

“They like to do the same thing, over and over”:

Do autistic children learn differently?



My name is Tanya, I am a specialist family support worker, Early Years Educator and trainer who has also been working in the field of Autism and disability for around 12 years. I am currently delivering on a National Autism Training Programme, and I am a qualified Intensive Interaction Coordinator. I have three autistic children of my own (who are all much older than Early Years now) but who have driven my passion in creating a more inclusive, neuro-affirming world.

“We have to stop assuming that every child is travelling down the same developmental pathway.”

Kerry Murphy¹

Neurodiversity awareness has been growing and our understanding of what that means is evolving constantly. One possible neurodivergence is Autism – we are all so familiar with this word now but what is less talked about are the implications for understanding developmental patterns and learning in autistic children. The title of this blog references a phrase I have heard many times in relation to autistic children. I am going to share my thoughts, experiences and a theory to consider on this topic. You undoubtedly all have many autistic learners within your settings as practitioners and childminders– whether you know it or not!

Undeniably, autistic people process, experience and interact with the world in an extremely different way to non-autistic people; this is not to say that one way is right and the other needing to be corrected in line with the majority. All of us have unique strengths and support needs which will vary through our lifespan and the early years are no exception. How, then, do we frame, understand and support these differences in a positive way? It can be tempting always as practitioners to avoid stepping out of our comfort zone, or to remain in denial of a potential neurodivergence due to a lack of diagnosis. I’m here to tell you that, even when you do have a diagnosis, that the individual and their needs will still be completely unique and unlikely to be met unless we can shift our views away from a neuro-normative idea of learning.

“No brain is the same. No brain is the best. Each brain finds its own special way.”²

Edward M. Hallowell

Where the Early Years has particular importance, however, is that we are setting the standard for how that young person is perceived and how they view themselves throughout their educational journey. That young person’s learning style is developing and evolving rapidly and considering how we understand this can literally shape the trajectory of that child’s learning.

Autistic learners tend to have different styles of play; some of this can be framed using the theory of Monotropism to understand the levels of engagement and joy around very specific activities and subjects and even to make sense of communication styles. This can look like the young learner who enjoys engaging with one specific subject or activity for hours on end, sharing long strings of information around this passion and preferring to use resources in unique and personally meaningful ways that do not necessarily replicate the way we might think they would be used.

Monotropism³ talks about differences in cognition between autistic and non-autistic people in a non-pathological way; it simply proposes that autistic people tend to give their attention to one or two things at great depth and that



once they are hooked in, this flow state can be joyful (and, tricky to disconnect from). Non-autistic people under this theory give their attention to multiple things at once, at a much less deep level.

Oftentimes, it is noticed that autistic learners might prefer to do the same activities within a setting, but efforts can be made to either withhold these activities as a reward, move the learner's attention to other things or even set targets on how to play with toys 'correctly'. It is seen as a deficit that autistic learners can prefer to do somethings over and over without the appreciation of the depth of knowledge, expertise and even mental health benefits that can come from engaging in this way. Sometimes items are withheld because the response of someone being pulled out of monotropic flow can be misinterpreted as challenging behaviour. When we try to make an autistic person think, process and learn in a non-autistic way we are setting them up to fail. This shift in attitude and approach that is needed to accommodate autistic learner's, links to the EEF cited evidence of successful preschool social, emotional learning through "demonstrating

respect for students and taking responsibility for one's actions, displaying warmth and empathy in relationships with students (Roorda et al., 2011)⁴

"For autistic people it can be extremely difficult to direct attention towards tasks for which there is a lack of intrinsic interest and motivation." This can lead to us interpreting a distressed child being pulled away from what they are doing as bad behaviour without appreciating that "*Flow states* are heightened moments of concentration, motivation and enjoyment, leading to total absorption in the present moment"⁵

What else needs to be considered?

There are of course many other reasons that autistic children learn differently. We could consider sensory differences – including those with interoception, a need for predictability to provide a sense of safety within the environment as well as all of the potential variables that come with considering intersectionality. For example, any co-occurring conditions, ethnicity and culture, gender etc. Considering cognition style when we are working with our autistic children is undeniably fundamental in celebrating difference and promoting inclusion.

Of course, we know that happy, engaged children who are leading their own play develop and learn much more than distressed children. Once we have this knowledge, we can enter their world and be led by them. We can use a relational approach to them that is hinged on the focus they have and use this to develop other areas – embedding this fascination in early maths activities, literacy and communication opportunities. We can truly adopt planning in the moment without the fear that playing and learning differently is incorrect or something to be fixed.

End thoughts

In a world where we are becoming more aware of our neurocognitive differences – a simple shift in mindset to understand cognitive differences can avoid us pushing an ableist narrative that doesn't work. It allows us to appreciate the positives in different learners and harness this knowledge to shape the learning opportunities that we provide.



Self-reflection questions to consider:

- Am I following the young person's lead and making resources available that follow and ignite their passion?
- Am I using good, multi modal communication to show when a transition is going to happen?
- Am I allowing time for monotropic engagement?

¹ [Murphy, K. \(2023\). A guide to neurodiversity in the early years. Anna Freud Centre.](#)

² [Hallowell, E. M. & Ratey, J. J. \(2022\). ADHD 2.0: New science and essential strategies for thriving with distraction: from childhood through adulthood. Ballantine.](#)

³ [Murray, D., Lesser, M., & Lawson, W. \(2005\). Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 9\(2\), 139–156](#)

⁴ [3. Murano, D., Sawyer, J. E., and Lipnevich, A. A. \(2020\) 'A meta-analytic review of preschool social and emotional learning interventions', *Review of Educational Research*, 90\(2\), p227-263](#)

⁵ [Williams, G. Charura, D. Hamilton, Lorna G. Milton, Damian. Murray, Fergus. \(2024\) Towards autistic flow theory: A non-pathologising conceptual approach](#)