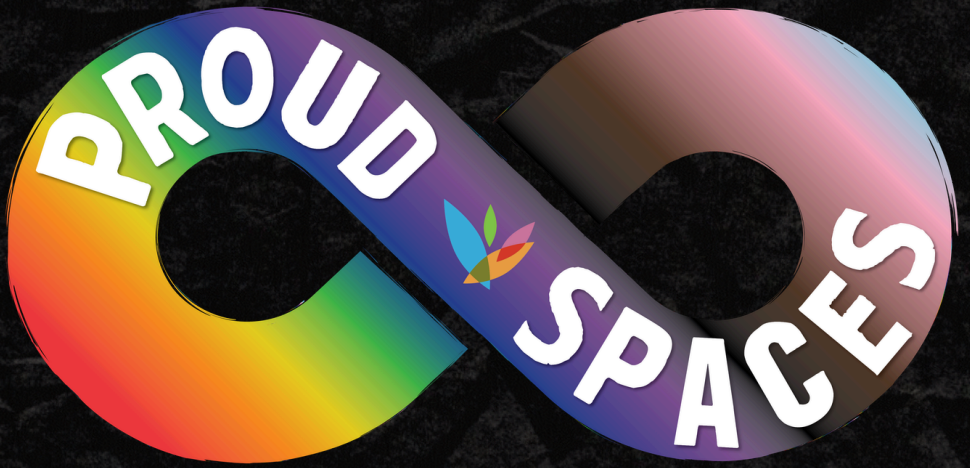




Neuro Affirmative Spaces in Youth Work

with a focus on

LGBTQI+

young people



An Roinn Leanai, Míchumais
agus Comhionannais
Department of Children,
Disability and Equality



Youth Work Ireland

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About Proud Spaces

The **Proud Spaces** project by Youth Work Ireland is an evidence-based model of youth work designed to create safe, inclusive, and affirming environments for young LGBTQI+ people across Ireland, particularly in rural or isolated areas where access to supportive services can be limited.

Emerging from a three-year Erasmus+ partnership with European organisations, Proud Spaces provides a structured yet flexible framework for inclusive practice, embedding LGBTQI+ support across Youth Work Ireland's Integrated Youth Services Model rather than as a standalone activity. The model is grounded in consultation with young people and youth workers and focuses on fostering belonging, identity exploration, and community connection through values of inclusion, equality, and empowerment.



Central to the Proud Spaces approach is the belief that every young person deserves to be seen and supported as their whole self, with youth workers creating “brave” as well as safe spaces that promote dialogue, authenticity, and shared learning.

Building on this model, Youth Work Ireland launched the **Neurodiverse LGBTQI+ Youth Group** in 2025 which is a pioneering online initiative designed to support young LGBTQI+ people with neurodiverse needs who often experience compounded barriers to participation and belonging.

Identified by youth workers within the Proud Spaces Community of Practice as a particularly vulnerable and under-served group, the group offers a sensory and communication sensitive online space for neurodivergent young LGBTQI+ people aged 18–24 to connect, share experiences, and build confidence. By combining digital accessibility with trained, neuro-affirming, and LGBTQI+ inclusive staff, the initiative recognises how geography, stigma, and sensory or social communication differences can exclude young people from traditional youth settings. The group thus provides both an accessible community and a potential pathway into local in-person youth work for those who wish to engage further.



Together, the Proud Spaces framework and the Neurodiverse LGBTQI+ Youth Group represent a progressive, intersectional approach to youth work in Ireland one that integrates neurodiversity and queer inclusion within a shared commitment to youth voice, accessibility, and wellbeing.

This initiative was funded by the DCED's LGBT Community Youth Funding Grant 2025

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Neurodiversity refers to the virtually infinite neuro-cognitive variability within Earth's human population. It points to the fact that every human has a unique nervous system with a unique combination of abilities and needs.

Judy Singer



Introduction

Neurodiverse youth work is grounded in the understanding that neurological difference is a natural and valuable aspect of human diversity, not a deficit to be corrected. It seeks to create flexible, inclusive, and affirming environments where young people's individual needs, interests, and ways of communicating are respected and celebrated.

Central to this practice is a youth-centred, participatory approach that empowers young people to shape their own experiences and spaces, whether through decisions about sensory environments, the use of fidgets, quiet areas, or designing programmes that reflect their identities and preferences. Relationships of trust, safety, and care underpin this work, with youth workers emphasising predictability, empathy, and emotional attunement rather than control or corrective behaviour.

Neurodiverse-affirming youth work values accessibility, strength-based practice, and co-production with young people, recognising that lived experience is expertise. It also foregrounds intersectionality, acknowledging that neurodivergent young people may also be LGBTQIA+, disabled, migrants, or otherwise marginalised and commits to addressing the systemic barriers that shape their participation. Ultimately, it is guided by the values of respect, equality, inclusion, and empowerment, striving to build communities of belonging where every young person can be seen, heard, and supported as their whole self.



Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is the concept that variations in brain function are normal, natural differences within the human population, rather than deficits. the term encompasses conditions like Autism, ADHD, and Dyslexia, viewing them as distinct ways of processing information and interacting with the world.

The neurodiversity movement advocates for inclusion, challenging stigma and advocating for accommodations and societal changes that support the unique strengths of neurodivergent individuals. - (*Neurodiversity Ireland*).

Our understanding of neurodiversity has evolved significantly over time. Historically, autism and other neurodivergent conditions were often viewed through a deficit-based or medical model, where the focus was primarily on perceived challenges, limitations, and barriers. Within this framework, the emphasis was on changing the individual to better fit societal expectations. Common practices included encouraging young people to suppress natural behaviors such as fidgeting or stimming, maintain eye contact, sit still or conform in order to make others more comfortable.

In contrast, a neuro-affirmative approach adopts a strengths-based perspective that recognises neurodivergence as a natural variation of human experience rather than a disorder to be fixed. This approach shifts away from the idea that something is “wrong” with neurodivergent individuals and instead focuses on understanding and valuing different ways of thinking, communicating, and engaging with the world. Rather than expecting young people to adapt to society, the neurodiversity model asks how society, including services, environments, and practices can adapt to better support neurodivergent people so that everyone can live fulfilling and positive lives.

Youth work has long provided a supportive and inclusive space for young people who may not fit within traditional social norms. At its core, youth work has consistently aimed to be a safe, accepting environment that values young people for who they are. This resource seeks to reaffirm the inclusive practices already embedded within youth work, while also identifying and promoting neuro-affirmative approaches. It highlights practical ways to further adapt our spaces and practices, supporting the ongoing development of more neuro-affirmative environments, ensuring that youth work remains accessible, inclusive, and welcoming for all young people.

This resource will be reaffirming the work and supports we actively do with young people and identifying neuro affirmative approaches and spaces, highlighting ways to adapt continue to strive for more neuro affirmative spaces for young people...youth work for all!

Intersectionality & Minority Stress

Neurodiverse people are not a monolithic group; their experiences are profoundly affected by intersecting identities, for example from our learning from the Proud Spaces LGBTQI+ online youth cafe is that their experience as an autistic young person is also affected by their experience as a young LGBTQI+ person and the discrimination and social isolation they face.

When discussing neuro affirmative spaces, it is important to highlight intersectionality and minority stress. Neurodivergent young people like a lot of young people often come to youth work as they figure out who they are and become comfortable and confident as their authentic selves.



Intersectionality helps autistic individuals understand how their autistic identity connects with other aspects of who they are, particularly in societies that may not fully understand or accept their multiple identities (National Autistic Society, UK)

Most neurodiverse people feel burdened by stigma and discrimination in society, including the pressure to mask their autistic characteristics in order to be accepted. When we look at this alongside other identities e.g. LGBTQI+ identities and experiencing homophobia and transphobia this can add further stress, further discrimination, further social isolation.

As youth workers it is important to be mindful of a person-centred approach to supporting young people and to continue to advocate for young people on issues affecting them



Exploring the Intersection of Neurodiverse and Transgender Identities

While there are no clear, published figures for Ireland that precisely state the percentage of young people who are *both* LGBTQI+ and neurodiverse several studies over the past few years have shown the overlap between LGBTQI+ and neurodiversity is substantially higher than would be expected by chance (*i.e., autistic young people are much more likely than the general population to report non-heterosexual and gender-diverse identities*). Neurodiverse individuals are more likely to identify as transgender or gender-diverse compared to the general population. This is echoed by youth workers within the Youth Work Ireland membership who have reported an increasing number of young LGBTQI+ people with neurodiverse needs presenting in LGBT groups (Youth Work Ireland, 2023).

However precise population-level percentages vary by study, country, age group, and how neurodiverse and LGBTQI+ are measured. For example, The Trevor Project's research with tens of thousands of LGBTQI+ young people reports 5% have been diagnosed with autism and 35% suspect they might be autistic (rates vary by gender identity subgroup) (The Trevor Project, 2022) (D, et al., 2021). Research by the University of Cambridge suggests that autistic people are more likely than non-autistic people to report non-heterosexual orientations (bisexual, asexual, "other"), and to report greater fluidity in sexual orientation and gender (Warrier et al., 2020). A large study by the Autism Research Centre at the University of Cambridge found that transgender and gender-diverse people are between three and six times more likely to be autistic than cisgender people (Warrier V, 2020)

Researchers and autistic self-advocates have proposed several possible explanations for why this overlap exists:

- **Authenticity and less social conformity:**

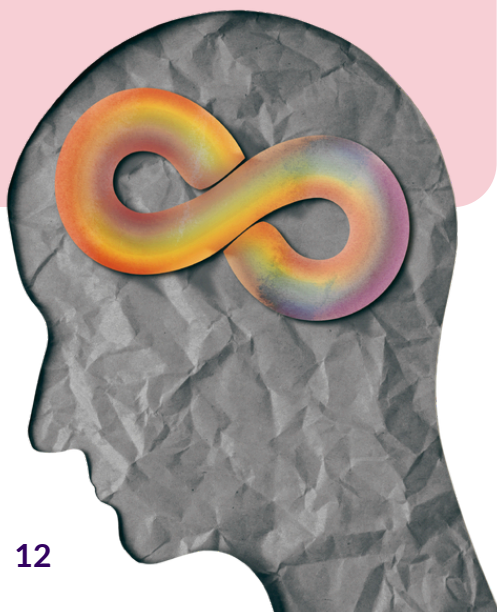
Autistic individuals may be less bound by social expectations and stereotypes, which could make them more open to recognising and embracing a gender identity that differs from societal norms.

- **Deep self-reflection:**

Some autistic individuals experience a strong internal sense of identity and engage in deep self-reflection, which can support exploration of gender.

- **Heightened sensory awareness:**

Sensory sensitivities might make aspects of physical gender expression (such as clothing or body changes) feel particularly significant, contributing to a strong awareness of gender dysphoria or euphoria.



Neuro Affirmative Spaces - Unlearning:

Unlearning is the active process of shedding ingrained biases, assumptions and stereotypes about neurodivergent individuals by consciously replacing them with a neurodiversity-affirming perspective.

Neuro-typical people (people who are not neurodivergent) sometimes have to unlearn ingrained social norms to support neurodivergent young people, that we all don't have the same social goals and that we don't all have the same social experiences. We have to take time to reflect on young people's individual needs and ensure we are taking a person-centred approach.

Activity: Unlearning in Practice

Discuss with a coworker or self-reflect about a time where you had to unlearn something to fully support a young person, this is not to discourage each other but rather to empower each other and showcase that we all have to unlearn social norms that are expected of society to support and empower a young person and discuss

- *What neuro affirmative spaces / activities went well in your youth group?*
- *Have you made any changes or adaptations to make your youth group neuro affirmative?*
- *Is there anything you would do differently if you were to do it again?*
- *What supports are needed for youth workers within this area*

Core Principles of Neurodiverse Youth Work

1. Neurodiversity as Difference, not Deficit

- Embracing Neurodiversity: This approach views autism and other neurotypes as differences, not disorders that need to be corrected.
- Sees neurological variation (autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, etc.) as part of natural human diversity not something to fix or normalise.
- Shifts focus from “supporting special needs” → to creating enabling environments where young people can flourish on their own terms.
- Encourages identity pride and community connection.
- Focusing on Strengths: Instead of deficit-based language and strategies, the neuro affirmative approach highlights the individual's strengths and goals



2. Youth-centred and Participatory Practice

- Having a person-centred approach: Be open and willing to learn from young people. Avoid making assumptions and instead seek to understand each individual's unique perspective and needs. This may involve adjusting communication methods or providing sensory and time-factored accommodations to support people's wellbeing.
- Follows the youth-work value that *young people co-create the space*.
- In neurodiverse contexts, this means listening in multiple modalities, spoken word, art, movement, writing, AAC devices, etc.
- Decision-making and agenda-setting should be flexible and collaborative.

3. Relational Safety and Trust

- Emphasises predictable, sensory-safe, emotionally attuned spaces.
- Workers model acceptance, curiosity and care rather than control.
- Reliability (e.g., same staff, clear routines) builds the sense of safety necessary for participation.

4. Accessibility and Flexibility

- Environments and processes are adapted to varied sensory, communication, and cognitive needs.
- Examples: quiet zones, visual schedules, plain-language materials, lighting control, and options for written or non-verbal expression.
- Accessibility is treated as a collective responsibility, not an individual accommodation.

5. Strength-based and Interest-led Approaches

- Focuses on what young people enjoy and excel at, deep interests, creative talents, pattern-spotting, honesty, empathy, etc.
- Uses those interests as starting points for learning, identity building, and community engagement.
- Avoids pathologising traits (e.g., “fixing” stimming, inflexibility, or hyperfocus).

6. Intersectionality and Inclusion

- Recognises that young neurodiverse people may also be LGBTQI+, migrants, disabled, racialised, or economically marginalised.
- Acknowledges compounded barriers (e.g., school exclusion, healthcare bias, family misunderstanding).
- Builds alliances with other inclusion-oriented practices in youth work.

7. Co-production and Lived Experience Leadership

- Neurodivergent young people should help design, deliver, and evaluate programmes.
- Peer mentors and facilitators can enhance accessibility and authenticity.
- “Nothing about us without us” becomes operational, not rhetorical.
- Promoting Authentic Self-Expression: supporting individuals in communicating and interacting in their preferred ways, rather than forcing them to conform to neurotypical norms. supporting young people to be their authentic selves this could be stimulating, dressing a certain way that’s comfortable but makes a young person happy.

8. Advocacy and Systemic Change

- Youth workers act not only as facilitators but also as advocates, challenging exclusionary systems (education, care, employment).
- The goal extends beyond “helping individuals cope” to shifting societal attitudes towards neurodiversity.



Underpinning Values

(shared with inclusive youth work)

Value	Neurodiverse-affirming interpretation
Equality & Inclusion	Recognising that fairness means different supports for different ways of being.
Respect	Valuing different communication styles, sensory preferences, and cognitive rhythms.
Empowerment	Building confidence in self-advocacy, agency, and identity ownership.
Voluntary participation	Ensuring informed choice – participation on one's own terms, with options to observe or step out.
Community & Belonging	Creating spaces where being neurodivergent is ordinary, not exceptional.
Care & Relational Ethics	Emphasising empathy, consistency, and attunement over compliance or control.

Feedback & Key Findings from Youth Workers

In September 2025 60 youth workers from across Youth Work Ireland's membership attended a training on **Proud Spaces: Neuro Affirmative Spaces in Youth Work** with a focus on LGBTQI+ youth spaces. In small groups the workers identified the following actions and initiatives they felt worked well or could improve practice.



What Worked Well

- **Physical environment adaptations:** sensory rooms, quiet spaces, beanbags, weighted blankets/teddies, soft lighting, fidget toys, sensory walks, balance boards, exercise balls.
- **Youth co-design:** involving young people in auditing and designing spaces; conversations about what helps them feel safe; reviewing physical spaces with them.
- **Freedom and autonomy:** flexible use of building, freedom to move, option to step in/out, free-flowing spaces, autonomy to participate or observe.
- **Familiarisation:** allowing youth to visit or view the space before joining a group.
- **Youth voice:** listening to opinions, providing time for personal stories, and reviewing programmes with young people.
- **Building trust:** providing safe spaces, time to listen, one-to-one spaces, relational approaches.



- **Inclusive communication:** alternative methods like PECS, visual supports, and art materials for expression.
- **Parent/guardian communication:** initial meetings to discuss needs and establish trust.
- **ASD training:** increased awareness of neurodiversity and inclusion.
- **Reframing practice:** greater recognition that behaviour communicates need; patience and understanding improved after training.
- **Integrated and inclusive groups:** ASD weekly groups within UBU, inclusive of all youth where appropriate.
- **Activity diversity:** arts groups, sensory walks, “pet parties,” skittles clubs, variety of engagement pathways.
- **Seeing the whole person:** focusing on individuality, strengths, and humanity.
- **Respect and humour:** awareness around tone and social dynamics.
- **Affirmation:** pronoun sharing and inclusive language normalised in groups.



What to Change / Adapt

- **Embedding neuro-affirmative culture:** organisation-wide reflection on inclusivity, patience, understanding, and awareness of sensory and social needs.
- **Earlier and ongoing training:** staff want practical day-to-day strategies.
- **Upskilling:** deeper understanding of neurodiversity, sensory regulation, and adaptive communication
- **Funding and resources:** more funding for sensory equipment, lamps, lighting, and adaptable spaces.
- **Organisational commitment:** neuro-affirmative design considered at the level of building leases and facilities management.
- **Space flexibility:** small groups, breakout areas, 1-to-1 support spaces for transitions or regulation.
- **Continuous evaluation:** formal processes for gathering feedback from young people about comfort, accessibility, and programme design.
- **Youth-led programme adaptation:** integrate feedback loops, let youth shape sessions and group dynamics.
- **Stronger parent engagement:** ongoing dialogue with parents when youth cannot communicate needs directly.
- **Enhanced understanding of behaviour:** staff reframing “safety” expectations and avoiding school-based corrective behaviour.
- **Clarifying boundaries:** awareness that youth work complements but doesn’t replace clinical or educational services.
- **Safeguarding and boundaries:** clarity about youth worker roles and limits.



- **Peer learning:** visiting other projects to see adaptive practices in action.
- **Group size management:** smaller groups or 1-to-1 supports to help integrate individuals with higher needs.
- **Visual structure:** use of visual schedules to improve predictability.
- **Preparation:** notifying staff and youth when new participants join to ease transitions.
- **Balancing inclusion and need:** some groups may benefit from dedicated neurodiverse or quiet cafés within broader programmes.
- **Funding and systemic advocacy:** seeking organisational and structural commitment to neuro-affirming practice.

Youth Work Ireland

Member Youth Services

Canal Communities Regional Youth Service

www.ccrys.org

Carlow Regional Youth Service

www.carlowrys.org

CDYS Youth Work Ireland

www.cdys.ie

Clare Youth Service

[www.facebook.com/
clareyouthservice](http://www.facebook.com/clareyouthservice)

Donegal Youth Service

www.donegalyouthservice.ie

FDYS

www.fdys.ie

In Sync Youth and Family Services

www.insync.ie

KCYS

www.kcys.ie

Limerick Youth Service

www.limerickyouthservice.com

Ossory Youth

www.ossoryyouth.com

Waterford & South Tipperary Community Youth Service

www.wstcys.ie

Youth Work Ireland

Cavan/Monaghan

www.ywicm.ie

Youth Work Ireland Longford

www.lcrl.ie/youth-service

Youth Work Ireland Galway

www.youthworkgalway.ie

Youth Work Ireland Laois

www.ywilaois.com

Youth Work Ireland Louth

www.youthworkirelandlouth.ie

Youth Work Ireland Meath

www.youthworkirelandmeath.ie

Youth Work Ireland Midlands

www.youthworkmidlands.org

Youth Work Ireland

North Connaught

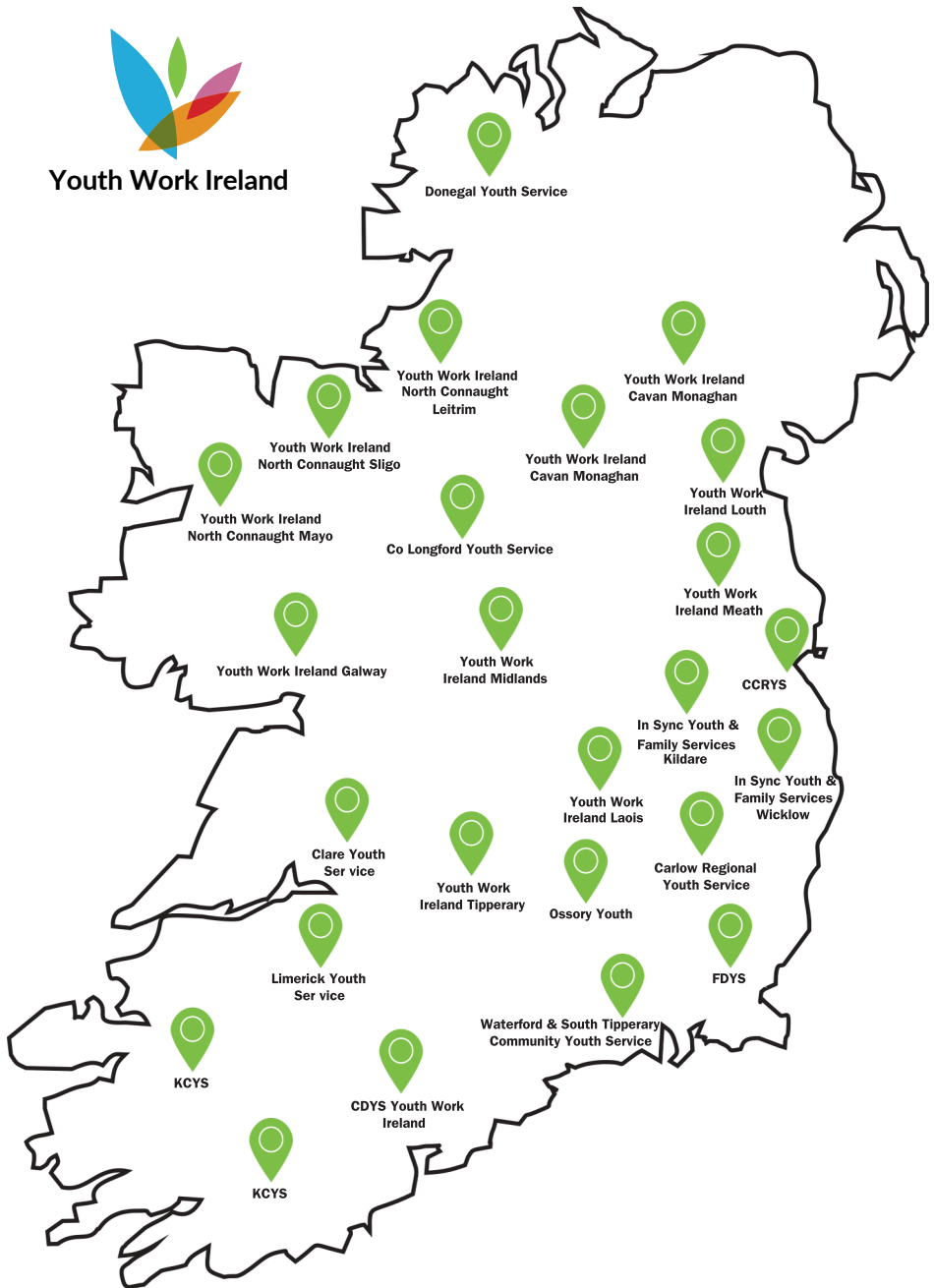
www.ncycs.ie

Youth Work Ireland Tipperary

www.youthworktipperary.ie



Youth Work Ireland



National & Youth Focus Neurodiversity Organisations

ADHD Ireland: A national charity offering support, information, advocacy, and community initiatives for people with ADHD (including resources useful for younger people and parents). Works with partner networks such as Spectrum Alliance (autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia groups).

Website: <https://adhdireland.ie/>

ASD Ireland: Provides socially inclusive activities, camps, movement groups, psychotherapy counselling, and community programmes mainly for autistic children and families.

Website: <https://www.asdireland.ie/>

Neurodiversity All Abilities Ireland: Neurodiversity-friendly programmes including sensory camps, psycho-educational supports, creative activities, and transition supports tailored to children and families across multiple neurodiverse conditions like autism, dyslexia, ADHD, and dyspraxia.

Website: <https://www.allabilities.ie/>

Neurodiversity Spark: Educational institution offering neurodiversity-focused learning and inclusion support (useful for youth learning and development).

Website: <https://www.neurodiversityspark.com/>

Thriving Autistic: A neuro-affirmative organisation led by autistic and neurodivergent professionals; provides training, workshops, consultancy and resources that can benefit young neurodivergent people and the adults who support them locally.

Website: <https://www.thrivingautistic.org/>

AS I Am: Promotes inclusion, neurodiversity affirmation, and community education in Ireland. Focuses on supporting neurodivergent children and families through awareness and inclusion programmes.

Website: www.asiam.ie

Shatterbox: Shatterbox is a grassroots, family-run charity forged from the shared experiences and passion of three parents with neurodivergent and LGBTQIA+ children. We also have a wealth of knowledge in the Community and Youth Work field, inclusive of advocating for marginalized people for over two decades.

Website: www.shatterbox.ie

Notes



Youth Work Ireland