

Neurodiversity-Affirming Practices (Early Years)

A note on language: *Identity-first language (i.e. 'autistic person') is used to align with the preferences of many autistic people. However AQ recognises families of young children who are moving through the diagnostic journey may use other terms. When talking with families, learn about the terms they prefer.*

Terminology

Neurodiversity: An umbrella term to describe variations in the human brain and ways of being (e.g. autism or ADHD).

Affirming: Acceptance of different ways of being and the recognition that there is not one 'correct' way of thinking, behaving, and communicating.

Practices: Any and all strategies, supports, and approaches.

Why is it important to be neurodiversity-affirming?

Masking autistic traits to conform in a neurotypical society can have a negative impact on social-emotional wellbeing and mental health (Miller et al. 2021).

Aligns with the **National Early Years Learning Framework** (EYLF) to support all neurodivergent children to "have equitable access to resources and participation, and opportunities to demonstrate their learning and to value difference" (AGDE; EYLF 2022).

What does 'neurodiversity-affirming' look like in early childhood settings?

- **Prioritising** authentic connection, positive regard, emotional wellbeing, and safety of all children.
- **Respecting and responding** to all communication methods, learning styles, play preferences, and emotions.
- **Ongoing evaluation** of inclusive practices.
- **Open to learning** from a range of information sources through 'ongoing learning and reflective practice' (AGDE; EYLF 2022).
- **Listening** to neurodivergent voices and their families.
- **Encouraging** authentic peer connections.
- **Using strengths-based language** when talking with and about all children.



Practices to avoid:		Instead:
Planned ignoring or punishments.		Support the child through connection, co-regulation , and identifying the reasons for their behaviour and provide proactive supports .
Physical promptin to complete tasks.		Value the child's right to consent and autonomy by slowing down and using the least amount of prompting necessary.
Redirecting or discouraging stims (i.e. self-stimulatory behaviours).		Recognise the necessity of stimming and the purposes it serves . Support the child to engage in non-harmful stims and make environmental modifications if necessary.
Rewards to ensure compliance.		Discover more about the child's strengths, interests, and learning styles . Refusals should be respected (when safe to do so).
Only responding to "appropriate" communication or requiring eye contact.		Recognise all forms of communication as valid and teach others about communication styles. Support with translations between styles.
Only responding to "appropriate" whole body learning.		Recognise that learning can happen in many ways and support all children to access learning in their preferred way or with preferred supports.

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EYLF principles that promote neurodiversity-affirming practice:

Secure, respectful, and reciprocal relationships: *"Through a widening network of secure relationships, children develop confidence and feel safe, respected and valued. They become increasingly able to recognise and respect the feelings of others and to interact positively with them."*

Partnerships: *"Partnerships are based on the foundations of respecting each other's perspectives, expectations and values, and building on the strength of each other's knowledge and skills."*

Respect for diversity: *"When educators respect the diversity of families and communities, and the aspirations they hold for their children, they can foster children's motivation to learn and reinforce their sense of themselves as competent learners."*

Equity, Inclusion and high expectations: *"Educators view all children as competent and capable and hold high expectations for their learning. Educators who are committed to equity recognise that all children have the right to participate in inclusive early childhood settings, regardless of their circumstances, strengths, gender, capabilities or diverse ways of doing and being."*

References

Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE] (2022). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (V2.0)*. Australian Government Department of Education for the Ministerial Council.

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*, 10(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1937>

Miller D, Rees J, & Pearson A (2021) Masking Is Life: Experiences of Masking in Autistic and Nonautistic Adults, *Autism in adulthood*, 3(4):33–338, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0083>



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The content of this resource was informed by final year speech pathology students and autistic voices.