

Language Reframes

Milestones

Milestones rely on fixed ages, stages and linear expectations that presume all children develop in the same way and at a comparative pace. While often intended as helpful guidance, milestone language can inadvertently position difference as delay and create narrow judgments about what children “should” be doing. This approach tends to emphasise comparison, productivity and competition over understanding. This reinforces neuronormative narratives that overlook diverse sensory profiles, communication identities, play patterns and the many ways children learn, relate and express themselves. Milestones can become a measure of conformity rather than a lens for truly seeing the child in front of us.

Developmental Insights

Developmental Insights shift the focus from age-based checklists to a richer, more nuanced understanding of each child’s unique developmental pathway. Instead of asking whether a child matches a predetermined sequence, Developmental Insights are about sense-making and respecting the diverse interpretations of development.

Developmental Insights honour neurodivergent and disabled children’s lived experiences, recognising nonlinear growth. This reframe supports educators, families and practitioners to respond with attunement, flexibility and curiosity which create environments that nurture autonomy rather than compliance.



Full Guidance available at www.diversepathways.org

Language Reframes

Milestones	Developmental Insights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive • Fixed ages and stages • Linear pathway assumptions • Universal expectations of all children • “On track / behind” language • Normative checklists that position divergence as delay • Prioritises comparison over understanding • Centres observable outputs rather than lived developmental processes <p>Why This Framing Falls Short</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not account for divergent developmental pathways including play, regulation, communication, embodiment and social diversity. • Implies that difference equals deficit • Ignores that development is nonlinear and transient • Contributes to ableist and neuronormative interpretations of behaviour • Creates pressure for “catch up” rather than recognising authentic pathways • Misses the meaning, purpose and function behind children’s play, regulation, behaviour and communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise diverse pathways of growth, learning and expression • Shift from “age-based expectations” to “experience-sensitive” understandings • Focus on underlying energy states, rhythms and regulation processes • Honour neurodivergent communication, play and relational styles • Explore functions, motivations and sensory drivers rather than compliance • Emphasise strengths, patterns, preferences and conditions for thriving • Use insights to shape attuned, low-demand, flexible environments • Understand behaviours as clues, not checkpoints • Look for patterns over time, not performance in the moment • Prioritise co-regulation, rest, autonomy and relational safety • Centre children’s autonomy, authenticity and access to support • Move from “What should they be doing?” to “What is meaningful to this child in this moment?”



Full Guidance available at www.diversepathways.org

Lineage Statement and References

Lineage and Reference Influences

This work draws on and is deeply indebted to a lineage of thinkers, practitioners, and pioneers who continue to reshape contemporary understandings of child development, neurodiversity, and inclusion.

- **Tricia Hersey** – founder of The Nap Ministry and author of *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (2022), reframing rest as a portal to liberation.
- **Sandra Dalton-Smith** – physician and author of *Sacred Rest: Recover Your Life, Renew Your Energy, Restore Your Sanity* (2017), articulating seven distinct types of rest.
- **Dr Amy Laurent and Dr Jacquelyn Fede** – co-founders of Autism Level Up, whose frameworks reimagine energy regulation, engagement, and everyday supports as accessible, affirming, and practical.
- **Sonny Jane Wise** – activist and author of *We're All Neurodiverse* (2022), whose work amplifies neurodiversity as identity, culture, and lived experience.
- **Warda Farah** – speech and language therapist, educator, and writer centring anti-racist, anti-ableist, and neurodiversity-affirming approaches to communication and education.
- **Dr Abi Miranda** – educational psychologist and researcher advancing inclusive, relational, and strengths-based practices in early childhood settings through an anti-racist lens.
- **Hailey R. Love** – researcher and advocate whose scholarship interrogates deficit-framed models of disability and calls for justice-oriented early childhood practice.
- **Liz Pemberton (The Black Nursery Manager)** – anti-racist trainer, consultant, and speaker amplifying equity, justice, and critical reflection in the early years sector.
- **Helen Edgar (Autistic Realms)** – writer, educator, and advocate whose reflections on autistic lived experience, relational safety, and sensory authenticity continue to inform more humane, neurodivergent-led understandings of development.
- **Ryan Boren (Stimpunks Foundation)** – activist, writer, and systems thinker whose work on human-centred design, access intimacy, and neurodiversity justice challenges exclusionary structures and offers radically affirmative alternatives.

This lineage is partial and ever-evolving; I remain indebted to the wider communities of scholars, practitioners, activists, families, and children themselves whose insights, challenges, and lived experiences continue to shape and expand this work.

References

- Fisher, E., MacLennan, K., Mullally, S., & Rodgers, J. (2025). Neuro-Normative Epistemic Injustice – Consequences for the UK Education Crisis and School Anxiety. *Neurodiversity*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330251353565> (Original work published 2025)
- Love, H.R. and Beneke, M.R., 2021. Pursuing justice-driven inclusive education research: Disability critical race theory (DisCrit) in early childhood. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 41(1), pp.31-44.
- Edwards, S., Blaise, M. and Hammer, M., 2009. Beyond developmentalism? Early childhood teachers' understandings of multiage grouping in early childhood education and care. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 34(4), pp.55-63.
- Bloem M and Evans K 2024 'What to make of developmental milestones' *The Informed SLP*, 8 August. Available at: <https://www.theinformedslp.com/review/what-to-make-of-developmental-milestones> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).

Full Guidance available at www.diversepathways.org

