

Supporting Your Child's Communication: A Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach

Neurodiversity-affirming practice is a movement, led by people with disabilities, for people with disabilities. This approach is increasingly being adopted in Australian healthcare and educational settings, moving away from traditional methods that aimed to 'fix' neurodiverse traits.

Research, combined with voices from the Autistic community, shows that 'masking' or hiding neurodiverse traits can lead to poor mental health outcomes (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Neurodiversity-affirming practice recognises that brains naturally work in different ways, celebrating these differences as strengths rather than deficits.

What are the Principles of Neuro-Affirming Practice?

When supporting language development, there are three key principles:

1. Presume Competence

We assume that children are capable of communication, regardless of their current abilities (Mirenda, 2003 and Biklen & Burke, 2006).

2. Honour Communication Differences

We recognise that all communication is valid, including alternative and augmentative communication methods (Gernsbacher et al., 2008).

3. Take a Strengths-Based Approach

We use each child's natural strengths and interests to support their language development.
Practical Strategies for Home and School



Here are two evidence-based strategies for supporting your child's language development while respecting their neurodivergence. These approaches benefit children of all neurotypes!

1. Visual Supports

Visual supports enhance communication by leveraging natural visual processing strengths. They can be simple (like green and red cards for yes/no) or complex (like communication boards). Examples include:

- o Daily schedules that help children understand routines
- o First-then-next boards that break down activities into manageable steps
- o Picture cards that support comprehension and memory



2. Language Expanding

This approach builds on how children already communicate without direct correction, honouring their unique communication style while supporting growth. Simply expand on what your child says using correct grammar and richer vocabulary.

Example:

- o Child: "Ball go."
- o Adult: "Yes, the ball is rolling! It's rolling fast."

Remember to let your child lead these interactions - following their interests increases engagement and learning.

These two strategies are an excellent starting point for neurodiversity-affirming language support. There are many other approaches available, and we encourage you to explore what works best for your child.

References:

- Biklen, D., & Burke, J. (2006). Presuming competence. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 39(2), 166-175.
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- Mirenda, P. (2003). Toward functional augmentative and alternative communication for students with autism. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 34(3), 203-216.