



Speech and Language Therapy Advice Sheet

Supporting children using a neuro-affirmative approach

What do neurodiversity, neurodivergent and neuro-affirmative mean?

Neurodiversity is about recognising that everyone's brains work differently.

Being neurodivergent means your brain functions differently from what is considered 'typical' or 'normal'. There are lots of examples of this, including autism, dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Being neuro-affirmative means accepting and celebrating these differences, rather than trying to 'fix' them.

Why is this important?

In the past, interventions used when working with autistic children often had an aim of making the child appear 'less autistic'. We now know from autistic adults that these interventions led to the autistic person hiding their true self (known as 'masking') which is very emotionally draining and has had a significant impact on the mental health of many people. It's important that we listen to this group of adults, to ensure that we do better for the children we are working with now.

I've heard that my child may be developing their language as a 'Gestalt Language Processor'. What does this mean?

Language development is a complex process, and children develop communication skills in different ways. There are two main ways that children can develop language (analytic and gestalt):

Analytic	Gestalt
Learn language as single words e.g. 'juice' 'Mama'	Learn language in chunks with lots of intonation e.g. 'thewheelsonthebus'
Single word carries individual meaning	The 'chunk' carries the meaning rather than the individual words e.g. child may say 'thewheelsonthebus' only when getting on and off the bus

What can I do to help?

There are some things that we know are important when supporting autistic children, regardless of how they are developing their language, which we have outlined below:

- Your approach should be child-centred. This means it should consider the child's strengths and their needs
- All communication is valid. Embrace a total communication that accepts all types of communication (pictures, signs, words, body language) rather than prioritising spoken words
- Understand and respect the child's differences
- Build the child's enjoyment, self-esteem and well-being
- Engage them by using fun motivating activities
- Show new things to promote learning
- Include sensory and regulatory support such as fidget spinners and sensory breaks
- Respect and enjoy the child's differences

(Murphy, 2022)

If you have tried using these strategies and you are still concerned about the impact of your child's communication differences, you can:

- Look on our website for further information, training opportunities and advice:
<https://www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/childrens-centre/your-childs-hospital-journey/therapy-services/speech-and-language-therapy/>
- Contact your Specialist Advisory Teacher if the child has a diagnosis of autism
- Contact the Parent Educational Psychologist telephone line <https://www.york.org.uk/families/Local%20Offer/Education/Specialist%20Teaching%20Team/Universal%20Offer%20Autumn%202023%20v1.pdf>
- Contact us via our 'Request for Help' line – see our website for further details

You can access further information from the following websites:

- <https://www.autism.org.uk/>