



What is “neurodiversity-affirming”?

~~~~~ A parent primer ~~~~~

“You have a magical, beautiful, perfect, Autistic child.”

– Sarah Selvaggi-Hernandez, Autistic OT



You may have been told that your child has “red flags” for autism, that they need “intervention,” or other phrases that make it sound like your child is suffering from a medical condition.

But in reality, autism isn’t a medical condition. It’s just a description of how some kids’ brains work. There are lots of different ways for brains to be wired, and all of them are okay. These are called “neurotypes.” And there’s nothing inherently good or bad about any particular neurotype.

The problem is that when your child is neurodivergent, the world simply isn’t set up for them. And that can be hard to navigate.

But before you let a provider write a single goal, let’s start with the most important piece: you’re child’s felt sense of safety and well-being. We’re guessing that you:

- Want your child to feel loved, connected, and accepted as their most authentic self
- Want your child to spend the moments of their life learning, growing, and connecting, not trying to hide their true self to make others’ feel more comfortable

If so, this guide is for you.

Let's Talk About Masking



Teaching Autistic kids to act less Autistic is called “masking.” Here are some examples:

- Being told to make eye contact, which makes it look like they are listening to non-Autistic people but makes it harder to actually listen for most Autistic people.
- Being asked not to move their bodies in the ways that are natural and regulating to them (“stimming”). This makes it harder for them to really regulate their bodies to feel safe, present, connected, or ready to learn.
- Being asked to perform neurotypical social behaviors like back and forth conversations, instead of engaging in more natural ways like repeating scripts or info-dumping / monologuing.

Take a moment to imagine what it would feel like trying to change the natural ways you use your eyes, your body, and your words when connecting with others and when learning. It would be exhausting and unsatisfying. And if that's what it took to feel accepted, you would likely feel like your authentic self was truly unworthy of love.

Everyone masks in some situations. But teaching Autistic kids to mask for social acceptance is linked in research to depression, PTSD, and suicidality.

There are kids out there who will be excited to love your Autistic child exactly as they are. An affirming provider will help you find those spaces and opportunities and problem-solve hard situations along the way.

Strengths-Based Approach



Everyone has strengths as well as things that are hard for them. Some providers will compare your child to “developmental norms” that were never meant for the way your child’s brain learns and grows. The truth is, there is no one way to grow and develop.

A strengths-based approach doesn’t mean ignoring all of the ways that the world is hard for your child. It does mean:

- Making space for them to build from their passions. Autistic people tend to love the things they love with great passion. They often want to learn about them until they feel satisfied. Honor this process. Your child’s passions will most likely be the building blocks for their hobbies, their friendship, their work, and – most importantly – their joy.
- Accommodating things that are too hard, rather than spending endless hours of your child’s life trying to change the things that are the hardest for them. Here are a few examples of what may look like:
 - Teaching typing instead of handwriting
 - Allowing a child who can speak – but finds it taxing – to use an AAC device to communicate
 - Providing sensory supports to help dampen overwhelming sensations instead of desensitizing a child to them
- And for the things your child is ready to learn (which will be so many things!), a strengths-based provider will incorporate your child’s interests to make learning more fun and meaningful, but will never use them as a reward.

Strengths-Based Approach



Your child has their own set of strengths. Take the time to make a list and share with all of your providers! Ask what they've observed as well.

While every Autistic person is different, here are traits that are a strength for many Autistic people to get you started:

- Does your child have a strong sense of empathy?
- Are they honest?
- Do they love humor?
- Are they accepting of others despite differences?
- Do they have a clear sense of justice and right versus wrong?
- Do they pay careful attention to detail?
- Do they find patterns easily?
- Do they stick with their routines?
- Do they notice beautiful things in the environment that others miss?
- Do they focus without multitasking?
- Do they attend deeply to the present moment?

What else have you observed? These are the traits that will help your child thrive. Nourish them, and surround your child with others who nourish their strengths, too.

Should You Tell Your Child They Are Autistic?



"I grew up thinking I was a weird kid, and just nobody liked me. But [when I learned I was Autistic as an adult] I realized that this is just how my brain works. And there actually were other people who were like me a little bit, and they did like me." - Lei Wiley-Mydske

Many Autistic adults like Lei report that their childhoods would have felt so much better had they known they were Autistic.

There is nothing wrong with having an Autistic brain. Letting your child know they are Autistic sets them up for a lifetime of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-advocacy.

The book "Just Right for You" by Melanie Heyworth is great for younger kids. And we love "The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide: A Practical Handbook for Autistic Teens and Tweens" by Yenn Purkis and Tanya Masterman for older kids.

We also have lots of affirming resources for you at parents.learnplaythrive.com

We wish you the best on your journey on parenting your Autistic child to feel fully loved and accepted as their most authentic self.