



Neurodiversity– affirming goal setting

How do we define the terms around neurodiversity?

To understand neurodiversity, we need to understand what the terms neurotypical and neurodivergent mean.

- **Neurodivergent:** Having a brain that functions in ways that might be different from society's standards for 'normal functioning' – includes ADHD, autism, dyslexia, developmental coordination disorder and Tourette syndrome, to name a few.
- **Neurotypical:** Having a type of brain functioning that falls within society's standards for 'normal functioning.' Accepting this definition also means understanding the privilege that comes with being neurotypical in a society and recognising the advantages possessed in an environment where inequality exists for individuals who are neurodivergent.
- **Neurodiversity:** Brains work in different ways!
- **Neurodiversity movement:** is a social and justice rights movement calling for respect, equity, and inclusion for neurodivergent people, based on the shared beliefs that:
 - neurodiversity is valuable and necessary, there is no right form of neurology
 - thinking and processing is an integral part of a person and if that part is changed, then their personhood is also changed.

What is neurodiversity–affirming goal setting?

- It is a strengths-based approach to working with Autistic people which reflects an individual's strengths and interests.
- It includes respecting and validating the person's sensory processing differences, communication style, ways of social relating and information processing.

What does it look like?

- Prioritising the perspective of the person, understanding their strengths, needs and aspirations.
- Developing goals in collaboration with the person and family that address their wants and needs rather than goals that might be defined or expected according to neurotypical development or perspectives.
- Considering the environment around the person when goal setting rather than focusing only on the person. We do this because it can often be environmental or contextual changes that need to be targeted rather than the person's skills or abilities. Environmental barriers can include sensory aspects, lack of structured supports or a lack of autism understanding of those around them.

Key principles of neurodiversity-affirming approaches

- Prioritise child wellbeing:**
Focus on enhancing overall wellbeing and quality of life.
- Neurodiversity-affirming:**
Support and celebrate the child's strengths and natural behaviours.
- Individualised support:**
Tailor supports to each child's unique needs.
- Environmental adaptation:**
Modify surroundings to better accommodate the child.
- Adult training and support:**
Equip parents, teachers and other therapists with effective support strategies.

Examples of neurodiversity-affirming goals

Non-neurodiversity-affirming goal	Neurodiversity-affirming alternative	Explanation
The child will tolerate x minutes of sensory stimulation, showing less sensitivity.	The child will advocate for herself, communicating preferences and approval/disapproval.	Desensitisation is not considered a neurodiversity-affirming goal because it asks a child to ignore or suppress their response to sensory stimulation, which can involve dissociating from bodily sensations or forcing themselves to tolerate sensations that hurt or are deeply unpleasant. Changing the focus to self-advocacy helps a child learn to protect themselves and advocate for their own sensory needs.
The child will explore new areas of play interests.	The child's family will express satisfaction with their ability to join with the child in shared, meaningful play.	The child's neurodivergent play is a valid pursuit, and it is not affirming to attempt to reroute or reshape interests so they appear more neurotypical. The alternative goal shares the work with the child's family and peers to support engagement with the child through play.
The child will demonstrate fewer challenging behaviours during transition periods.	The child uses a preferred tool to self-regulate when transitioning.	Behaviours of concern occur when a child is communicating stress. It is not affirming to focus on just reducing the occurrence of challenging behaviours. Rather the focus should be on understanding what is causing the child's stress and addressing the environment or teaching skills.
Increase eye contact during conversations to appear more engaged.	Develop strategies to communicate effectively and comfortably in social situations, respecting personal preferences for eye contact.	The neurodiversity-affirming goal respects individual differences in communication styles. For many Autistic individuals, making eye contact can be uncomfortable or distracting. By focusing on effective communication rather than enforcing a neurotypical behaviour, this goal supports the person's natural way of interacting and reduces anxiety.
Reduce or eliminate stimming behaviours to avoid standing out in social settings.	Identify and use self-regulation techniques, including stimming, to manage sensory and emotional needs in various environments.	Stimming is a natural and often essential behaviour for many Autistic people to regulate their sensory input and emotions. The neurodiversity-affirming goal acknowledges the importance of stimming and encourages the development of self-regulation strategies that include rather than suppress these behaviours, promoting well-being and self-acceptance.
The child uses verbal communication when interacting with others	The child uses their preferred communication methods, whether verbal, written, or through assistive technology, when wanting to express needs or interact with others.	This neurodiversity-affirming goal values all forms of communication equally and recognises that not everyone may prefer or be able to communicate verbally. By supporting preferred communication methods, this goal promotes inclusivity and respects individual needs and abilities.

Resources and references

Where can I learn more?

- [Neurowild Facebook video](#) on Neurodiversity-affirming IEP goals
- Neurodiversity-affirming [IEP Goal Bank](#)
- [How to Write Neurodiversity-Affirming Speech Therapy Goals](#) – with goal bank
- [Therapist neurodiversity collective](#) – has a range of resources
- [Making the Shift Podcast](#) – has a goals-related episode
- [Autism Level Up](#) – checklist for goals
- Explaining neurodiversity-affirming practice to [parents and caregivers](#)
- [Neurodiversity-affirming Services](#) blog, by Reframing Autism
- Thinking about social skills and neurodiversity, [Psychology Today](#) article

Selected research articles

Note – Much of the peer-reviewed research around neurodiversity has been published only recently in the context of therapy. A few articles are emerging about neurodiversity in higher education, but the research around school-aged students and neurodiversity is still emerging – stay tuned! We expect to see it emerge in the next few years! For now, this summary is based on what has been published in the context of therapy and the broader conversation around neurodiversity – especially from Autistic authors when possible.

Bolton, M. J. (2023). De-centering neuro-normativity is an imperative in humanistic psychotherapy: Towards a neurodiversity-informed, person-centered approach. *The Person-Centered Journal*.

Chapman, R., & Botha, M. (2023). Neurodivergence-informed therapy. *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology*.

Dallman, A. R., Williams, K. L., & Villa, L. (2022). Neurodiversity-affirming practices are a moral imperative for occupational therapy. *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Dawson, G., Franz, L., & Brandsen, S. (2022). At a crossroads—Reconsidering the goals of autism early behavioral intervention from a neurodiversity perspective. *JAMA Pediatrics*.

Leadbitter, K., Buckle, K. L., Ellis, C., & Dekker, M. (2021). Autistic self-advocacy and the neurodiversity movement: Implications for autism early intervention research and practice. *Frontiers in Psychology*.

Lerner, M. D., Gurba, A. N., & Gassner, D. L. (2023). A framework for neurodiversity-affirming interventions for autistic individuals. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

Jellett, R., & Flower, R. L. (2023). How can psychologists meet the needs of autistic adults? *Autism*.

Schuck, R. K., Tagavi, D. M., Baiden, K. M., Dwyer, P., Williams, Z. J., Osuna, A., ... & Vernon, T. W. (2021). Neurodiversity and autism intervention: Reconciling perspectives through a naturalistic developmental behavioral intervention framework. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

Pellicano, E., & den Houting, J. (2022). Annual Research Review: Shifting from 'normal science' to neurodiversity in autism science. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.



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