

# Neurodiversity-Affirming Autism Evaluation

DNEA Resource Guide  
for Professionals

## Key terms to know

**Neurodiversity** refers to natural differences in the brain that can lead people to experience and interact with the world in a variety of ways.

**Neurotypical** people generally behave and process information in ways that are considered standard or typical.

**Neurodiversity-affirming** means understanding, valuing, and celebrating the differences associated with neurodiversity.

**Masking** refers to hiding autistic traits to appear more neurotypical in order to benefit others.

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## Why is neurodiversity-affirming evaluation important?

The **medical model** for assessing autism focuses on autism as a disorder that needs to be diagnosed and treated.

A **social model** of assessing autism views neurodiversity as a natural difference in how one's brain works and focuses on strength-based approaches and accommodations. Many traditional autism evaluation practices were developed based on the medical model of autism and focus on the individual's challenges.

An autism evaluation typically includes a discussion about challenges faced by the person and their family. This guide will provide professionals with strategies to discuss these issues in a more sensitive, non-judgmental fashion.

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## What strategies can I use to be neurodiversity-affirming during the evaluation process?

### Strategies to incorporate inclusive practices

Ask what accommodations may be needed. Some individuals might like the lights dimmed, a quiet room, or sensory toys.

Increase predictability about the evaluation activities. Consider providing information about the session in advance.

Discourage masking, or any actions that encourage an individual to hide their autistic traits.

Do not assume that caregivers are neurotypical.

Frame evaluation questions in a nonjudgmental and neutral manner.

## Neurodiversity-affirming books

*Sincerely, Your Autistic Child: What People on the Autism Spectrum Wish Their Parents Knew About Growing Up, Acceptance, and Identity* by Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network

*We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation* by Eric Garcia

*The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism* by Naoki Higashida

*Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* by Steve Silberman

*Welcome to the Autistic Community* by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network

*Start Here: a guide for parents of autistic kids* by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network

*Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Face of Neurodiversity* by Devon Price

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Additional resource guides and a full list of references at <https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/>.

Slavin, L., Vertucci, K., Anuma, A., Freedman, B., Mallory, S., Fletcher, A., & DNEA CDS Team. (2023). *DNEA resource guide for professionals: Neurodiversity-affirming autism evaluation*. Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism.

# Neurodiversity-Affirming Autism Evaluation

## Use a strengths-based approach

Label autistic strengths during the evaluation	Recognize the expertise & experiences of the person being assessed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize how autistic characteristics are personal strengths                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I love how she organizes her toys so precisely. It really shows how detail oriented she is!”</li> <li>“Your passion for marine animals is really amazing.”</li> <li>“Their knowledge of numbers and letters is so impressive.”</li> <li>“You are so perceptive of the environment around you.”</li> <li>“He is incredibly honest and true to himself.”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask them about their own strengths and support needs</li> <li>Ask them whether they feel pressured to mask, and if so, what it looks and feels like.</li> <li>Have them fill out self-rating scales, if appropriate for their age and developmental level (e.g., Adult Autism Spectrum Quotient for ages 16+).</li> <li>Acknowledge that the individual may feel discomfort with some assessment tasks and modify or end the tasks if they are causing distress.</li> </ul>
Give feedback in an honest and affirming way	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain the characteristics of autism that the individual has shared.</li> <li>Acknowledge that the world is not made for autistic people, which causes barriers and stressors.</li> <li>Focus on strengths in addition to areas of support.</li> <li>Hold space for any emotions that may arise.</li> <li>Encourage open discussions with the individual about their diagnosis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasize the diagnosis as a helpful thing. It can increase access to supports, open doors to a new community, and help the individual, their family, and those working with them to better understand and support them.</li> <li>Discuss the impact of the diagnosis in light of other identities the individual or family holds, such as race, ethnicity, and religion.</li> </ul>

## Research

Fung, L. K. & Doyle, N. (2021). *Neurodiversity. The new diversity. In Neurodiversity: From phenomenology to neurobiology and enhancing technologies.* American Psychiatric Association Publishing.

Hartman, D., O’Donnell-Killen, T., Doyle, J. K., Kavanagh, M., Day, A., & Azevedo, J. (2023). *The adult autism assessment handbook: Neurodiversity-affirming approach.* Jessica Kingsley Publishing.

Natri, H. M., Rose, J., & Autistics Unmasked Research Team. (2022). *Am I autistic? Your guide to self-evaluation and navigating the clinical assessment process.* Autistics Unmasked.



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