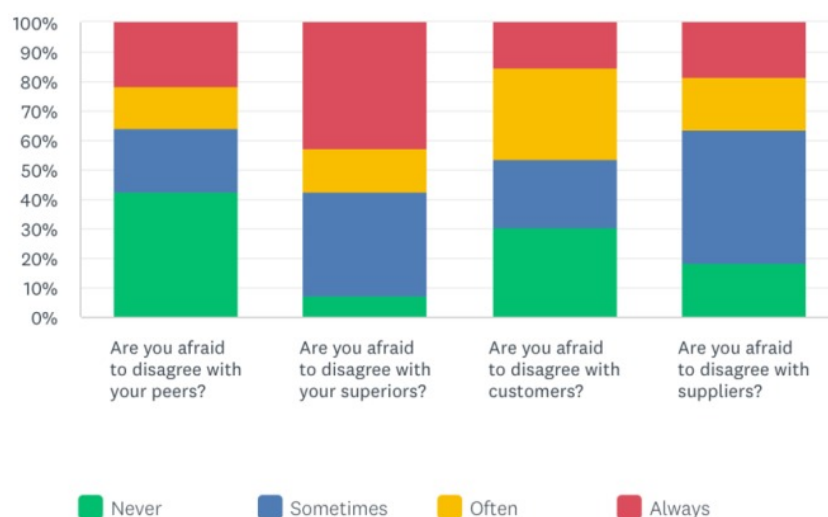
Afraid to raise problems

Answered: 14 Skipped: 0



Afraid to disagree

Answered: 14 Skipped: 0



Conclusions

Safety of intersectionally marginalised students

Across the board, **most Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled students do not feel safe within their families, amongst their classmates, and with their teachers.**

Prevalence of trauma

In our survey data, 92% of Autistic and otherwise Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled students often or always feel **overwhelmed**, and over 89% of Autistic and otherwise Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled students often or always feel **misunderstood**. Over 70% of Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled people often or

always have at least five negative feelings, in addition to the above, feeling **bullied**, **insecure**, and **disrespected**. Furthermore over 60% often or always feel **unsafe**, and over 30% indicate that they often or always feel **betrayed** and **abandoned**.

84% of the Neurodivergent respondents to our **Feeling Safe Growing Up** survey identify as Autistic. This means that the demographics of our data show the large overlap and the intersectionality between Autistic communities, and the LGBTQIA+ and Disabled communities.

In our survey data 45% of Autistic students also identify as Disabled, and 61% number identify as LGBTQIA+. This means **the majority of Autistic students are intersectionally marginalised**. We are part of an easily overlooked minority within the Disabled and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Given this context, it is no surprise that complex trauma is very common amongst Autistic students, and that this is reflected in our mental health statistics.

Our survey data indicated that 97% of Autistic and otherwise Neurodivergent students often or always experience **anxiety**, and 80% often or always feel **depressed**. 67% often or always suffer from **stress related health problems**, and 58% often or always suffer from **burnout** and **insomnia**.

The biggest fears of Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled students relate to:

1. classmates (78%)
2. their parents (64%)
3. teachers (58%)

In comparison, the numbers of those whose greatest fears relate to other social spheres are much lower:

1. healthcare environments (36%)
2. school bus / transport environments (25%)
3. unmet healthcare needs (22%)
4. siblings (22%)
5. friends (19%)

It is very clear that **education settings are consistently experienced as highly unsafe** by Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled students.

This is also reflected in the experiences submitted in the qualitative parts of our survey.

Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled education professionals

Many Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled education professionals often or always feel unsafe amongst peers, and **more than 50% or more of Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled professionals often or always feel unsafe with their superiors**, noticeably more so than their non/less-marginalised colleagues.

Across the board, the level of psychological safety amongst Neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled workers is much lower than the level of psychological safety amongst workers in general.

Next steps

Contribute to our participatory research

Participate in our **anonymous surveys**, submit **lived experience reports**, and encourage your colleagues, families, friends, and local schools to participate. Our surveys do not ask for the names of schools. We are not interested in ranking schools, we are interested in gathering country wide statistics.

Feeling Safe Growing Up – This 5 minute anonymous survey (fifteen questions) is conducted by the Autistic Collaboration Trust and is sponsored by S23M.

Feeling Safe – This 5 minute anonymous survey (fourteen questions) is conducted by the Autistic Collaboration Trust and is sponsored by S23M.

Regularly attend our education courses for educators

If you are a teacher or education professional, join our **education courses for educators** as part of your Continuous Professional Development (CPD) efforts.

Our courses are taught by neurodivergent educators, allow you to learn from our unique database of lived experiences, and provide interactive opportunities to learn from and with members of the intersectional AutCollab community.

Onwards! – The AutCollab Education Team.

About Latest Posts



Jorn Bettin

Knowledge archaeologist by day and neurodivergent anthropologist by night at S23M



The more we help each other to question in ways we otherwise wouldn't – and correspondingly discover new insights about the world and ourselves, the more we are able to learn from each other, and the more we start to understand each other. The gift that we all bring to the world is the (re)generative potential of all the trusted relationships that we co-create.

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6 Responses



Raphael Solomon says:

April 23, 2024 at 10:30

Interesting. I was born in the 70s. I felt anxiety all through school. But since I was not told to be my authentic self, I masked. I don't fit too many of the intersectional categories either, except for non White, and I am white passing. Don't think my results would fit your survey data.

★ Loading...

Reply



Jorn Bettin says:

April 28, 2024 at 02:35

By all means, don't hesitate to contribute to the survey, and simply indicate which social factors apply (or not) in your case. If you only identify as Autistic that's fine, and we're also interested in gathering data from those who don't identify with any minority group.

★ Loading...

Reply

Pingback:

How safe do/did you feel growing up?



Jorn Bettin says:

April 28, 2024 at 02:40

Many thanks to everyone who has participated so far.🙌 The number of responses and lived experience reports keeps growing. The more data we gather from various jurisdictions, the more compelling evidence we have to assist local advocacy work and to inform our education courses.

★ Loading...

Reply



Andrea Brownridge says:

May 6, 2024 at 10:55

Bravo !

★ Loading...

Reply



Theresa Lasalle says:

May 29, 2024 at 10:05

Cool! Really great post!

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Reply

Talk to us... what are you thinking?



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