

The **Essential** Neurodiversity Affirming Guide

A simple tool for parents, teachers, and
therapists to change their language.

For more info visit



What is neurodiversity affirming or neuroaffirming?

Being neuroaffirming means validating, respecting, and **embracing neurodiversity** instead of trying to change or suppress it. It's about creating environments where neurodivergent individuals feel safe, supported, and understood.

"**Neurodiversity** may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?"

Harvey Blume (1998), The Atlantic

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm believes differences and altered states are a part of the diversity of being human but acknowledges said differences and altered states can be disabling or distressing for individuals.

It focuses on supporting individuals and reducing distress – where medication can be an option if it supports someone's well-being.

This paradigm respects and encourages autonomy as well as individuals defining what is distressing, functional or dysfunctional for themselves.

Vs

The Pathology Paradigm

The pathology paradigm views differences and altered states as a disorder or mental illness.

It focuses on fixing or curing individuals through medication and other forms of treatment.

Enforces compliance with normality – refusal often results in being labelled as lacking insight.

Neurodivergent

First coined by Kassiane Asasumasu in the 1990s as a tool of inclusion.

Neurodiverse

A group of people is neurodiverse if one or more members of the group differ substantially from other members, in terms of their neurocognitive functioning. Or, to phrase it another way, a neurodiverse group is a group in which multiple neurocognitive styles are represented.

Thus, a family, the faculty or student body of a school, the population of a town, or the cast of characters of a TV show would be neurodiverse if some members had different neurocognitive styles from other members – for instance, if some members were neurotypical while others were Autistic.

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the concept that neurological differences like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and others are normal variations in the human brain rather than deficits or disorders that need to be “fixed.”

Neurodivergent

Individuals whose brain diverges significantly from the dominant societal standards of normal.

Neurotypical

Individuals whose ways of thinking and being are aligned with social expectations.

See also:
neuromajority, neuronormative

How to be neuroaffirming in everyday life



Support sensory needs

Provide quiet spaces, allow movement, and avoid strong scents or harsh lighting.



Embrace unique thinking & processing styles

Give time for processing, avoid forcing eye contact, and offer predictable routines.



Empower rather than fix

Encourage strengths and self-advocacy rather than trying to “correct” neurodivergent traits.



Respect different communication styles

Some people may prefer written, visual instead of verbal speech.



"Being neuroaffirming means going beyond tolerance and moving towards **celebration of neurodiversity.**

A simple yet powerful step is adjusting our language—an idea championed by many neuroaffirming advocates.”

Some of our favourite advocates are listed on page 11

Quick language shifts for a more neuroaffirming approach

Instead of saying...	Say this instead...	Reason
“Make eye contact, it’s polite!”	“Would you prefer to look elsewhere while we talk?”	<i>Respects personal comfort.</i>
“Stop fidgeting; it’s distracting.”	“If fidgeting helps you focus, feel free to continue.”	<i>Movement aids regulation.</i>
“You don’t look autistic.”	“Autism looks different for everyone.”	<i>Acknowledges individual differences.</i>
“Calm down, you’re overreacting.”	“I see you’re feeling big emotions. How can I support you?”	<i>Validates emotions.</i>
“Use your words.”	“I see you’re struggling. Would you like to point or show me?”	<i>Allows alternative communication.</i>
“They just need more discipline.”	“Let’s explore what’s making this difficult for them.”	<i>Looks for root causes.</i>
“ASD”	“Autistic.”	<i>Uses identity-first language.</i>
“High-functioning/low-functioning.”	“High support needs/low support needs.”	<i>Focuses on individual support needs.</i>
“Non-verbal.”	“Non-speaking.”	<i>Avoids ableist language.</i>
“Special needs.”	“Additional support needs.”	<i>More respectful and precise.</i>
“Suffers from autism.”	“Is autistic.”	<i>Removes negative connotations.</i>
“Has a disorder.”	“Has a neurological condition or difference.”	<i>Avoids pathologising language.</i>

Neuroaffirming practices that make a difference

Communication

- Offer different communication methods (visual, written, gestures).
- Allow extra time for processing responses.
- Avoid sarcasm, idioms, or vague instructions.

Sensory Support

- Create sensory-friendly environments with dim lighting, quiet areas, and movement breaks.
- Allow flexible clothing choices to avoid sensory discomfort.

Structure & Flexibility

- Allow self-directed learning and task modification based on strengths.
- Offer breaks when needed, without punishment.

Social Inclusion

- Avoid forced participation in social events.
- Teach peers about neurodiversity to foster understanding and acceptance.
- Celebrate strengths rather than focusing on areas of difficulty.

Reframing behaviours with a neuroaffirming lens

Negative Language	What’s Really Happening	Better Language
Defiant	Needing predictability, feeling overwhelmed.	<i>“Seeking control to feel safe.”</i>
Manipulative	Trying to reduce distress, needing validation.	<i>“Attempting to meet a need.”</i>
Disruptive	Overwhelmed, in need of movement.	<i>“Regulating emotions through movement.”</i>
Attention-seeking	Feeling disconnected, needing reassurance.	<i>“Looking for connection and support.”</i>
Aggressive & oppositional	Feeling scared, needing a way to express frustration.	<i>“Communicating distress in the best way they can.”</i>
Risk-taking	Testing boundaries, seeking autonomy.	<i>“Exploring independence and self-expression.”</i>
Sabotaging	“Autistic” Fear of failure, past experiences of rejection.	<i>“Protecting themselves from perceived threats.”</i>
Stealing	Seeking control, feeling scarcity or insecurity.	<i>“Meeting an unmet need for security or resources.”</i>
Lying & dishonest	Avoiding consequences, fear-based response.	<i>“Using a strategy to navigate a challenging situation.”</i>
Shut down & unresponsive	Overwhelmed, experiencing sensory or emotional overload.	<i>“Needing time to regulate before engaging.”</i>
Overreacts or exaggerates	Feeling invalidated, needing recognition.	<i>“Seeking validation and understanding.”</i>

Neuroaffirming Advocates & Resources We Love

These experts are only a few from a large list who provide valuable insights, resources, and support for neurodivergent individuals and their families.

We have more recommendations! Join Understanding Zoe to connect with an aligned neuroaffirming community. You can always explore our blog too for resources. By following their work, parents, educators, and therapists can adopt neuroaffirming practices and better advocate for inclusivity.



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Your next step

This guide is just the beginning!
If you want more support, resources,
and a like-minded community, join
Understanding Zoe today.

