



# Neurodiversity-Affirming Autism Interventions

## What does it mean to be neurodiversity-affirming?

To be neurodiversity-affirming means that professionals embrace and respect the unique strengths and perspectives of neurodivergent individuals while avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. This resource guide provides strategies for professionals who wish to deliver neurodiversity-affirming interventions.

## How to provide neurodiversity-affirming services:

 Don't ...	 Be neurodiversity-affirming and ...
Encourage masking by encouraging and teaching an autistic person to act less autistic and behave or communicate in a "neurotypical" way.	Promote authenticity and embrace neurodiversity. Support people in expressing themselves genuinely without pressure to conform to neurotypical behaviors or communication styles. Focus efforts on fostering self-acceptance and celebrating their unique perspectives and ways of being.
Stop stimming or body movements.	Encourage an autistic person to use self-stimulatory behaviors, also known as "stimming," to express themselves and regulate.
Discourage autistic ways of playing, including activities like lining up toys or repeated play scripts.	Embrace autistic ways of playing. Support and validate behaviors like lining up toys and engaging in repeated play scripts.
Discourage autistic ways of connecting, including "information dumping" (when a person talks a lot about one topic).	Recognize the value of individuals with autism connecting with others, including allowing them to share information in their preferred manner without discouragement or criticism.
Overly rely on hand-over-hand prompting or forced compliance, especially during times of emotional distress.	Respect a person's emotional state and promote self-regulation and independence rather than enforcing compliance through physical manipulation or pressure.
Use food as rewards.	Use alternative forms of motivation or reinforcement such as verbal praise, access to preferred activities, or tangible rewards unrelated to food. This approach aims to foster healthy relationships with food and encourages behaviors for reasons other than obtaining access to basic sustenance. One major concern related to food reinforcers is that children should never have to "work" for food, clothing, or shelter, which are the basics needed to live.
Recommend the same therapies for every autistic person.	Focus the goal of treatment on ensuring an autistic person is receiving individualized supports so they may live their best life. Interventions and therapies should focus on identifying the specific services that person need. This will be different for each person with autism.

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

Slavin, L., Bernabe, E., Freedman, B., Mallory, S., Fletcher, A., & DNEA CDS Team. (2024). *DNEA resource guide for professionals: Neurodiversity-affirming autism interventions*. Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism.



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DNEA Resource Guide  
for Professionals

## Strategies to provide more neurodiversity-affirming services:

### Accommodate the environment

- Increase structure and predictability through use of visual supports and schedules.
- Reduce the need for masking by encouraging a person to communicate in their preferred way.
- Make the environment sensory friendly by offering fidget tools, sensory rooms, and comfortable clothes.

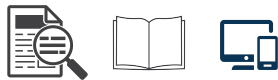
### Focus on self-advocacy skills

- Teach ways to communicate wants, needs, preferences, and boundaries.
- Identify peers and adults who are allies.
- Consider when, where, and how to self-disclose about an autism diagnosis.

### Help with self-understanding

- Talk with an autistic person about autism in a positive way.
- Help an autistic individual identify their triggers so they may use coping skills that feel good to them and build upon their autistic strengths.
- Recommend neurodiversity-affirming media on autism.
- Explore areas of strength and support needs associated with autism.

## Resources



Allen, L.L., Mellon, L.S., Syed, N., Johnson, J. F., & Bernal A. J. (2024). Neurodiversity-affirming applied behavior analysis. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-024-00918-0>

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Sandbank, M., Pustejovsky, J. E., Bottema-Beutel, K., Caldwell, N., Feldman, J. I., Crowley LaPoint, S., & Woynaroski, T. (2024). Determining associations between intervention amount and outcomes for young autistic children. *Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics*, 178(8). <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2024.1832>

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