



Reimagining Autistic Child Development: From fixing to affirming approaches

About the AUTHOR

Kerry Murphy is an Early Childhood Advocate with a specialism in neurodiversity-affirming practice and disability justice. She is an author, lecturer, consultant and trainer whose work is focused on disrupting

deficit approaches in the SEND system. She is also completing her doctorate on diverse development and play patterns. She is both autistic and ADHD and draws upon lived experience frameworks to frame her advocacy work.



Introduction

If you are an early year's educator, it is highly likely you will support autistic children in your setting. Often, you may be part of the journey as a child and family begins to understand their autistic identity, especially after a diagnosis. While we cannot change how the medical system currently defines or approaches autism, we are still in a powerful position to reframe these deficit narratives and help broaden understanding by acknowledging and affirming autistic culture and ways of being.

Over the past thirty years, our understanding of autism has evolved significantly, driven by the "voices" of autistic people sharing their lived experiences, increased advocacy, and a growing body of autistic-led research. For example, in recent years there has been an increase in autistic researchers exploring autistic play patterns, thus rejecting that autistic children need to be taught how to play "appropriately". Autistic individuals are increasingly resisting non-autistic perspectives in defining autism and determining what is best for autistic lives.



These shifts in understanding are largely driven by a move away from medicalised models of disability and difference as the only lens through which to view human diversity. For example, the dominant view that being autistic requires a medical diagnosis, which then labels the person as disordered and leads to interventions aimed at reducing or eliminating autistic traits, is increasingly being challenged.

Instead, many autistic communities advocate for a neurodiversity-affirming approach, one that recognises the natural variation in human development. Viewing autism solely as a disorder limits our understanding of the full, lived experience of being autistic, which does not deny needs and challenges but also recognises strengths, traits, and differences.

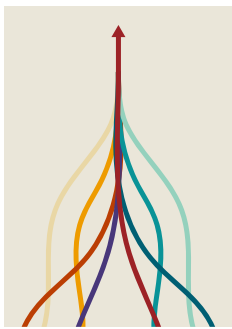
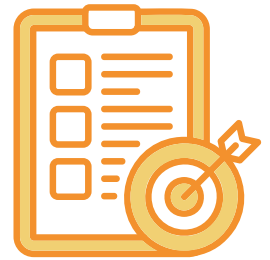
So, what does this actually mean in early years practice?



Understanding Developmental Diversity

Much of early childhood development is still taught and understood as a mostly linear, universal pathway: one in which all children are expected to meet the same milestones in a similar order.

Additionally, children with different developmental experiences are often compared to the ideal “norm”, and if they do not fit into these norms, they are considered delayed, or behind their peers. But the reality is far more diverse. Autistic children, along with children with ADHD, Down Syndrome, and other developmental differences, may diverge from typical trajectories, not necessarily because they are behind, but because they are moving along different paths entirely. As early educators, this might feel most closely aligned with the principle of the *Unique Child* which can sometimes feel devalued in the pursuit of *school readiness*.



Recognising diverse pathways of development does not mean lowering expectations or overlooking needs and challenges. It means widening our perspective and understanding that not matching the developmental trajectory of a typically developing peer does not signify failure or delay, it may simply indicate a different, equally valid path, such as being autistic. In short, autistic child development is a valid way to develop, rather than something that needs to be fixed, cured, eliminated or reduced. As educators, it is not unreasonable to expect child development guidance to reflect and include these diverse pathways.

Where to start in re-imagining autistic development...

The possibilities with diversifying our understanding autistic child development are endless. While educators might feel slightly apprehensive about this change, it should also ignite excitement and curiosity. Why? Because once we begin to understand autistic child development more holistically, the greater our connections and support to autistic children. Some starting points:

1. Reframe Language

The way we talk about a lived experience can become how we act towards that lived experience. For example, if we refer to autistic children as disordered, we might then focus only on reducing their autistic traits. You might choose to just refer to a child as autistic as opposed to ASD (autism spectrum disorder). Or instead of describing their development as a ‘red flag’, you might refer to indicators or differences. Similarly, you might talk about their traits as opposed to their symptoms.



2. Access autistic-led research and information

For so long, it has been non-autistic people that have led on raising awareness of autism, but this can often create more stigmatising views as they are promoting corrective, or curative approaches (how to reduce autistic traits).

By seeking information from autistic-led organisations, you hear directly from autistic advocates and allies who promote affirming views of being autistic. You might want to check out:

★ The Diverse Pathways of Development by the Neurodiversity Affirming Early Childhood Collective:
www.diversepathways.org

★ Yellow Ladybugs:
<https://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/>

★ Autism Level Up:
<https://www.autismlevelup.com/>



3. Trust your instincts

When I work with early years educators, one of the most powerful strengths I see is their capacity to build deep, lasting connections with children. These relationships develop attuned, intuitive knowledge that often sits outside of traditional developmental frameworks. Yet, this knowledge is too often undervalued or overridden by external pressures or expectations rooted in normative child development. Educators may doubt what they know to be meaningful for a child in the moment, especially when it does not align with predefined outcomes. For example, I often hear educators say that they engage in certain practices because children need to be school ready such as sitting still or calming down quickly despite these things not feeling relevant for that child in that moment.

Here is the truth: those outcomes were rarely designed with autistic children in mind. Trust your insights. Honour what feels meaningful for a child right now. Advocate for that because attuned practice is not about fitting children into existing models but about meeting them where they are and walking alongside them.

Reflective Questions:

- ★ How could I bring more autistic-led perspectives into my work or setting?
- ★ What language do I use when talking about autistic children, and how might that shape my practice?



Resources:

Murphy, K., 2025. Neurodiversity-Affirming Practices in Early Childhood: An Empowering Guide to Diverse Development and Play. Taylor & Francis.

Murphy, K., 2023. A guide to neurodiversity in the early years. London: Anna Freud Centre.

Kavanagh, M., Day, A., Hartman, D., O'Donnell-Killen, T. and Doyle, J.K., 2025. The Neurodiversity Affirmative Child Autism Assessment Handbook. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

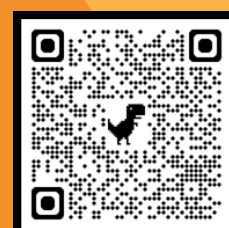
Leadbitter, K., Buckle, K.L., Ellis, C. and Dekker, M., 2021. Autistic self-advocacy and the neurodiversity movement: Implications for autism early intervention research and practice. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, p.635690.

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