

Diverse Pathways of Development Guidance



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- **The Early Childhood Neurodiversity Affirming Collective**
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We have to stop assuming that **all children** are **travelling** down the **same** developmental **pathway**

(Kerry Murphy)



The Diverse Pathways was developed by the **Neurodiversity Affirming Early Childhood Collective**.

Our group includes early childhood educators, specialists, therapists, parents, carers, teachers, and young people with diverse lived experiences.

We came together to create and share new knowledge around neurodiversity-affirming practices in early childhood.

If you're interested in joining the collective, please get in touch:
queries@diversepathways.org.uk

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If you wish to reference this Divergent Pathway, please include the following:

Neurodiversity Affirming Early Childhood Collective (2025). The Divergent Pathway for Autistic Early Childhood: Play Patterns.



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Lineage Statement

Diverse Pathways for Early Childhood is rooted in the shared labour of many communities, including autistic and disabled people, educators, families, and researchers, who have long questioned the idea of a single “normal” path of development. This work grows from their courage and knowledge. It is part of an ongoing movement to reframe how we understand children’s growth, not as a race to milestones, but as a relationship between the child, their environment, and the conditions that help them thrive.



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Things to consider before accessing the materials



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Considerations

We understand that this project may generate lots of questions and reflections. We want to give people time to engage with the materials before sharing their feedback, comments, and queries. However, there are a few things we would like to clarify before you access the materials, which we feel are important.

What if a child is not yet diagnosed as autistic? Or does not generally present as autistic?

While this divergent pathway focuses on the autistic **neurotype**, there will be descriptions of development and play within this document that **span beyond autism**, and will intersect with other neurotypes, disabilities and lived experiences. The aim of this document is **not** to suggest that all these developmental traits are exclusive to autism. Rather, we are trying to reframe developmental experiences that have been historically **pathologised** (thinking that differences are a problem that need to be fixed). This tool is designed as a springboard for thinking about children's development beyond **neuronormativity** (when people think there is only one "right" way for brains and bodies to work, even though all kinds of minds and bodies are valid). Finally, this document is not fixed or prescriptive. We welcome constructive feedback to ensure it evolves and continues to represent the diversity of child development.





Does this mean that documents that describe typical development are not useful?

Not necessarily. Current child development documents often present a beneficial insight into developmental experiences and “milestones” that are typical with neuronormative outcomes. They can be hugely useful in providing an overview of what to expect for many typically developing children. If a child is represented by these documents, and you find them useful, continue to utilise them. The more access we have to child development knowledge the better, and no pathway is more superior to another.

There is language in this document that seems complex, with lots of new terms. I feel slightly apprehensive about this.

We grappled a lot with how best to present this divergent pathway, in particular, we did not want the terminology to feel off-putting. We are providing a **glossary** and training to accompany the divergent pathway, and we have done our best to explain complex ideas in an accessible and useful way. The general agreement of the group which includes parents x carers is that the terminology and concepts within this document can give you the language to describe children in **non-pathologising** ways. This will ultimately empower you to advocate for what a child needs to thrive. However, we also appreciate that people come with different perspectives and lived experiences and that this document **as it stands** may not reflect your current views. That is okay! Thankfully this is one tool of many and we would always encourage people to use what best guides them.



Is the guidance evidence-based?

We have drawn on a wide range of research and lived experience sources, including autistic-led and neurodiversity-affirming research. It is important to note that understanding child development through a neurodiversity-affirming lens in early childhood remains a research gap. Much of the existing work focuses on identifying children as having special educational needs and positioning them as in need of remediation.

Most autistic-led research focuses on children and young people aged five and above, meaning we have had to make careful translations and interpretations based on lived experience to apply these insights to the early years. We also recognise that research can often take a narrow focus, overlooking important intersectional factors. For this reason, we have drawn on a broad range of perspectives, including those from the global majority, though this is an area we are keen to deepen further.

What if I have questions, feedback, comments and queries about the Diverse and Divergent Pathway?

We absolutely welcome this! You can either reach out to us directly at info@diversepathways.org, or complete our Queries, Feedback and Comments form by clicking [here](#) or scanning the QR code.

SCAN ME



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PartOne: Why do we need the Diverse Pathways of Development?



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Typical Child Development



Children's development is often presented to us as a universal pathway where all children will meet similar milestones, and all children will reach the same outcomes. While many children might conform to typical development, many children will also diverge from this typical pathway. Rather than seeing one pathway, we have to recognise there are lots of different possible pathways. All developmental pathways are valid.

Diverse Child Development

Autistic

ADHD

Down Syndrome



All pathways matter. We need to understand development that looks different. This guidance aims to support you to understand and honour autistic child development.

About



- The Diverse Pathways of Development is a **resource** intended for early educators, parents and caregivers, as well as specialists, to broaden their understanding of **non-neuronormative** child development. Traditionally, child development has been viewed through a universal lens, focusing on expected “milestones”.
- We know this is not a reality for so many children. When a child diverges from this universal path, their development is frequently seen as a “red flag” or a problem to be fixed.
- In short, children are assumed to have delays rather than potential differences. It is crucial to recognise that instead of being on a deficit pathway, these children may, in fact, be learning, developing, playing, feeling, sensing and moving in equally valid ways. They may also have various support needs that deserve sensitive recognition rather than invasive intervention.
- The agenda of current non-statutory guidelines for child development is to ensure children are “school ready” which often prioritises developmental conformity, and a standardised knowledge and skill set.
- While it is important to feel ready for the next phase of education and life experiences, this should not be narrowly pre-defined and described, but instead should embrace what is **developmentally meaningful** to the child.
- Furthermore child development should not be dictated by standard milestones and outcomes. Rather, we should tune into what is meaningful to the child both in their **quality of life** and **outcomes**.

Our aim is that the Divergent Pathway will grow and eventually we will produce pathways for other neurotypes and disabilities. We are also very happy for people to magpie this approach and create their own pathways with credit. If you are interested in collaborating, please contact us at kerry@diversepathways.org.

We look forward to re-imagining developmental experiences we have been taught previously to eliminate, ignore and reduce.

About

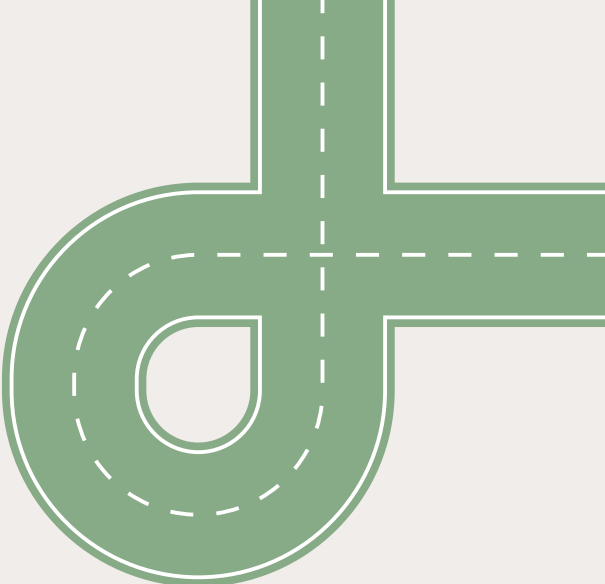


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The **Diverse Pathways** is the **umbrella term** for our project and collective. We recognise that every child follows a unique developmental pathway. As educators, parents, carers, and specialists, this perspective invites us to honour all developmental experiences as meaningful and a valid part of a child's lived experience.

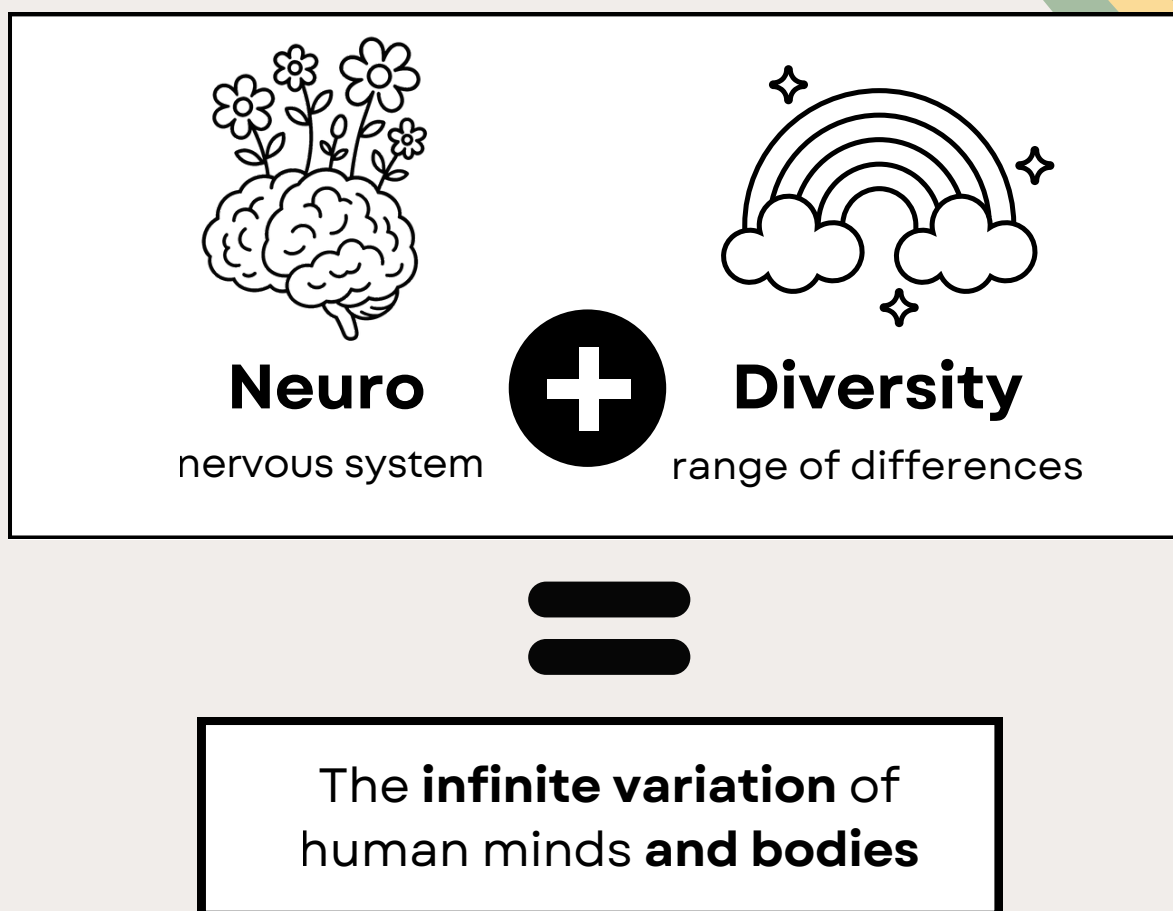


The **Divergent Pathway** is our collective attempt to create new knowledge by exploring **autistic child development**. This is rooted in lived experience frameworks and neurodiversity-affirming research. **The Divergent Pathway is not designed to be prescriptive, rather the aim is to provide an alternative framework from deficit approaches.** We very much hope these frameworks can be applied to lots of developmental experiences.

Interested in creating your own Divergent Pathway based on lived experience or specialist knowledge? We are developing a template framework to support others in doing just that and we warmly welcome collaborations and crossovers. If you would like to explore creating Divergent Pathways together, get in touch: queries@diversepathways.org



Defining Neurodiversity



Neurodiversity refers to the natural variations in how we think, feel, function, play, sense, move, interact and exist in the world. No one is inherently inferior or superior because of those differences. Neurodiversity is grounded in the understanding that human minds and bodies are wonderfully diverse, and there is no single “right” way to function. There are many valid ways of being, and all children deserve validation, recognition and understanding.

Neurodiversity-affirming practice means offering every child a holistic understanding and creating the right conditions so they can feel safe, belong, and thrive. The aim is a good quality of life and meaningful outcomes for everyone.

- Walker, N. Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions. Retrieved at: <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>
- Neff, M.A., Neurodiversity101.
- Botha, Monique, Robert Chapman, Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, Steven K. Kapp, Abs Stannard Ashley, and Nick Walker. "The neurodiversity concept was developed collectively: An overdue correction on the origins of neurodiversity theory." Autism 28, no. 6 (2024): 1591-1594.

Neurodiversity terms



Everyone belongs under the neurodiversity umbrella. The term and approach of neurodiversity is a **tool of inclusion** meaning everyone should feel valued within their experiences. The reference to an umbrella is about togetherness, community and acceptance of differences. It is not about division between those who are neurotypical (conforming) and neurodivergent. It is also important to note that we are more than our assumed or identified neurotype and have heaps of other identity markers, and lived experiences that shape our ways of being in the world.

Neurodiversity terms

Neurodiverse refers to a group of people who have a variety of ways of being. This includes variations in thinking, functioning, sensing, communicating, playing, and feeling. A neurodiverse group includes both those who conform to neurotypical or neuronormative expectations and those who diverge from them.

Neurotypical conforming refers to children who are able to conform to the norms, standards and expectations of “normalcy” to fit in. These children are assumed to represent the “correct” way to think, feel, play, communicate, behave, sense and function (adapted from Wise, 2023).

Neurodivergent was coined by disability activist Kassiane Asasumasu in the early 2000s. It is an umbrella term used to describe those whose assumed or identified neurological functioning diverges from dominant social expectations or “norms,” also known as neuronormativity. Neurodivergent is not a medical diagnosis but a term of identification for those who find it useful to describe their way of being. You can align with the term neurodivergent whether or not you have a formal diagnosis.

Emerging Neurodivergent refers to children whose traits and characteristics are in the process of becoming understood. It can also refer to late diagnosed children who are re-discovering their natural selves.

Please explore section two to understand why we need neurodiversity-affirming approaches, and Diverse Pathways.

- Wise, S.J., 2023. We're all neurodiverse: How to build a neurodiversity-affirming future and challenge neuronormativity. Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Epley, P. and Souto-Manning, M., 2023. Justice for whom and according to whom?(Re) considering equity, inclusion and belonging in early care and education. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 24(2), pp.93-96..
- Chapman, R. (2024) Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism. London: Function Books.
- Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H., Hultman, L., Österborg Wiklund, S., Nygren, A., Storm, P. & Sandberg, G. (2023) Naming ourselves, becoming neurodivergent scholars, Disability & Society, 40(1), pp. 128–147.
- Asasumasu, Kassiane. 2018. 'PSA from the Actual Coiner of "Neurodivergent"'. <https://sherlocksflataffect.tumblr.com/post/121295972384/psa-from-the-actual-coiner-of-neurodivergent>



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Part Two: **Dismantling Deficit Systems**

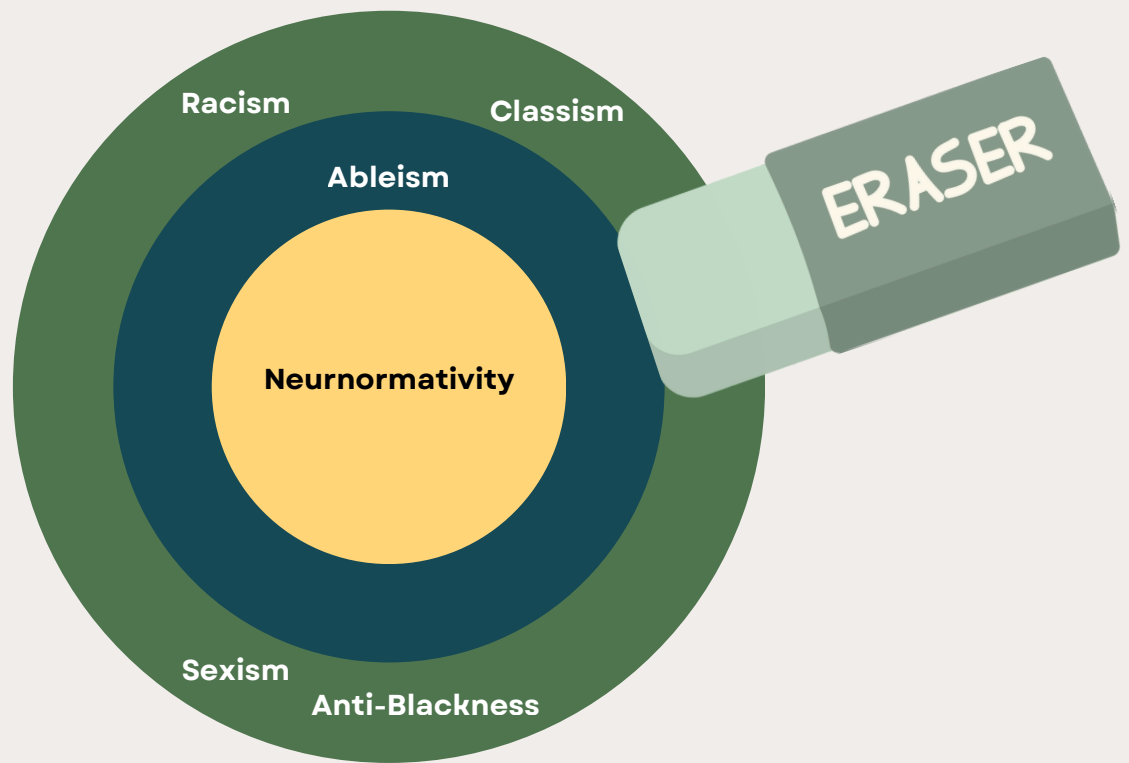


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Ableism and Neuronormativity



We live in a society where different forms of marginalisation such as racism and classism are interconnected. These forms of discrimination often overlap and influence each other, so when we address one, we must also recognise how it connects to others.

Ableism is the broader discrimination, prejudice, or systemic oppression against disabled people, rooted in the idea that non-disabled bodies and minds are superior, normal, or preferable.

Neuronormativity is a branch of ableism and is a specific cultural norm that assumes there is one “right” or “normal” way of thinking, feeling, learning, and behaving, usually aligning with neurotypical conforming standards.

- Lewis, T.A., 2022. Working definition of ableism. Retrieved April, 4, p.2025.
- Goodley, D., 2014. Dis/ability studies: Theorising disablism and ableism. Routledge.
- Wise, S.J., 2023. We're all neurodiverse: How to build a neurodiversity-affirming future and challenge neuronormativity. Jessica Kingsley Publishers



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A Note on the Roots of Neurodiversity

- While the term neurodiversity emerged in the late twentieth century within Western activism and disability rights movements, the principles it reflects, that human minds, senses, and ways of being are naturally varied and valuable, are not new.
- Many Indigenous cultures across the world have long held relational, ecological, and community-based understandings of human difference.
- Before the dominance of Western medical and colonial frameworks, cognitive and sensory diversity was often seen as part of the natural balance of life, with individuals recognised for their unique ways of perceiving and contributing to the collective.
- These perspectives remind us that ideas of diversity, interdependence, and inclusion are deeply rooted in many knowledge systems beyond the West.

In recognising this, Diverse Pathways aims to honour both the origins of the neurodiversity movement and the broader, older wisdoms that value difference as part of human and ecological wholeness.



Neuronormativity



Definition: Neuronormativity refers to the privileging of bodies and minds that conform to dominant norms of “typical” or “non-disabled”. When a child meets these expectations of what is considered “normal”, they are more likely to be seen as developing the “right” way. This creates systemic bias, resulting in inaccessibility, exclusion, and discrimination against neurodivergent and disabled children. In early education, these neuronormative assumptions are often deeply embedded in how we design environments, set expectations, and interpret children's development.









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Examples

Ableism and neuronormativity show up in many different ways. It is sometimes assumed that these forms of discrimination and bias are not relevant to early childhood, but the reality is that, like other forms of discrimination, such as racism, ableism can become embedded from the earliest years unless we actively identify and dismantle it through anti-bias pedagogies.

-  Communication “norms” such as believing that speaking (use of mouth words) is the most superior form of communication.
-  Having behavioural expectations that require children to be calm and still, such as enforcing whole-body listening compliance (“sit still”, “quiet hands”, “looking eyes”)
-  Expecting children to tolerate experiences in preparation for the “real world” even if it is uncomfortable, distressing or painful.
-  Suggesting play does not come naturally to neurodivergent or disabled children because their play does not fit into play stages or “norms”.
-  Using behaviourist systems such as behaviour charts to publicly shame or draw attention to neurodivergent traits.
-  Ignoring communication attempts that are considered meaningless, such as the use of echolalia or behaviours seeking connection.





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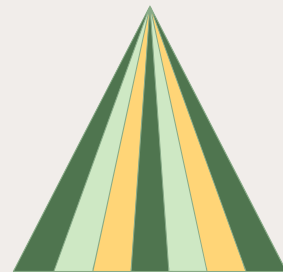
 Expecting children to tolerate experiences in preparation for the “real world” even if it is uncomfortable, distressing or painful.

 Suggesting play does not come naturally to neurodivergent or disabled children because their play does not fit into play stages or “norms”.

 Using behaviourist systems such as behaviour charts to publicly shame or draw attention to neurodivergent traits.

 Ignoring communication attempts that are considered meaningless, such as the use of echolalia or behaviours seeking connection.

Pathology Paradigm



Our education system is often dominated by a **pathology framework**, where developmental differences or disabilities are seen as problems to be “fixed” or normalised. This approach is unhelpful and limiting when supporting children’s diverse developmental experiences and trajectories. Diverse Pathways takes a neurodiversity-affirming approach which values differences and sensitively supports children.

Features

- ⊕ Differences and disabilities are seen as problems to be fixed, cured, or reduced.
- ⊕ Children are viewed through the lens of delays, deficits, and disorders rather than as developing differently.
- ⊕ Development is judged against “typical” or “normal” standards—anything outside this is flagged as a concern.
- ⊕ Children are often compared to peers and labelled as failing or behind, rather than recognised as on a different path.
- ⊕ Interventions focus on correcting the child to fit expectations, even if those expectations feel unnatural or cause distress.



Neurodiversity Paradigm

The Neurodiversity Paradigm enables us to explore alternative approaches to early education that focus on neutral associations with difference and disability, but there is also the expectation that as educators we will be strength's led and needs driven. The neurodiversity paradigm is a rejection of deficit systems that pathologise and dehumanise the very natural occurrence of human needs. **The Diverse Pathways for Early Childhood is driven by strength's led understandings.**

Features



Differences and developmental variation are natural and expected, not signs of failure.



All children's needs and ways of developing are part of the human experience and deserve respect.



Development is understood through a holistic lens that values children's interests, strengths, and needs.



Children are supported in ways that align with their authentic selves, not forced to fit external norms.



The goal is not "fixing" the child, but creating attuned environments and relationships that support meaningful engagement and wellbeing.



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“Autism isn’t something a person has, or a “shell” that a person is trapped inside. There is **no normal child** hidden behind autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; **it colours every experience**; every sensation, thought, perception, emotion and encounters every aspect of existence”

(Jim Sinclair, 1993)

Autism and neurodiversity

Defining Autism

- Autism is currently assessed through a **medical model of disability** and is generally diagnosed as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (henceforth autism).
- It is **neurodevelopmental** meaning it is present from birth and lasts across the lifespan though it will also be shaped by lived experiences.
- While some people may suggest that autism should be cured, this is not the position or belief of this supporting guidance.
- While autism is linked to how the brain develops and has a strong genetic basis, there is no single medical test or clear biological marker that can confirm it.
- Instead, autism is diagnosed by professionals who look closely at a child (or adult's) behaviour, listen to reports from family or others, and consider how these behaviours match the current diagnostic criteria.
- Autistic advocates often point out that the **current diagnostic criteria is very narrow** and was focused on white, middle-class, western, males meaning the autistic community have done a great deal to diversify the criteria and traits beyond a diagnostic manual. We reject that autism is just a set of problems, symptoms or impairments to be fixed but a much more complex experience.

If you wish to find out more about the diagnostic and lived experience for autism, please consider the following reads.



- Kavanagh, M., Day, A., Hartman, D., O'Donnell-Killen, T. & Doyle, J.K. (2024) The Neurodiversity-Affirmative Child Autism Assessment Handbook. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Wise, S.J. (2023) We're All Neurodiverse. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Garvey, N. & Burgess, R. (illus.) (2024) Being Autistic (and what that actually means). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Autism and neurodiversity



Re-defining Autism

- Thanks to autistic people in the 1990's and the arrival of the internet, autistic advocates began to connect with each other in internet chat rooms and questioned why allistic (non-autistic) people **got to define their lived experience and to label this as disordered**.
- This is where the term “neurological diversity” was first used (later to become neurodiversity) and the recognition that maybe autistic people are not broken, but experience the world in different and equally valid ways.
- For this reason, many autistic people, have tried to raise awareness that autism is a lifelong developmental difference rather than solely a disorder or set of problems.
- **This does not mean that autistic people do not experience challenges or difficulties but they should not be pathologised because of this**, but understood and supported.
- Equally, neurodiversity approaches embrace the idea that we should change the environmental conditions to help someone thrive rather than trying to change the person.
- In short; you cannot make an autistic person less autistic but you can make the world more autistic affirming.

Autism and neurodiversity



- Not all autistic experiences are equal. Autistic advocacy seeks to improve the lived experiences of all autistic people, but the reality is that no two autistic people are the same, and their support needs and intersectional experiences may differ.
- Neurodiversity approaches are sometimes misunderstood as denying the very real challenges that autistic people may encounter. This can be a valid criticism when those with lower support needs are centred.
- In this guidance, we recognise that there are many interpretations of the autistic experience, and that we may have “concealed spots” that still need exploration.
- This guidance is an attempt to expand understandings of autism in early childhood, while acknowledging that no single document or approach can capture every autistic experience. We do not view this as fixed or final, rather, we share it with the hope that it will be continually enriched by the insights, experiences, and contributions of the communities who engage with it.

Rather than viewing autism as a linear spectrum, ranging from "mild to severe" or "high to low functioning", Diverse Pathways understands autism as a constellation of traits that vary from person to person in presence, salience, and interaction.

This means that autistic development is not simply more or less of something, but rather different combinations of ways of being, in how children sense, move, communicate, relate, focus, and play. These traits do not follow a neat pattern, and not every autistic child will share the same traits or experiences.



Autistic Constellation of Traits

adapted from Lowry, M. (2025). Reframing DSM Autism Criteria: A strengths-based perspective [Blog post]. LPP Clinical Practice.

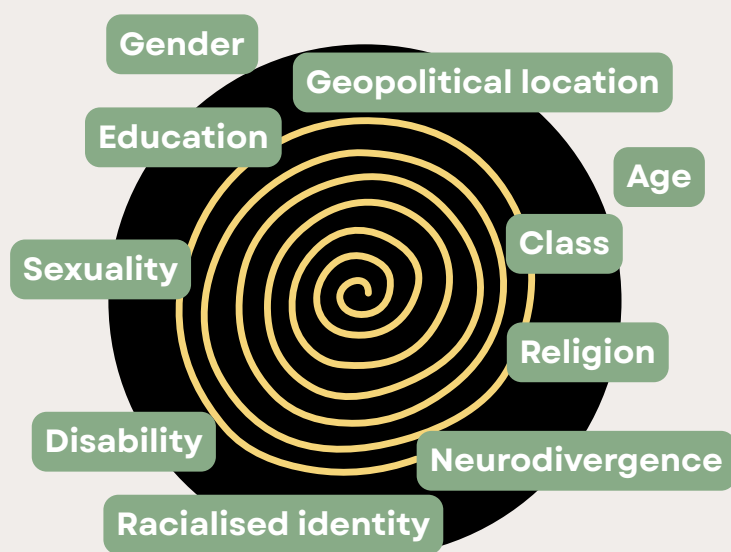


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Intersectionality



Intersectionality is a way of understanding how different aspects of a person's identity, such as race, gender, class, disability, and culture, interact to shape their experiences in the world. It recognises that systems of privilege and oppression (like racism, sexism, classism, or ableism) overlap and influence one another, meaning that people may experience advantage or marginalisation in complex and interconnected ways. For example, how might an autistic boy be perceived in comparison to an autistic girl? Or how might racialised identity influence how we support autistic children of different ethnicities?

Intersectionality originated from Black feminist movements and was first used to highlight how Black women were often excluded within both feminist and anti-racist spaces. Today, intersectionality helps us understand that no single form of discrimination can be examined in isolation. Meaningful inclusion requires awareness of the multiple, intersecting power structures that shape people's lives.

An understanding of intersectionality does not mean we need to become experts in every identity marker. Rather, it means listening to people's lived experiences, validating what they share, and accepting that their perspectives may be different from our own. In fact, recognising intersectionality is often about de-centering ourselves to ensure space for the full diversity of experiences to be heard and valued.

Anti Bias Framework



Adults should also be aware of potential bias towards autistic children. For example, an autistic child may have their play or development judged as incompetent because it does not conform to typical and non-disabled ways of playing. Similarly, children of the global majority, in particular Black children may experience adultification bias where their play pattern is judged more harshly or described through charged language, for example, suggesting the play is aggressive rather than energetic.

As well as challenging neuronormativity, children will also play within and beyond gender norms but may be subject to heteronormativity. For example, a female-identifying child may be encouraged to play in passive ways. Consider what lens you are applying to play patterns and show curiosity about your bias in order to dismantle it.

- Derman-Sparks, L. & Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force (1989) Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Trammell, A. (2023) Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press



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It can be **overwhelming** to witness/experience/take in all the **injustices of the moment**; the good news is that they're all connected. So if your **little corner of work** involves **pulling at one of the threads**, you're helping to **unravel** the whole damn cloth.

Ursula Wolfe-Rocca

Part Three:

Principles of

Diverse Pathways

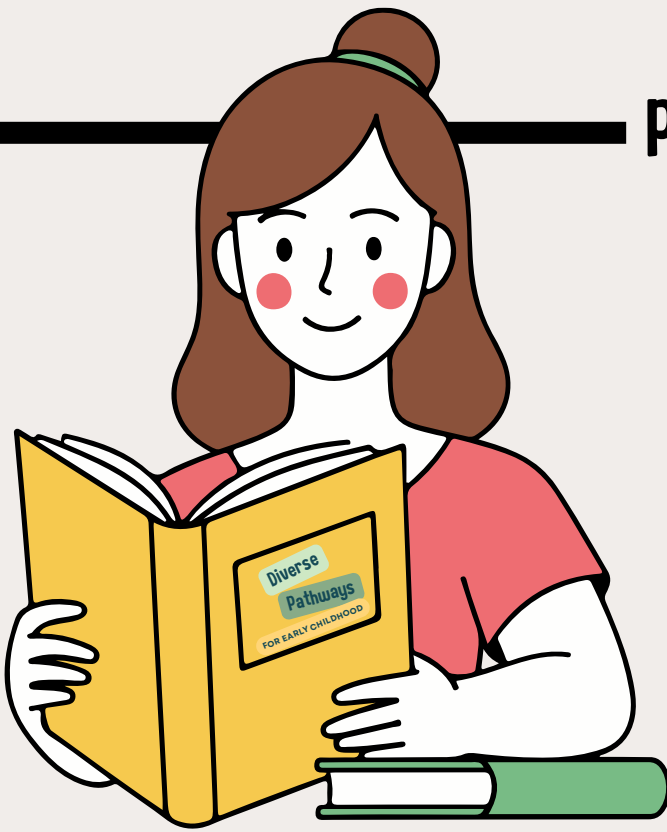


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Principles of the Guidance



A commitment to understanding Holistic Child Development that is strength's led

Adopting humanising language to describe developmental experiences



Recognising attunement before intervention



Embrace my holistic profile



Interests & Passions

The gateway to understanding and connecting with a child is tuning into their interests, passions, and motivations. These may not always make immediate sense to us, and it can take time to understand the purpose they serve. But by following a child's lead and staying curious, we can create meaningful, connected experiences that honour who they are and how they engage with the world. This should be the starting point when discussing or documenting any child's experiences. What lights up their dark, sparks joy or adds meaning to their everyday lives?

Unique Strengths

Any support for a child must be considered in the context of their **unique** strengths. You might think about both established strengths and scaffolded strengths.
Remember compliance or meeting adult demands is not a strength.

Differences

Instead of thinking about what a child cannot do, think instead about how they might demonstrate that skill differently. There is more than one way to do things and we embrace all the various ways children express their development. For example, a child being non-speaking and using a tech device to communicate.

Traits & Characteristics

The development of neurodivergent and disabled children is often viewed through the lens of symptoms, even when what is being expressed is actually a trait of their difference. Where possible, try to reframe from symptoms to traits, especially when what you're noticing isn't causing distress or harm but reflects a natural variation in development.

Unmet Needs

Unmet needs should never be ignored or denied. They are best supported in the context of a holistic understanding. Using the holistic profile enables you to plan sensitive and informed scaffolding so that the child can reach developmentally meaningful outcomes through strength's led approaches.



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Make strengths led practice your non-negotiable...

Interests & Passions

- What lights this child up?
- What does the child return to again and again in their play?
- What topics, themes, objects, or routines do they gravitate toward?
- When do they seem most engaged, joyful, or in flow?
- Are there any emerging fascinations or deep interests we should nurture?

Unique Strengths

- What comes easily to this child?
- What are they really good at—socially, physically, cognitively, emotionally?
- How do they show problem-solving, creativity, or persistence?
- What do peers or adults naturally turn to them for?
- What do you admire most about the way they approach the world?

Traits & Characteristics

- What are some key traits or ways of being that make this child who they are?
- How do they communicate, express emotions, or relate to others?
- Are there any sensory, movement, or play characteristics we notice regularly?
- What kind of environments or routines seem to support their wellbeing?
- How would you describe their temperament or rhythm?

Differences

- What makes this child different or distinct—not as a deficit, but as part of their identity?
- Are there ways they process the world differently (e.g. sensory, social, emotional)?
- What do they do that might be misinterpreted but actually holds meaning?
- Are there cultural, linguistic, or developmental differences that shape how they engage?
- How can we celebrate and affirm these differences in our practice?

Unmet Needs

- When does this child seem dysregulated, overwhelmed, or disengaged?
- Are there patterns or contexts that seem to cause stress or difficulty?
- What might be missing in the environment, routine, or relationships?
- What needs may be going unseen because of masking, compliance, or quietness?
- How can we respond proactively and compassionately?
- How might the holistic profile inform future support?



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Humanising Language

- Our Diverse Pathways of Development adopts neurodiversity affirming language. We take a neutral approach to human differences, recognising them as part and parcel of our human experiences.
- We avoid using language that pathologises or stigmatises children. For example, we do not refer to children as disordered, instead choosing to understand their experiences through differences.
- You will notice this document reframes lots of terms that have historically led to more deficit perspectives of children with lifelong developmental differences and disabilities.
- If children are **presented** as problems, they are then **treated** as problems and the language we use about children can translate into our actions. For example, if we suggest a child needs intervention, we might then disrupt, interfere or try to correct their ways of being.
- When what we are really trying to achieve, through early support, is early attunement. We want to tune into their experiences and meet them in the space that is most developmentally meaningful.
- We also recognise that language preferences are unique, and personally positioned based on our lived experiences and beliefs.
- In the Diverse Pathways of Development, we aim to provide a language framework that aligns with neurodiversity affirming practice and disability justice, but we also know language evolves, shifts and changes.
- We would recommend being curious about language and using that which most aligns with your preferences.

Please find some of our interpretations of the language of neurodiversity, along with some neurodiversity-affirming reframes.



Humanising Language

We do not use the language of milestones, or terms like “developmentally appropriate” because these feed into normative assumptions. Instead, we ask three fundamental questions...

in your own
space and time



Instead of milestones, we ask; what are my **Developmental Insights** about this child?

Instead of developmentally appropriate, we ask:
How can I ensure I provide what is **developmentally meaningful**?

Instead of pre-defined outcomes or so-called “good levels of development”, we ask: How do I ensure a good **Quality of Life** on the way to **Affirming Outcomes** for this child?



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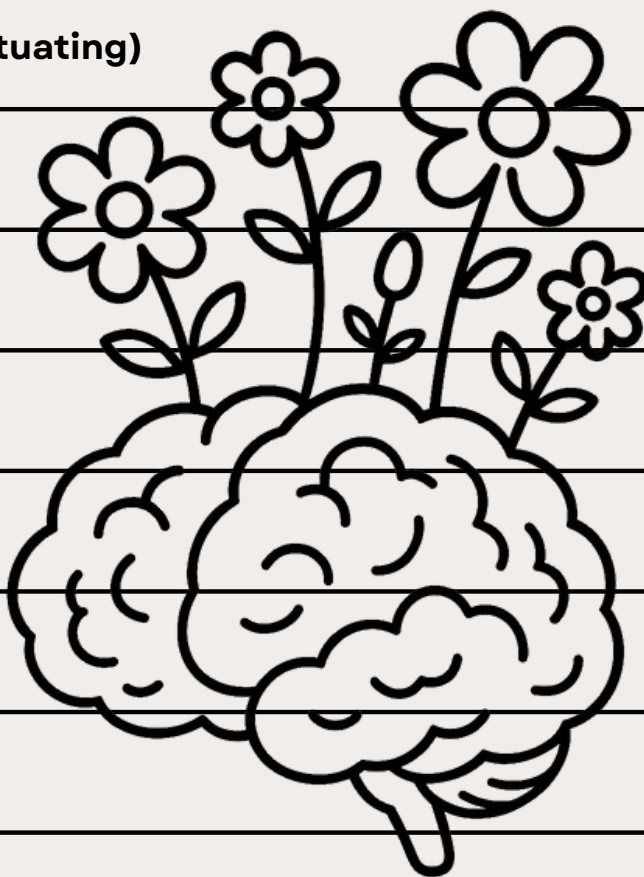
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Alternatives to SEN(D)

As a collective, we actively reject the Special Educational Needs Terminology. There are many reasons for this but ultimately, we find the term imprecise and stigmatising. You can find out more about our rejection of SEN as a term by reading our **blog here!** You can find alternative terms we use listed below:

Neurodivergent
Emerging Neurodivergent
Disabled
Diagnostic or Identity marker, for example, just say autistic over SEN
Support Needs (high, medium, low, fluctuating)
(Lifelong) Developmental differences
Developmental Variations
Diverse Access Needs
Complex differences and needs
Acquired neurodivergence
Unique ways of being
Traits, Indicators, Divergent Experiences
Unique Patterns of Development



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The problem with Early Intervention...

- Early intervention is a broad term used to describe the importance of providing timely support when there is a risk to a child's quality of life or long-term outcomes.
- This can include safeguarding concerns, the impact of adverse childhood experiences, experiences of poverty or marginalisation, or discrimination related to a protected characteristic.
- **The Diverse Pathways of Development does not reject the value of reducing risk.**
- However, early intervention is too often framed in a way that positions neurodivergence or disability as the risk itself, rather than recognising that the true risk lies in ableism, structural inequity, and environments that are incompatible with human diversity.
- This framing leads educators and professionals to feel compelled to intervene in developmental differences that fall outside narrow definitions of 'normal.'
- Early intervention then risks becoming a tool of correction and normalisation, aiming to eliminate difference rather than understand, affirm, and attune to it.

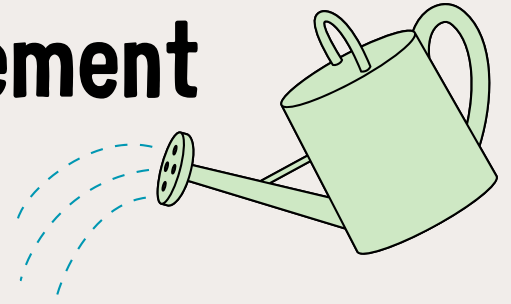


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Early Attunement



It is not about changing the child, rather it ensuring the conditions are compatible for the child to blossom and bloom.

- Early Attunement is a term we use that sits within, but is distinct from, the broader concept of early intervention. Early attunement emphasises the importance of tuning into a child's strengths, traits, differences, and needs, and responding in developmentally meaningful and respectful ways.
- Rather than aiming to “fix” or normalise, early attunement seeks to understand and support. It is grounded in the belief that development does not follow a single, linear path, and that children's ways of being in the world are deeply shaped by their sensory, cognitive, emotional, and relational experiences.
- Early attunement asks adults to slow down, observe with curiosity rather than concern, and co-regulate rather than control.
- Attunement is about shifting our lens from “What is wrong with this child?” to “What is this child showing me about who they are, and what they need to thrive?”
- Where early intervention often begins with assessment and targets for change, early attunement begins with following the child and families lead, and creating “experience sensitive” (McGreevy et al, 2024) approaches that are strength's led and needs driven.

Features of Early Attunement



Tunes into children and families through an “ experience-sensitive ” approach, defined as a humanistic, neurodiversity-affirming model of care that prioritises lived experience , autonomy , and dignity over attempts to eliminate, correct or normalise (McGreevy et al., 2023).
Intersectionality-informed practice ensures a holistic understanding of identity and experience, recognising how multiple social categories interact rather than viewing them in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, how does neurodivergence intersect with the child’s racialised identity, or gender.
A commitment is made to the child’s holistic profile of strengths, interests, traits, differences , and needs , ensuring access to sensitively scaffolded supports that build on capacities rather than focusing on deficits.
A network of allyship is built through solidarity with parents and carers, who are respected as valued partners rather than subjected to surveillance or scrutiny.
There is as much focus on the quality of life when providing supporting alongside affirming and developmentally meaningful outcomes . Children are not subjected to programmes or interventions that train them out of their inherent traits and characteristics.
Avoids one-size-fits-all approaches that do not account for developmental variations . Support is child-led and respects the diverse pathways for early childhood.
Problems are not located within the child , as if they are broken or failing to conform to neuronormative and ableist assumptions. Attunement instead recognises the internal, external, and relational conditions that shape experience.
Wellbeing, well-doing, pleasure, engagement and joy are central components of Early attunement planning.
An ecological approach to early attunement recognises that support must foster belonging. For example, if a child is non-speaking, this includes teaching peers about non-speaking communication identities.
If support programmes are delivered, they are to enrich pedagogy and practice, not to be delivered in isolation or to be focused on normalisation or correction. The evidence base of interventions is explored through an anti-ableist lens .
There are times when early intervention is relevant to reduce risks for the child, but neurodivergence or disability must never be assumed to be the risk itself. Early intervention should focus on reducing adverse experiences, and this responsibility belongs to everyone.

Part Four: Using the Guidance



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Overview

Developmental Insight

Play patterns

Play comes **naturally to all children** and contributes to **holistic development, being and becoming**. This

Developmental Insight comes first because we want to ensure that play is understood to **co-ordinate all learning and development** (Louis, 2025). It is not a luxury, an add-on or a thing to earned but something that **belongs to children** as a fundamental need and right.

Embodiment

Embodiment refers to the process of “**feeling safe enough to be fully in our body which means to think, feel, sense, move and emote without shame** (adapted from Corbyn & Aldred, as cited in Milton, 2025). Rather than have a separate Developmental Insight for Embodiment, it is a golden thread throughout all lived experiences. Each Developmental Insight explores how autistic traits link to Embodiment.

Areas of Unmet Need

The Diverse Pathways of Development does not deny the existence of unmet needs, difficulties, impairments or disabling experiences. We reject that these experiences mean the child is failing, is a problem or needs to catch up to peers who may be having different developmental experiences. We believe in **enablement, early attunement, sensitive scaffolding and strength’s led practice** to support children.

Affirming Quality of Life

Current Child Development measures **fixate** on neuronormative outcomes and peer uniformity, and have rigid development descriptions that **intentionally** marginalise children that do not conform (and then they blame children for failing to meet standardised and unambitious outcomes). The Diverse Pathways of Development does not set prescriptive outcomes, rather, we encourage developmentally meaningful outcomes with a deep exploration of the quality of life on the way to that outcome.

Developmentally Meaningful Outcomes



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Easy Read Overview



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The Easy-Read overview is designed for anyone who wants a quick introduction to the play pattern and its key insights. It includes a short description of why the play pattern matters, how to support it, possible unmet needs, and key terms. If you prefer to absorb information in other ways, you can also scan the QR code to watch a short video explainer.

Pathway Overview

Play Pattern Two: Playful Self-stimulatory repetitive actions (stimming)



Developmental Insight

Self-Stimulatory behaviour also known as "stimming" describes the repetitive movements, sounds or actions, like flapping, rocking, or humming a child might engage in. For autistic children, stimming can be regulating, expressive, and even playful, a way to explore, self-soothe, or show joy. It is a natural and meaningful part of their experience.



Why it matters...

Unfortunately, stimming can sometimes be presented as a problem or a symptom of a child's autism. While it can be a signal of stress, it is also increasingly found to be a positive aspect of the autistic experiences. For example, lots of autistic people report that stimming can be joyful, comforting, playful, soothing and even a form of interaction. A child may stim at you to indicate they want to connect or play. Or they may stim along to music. Stimming where possible should be validated and responded to positively so you can have shared experiences with a child that helps them feel connected, and understood.



How you can support...

- Look out for signals that suggest the stimming is enjoyable. For example, if a child is smiling or focused the stimming is likely to be supportive rather than disruptive to their experience.
- When a stim is interactive, such as hand flapping or vocalising, you can mirror it back to the child to connect.
- Learn about different types of stims (vocal, tactile, auditory, visual, etc.). You can scan the QR code for more information.
- Keep notes on possible meanings behind different stims. For instance, a child might squeal to show they want to play, or hand flap as a way of communicating excitement.
- Offer everyday objects that a child can safely explore for sensory joy, such as keys to jingle, combs to stroke, materials to stretch, or items that spin. These can provide satisfying "stimmy" moments.



Possible unmet needs...

- Stimming can become a sign of unmet need when it causes harm (such as headbanging or hair pulling) or when it happens in response to stress. For example, a child might rock if they need the toilet, bang their head if lights are too bright, or scream if others are too close. In these moments, the stim is a way for the child to cope with an experience that feels overwhelming.
- If the stimming is a sign of distress, consider what might be a trigger in the environment, or if there is an internal need that must be satisfied such as hunger. If the need is ongoing, seek out affirming support.



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Useful Terms

- **Movement stims** are repetitive movements that involve the body, such as rocking, hand flapping, spinning, or tapping fingers. They relate to movement and the motor system of the body.
- **Sensory stims** are behaviours that focus on stimulating or regulating the senses. These can include visual stims like watching spinning objects, auditory stims like humming or repeating sounds, tactile stims like rubbing fabrics, or proprioceptive stims like seeking deep pressure.






Scan me to find out more....



Detailed Version



We received feedback highlighting that while some people prefer an overview of the play patterns, others wanted the opportunity to explore them in more depth. Each play pattern includes a developmental insight, descriptions of embodiment, co-regulation within enabling environments, and areas of unmet need. You'll also find further reading and digital tools that you can click on to explore more.

Developmental Insights 	Embodiment 	Co-Regulation  <small>in environments that enable</small>	Areas of Unmet Need 
<p>Seeks out sensory highs, glimmers and glows (Conn, 2015 & Jelenjev, 2023)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Autistic children can often engage deeply with sensory experiences, potentially experiencing heightened sensory awareness, positive sensations and feelings (Conn, 2015).These can be described as <p>Sensory highs: Intensely pleasurable or heightened sensory experiences that bring joy, stimulation, or comfort.</p> <p>Glimmers: Sensory moments of joy or activation that spark feelings of safety, connection, or delight.</p> <p>Glow: Sustained feelings of contentment, or wellbeing that linger after a positive sensory high or glimmer(adapted from Beins, 2023).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Play can centre around sensations such as touch, sound, sight, and movement. For example, a child might repeatedly run their fingers through grains of rice or spin in circles while watching the light flicker across the room.These glimmers are often intrinsically motivating, and children may return to them time and time again, not necessarily for a particular goal, but for the feelings they evoke. <div> Further Reading Sensory Integration</div>	<p>For autistic children, sensory development can be distinctly different, and the following should be taken into account:</p> <p>Sensory integration: How the brain combines information from multiple senses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Glimmer: A child listening to music while dancing, joyfully coordinating movement with rhythm.Trigger: A child trying to follow spoken instructions in a noisy classroom, becoming overwhelmed by competing sounds. <p>Sensory processing: How the nervous system notices and responds to sensory input.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Glimmer: A child runs their hands through sand and finds it calming, helping them settle into play.Trigger: The same child feels itchy clothing labels and becomes distressed, unable to focus. <p>Sensory perception: How sensory input is consciously experienced and given meaning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Glimmer: A child notices the sparkle of sunlight on water and feels delighted, staring with fascination.Trigger: Another child perceives flickering fluorescent lights as harsh and unbearable, covering their eyes or leaving the space	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Every child has a unique sensory blueprint, so a one-size-fits-all approach rarely works. You can support children by shaping the environment with: <p>Predictability: Keep routines and transitions consistent so children know what to expect.</p> <p>Gentle novelty: Introduce small new experiences (e.g., a new song, texture, or object) without overwhelming change.</p> <p>Familiarity with variation: Maintain a familiar play area but rotate materials to add interest.</p> <p>Spotlights: Create moments for the child to engage in their sensory highs, glimmers and glows.For example, one child may enjoy a quiet corner with soft lighting and gentle fabrics, while another is drawn to a movement-rich area with spinning toys or textured mats.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Identify children's highs, glimmers and glows by noticing and affirming what brings the child comfort, engagement or pleasure. (e.g. spinning objects, light patterns, fabric textures or moving in particular ways).	<p>Sensory lows, triggers and dulls.</p> <p>Unfortunately, many autistic and other neurodivergent children can face challenging sensory experiences. These may arise from differences in sensory integration, processing, and perception, as well as from ableism, where environments and interactions are not designed to be autistic-informed or affirming. These experiences can be described as:</p> <p>Sensory lows: States of depletion, overwhelm, or reduced energy that arise when sensory needs are unmet.</p> <p>Triggers: Sensory experiences that activate stress, discomfort, or distress.</p> <p>Dulls: Lingering feelings of unease or heaviness that remain after a difficult sensory experience.</p> <p>It is important to be aware of the presence of lows, triggers and dulls so you can reduce them where possible, and sensitively support when needed. For example, if a child becomes distressed by the harsh buzz of fluorescent lighting (a trigger), or appears flat and withdrawn after a noisy group activity (a low or dull), adults can adapt the environment or offer soothing alternatives to help restore comfort and regulation.</p>

Play Patterns and Unique Developmental Insights













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As a collective, we discussed at length our belief that child development should not be prescriptive or presented as a set of definitive ways that children develop. As you explore the play patterns, you may find that you have your own insights and interpretations. We've included space for you to record these, and you'll also find examples of play patterns throughout. We're keen to continue gathering further examples from practice to add to our growing collection.

Developmental Insights 	Embodiment 	Co-Regulation  in environments that enable	Areas of Unmet Need 
<p>You may come across Monotropism described as a play pattern and see a natural fit with early childhood education, where pedagogy is often child-led, play-based, and interest-driven. In this way, Monotropism can be highly compatible when approached with care and intentionality. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the early childhood experience can feel intense for some children, particularly when environments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> place competing demands and expectations, are sensorially busy, carry high social demands such as playing, sharing, taking turns, and welcoming others into play, or emphasise school readiness in ways that increase pressure. <p>As a setting, consider in what ways are children supported to lean into their monotropic ways of being including activating flow states, having time to immerse themselves and provides with timely transitions.</p> <p> Listen to me Declarative Language Podcast</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For example, a child may ignore the discomfort in their body in order to follow the rules and transitions at nursery despite their body needing time to become immersed in fewer tasks. Alternatively, without support, they may struggle to recognise when their flow state leads to "interoceptive disconnect" such as meeting basic needs i.e. drinking, eating or going to the toilet. Utilising an interoceptive curriculum in your setting is key to ensuring that support needs related to monotropism are adequately addressed. <p>Unique Developmental Insights </p>	<p> Watch me Monotropic-aware childminder</p> <p> Further Reading Tendrill Theory</p> <p>Play Pattern Two autistic children with similar sensory preferences, who are non- or minimally speaking, love spending time together in the sensory space. There is a bubble lamp with little fish inside, and together they laugh, clap, and watch the fish swimming. They delight in this shared experience and can sit together for long periods, completely transfixed.</p> 	<p>Monotropic shifting and splitting (Adkin, 2022)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Monotropic split</i> refers to when a child is expected to divide attention between two or more tasks or inputs, but cannot fully attend to either. It creates a sense of discomfort or cognitive overload because their attention is naturally tuned to focus intensely in one direction. This can lead to withdrawal, frustration, or seemingly ignoring directions, not from disinterest, but from a mismatch between attention demands and processing capacity. For example; Group play or adult-directed activities that involve multiple layers of attention (e.g., following a rule while monitoring others' actions) may feel overwhelming. <p>Rewards and sanctions Access to play interests that bring joy, flow states and wellbeing should not be used as a reward or sanction. For example, taking away opportunities to play with interests as a form of discipline.</p> <p> Further Reading Supporting Monotropic Transitions</p>

Intersectionality Insights



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Exploring neurodivergence and disability cannot be separated from other identity markers. For example, when thinking about autistic play patterns, we must also consider how these intersect with race, gender, and class. Understanding the multi-layered perceptions we hold about child development helps us to actively stand against all forms of discrimination, not just ableism and neuronormativity.

Race and Neurodivergence

- Merleau-Ponty (2010) argued that we do not simply “have” bodies, but we are our bodies meaning we have to be sensitive to how we judge children’s bodies.
- Children’s sensory experiences, what they see, hear, touch, smell, taste, are embedded in social contexts.
- Children learn from the environment which bodies are considered “normal,” “safe,” “beautiful,” or “different.”
- This means racialisation is not only cognitive (what is said or taught explicitly) but also sensory and embodied (tone of voice, gaze, proximity, who is touched and who is avoided).

MY HAIR BELONGS TO ME, DON'T TOUCH



Intersectionality Insights

- **Recognise embodied representation:** ensure books, dolls, displays, and resources reflect diverse skin tones, languages, and cultures so children can feel sensory “glows” of recognition.
- **Pronounce names with care:** practice saying children’s names correctly; hearing one’s name respected creates an embodied “glimmer” of belonging.
- **Invite choice and agency:** Enable children to decide how they share cultural practices (songs, foods, stories) so affirmation feels safe and joyful.
- **Model embodied respect:** use warm tone, safe touch, and attuned proximity to communicate acceptance of racial difference in non-verbal ways.
- **Do not touch without consent:** avoid uninvited touching of hair, clothing, or cultural artefacts, which can feel invasive and racialised.
- **Avoid exclusion by omission:** regularly check who is missing from the sensory environment (e.g., skin-tone paints, role-play resources).
- **Watch body language:** notice when a child withdraws, stiffens, or becomes quiet. These may be embodied signals of racialised discomfort.

Practical Guidance



Each play pattern comes with two post-its. The first is an Affirming Practice Check-in, which offers provocative questions to help you reflect on how you are developing anti-ableist practice. The second is Put it into Practice, which provides practical ideas you can try out straight away.

Affirming Practice Check-In

Toys, objects and items can hold deep personal meaning to children in and out of our early childhood settings. Children are not just playing with toys but developing connections and understandings. Consider:

- Do I ever dismiss a child's collection as strange, obsessive, or inappropriate rather than recognising it as meaningful and joyful?
- Am I tempted to limit or stop collections because they do not align with adult ideas of tidy play or typical interests?
- How do I respond when a child is drawn to unusual or non-conventional items. Do I pathologise their choices or see the value in their curiosity?
- How do I teach all children about this play pattern to cultivate understanding?

Put it into Practice

When a child views their collection as something that belongs to them or needs to be preserved, it is important to manage social misunderstanding:

- Provide opportunities to distinguish between interactive (to be played with) and non-interactive (preserved) collections. For example, a child might do a show-and-tell and if there is an interest from peers, it might be about offering duplicates. You might say "This is June's rock collection, but we can also set up a rock basket in the space too".
- Support parallel play so that children can play alongside each other whilst respecting each others preferences.
- Acknowledge the importance of ownership, and that it is okay to keep a collection in-tact.



Digital Tools

We are committed not only to diversifying understandings of child development, but also to providing educators, parents, carers, and specialists with the tools to bring neurodiversity-affirming practice to life. Alongside a range of resources available at www.diversepathways.org, we've developed a dedicated digital resource pack for Play Patterns.



Autistic Play Profile

Primary Play Patterns
<ul style="list-style-type: none">What do you notice a child returns to again and again in play?What play types seem to support their regulation, focus, or joy?Do they lead or follow in play—and how do they express this?
Play Hibernations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">When does the child withdraw or resist engagement?What might the child be protecting (e.g. energy, sensory safety, autonomy)?Are there missed signals that the child is overwhelmed or misunderstood?
Play Scaffolding
<ul style="list-style-type: none">How might you support, not steer, their play pattern?What adjustments could help preserve their autonomy while inviting interaction?Is the environment flexible enough to allow their play style to unfold?

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