



Neurodiversity-Affirming Approaches

Introduction: A neurodiversity-affirming approach recognises neurological differences (e.g., autism, ADHD) as natural variations of the human brain, rather than deficits. It shifts focus from “fixing” or masking traits to **supporting CYP** to thrive by honouring their unique ways of communicating, processing and relating to the world.

Target Audience: This approach benefits **neurodivergent CYP** in both **primary and secondary** settings, especially those with:

- Autism
- Social communication differences
- ADHD
- Sensory processing differences
- Anxiety and/or trauma histories

Key Examples: Affirming practice includes adaptations to **environment, communication, relationships, and expectations:**

- **Visual supports tailored to the individual**, e.g. a bespoke *Now and Next* board with personal activities or *structured visual routines* showing whole-class and individual expectations.
- **Alternative communication methods** (e.g. gestures, writing, body language, communication cards) are accepted and supported.
- **Processing time** allowed before CYP is expected to speak or respond; use of sentence starters and vocabulary scaffolds.
- **Safe, calm environments** where co-regulation is prioritised over behavioural compliance.
- **Debriefing after miscommunications**, using a *Regulate–Relate–Reason–Repair* model (Bomber, 2020), to build trust and reflective thinking.
- **No pressure to maintain eye contact**, conform to neurotypical conversation styles, or mask autistic traits.
- **Staff attunement**, e.g. learning to recognise the CYP’s nonverbal cues and using these to respond sensitively.

How to Use (Training / Implementation)

- **Embed neuroaffirming values in staff development**
- **Build consistent, trusting relationships** before attempting communication-focused work.
- **Avoid correction of neurodivergent traits** — instead, offer choices and autonomy (e.g. when and how to communicate).
- **Model regulation and connection**, especially in moments of emotional intensity.
- Reflect on **power dynamics** and involve CYP in shaping their learning and support.



Evidence and Outcomes

- **Trauma-informed practices** (e.g. Bomber's *Know Me to Teach Me*) shows relational safety underpins learning.
- Neurodiversity-affirming approaches are linked to **improved mental health, lower anxiety**, and **greater engagement** (Aitken & Fletcher-Watson, 2022).
- Research highlights that **forced masking** or constant correction of neurodivergent traits can lead to distress and burnout (Miller et al., 2021).

A neuroaffirming setting supports **authenticity, emotional safety**, and long-term wellbeing which are critical foundations for learning.

Links and Resources

- **Autism Understood – Neuroaffirming Practice:** <https://autismunderstood.co.uk>
- **Neurodiversity Affirmative Education:** <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/neurodiversity-affirmative-education>
- **Autism Education Trust (AET)**
Training: <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk>
- **Suffolk Specialist Education Service – Supporting Girls Pack:** Available via [Supporting-girls-with-CI-needs-pack-for-schools.pdf](#)
- **‘Double Empathy’ theory** (Milton, 2012) – Understanding mutual communication differences between autistic and non-autistic individuals.