

NEURODIVERSITY EXPLAINED

A Brief History

The idea that brains vary naturally, the same way height or eye color varies, is old. The word for it is not. "Neurodiversity" first appeared in print in 1998, coined in overlapping conversations among autistic self-advocates on early internet mailing lists, journalist Harvey Blume, and Australian sociologist Judy Singer, whose university thesis that same year documented the emergence of a new disability and social movement led by autistic people themselves.

The concept built on groundwork laid five years earlier by autistic self-advocate Jim Sinclair, whose landmark 1993 essay "Don't Mourn for Us" argued that autism couldn't be separated from a person's identity, and that parents grieving an autism diagnosis were, in effect, grieving a child who was very much still there. That reframing, from something to be cured to something to be understood, became the philosophical backbone of the entire neurodiversity movement.

For its first decade, neurodiversity was largely a grassroots idea, circulating mainly within the autistic community. That changed in 2013, when journalist Steve Silberman brought the concept to a mainstream audience in a widely read *Wired* piece, followed by his bestselling book *NeuroTribes*. Since then, neurodiversity has expanded well beyond autism to include ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, Tourette syndrome, and other forms of neurological variation, and has moved from the margins into classrooms, workplaces, and public policy conversations.

What Neurodiversity Is

Neurodiversity is the idea that neurological differences, in how people think, learn, communicate, and process the world, are a natural and valuable part of human variation, not a list of deficits to be fixed. It's not a diagnosis; it's a framework. Under that framework, conditions like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia are understood as different operating systems for the brain, not broken versions of one "correct" system.

This is a significant shift from the older medical model, which viewed these differences purely as disorders to be treated or minimized. The neurodiversity framework draws instead from the social model of disability: it recognizes that many of the real challenges neurodivergent people face come from a mismatch between their brain and an environment (a classroom, a workplace, a set of social expectations) built around one narrow definition of "normal."

Being neurodivergent doesn't mean a person has no real challenges or doesn't need support. It means the support is aimed at building a better fit between the person and their environment, rather than trying to force the person to fit an environment that wasn't built with them in mind.

Understanding the Scope

- An estimated 15 to 20% of the world's population is neurodivergent, roughly 1 in 5 people, according to a widely cited 2020 review published in the *British Medical Bulletin*.
- That range translates to somewhere between 1.2 and 1.6 billion people worldwide, though the true number is almost certainly higher, since dyslexia and adult ADHD in particular remain significantly underdiagnosed.
- Neurodivergent conditions commonly grouped under this umbrella include ADHD, autism, dyslexia, developmental coordination disorder (dyspraxia), dyscalculia, and Tourette syndrome, among others.
- In the workplace, an estimated 68% of neurodivergent employees say they don't know what accommodations they're entitled to, even though the majority of requested accommodations are approved when they're actually made.
- Roughly half of neurodivergent adults are believed to be unaware of their own neurodivergence, having never been formally identified or diagnosed.
- In classrooms, an estimated 15 to 20% of students are neurodivergent, meaning in a class of 30, five or six students are likely processing instruction differently from how it was designed to be delivered.

Strategies for Teachers

- Design for variation from the start rather than retrofitting accommodations after a student struggles. Multiple ways to access content and multiple ways to show understanding benefit every student, not only neurodivergent ones.
- Separate compliance from learning. A student who needs to move, fidget, or take breaks to focus is still learning; stillness was never actually the goal.
- Use strengths-based language, even in official documentation. "Struggles with transitions" and "needs more time to shift between tasks" describe the same reality very differently.
- Assume there are neurodivergent students in every class, whether identified or not, and build flexibility into your default approach rather than only your accommodated one.
- Partner with families rather than only informing them. Parents and grandparents often have strategies that already work at home and are worth bringing into the classroom.

Strategies for Parents

- Let go of the comparison to a "typical" timeline. Your child's brain isn't behind or broken; it's wired differently, and it will reach milestones in its own way and its own time.
- Learn your child's specific profile of strengths and challenges, rather than relying only on a diagnostic label. Two children with the same diagnosis can look completely different.
- Model self-advocacy language early. "My brain works differently, and here's what helps me" is a phrase worth teaching a child long before they need to use it on their own.
- Seek out other neurodivergent adults and families when you can. Community reduces isolation for you and gives your child real models of neurodivergent adults living full, successful lives.
- Hold both truths at once: your child may need real support, and your child is not lesser for needing it.

Strategies for Grandparents

- Understand that neurodiversity is a genuinely new framework, not just new terminology for old ideas. It's worth learning, even if it wasn't part of how you or your own children were raised or taught.
- Trust that a diagnosis, or a different way of doing things, isn't a reflection on your child's parenting or on how your grandchild was raised.
- Ask questions rather than relying on assumptions from decades ago. Understanding of autism, ADHD, and learning differences has changed enormously, even in the last ten years.
- Offer your grandchild consistency and unconditional warmth. Neurodivergent kids often navigate a world that asks them to change; your role doesn't have to be about changing them at all.
- Recognize your own value. Grandparents who take the time to understand and adapt often become a neurodivergent grandchild's most treasured, least complicated relationship.