



Quick-Start Guide:

Differences & Diagnoses – Understanding to Build Self-Esteem

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General Information

Many parents/carers worry that having a child receive a diagnosis that states they have a neurodevelopmental difference will mean the child will be damaged by that information, that they will like themselves less, or people will look at or treat them differently. Many also aren't sure exactly how to raise the topic or to discuss it in positive ways. For these and other reasons, many choose to not share that information with their children.

The reality, though, is that a child who is innately different inside and out already knows they are different, as do the people around them. And when we don't give them the accurate words for describing or understanding those differences, they will make up their own. They will receive many 'labels,' from themselves and from others, about what those differences mean – and none of them are very nice or validating.

The best means of ensuring a child has positive self-esteem and high self-worth is to offer them every possible opportunity to know, understand, and love their natural and authentic self. It may be difficult to have those conversations, especially at first, but the potential harm that exists in not telling them is significant.

Knowledge is powerful; knowing that you are a perfectly normal neurodivergent person, not a broken neurotypical person, is priceless knowledge when it comes to understanding yourself and your place in the world. It allows you to self-advocate, to set realistic expectations for yourself, to make plans and achieve success, and live a meaningful life. All neurodivergent children deserve that opportunity to be their fullest, truest selves.



**Know what's harder than
telling a child they're Autistic?**

**NOT knowing you're
Autistic.**

Aut in Sight ~ Aut in Mind

Differences & Diagnoses

The Basics

Neurodivergent people have existed through all of time, although different words have been used to discuss it. Neurodivergence is not an illness, or something to be ashamed of; it's nothing that needs to be hidden or whispered about. Being neurodivergent means experiencing innate differences in processing, movement, expression, sensory need, and social connection. These differences are not deficits.

Neurodivergent people always know that they are different. They can feel it, as can everyone who knows them, even if they don't have the words to describe why. In the absence of having accurate words for explaining the differences they feel, people will use other ones.

Some of the nicer words people use are:

Quirky	Sensitive	Unique
Odd	Perfectionist	Deep-thinker
Old soul	Eccentric	Unusual

“

Neurodiversity is a biological fact. It's not a perspective, an approach, a belief, or a political position.

ROBERT JASON GRANT,
ASSESSING AND TREATING SUICIDAL THINKING
AND BEHAVIORS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Most of the time, though, the words that get used are harmful, critical, and demeaning:

Lazy
Difficult
Distracting

Whiny
Challenging
Selfish

Obstinate
Disruptive
Rude

From a very young age, unidentified neurodivergent children hear themselves described in these ways, explicitly and implicitly, every day. ADHD children, for example, are known to receive 20,000 more negative messages by age 12 than their non-ADHD peers. Due to this negative messaging, including hearing repeatedly that they need to 'try harder' and to 'behave better,' ND children learn to feel shame for their natural way of being. They break themselves trying to meet NT expectations — an outcome that is impossible for them to achieve — and are told it isn't good enough.

The consequence, invariably, is poor mental wellbeing: significant anxiety, chronic depression, emotional isolation, distress from being constantly misunderstood & having their expressed needs minimised, and suicidal ideation are tragically common, even in children younger than 8 years old. As stated by Rebekah Byrd and Yumiko Ogawa, “minoritized children may consolidate the internalized injustice into their identity, leading to a higher risk of suicidality” (Assessing and Treating Suicidal Thinking and Behaviors in Children and Adolescents, 2024).

We can mitigate these negative outcomes by providing those young people, as soon as possible, an affirming framework for understanding their differences. In doing so, we empower them to **celebrate their strengths** and **value their authentic selves**.

In more detail...

Current statistics indicate that approximately 20% of the world population is neurodivergent, with some estimates going as high as 30%. In reality, the number is

likely much higher, but we cannot speak with confidence on that as statistics are not consistently gathered on a global scale. We do know that, due to the recent improvements in understanding and awareness of neurodivergence, there has been an increased rate of self-identification and clinical diagnosis. That trend is likely to continue as understanding further develops and lived experience takes greater priority in the clinical process.

Differences are good

Neurodivergent people can only benefit from knowing the needs and strengths of their own brain and body. That doesn't mean it isn't complicated to find yourself needing something different to the "usual" pathway. It can be particularly scary for parents/carers to realise that their ND child/young person will need a different approach; they can feel enormous pressure to try to make the usual pathway work, believing that it is critical to their child's happiness.

Although societal structures value conformity, the reality is that we can't all be exactly the same and differences are OK. More than that, differences are good. How would scientific advancements be made, art created, music written, stories invented, if everyone thought and behaved in exactly the same way? Without differing experiences and perspectives, the world would be a monotonous, boring place.

There is more than one road to every child's happy future. Some may be more direct, others may take the scenic route, but none of them require strict adherence to a single method of doing anything. The best way to prepare a neurodivergent young person for their future is to ensure they know that **difference is good**, that their differences make them who they are and will get them where they want to go.

Benefits	Downsides
Finding community and companionship	
Setting realistic expectations for self	
Preventing poor mental health	
Building positive self-esteem	
Improved ability to self-advocate	
Empowered to accept full self	
Knowing how to find the right path for them	

Telling a child of a formal diagnosis

Most people tend to worry that telling a child about a formal diagnosis of neurodevelopmental difference will be met negatively and dramatically. But the child, whatever age they are, already knows that they are different. They just haven't had the relevant terminology to describe what they've always felt.

Although a formal diagnosis is usually provided in writing, it will always be written in line with the Medical Model (it is, after all, the language of clinicians). The child is not likely to benefit from seeing their needs and strengths captured in pathologising and deficit-focused framing. They don't need to see themselves described as deficient or disordered; their need is to know what the formal diagnosis means to them practically,

and what they should think about it — is it good, bad, neither? The focus should be on using neuro-affirmative language to discuss the child’s specific personal experience, to bring them a deeper understanding of themselves and to ensure they believe differences are natural and good.

The depth of content and wording should, of course, be adapted based on the child’s age, but it is **never too early to discuss neurodiversity** with a ND child, nor to encourage them to embrace and value their own differences. In all likelihood, the conversation will be an on-going one — as they grow and develop, they will have different questions and things to share. The individual child is your one true guide in what to share, and how and when to share it.

Some key considerations in preparing:

- ❖ Age and maturity of the child
- ❖ Competency of the child
- ❖ The way the child learns best (pictures; written words; recordings, etc.)
- ❖ The environment in which the child will be
- ❖ Their past experience with neurodivergence
- ❖ Their current understanding of neurodivergence
- ❖ Related past traumatic experiences or current situations

DO	DON'T
Pick a time when the child is calm & receptive	Try to discuss differences/diagnoses at the end of the day or right after stressful events
Choose an environment that is a safe one for the child	Rely on neurotypical expectations for what is ‘right’ for the environment, i.e., no YouTube, no pets nearby, perfectly quiet, sitting still, etc.
Ensure every adult is aligned with an affirming & strengths-focused approach	Describe neurodivergent trait as deficits
Position yourself beside the child	Position yourself opposite from the child, as it can feel confrontational and invasive
Ensure the conversation leader has an adaptive manner & encourages curiosity	Use ableist language, i.e., discuss neurodivergence as a problem to be fixed
Prepare answers to common questions and options for where they can find more	Expect the child to immediately understand or accept the information being shared
Involve the child’s deep interests and individual experience as much as possible	Speak in generalities or hypotheticals
Share your own similarities with their experiences & confirm they’re not alone	Speak as if the child’s experiences are ‘wrong’ or solitary
Be prepared for long breaks or pauses in the conversation while they process info	Be concerned/upset if breaks or repetition are needed for the child to feel settled
Assure them that the conversation space for this topic is always open & be prepared to revisit it frequently	Expect that everything will be covered in one conversation
See, hear, and believe whatever they describe as their experience and need	Prioritise your wants over their needs

Frameworks for discussion

Some suggested frameworks for how to discuss differences in affirming ways:

- ❖ Name physical similarities and differences of their to others they know (family members, friends, etc)

- ❖ Identify differences that require supports/aids (i.e. hearing aids, glasses, crutches, audio books, etc.)
- ❖ Talk about differences and similarities no one can see — things like nationality, religion, if you were adopted, how much someone likes cooking, etc.
- ❖ Emphasise that one person's experience is not the only experience on this planet, so you have lots to learn from them about what their experience includes
- ❖ All of these things together can be discussed in relation to the value and importance of diversity in life, *including disability*; to demonstrate that differences don't determine who is worthwhile vs. who is not; and to affirm that it is OK to need, seek, and accept support.

Aim to Emphasise
Different ≠ Worse

Personalising the discussion to the child as much as possible will help them to better engage with the topic and encourage them to think it through deeply and fully. You can do this with anything that is of interest.

Interest-based 'Difference' examples			
Dinosaurs	Types	Advantages	Challenges
Favourite character	Similarities to other favourite characters	Strengths	Times they should have asked for help
	Differences to other favourite characters	Challenges	Times they could have offered help
Technology	Same devices used differently	Game consoles	Operating systems
	Smart phones vs. old phones	Variety of Apps	Variety of game types
Lego	Block diversity (all are useful)	Variety of sets	Quantity of accessories
	Free build vs. Directions	Colours	Variety of benefits
Make-up	Varieties & purposes	Palettes	Styles
Cooking	Favourite recipe vs. other recipes for same dish	World cuisine	Healthy vs. tasty
Music	Genres	Artists	Loudness

Recommended Reading

The ND hub Resources capture accessible, positive, neuro-affirming reading to support you and your child in understanding their specific needs.

A few to highlight here are:

[How to Raise Happy Neurofabulous Children: A Parents' Guide](#) by Katy Elphinstone

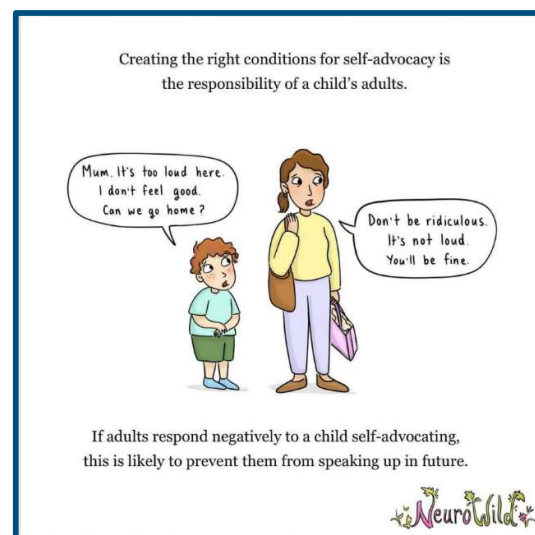
[A Different Kind of Parenting](#) by Eliza Fricker

The Autism Discussion Page books by Bill Nason

NeuroWild's resources at

<https://www.neurowild.com.au/>

[ADY and Me](#) by Rich and Rox Pink (ADHD Love)



Sources & Resources:

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Collier, Kate. Milliken Flooring, “10 Neurodiversity at Work Statistics that Might Surprise You,” 19 Sept 2024. <https://europeblog.milliken.com/10-neurodiversity-at-work-statistics-that-might-surprise-you?> From their Whitepaper titled: “Designing a Neuro-Inclusive Workplace.” <https://floorseurope.milliken.com/en-gb/download-our-whitepaper-designing-a-neuro-inclusive-workplace>

Grant, Robert Jason. Assessing and Treating Suicidal Thinking and Behaviors in Children and Adolescents, Chapter on Autistic and Neurodivergent Children and Adolescents, (1st Ed, 2024).

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003358565-17/autistic-neurodivergent-children-adolescents-robert-jason-grant?context=ubx>

Kennedy Krieger, <https://www.kennedykrieger.org/stories/news-and-updates/research-news-releases/new-research-shows-alarming-number-suicidal-thoughts-among-young-children-autism-spectrum-disorder>

NeuroWild, <https://www.neurowild.com.au/>

- Self-advocacy support, <https://www.neurowild.com.au/product-page/self-advocacy-support>
- I might need, <https://www.neurowild.com.au/product-page/i-might-need-self-advocacy-poster-a4-a3>