

# SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAM

## Neuro-affirming Practice

### A Brief Guide



#### What is Neuro-affirming Practice?

Neuro-affirming practice recognises and respects the natural variations in how individuals think, learn, and interact with the world. It values diversity in neurological profiles—such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or sensory processing differences—by celebrating strengths rather than emphasising on deficits. Rooted in the Social Model of Disability, it shifts the focus from "fixing" a child to adapting environments and reducing barriers that hinder participation, fostering inclusion and belonging. By emphasising compassion, flexibility, and collaboration, neuro-affirming practices build confidence, reduce anxiety, and empower children to thrive as they are. This approach benefits not only neuro-diverse children, but also their peers and educators, creating a community of mutual respect, understanding, and learning about difference, ensuring all children feel seen, valued, and supported in their learning journey.

#### Why is it Important to Support Children in a Neuro-affirming Way?

Supporting children in a neuro-affirming way is about understanding and embracing their unique neurological profiles and adapting environments to meet their needs. This approach not only reduces anxiety and frustration but also builds children's confidence and ability to engage with the world on their own terms. It aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasising every child's right to dignity, respect, and the opportunity to develop their potential.

By removing societal barriers in line with the Social Model of Disability, educators create inclusive spaces that value diversity and encourage children to participate fully. Other essential elements of inclusive early childhood education are ongoing critical reflection, tailored, inclusive environments and teaching strategies, effective collaboration and high expectations for all children.

Neuro-affirming practices also benefit typically developing peers and educators by increasing empathy, understanding, and extending professional growth. Ultimately, these practices are a part of our professional responsibility, to ensure every child is supported, safe and valued.

#### Key Points of Neuro-affirming Practice

- ▶ Respects individual differences: honours each child's unique neurological profile and focuses on strengths rather than deficits.
- ▶ Builds confidence and self-worth: helps children feel valued, building resilience and a positive self-image.
- ▶ Reduces anxiety and stress: minimises barriers by adapting environments and expectations, creating a sense of safety and support.
- ▶ Encourages inclusion: creates spaces where all children can participate meaningfully, promoting belonging.
- ▶ Supports long-term development: aligns teaching with children's natural ways of thinking, developing skills for long term learning.
- ▶ Aligns with the Social Model of Disability: focuses on removing societal barriers rather than changing the child, encouraging participation and thriving within communities.

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#### Quick Reference Table for Neuro-affirming Practice

Remember, as educators, it is not our role to diagnose a child. Instead, our focus should be on understanding the 'why', i.e. why is this child behaving or feeling this way? By addressing the underlying cause rather than just the behaviour, we can provide more meaningful and effective support. It is also our responsibility to support the individual needs of every child, regardless of whether they have a diagnosis. Every child deserves understanding, inclusion, and support tailored to their unique needs.

Observed Behaviours	Possible Underlying Reasons	Neuro-affirming Ways Educators Can Support
Difficulty transitioning between activities	Anxiety about change, need for predictability	Use visual schedules or timers to prepare for transitions. Offer a transitional object or activity (e.g., carrying a favourite toy or object relating to next activity). Use consistent language like "Next, we will..." and provide time for the child to process the transition.
Avoidance of tasks or demands	Anxiety, sensory sensitivities, or feeling overwhelmed	Reframe tasks to reduce pressure, such as, "Let's try this together." Offer choices like "Would you like to start with blocks or puzzles?" Allow for breaks and adapt expectations based on the child's readiness.
Difficulty focussing or staying still	Challenges with attention regulation, sensory needs, or high energy levels	Consider child's interest in the experience. Provide sensory-friendly seating (e.g. wobble cushions) or standing desk options. Incorporate movement breaks or calming activities like yoga. Create short, focussed tasks with clear goals and acknowledge their effort.
Frequent defiance or refusal	Emotional regulation challenges, need for autonomy	Respond with empathy and patience, saying, "I see this is hard for you." Provide clear but flexible boundaries and offer choices that respect their need for control. Praise moments of cooperation to build trust.
Repetitive behaviours or rituals	Coping mechanism for anxiety, need for predictability	Recognise and respect repetitive behaviours as a form of self-regulation. Integrate predictability into routines and prepare the child for changes with visual or verbal cues.
Over- or under-reactivity to sensory input	Unique sensory processing patterns	Create a sensory-friendly environment with access to sensory tools like noise-cancelling headphones. Allow for sensory breaks and adjust the space (e.g., dim lighting, reduce noise).
Difficulty with peer interactions	Differences in social communication or play skills	Facilitate supported play scenarios and model social interactions. Use visuals or social scripts to teach turn-taking and sharing. Pair the child with a peer who can model inclusive and kind behaviour.

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Emotional outbursts or meltdowns	Feeling overwhelmed, difficulty regulating emotions	Offer a calming space with soothing tools like sensory items or visual prompts. Reduce verbal input and use a quiet and supportive tone to validate their emotions. Avoid judgment or urgency; let them take the time they need. Incorporate movement breaks, sensory 'heavy work' or the child's need for space.
Difficulty with fine or gross motor tasks	Challenges in motor planning or coordination	Provide adaptive tools (e.g., thicker markers, loop scissors). Break down tasks into smaller, achievable steps and celebrate each accomplishment. Offer alternative ways to participate, such as verbal or digital responses.
Worry or excessive need for reassurance	Persistent anxiety or fear of failure	Reassure with consistent phrases like, "I'm here to help." Use visual supports to show what's next, and celebrate progress, no matter how small. Provide opportunities for success to build confidence.
Challenges with pre-academic tasks	Cognitive processing differences (executive functioning) or specific learning challenges	Offer assistive technology (e.g., computer or text-to-speech tools). Adapt tasks to focus on the child's strengths. Provide extra processing time and minimise pressure.
Resistance to group activities	Anxiety about participation, sensory sensitivities, or social discomfort	Allow observation before participation and offer a smaller group option. Use the child's interests to connect them with peers. Provide supportive language like, "Join when you're ready." Offer alternative seating (e.g. from a distance, with an educator nearby)
Avoidance of eye contact	Cultural differences, sensory sensitivities, or feeling overwhelmed	Respect their comfort level; do not insist on eye contact as this may cause discomfort. Focus on words and non-verbal cues instead. Sit beside or near them to reduce social pressure and build connection.
Frequent questioning or negotiating	Seeking control or reducing anxiety about expectations	Acknowledge their curiosity while maintaining boundaries, saying, "That's a great question—let's focus on this now." Redirect gently and ensure their need for clarity is respected.
Hyperfocus on specific tasks or topics	Strengths in attention to detail or difficulty shifting focus	Celebrate their focus and interest, saying, "You're doing amazing work here." Use timers for fore-warning or visual cues to support transitions and find ways to incorporate their interests into broader learning activities