Shropshire Educational Psychology Service
Telford and Wrekin Educational Psychology Service

# Neuro-Affirming Language Guide

Guidance for service providers supporting children and young people around the use of neurodivergent-affirming language

*Document Version 1, October 2025*

# Acknowledgements

# Contents Page

# Foreword

Language around neurodiversity is evolving, and we appreciate that people may use a range of terms to describe themselves and others. It is important that we use language that people with lived experience have agreed is respectful, positive and inclusive.

Neuro-affirming language means using respectful, person-centred, strength-focused language that avoids reinforcing stereotypes and stigma around neurodiversity. It means listening to neurodivergent voices to guide our practice.

This guide has been developed with people with lived experience and neurodiversity professionals across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin. It is a live document, which means it can be edited and added to as needed and as language practices continue to evolve.

**Document Version:** 1
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# Neuro-Affirming Glossary

### Neurodiversity
The term 'neurodiversity' refers to the natural diversity of human brains and cognition, recognising all brains or 'neurotypes' as equally valued.

### Neurodiverse
'Neurodiverse' refers to a group of individuals representing the broad spectrum of neurodiversity, which includes neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals.
**One individual cannot be 'neurodiverse'.**

### Neurodivergent
An umbrella term for individuals whose neurotype (brain functioning) diverges from the neurotype most accommodated by society. 'Neurodivergent' should not be used as a synonym for specific neurotypes, i.e., Autistic, ADHD, Dyslexic.

### Neurotypical
'Neurotypical' refers to an individual whose neurotype (brain functioning) falls within society's standards of 'typical' or 'normal'. Alternative terms are *neuro-normative* and *predominant neurotype.*

# Introduction

Language is a powerful tool and can have a significant impact on the way that people think about themselves, think about others, behave towards others and offer support. As with all language, the language around neurodiversity continues to change and develop over time, and it is increasingly informed by lived experience and by the neurodiversity paradigm and movement (Hartman, O'Donnell-Killen, Doyle, Day & Azevedo, 2023).

**Reflection Point**

Take a moment to watch this video, created and shared by the Autistic Young Experts (Autism Education Trust). This video highlights the importance of language, alongside recognising the impact of the words that we use to think and talk about others.

**WATCH NOW**

## What is the Neurodiversity Paradigm?

"The Neurodiversity Paradigm is a perspective that understands, accepts and embraces everyone's differences. Within this theory, it is believed there is no single 'right' or 'normal' neurotype, just as there is no single right or normal gender or race. It rejects the medical model of seeing differences as deficits." (Edgar, 2023)

The Neurodiversity Paradigm is underpinned by three main components:

**1** Variability in human cognition is natural, and is considered a collective strength

**2** All neurotypes are equally valued

**3** Neurodiversity should be considered within the context of the environment
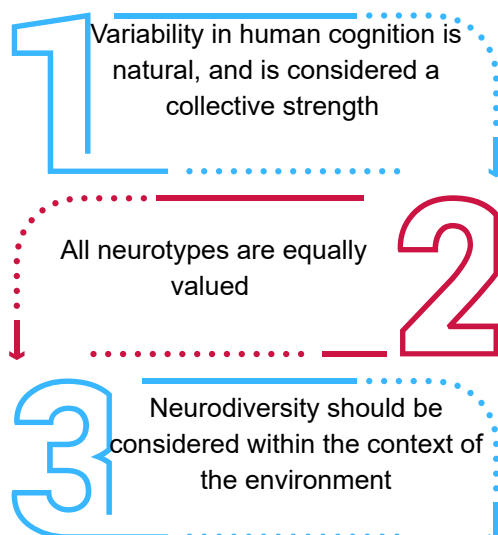
# Language of Neurodiversity

## What is Neurodiversity Affirming Language?

Neurodiversity Affirming (henceforth referred to as 'neuro-affirming') language honours the neurodivergent experience and neurodivergent identity through focussing on language that encourages, accepts and affirms an individual's unique way of 'being'.



**Neuro** = Neurodiversity and Neurodivergent

**Affirming** = to state that something is true and show support and/or advocacy

## Language Matters

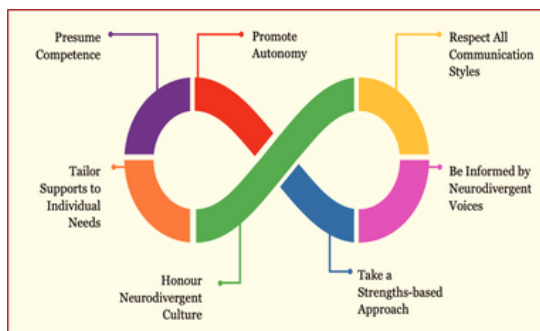A commitment to neuro-affirming language, and adopting a neuro-affirming approach in our practice, allows for a shift away from a lens of deficit and pathology which looks to 'fix' a person or encourage conformity. Language centred around *deficit* and *disorder* can serve to further disable neurodivergent individuals and, if internalised, can contribute to low self-esteem, low self-worth and crises across self-identity.

### Reflection Point

Think about the language that you use, both in your writing and verbally, when talking about neurodivergent individuals:

- Does this language allow for sufficient attention to the individuals strengths as well as differences/needs?
- How would I feel about the language used if it were describing a loved one?

# Language of Neurodiversity

### Person-first vs. identity-first language

Adopting identity-first language is one way of being neuro-affirming, and is informed by the growing movement within the neurodivergent community advocating for a preference around the use of identity-first language.



Person with autism

Autistic person

Neurology is not an accessory
www.identityfirstautistic.org
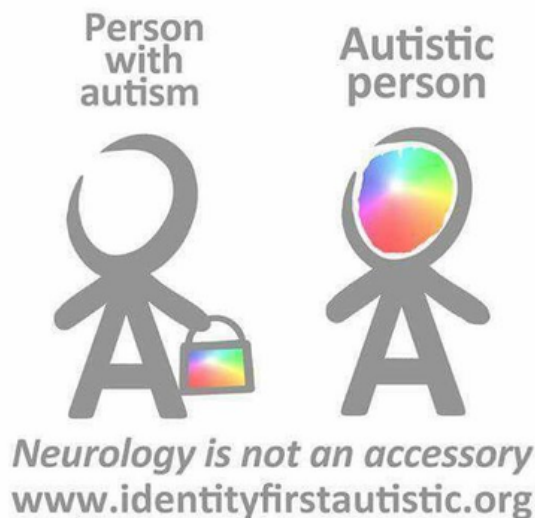
### Person-first language
   *i.e., "person with autism"*

Person-first language is widely used within the medical model, and separates the individual from the 'condition', i.e., autism.

### Identity-first language
   *i.e., "autistic person"*

Identity-first language recognises and embraces the individual's whole identity, placing the person's neurotype as a core component.

Individual preferences around language use should always be considered where neurodivergent individuals are free to dictate the language that best describes their own personal experiences, beliefs and identity. However, neuro-affirming language should default to identity-first language if a preference is unclear.
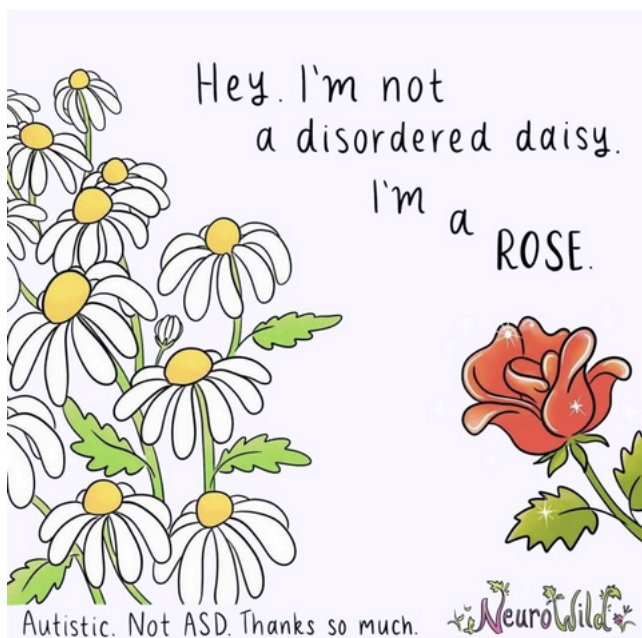


Hey. I'm not a disordered daisy. I'm a ROSE.

Autistic. Not ASD. Thanks so much. NeuroWild

# The Power of Language

**Reflection Point**

Take a moment to watch this video, created and shared by NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin as part of Neurodiversity Celebration Week 2023. This video explores the power that language holds in supporting neurodivergent individuals to feel accepted, heard, supported and included.

## *The Power of Language*

Language is one of the most powerful tools that we possess. It not only reflects our thoughts and values, but also actively shapes them. The words that we use influence how we perceive others, how we relate to ourselves and how society defines what is 'normal' or 'valuable'. The words that we choose have the power to affirm identities, foster inclusion and challenge harmful stereotypes, or they can marginalise, exclude and perpetuate stigma. Language can build bridges or create barriers; it can empower or oppress.

In the context of neurodiversity, the impact of language is especially profound. It can either validate the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals, or dismiss and even pathologise them. Historically, the dominant language around neurological differences has been rooted in deficit-based models, framing neurodivergent individuals in terms of what they lack rather than what they contribute.

A neuro-affirming approach to language seeks to shift this narrative. It embraces the diversity of human minds as natural and valuable, and it promotes language that respects autonomy, affirms identity and fosters genuine inclusion.

# Reframing Language

### *Reframing Language in Neuro-Affirming Practice*

Reframing language is a key, foundational step in neuro-affirming practice towards creating more inclusive, respectful and empowering environments for neurodivergent individuals. As described throughout this guide, a neuro-affirming approach recognises that the words we use are not simply descriptive; they shape perceptions, influence attitudes and have the power to reinforce harmful stereotypes or promote acceptance.

Reframing language means intentionally shifting away from narratives that centre around deficits and disorders, and adopting language that instead reflects the strengths, identities and autonomy of neurodivergent individuals. It is not about prescribing 'correct' language, but about fostering awareness and offering alternatives that align with values of dignity, equity and respect. Through this lens, language can become a powerful tool for advocacy, connection and cultural change.

**Reflection Point**
- What impact does the below language have?
- How might the use of the words below influence our thoughts or perceptions of an individual who is described that way?

impatient  impairment  problematic  non-compliant  pedantic  loud  hyper  obsessive  rigid thinking  stubborn  deficit  bossy  weakness  dramatic  defiant  functioning  fixated  rude  disordered  attention seeking  demanding  restricted interests  difficult  impulsive  abnormal  disruptive  challenging

# Reframing Language

## Reflective Activity

As described throughout this guide, the language that we use to describe individuals has a profound impact, not only on how others perceive them, but also on how they perceive themselves, the kind of support that they may receive and the expectations that are placed upon them.

In this activity, we invite you to reflect on the below example which uses language that frames behaviour through a lens of deficit or disorder. As you read through the example, take a moment to notice how the language makes you feel.

What assumptions does it carry?

How might it influence your attitudes, your emotional response or the way that you approach support?

> *Charlie presents with attention seeking behaviour where she dominates conversation with peers. In her play, Charlie is demanding and controlling, and is not able to engage in typical reciprocal play. She refuses to engage in learning and are disruptive in the classroom. Charlie presents with challenging behaviours when upset in the classroom and shows little awareness of the consequences of her behaviour.*

### Reflection Point

Consider how reframing this description using affirming, strengths-based language might shift perspective. What might this look like if it were neuro-affirming?

*This reflection is not about judgement, but about growing awareness of how language can either reinforce harmful narratives or open the door to understanding, compassion and more inclusive practice.*

# Reframing Language

Instead of saying, *"Charlie presents with attention-seeking behaviours and is disruptive in class",* we could reframe this as:

*Charlie is a highly expressive and socially motivated learner who seeks connection and engagement with those around her. Charlie may find traditional classroom structures challenging at times, especially when these don't align with her communication style, interests and/or way of processing information. With supportive strategies and a responsive environment, Charlie can thrive and contribute meaningfully to group learning*

This activity has invited you to reflect on how language shapes our perceptions of neurodivergent individuals. By reflecting on, and reframing pathologising or deficit-focussed descriptions, we are able to see the real power and influence that language has, not only on our attitudes and expectations, but also on the quality of support that we offer.

Neuro-affirming language shifts the focus from deficits to strengths, from control to collaborations, and from judgement to understanding. It encourages us to recognise behaviour as a form of communication, and to respond with curiosity, compassion and respect. Each time that we choose to use words that affirm, we contribute to a more inclusive and empowering environment for all.

# Language 'swaps'

The words that we choose matter. Even the smallest shift in language can have a big impact on how neurodivergent individuals are perceived and supported. Here are some simple, practical language swaps that move away from deficit-based terms and towards language that is respectful, strengths-based, and inclusive:

| | VS | |
|---|---|---|
| • Easily Distracted | | • Observant or Highly Attuned |
| • Overbearing | | • Knowledgeable or Passionate |
| • Cold or Uncaring | | • Pragmatic |
| • Rude | | • Direct or Honest |
| • Nosey or Interfering | | • Curious |
| • Demanding | | • Decisive or Assertive |
| • Bossy | | • A leader |
| • Rigid | | • Precise |
| • Over-Dramatic | | • Expressive |
| • Anti-Social | | • Introverted |
| • Stubborn | | • Persistent |
| • Impulsive | | • Spontaneous |
| • Pedantic | | • Detail Oriented |
| • Attention-Seeking | | • Seeking Connection |
| • Fixated | | • Focussed |
| • Non-Compliant | | • Values Autonomy |

**Reflection Point**

- How do you plan to adapt how you speak or write about neurodivergent individuals in the future?
- Why does using neuro-affirming language matter to you - perhaps in your role, your values, or your lived experiences?
- How might these shifts in language contribute to a more inclusive, respectful, and empowering environment for neurodivergent individuals?

# Neuro-Affirming Writing

### Neuro-Affirming Writing

**When** writing about others, we are creating a permanent record of the language used to describe their strengths and differences. Therefore, we need to be mindful about the language that we choose to use. It is also important to balance the professional responsibility to appropriately describe areas of challenge, so that they are understood by the reader, with our need to be affirmative.

**Reflection Point**
- Who determines what is a strength or a challenge? What is right or wrong? Or what is 'normal' vs what is unusual?
- If we are all sharing this world together, who is making these value judgements?

### Neuro-Affirming Writing

**Language** used in written records or reports around an individual should be clear and accessible, both to the reader and to the named individual. Neuro-affirming writing moves beyond deficit-based descriptions, and centres the voices, strengths and lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals.

Adopting and committing to a neuro-affirming writing style is a powerful tool for advocacy, equity and cultural change, whether this be within written records, reports, educational materials, professional development materials, policies or everyday communication.

Neuro-affirming writing not only influences how others perceive neurodivergent individuals, but also how individuals see themselves.

A commitment to neuro-affirming writing can foster self-worth, identity and a sense of belonging.

# Neuro-Affirming Writing

## Key Principles to inform neuro-affirming writing

**Adopting a neuro-affirming approach in writing involves actively listening and responding to individuals' lived experiences, learning from the neurodiversity paradigm, and moving away from writing that is deficit-focussed. The National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT) propose the below principles to inform and guide neuro-affirming writing:**

### Diagnosis Matters

**1**

A diagnosis can play a valuable role in affirming neurodivergent identity and helping others to understand an individual's strengths, needs, and preferences in line with their neurotype. However, access to support should not rely solely on a formal diagnosis. It is also important to recognise that diagnostic language often reflects a medical model and may not align with neuro-affirming principles. We should be mindful of how we describe diagnoses, reframing language of "disorder" to reflect a more respectful and strengths-based perspective.

### Difference not Deficit

Adopting a neuro-affirming approach in writing does not equate to denying that neurodivergent individuals experience challenges and will likely have varying support needs throughout their lives. It is important to reflect on how individual differences are described and that the writer does not shy away from referencing the challenges experienced.

**2**

### Language Matters

**3**

Throughout this guide, we have talked about the importance of language and of reframing language used to describe neurodivergent characteristics in a neuro-affirming way. Whilst individual preferences and understanding of language will continue to evolve, it is key that the writer endeavours to use language that affirms and validates the lived experiences and also aligns with the individuals' preferences, thereby bringing sufficient attention to strengths as well as differences and/or needs.

### ✔ Reflection Point

*"Liam is fixated on trains and struggles to talk about anything else. His behaviour can be disruptive and obsessive."*

- Is the language used here free of judgement? Does it invite feelings of shame?
- Consider how you might reframe the same behaviour in a strengths-based, affirming way.

# Neuro-Affirming Writing

**4**

### Nothing about us without us

A neuro-affirming approach to writing acknowledges that one size does not fit all, and that written records and reports can serve multiple purposes i.e., for the named individual, their family and for service providers. Writing should always be person-centred and informed by the individual. Below are some key considerations to inform neuro-affirming writing:

- Parent, carer and family needs, such as connection and signposting
  *i.e., including links to local support groups*
- An individualised profile, i.e., communication/sensory preferences.
  *i.e., noting that a child prefers visual schedules and finds loud environments overwhelming*
- Ensuring accessibility.
  *i.e., using plain language, avoiding jargon, and offering alternative formats where appropriate*
- Consider intersectionality.
  *i.e., recognising how being autistic and from a minoritised ethnic background may shape experiences*

### ▶ WATCH NOW

**Reflection Point**
Take a moment to watch this video, created and shared on World Down Syndrome Day 2025. It advocates for the inclusion of individuals with Down Syndrome and other disabilities in all decision-making processes that impact upon their lives.

### Environment First

In moving away from the deficit model, emphasis should be placed on how the environment can be adapted to meet the needs of neurodivergent individuals, rather than expecting the individual to change their behaviour to conform to neurotypical expectations. Below are key environmental areas to consider, with examples:

**5**

- Physical and Sensory environment
  *i.e., providing access to quiet spaces, using soft lighting, or offering noise-reducing headphones*
- Communication environment (such as Inclusive Communication)
  *i.e., using visual supports, offering processing time, or using clear, literal language*
- Educational environment
  *i.e., Offering interest-based learning tasks, or alternative methods of assessment*
- Social environment
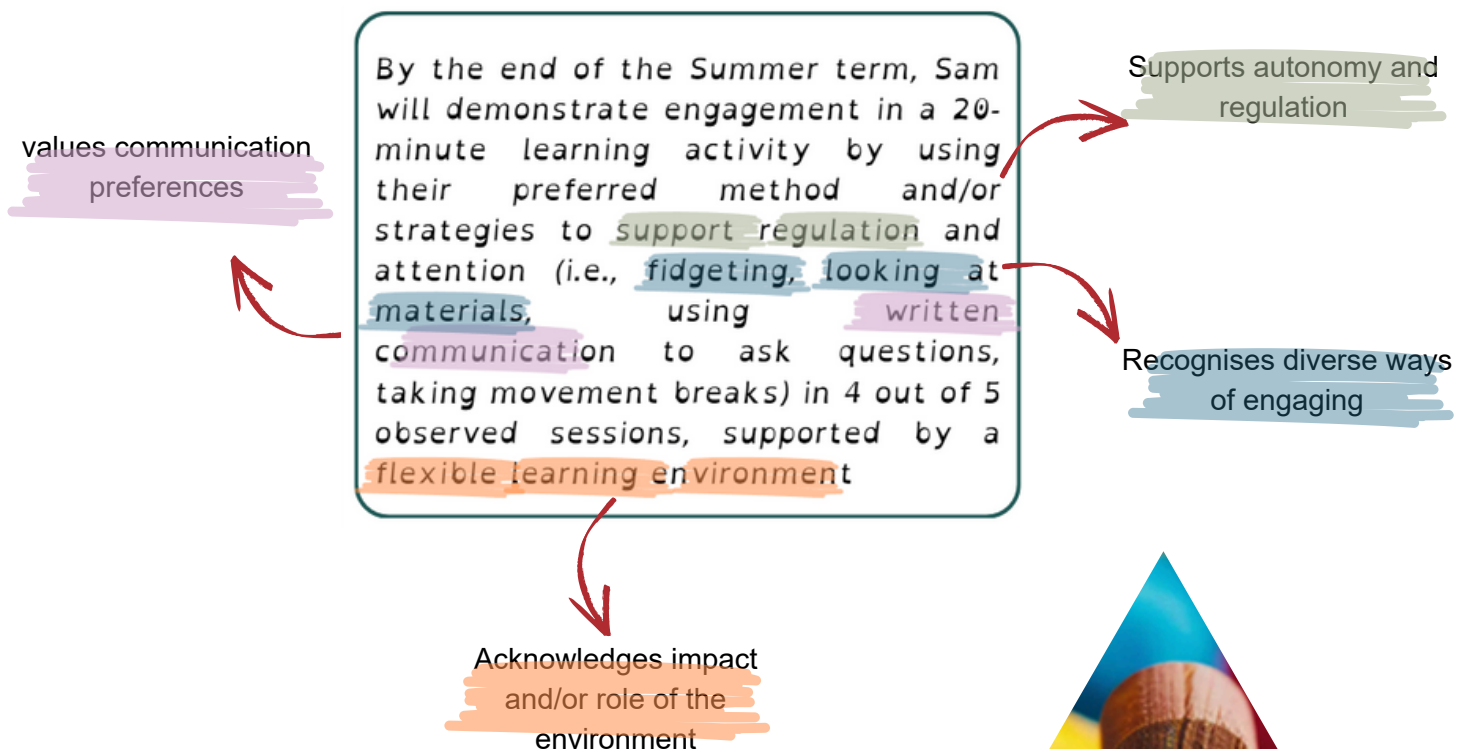  *i.e., supporting structured peer interactions, respecting social boundaries*

*To read NAIT's full guidance on neuro-affirming report writing, click here*

# Neuro-Affirming Outcomes

### *Key considerations for writing neuro-affirming outcomes*

When setting goals/outcomes for neurodivergent individuals, it is important to prioritise individual strengths, needs and preferences whilst also focussing on creating an inclusive and supportive environment that affirms and celebrates neurodiversity. Neuro-affirming SMART outcomes will be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant to the individual and appropriately **T**ime-bound according to individual differences.

Neuro-affirming outcomes will leverage individuals' existing strengths and skills and and will focus on what is meaningful for that individual. In other words, the outcomes will consider what is needed to enhance their experience of the world and will take into account the individuals' neurotype, cultural background and lived experience. In addition, neuro-affirming outcomes should prioritise wellbeing and promote skills for autonomy and self-advocacy, outlining the appropriate support required to facilitate this.

values communication preferences

Supports autonomy and regulation

By the end of the Summer term, Sam will demonstrate engagement in a 20-minute learning activity by using their preferred method and/or strategies to support regulation and attention (i.e., fidgeting, looking at materials, using written communication to ask questions, taking movement breaks) in 4 out of 5 observed sessions, supported by a flexible learning environment

Recognises diverse ways of engaging

Acknowledges impact and/or role of the environment

# Neuro-Affirming Practice

## *Principles of Neuro-Affirming Practice*

### *1.* Presume Competence

Assume that an individual is able to process and understand information, even when their individual differences may appear significant and/or challenging. Presuming competence also involves refraining from making judgements based on preconceived ideas. By presuming competence, we foster environments that are inclusive and empowering.



Neurodiversity Affirming Practice

Presume Competence • Promote Autonomy • Respect All Communication Styles • Be Informed by Neurodivergent Voices • Take a Strengths-based Approach • Honour Neurodivergent Culture • Tailor Supports to Individual Needs

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### 2. Promote Autonomy

Support individuals to develop the skills they need to advocate for themselves and to make informed decisions about their own experiences.

### 3. Respect All Communication Styles

All communication is valued through a neuro-affirming lens, including communication beyond spoken language. Neuro-affirming practice encourages and supports neurodivergent individuals to use their preferred communication style. This may include a preference for written language, signs and gestures or the use of assisted technology.

### *4.* Be Informed by Neurodivergent Voices

Listening and learning from experts with lived experience is a key factor of neuro-affirming practice. Being informed by neurodivergent voices means centring the lived experiences, insights and preferences of neurodivergent individuals across each aspect of our practice. Neurodivergent voices should guide what support looks like, what inclusion means and how success is defined.
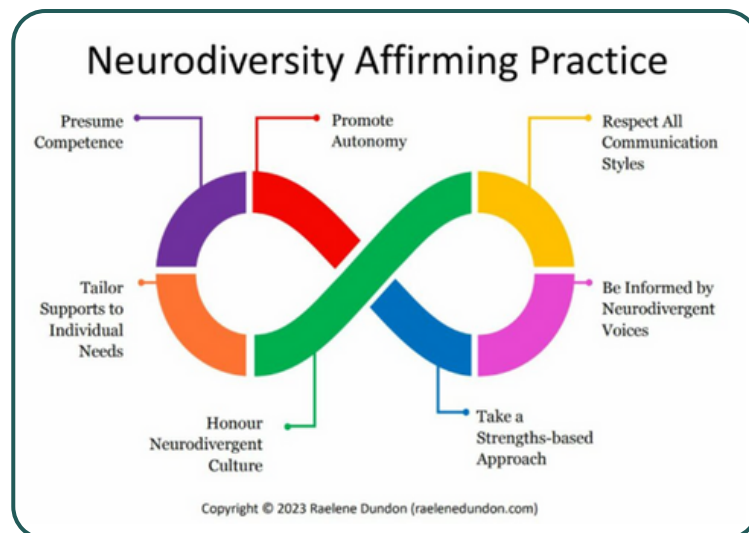
# Neuro-Affirming Practice

## 5. Take a Strengths-Based Approach

A strengths-based approach focuses on what a neurodivergent individual enjoys, excels at, and finds meaningful rather than centring on challenges. By recognising and building on passions, skills, and preferred ways of learning, we can support development in a way that feels relevant and motivating. A strengths-based approach also looks at how the environment can be adapted to reduce and remove barriers. Taking a strengths-based approach does not dismiss or ignore challenges, it looks to identify supportive resources or adjustments that can help neurodivergent individuals to achieve their goals.

### Reflection Point

Reflect on Luke Beardon's Golden Equation:

*Autism + Environment = Outcome*

- How do we adapt the environment to support an individual to thrive?
- What environmental factors support success?

## 6. Honour Neurodivergent Culture

Honouring neurodivergent culture goes beyond simply accommodating needs, it means recognising, respecting and celebrating neurodivergent ways of being. In creating safe and inclusive spaces where neurodivergent individuals are able to be their authentic selves we are honouring neurodivergent culture and encouraging pride in neurodivergent identity.

## 7. Tailor Support to Individual Needs

The final principle of neuro-affirming practice is to recognise that every neurodivergent person is unique, and therefore, support should also be personalised to the individual's strengths, interests, communication style and sensory profile. Support will need to be flexible over time as needs and preference evolve, and the individual should remain at the centre of all discussions that concern them.

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# Individual Practice

### *Where are you now?*

*We* are all on our own journeys to enhancing our understanding and use of neuro-affirming language. This guide is not intended to criticise or to inflict feelings of shame or guilt, it is to introduce and inspire new and empowering alternatives that enable us all to embed neuro-affirming and inclusive language into our daily practice.

As you come to the end of this guide, we invite you to pause to reflect:

- *How does your current practice affirm neurodivergent identities?*
- *In what ways does your language (spoken or written) empower or unintentionally pathologise?*
- *Are the supports that you offer or recommend truly tailored to the individual, or shaped by expectations of conformity?*
- *How can you continue to learn from neurodivergent voices and experiences?*

We encourage you to revisit this guide regularly, engage in open dialogue with colleagues and neurodivergent individuals, and commit to ongoing reflection and growth.

*Neuro-affirming practice is not a destination, it is a journey of listening, unlearning and evolving.*

**Reflection Point**

### *Neurodiversity & Anti-ableism Reflection Tool (Kerry Murphy, 2023)*
This reflection tool can be used to explore where you and your team/service/organisation are in relation to neuro-affirming practice, and what your next steps could be.

# References and Further Reading
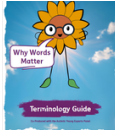
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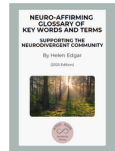
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*For more beautiful and Neuro-Affirming illustrations which detail neurodivergent experiences in a clear and accessible way, check out 'NeuroWild'*