

# NEURODIVERSITY GUIDE FOR HANNAH EDWARDS SECRETS OF RIVERWAY BY ASHLEY HARDS

## SECTION 1 EXPLORING NEURODIVERSITY & SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVES

The following section can be used to guide conversations about neurodiversity and expand understanding of important terms related to disability awareness.

1. Define the term **neurodiversity**, which emphasizes that all brains are unique. **Neurodiversity** challenges the idea of *one size fits all* in our society by embracing a wide range of differences in development, behaviors, perceptions, and interactions.

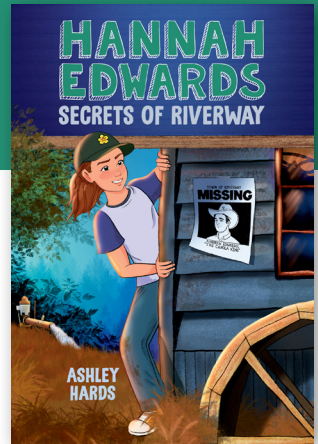
■ **Guiding Questions** What are 2–3 special things that make your brain unique? For example, how do you learn new things? What are your talents or things you do well?

2. Discuss the prevalence of disability by highlighting that 1 in 4 individuals in the United States has a disability, approximately 26% of citizens. Many people are surprised by this statistic because disabilities are often “invisible.” For example, Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), etc., may only be recognized if someone discloses their disability status. Based upon the rates of disability in our society, it is very important to speak about everyone with *respect*.

■ **Guiding Question** Many things about a person can be invisible. What aspect of yourself may be “invisible” to others?

■ **Activity Connection** During the discussion, place one post-it note in front of every four students to show them the magnitude of a 1 in 4 disability rate. Emphasize that we must use respectful language because we often may not know if someone we’re speaking with or their loved ones have disabilities.

*Hannah Edwards Secrets of Riverway*  
Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-944020-91-0  
\$16.99 | Page Count: 268 pages  
Lexile 750L | Fountas & Pinnell W  
Available as an ebook



3. Explain to students that it is critical to respect all individuals by choosing to use appropriate and responsive terminology. When referring to a person with a disability, there are two types of language that may be used: (1) **Person-First Language**: The person is recognized *before* the disability or (2) **Identity-First Language**: The disability is mentioned *before* the person. It is very important to recognize the preferred language of the individual you are speaking with instead of applying a “one size fits all” approach.

■ **Guiding Question** Which have you heard more often, person-first language or identity-first language?

■ **Activity Connection** Hang a chart that shows examples (see Figure 1 on page 4) and ask participants to brainstorm three more examples of person-first language and identity-first language.

4. Define **ableism**, which occurs when someone’s actions or beliefs discriminate against individuals who identify as neurodiverse and/or members of the disability community. Examples include creating spaces that aren’t accessible to wheelchairs, trying to find a *cure* for a disability, and expecting everyone to accomplish an activity in the exact same way (e.g., sitting quietly and writing).

■ **Guiding Question** Think about your community: In what ways is it designed to be accessible to everyone? What barriers are in place for individuals with disabilities? Be sure to brainstorm both visible and invisible disabilities.

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## SECTION 2 HANNAH EDWARDS NAVIGATES NEURODIVERSITY

*The novel highlights neurodiversity through the lens of Hannah Edwards. Discuss the ways that Hannah’s perspective informs her actions, her views, and ultimately the progression of the book.*

1. Describe Hannah’s relationship with her mother and father. How is her relationship with each parent unique? Based on Hannah’s perspective, how might each parent view her differently?
2. Many novels have literal and figurative language. The word “mask” is a figurative way to say that Hannah is hiding her true feelings or self from others. How does Hannah “mask” or hide her true self from her mom? Is there anyone else that Hannah wears a “mask” for in the novel? Provide examples from the story.
3. **Personification** is when someone gives human attributes or characteristics to an object. Think about Hannah’s journal entries. How does she tend to *personify* the journal? Why is the journal important as Hannah investigates her father’s disappearance and grieves his absence?
4. On page 17, Hannah says, “I always try to pretend to be a GOOD KID.” How does Hannah define a “good kid” vs. a “bad kid”? Do you agree? Why or why not? How does her definition of a “good kid” align with ableist perspectives?

### Possible Answers for Question 4:

- **Page 16:** Hannah is having a difficult time focusing during class but does not want to leave because of how she’ll be perceived. Making a classroom accessible requires giving students necessary breaks to refocus, process information, and organize their thoughts.
- **Page 22:** Hannah passes a note in class and worries that Ms. Luna won’t like her anymore. If teachers



accept all learners, they won’t assume negative intent or only give one opportunity for success.

- **Page 62:** Hannah doesn’t feel comfortable telling Ms. Grant that she didn’t hear her comment. Expecting all students to hear things the first time doesn’t acknowledge that we all process information differently. Repeating a statement, directions, or instructions can be very helpful.
  - **Pages 92 & 93:** Hannah misses the deadline for Ms. Luna’s book report and is very distressed. Providing flexible deadlines and extensions makes assignments more manageable for some students.
5. Brainstorm examples of *neurodiversity* that are evident throughout the story. How does Hannah process information differently? How does she perceive the world differently? Based upon your experiences, which of the examples can you most relate to? Why is it important to have *neurodiverse* characters in literature?

### Examples to Consider During the Discussion:

- **Pages 22 & 102:** At times Hannah can get overwhelmed by her thoughts. For example, “Once I start worrying about things, sometimes my thoughts swirl and build and it’s hard for me to move on while they pile up” (p. 22); “On Saturday, the simple five-page book report morphed in my mind into a fifteen-foot-tall, big red deadline, and I panicked. I decided to put the paper off again until Monday after school, when I would feel calmer” (p. 102).
- **Page 62:** Hannah sometimes focuses on small details and struggles to attend to everything else that is happening. For example, “[Ms. Grant] paused and raised her eyebrows, waiting for some kind of response. But I was busy staring at her bag. One of the sequins had flipped the wrong way, making it slightly less sparkly than the rest.”
- **Page 66:** Hannah has a vivid imagination that may distract her during a conversation or task. For example, “I chose a furry green one. (It was likely made from the pelt of some rare animal that had accidentally wandered into the dragon’s clutches.)”

- **Pages 73 & 74:** Hannah may seem forgetful. For instance, “I was always leaving cupboards open at home (much to Mom’s annoyance)” (p. 73); “I very well could have gotten up and walked away from my locker before locking it” (p. 73); “I didn’t want to tell her about my mind wandering. She needed to think that, other than my loss, everything in my head was perfectly alright” (p. 74).

- **Page 103:** At times Hannah struggles to prioritize tasks. She says, “And whenever I decided on one task to finish, the others called out, *HEY WHAT ABOUT ME!* It felt like my brain was spinning in circles even though I was standing.”

6. How is Hannah’s *neurodiversity* helpful as she investigates her father’s disappearance? How does her *neurodiversity* make some situations more challenging? How does Hannah’s perspective of her *neurodiversity* change as the story unfolds? Which events help her remove her “mask” or desire to hide?

### SECTION 3 BARRIERS AND ABLEISM

This section can be used to facilitate a discussion about societal barriers experienced by neurodiverse individuals. Students can explore ableist perspectives through Hannah’s experiences with teachers and the adults in her life.

1. Define *medical model* versus *social model* of disability. The *medical model* highlights disability as an impairment, abnormality, or skills that are lacking from the individual. Within a *medical model* approach, the goal is to make the individual “normal.” The *social model* emphasizes that a disability is the result of environmental barriers, discriminatory practices, and stereotypes. Therefore, the *social model* encourages people to address the societal barriers instead of focusing on perceived “deficits” of the individual.

- **Guiding Questions** What is the difference between the *medical model* and *social model* of disability? What actions would suggest someone is taking a *medical model* approach? What actions would suggest someone is taking a *social model* approach?

2. What types of accessibility “barriers” does Hannah encounter at school? What could the teachers do to make school less overwhelming for Hannah? Be specific.
3. Throughout the book, many of the adults do not fully understand Hannah. What do the following interactions suggest about Hannah’s relationship with each adult? How do some of these examples highlight ableist perspectives?

- **Ms. Grant:** When Hannah shares that she is using a journal, Ms. Grant comments, “But, Hannah, you’re not *using* it right” (p. 60).
- **Ms. Luna:** Hannah’s teacher, Ms. Luna, often calls on students without warning during class. Hannah answers Ms. Luna’s question correctly and says, “I am not paying attention, but no one can really tell” (p. 19).
- **Fergus:** During a conversation about school, Fergus makes a comment about paying *attention*. Hannah says, “Even though I knew it was impossible, ‘pay a whole lot more attention in class’ felt directed at me. But there was no way Fergus could know how distracted I can be in class, and how it’s gotten worse since Dad disappeared” (p. 44).
- **Mom:** While speaking with her mom, Hannah grapples with sharing more information about areas she is struggling in. Hannah says, “That behavior was *unlike me*. But another part of me wanted to tell her that it was like me and she didn’t have a clue why” (p. 137).

4. How could the adults who interact with Hannah better support her throughout the novel? If the adults only push Hannah to move on from loss, achieve academically, and do things *perfectly*, how will that affect her well-being? Be specific.
5. Can you think of a time you had to advocate for yourself to get something you needed at school? How could Hannah advocate to get more support or accommodations in her classroom? Why is advocating an important skill?

**SECTION 4**  
**HANNAH AND HAMLET (EXTENSION**  
**FOR ADVANCED READERS)**



The following section can be used to explore connections between the play *Hamlet* and the Hannah Edwards *Secrets of Riverway* novel. These questions are more advanced since students often read *Hamlet* at the high school level.

1. How are each of the themes below evident in the novel through the character actions, plot, problem, and resolution:

- **Action and Inaction:** What activities and actions come easily to Hannah? What types of activities and/or tasks are challenging for Hannah to begin? What is Hannah unable to finish? Be specific.
- **Grief and Death:** What happens as Hannah grapples with the loss of her dad? How do her emotions shift and change throughout the novel? Which events and/or interactions increase her grief? Which events and/or interactions bring her comfort?
- **Appearance vs. Reality:** How do characters in the novel “mask” their true intentions or aspects of themselves? How do the “masks” complicate the character relationships? How do the “masks”

interfere with the resolution of the problem in the novel?

- **Family:** What aspects of Hannah’s family dynamics are most difficult as she navigates loss? How is the relationship with her mother repaired?

2. How does the play *Hamlet* approach each theme (above) similarly to the *Hannah Edwards Secrets of Riverway* novel? How does the play approach the themes differently? Which characters from the play are comparable to those mentioned in the *Hannah Edwards* novel?

**Possible Answers:** Hannah/Hamlet, Barbara Edwards/Gertrude, Fergus Edwards/Claudius, Andrew Edwards/Hamlet Senior, Sam Castillo/Horatio, Tim/Ophelia, Mary/Fortinbras, Mrs. Grant/Guildenstern, Frogs/The Pirates

■ **Extension Question** How is the dated theme of “madness” in *Hamlet* very different from the exploration of *neurodiversity* in the *Hannah Edwards Secrets of Riverway* novel?

**Educator Guide Writer**

This guide was written by Dawn Jacobs Martin, PhD, an Associate Clinical Professor and Director of Special Education Teacher Preparation at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Figure 1

Term	Person-First Language	Identity-First Language
Definition	The person is recognized <b>before</b> the disability.	The disability is mentioned <b>before</b> the person.
Examples	<p>He is an individual with a hearing impairment.</p> <p>My sister is an individual with autism.</p> <p>She is a person with a learning disability.</p> <p>My uncle uses a wheelchair.</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>He is deaf.</p> <p>My sister is autistic.</p> <p>She is neurodiverse.</p> <p>My uncle is disabled.</p> <p>_____</p>

## Notes

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1. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>
2. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>
3. <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/neurodiversity-what-you-need-to-know>
4. <https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/what-we-do/science-health-public-trust/perspectives/writing-respectfully-person-first-identity-first-language>
5. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ableism>
6. <https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psychology-teacher-network/introductory-psychology/disability-models>

## Additional Resources for Educators

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1. Center for Parent Information & Resources: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/new-to-disability/>
2. Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Teacher Resource Repository: <https://exceptionalchildren.org/teacher-resources>
3. Learning for Justice: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/>
4. National Education Association Disability Awareness Booklist: <https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/disability-awareness-booklist>
5. Perceptions of Disability Interactive Module: <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/da/challenge/#content>
6. Trauma Informed Care: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-and-why-trauma-informed-teaching>
7. Understanding Disability: <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/through-your-childs-eyes>

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