



Cymru
National Day Nurseries Association

Factsheet



Neurodiversity in the Early Years

Curriculum for Wales

Neurodiversity in the Early Years

We are all unique, it's what makes the human race special. We have different strengths and challenges, and our brains can work in different ways. Everyone's identity should be understood and welcomed as part of a neurodiverse society.

As enabling adults, it is your responsibility to implement inclusive practice within your settings, that ensures children feel valued and represented, with a sense of belonging and an equitable opportunity to thrive and develop.

"Inclusive practice respects and responds to the unique experiences of children and their families, ensuring that all children receive appropriate support to participate fully in learning."

Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, Welsh Government

What is neurodiversity?

To consider this question, let's split the word up - 'neuro' refers to neurological function, which essentially means the brain, and 'diversity' is the fact of being different or varied, so variety in something. Therefore 'neurodiversity' can be described as 'brain variety'.

Whilst our brains do have some consistent attributes, all brains are different and unique. Babies are born with all of the brain cells (neurons) they will have for the rest of their life. It is the connections (synapses) between these cells that makes the brain develop. From the moment they are born, babies' brains start to form billions of connections and pathways between the neurons. This development can be influenced by a wide range of things including genetics and external environmental factors.

Neurotypical is usually the group majority. Their information processing is *typical*.

Neurodivergent people are in a minority. Their information processing is *atypical* and *diverges* from that which is typical in the group.

Whilst neurodivergent people may be said to be in a minority, they do represent as much as one in five people.

Neurodiversity refers to the unique neurological variations within the human mind (Walker, 2014). Neurodiversity embraces the fact that not all brains take the same pathway developmentally. When we talk about neurodiversity, we are recognising that we all have different ways of thinking and feeling, and that our brains work differently from each other.

The term 'neurodiversity' became popular in the 1990s. Neurodiversity is often associated with autism, but it includes a wide range of 'neurotypes' (types of brains). Every setting will be *neurodiverse* because they consist of a group of children who may include those who are *neurotypical* and those who are *neurodivergent* in the ways they process information.

What is the neurodiversity umbrella?

The neurodiversity umbrella is a term used to encapsulate the range of ‘neurotypes’. For example:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism
- Developmental language difference
- Dyscalculia
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Epilepsy
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Sensory processing differences
- Tourette’s syndrome.

(N.B. This list is not exhaustive)

How does neurodiversity apply to children in the early years?

Understanding neurodiversity supports enabling adults to consider those children whose development is not moving in the direction that they may initially expect. It is really important to note that highlighting a child as being “delayed” or “not in line with their age or peers” could negatively impact a child’s well-being and development. Neurodiversity in the early years embraces that some children will simply be different, not less than.

Why do we need neurodiversity informed practice in the early years?

We live in a society that favours typical brains and non-disabled bodies, this is often referred to as ableism. Because of this, neurodivergent people can feel that they do not belong. As enabling adults, it is important to consider your own practice and provision through the lens of ableism, to reflect on how you can better support individual children. As you start to explore this concept, you may find that many early years tools, knowledge and resources view neurodiversity through a deficit lens and therefore promotes ableism.

Neurodiversity informed practice encourages you to identify children who may need support, whilst disrupting ableist practices and improving early years experiences for neurodivergent children. It is important to recognise that practitioners can sometimes fall into ableist behaviours, because that is how things have always been done e.g. play-based intervention programmes to train the child to behave more “normally”. As your knowledge and understanding of neurodiversity develops, you can further identify pedagogy and practice that supports children’s individual needs and optimises the unique and holistic development of all children.

**“If we continue with approaches that focus too heavily on normative developmental milestones, we can overlook the many divergent, creative and unique efforts and abilities of all children”
(Sakr et al 2018)**

How can you support parents and families of neurodivergent children?

As previously mentioned, neurodiversity can often be seen as a delay, concern or “red flag”, this could cause a parent/carer to be reluctant to engage and they may struggle to understand their child’s needs.

As an early year’s practitioner, you have a unique opportunity of being present for the initial stages of identification, assessment and diagnosis, and this is where you can introduce neurodiversity affirming practice to ensure that a child’s neurotype is understood and not viewed as a negative.

Recognising neurodiverse children

Children within your setting will change drastically between birth and 5 years old and all will do so in an individual way – so how are you supposed to recognise a neurodiverse child? It can be difficult to isolate common behaviours from those that may be pointing to neurotypical behaviour. For example, physical outbursts, attachment issues and communication challenges could be dyslexia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in disguise.

Under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and The Additional Learning Needs Code ALN 2021, it clearly states that it is not the role of the early years’ practitioner to diagnose a child as being neurodiverse. However, your skills as early years specialists and your knowledge of the individual child can be helpful in observing and recording specific behaviours which may provide valuable information for the local authority as part of the diagnostic process.

Using effective observation to support neurodivergent children

The most important thing to remember when observing children who may be neurodivergent, is to view them as unique individuals who may need additional tools or adult support in order to thrive not as ‘underachievers’ or ‘delayed’. Effective observation of all children, enables us to record what we notice, analyse what we see and hear, and to respond in ways that will help all children make progress and develop.

Things to consider when carrying out observations:

- Are there any potential triggers that cause emotional distress?
- Avoid idioms or shaming.
- Consider how children interact with the environments, adults and peers
- Do children show clear preferences or avoidances?
- Do not make assumptions
- How long does it take to soothe the child after a period of emotional distress? What soothes them?
- Observe children throughout the day, indoors and outdoors
- Reframe ‘challenging’ behaviour as an unmet need; neurodivergent children may have difficulty in expressing exactly what their need is, you need to be patient
- When analysing your observations, do any patterns emerge?

Practical ideas for supporting neurodiverse children

Consulting with the local authority Early Years Additional Learning Needs Lead Officer (EY ALNLO) and other health practitioners, such as occupational therapists or speech and language therapists can provide valuable advice, guidance, resources and training opportunities.

There are many simple adaptations you can put in place to improve inclusion within your setting. Engaging in professional learning to deepen your knowledge and understanding can support you in reflecting on your existing practice, self-evaluating and making positive changes. Keep learning and remember to celebrate when things are going well.

Some ideas to promote inclusivity of neurodivergent children:

- Consider noise levels within the setting and review effectiveness of quiet areas
- Implement simple interventions and review their impact. E.g. sensory areas/times/rooms, assistive technology, visual timetables and communication resources
- Use simple language and sentence structures: a child's understanding of language may be literal, requiring more thinking time
- Use social stories to explain scenarios without 'blame'
- Use visual prompts and reminders to support practitioners with effective practice and allow them to share ideas with parents and families
- Use the child's name before any interaction i.e Griff, why are you feeling sad?
Neurodivergent children may not immediately recognise that the conversation is directed at them.

Children are influenced by their environment and the adults around them and they learn from everything they see, hear and do. Enabling adults have a responsibility to influence children's development positively through creating an accessible and inclusive environment within their settings, one that values and celebrates everyone.

An effective and inclusive environment should:

- Be well organised to ensure accessibility for all
- Include diverse and authentic representation within resources, images and text (in terms of gender, ability, sexual orientation, religion, etc.)
- Make appropriate adaptations to remove barriers to participation
- Offer open-ended resources that reflect diversity and are not gender-specific.

Further support and NDNA resources

- NDNA An Afternoon with Kerry Murphy: Neurodiversity affirming practice webinar recording: <https://bit.ly/NDNAAWKM>
- A No Wrong Door Approach to Neurodiversity: a Book of Experiences, Children Commissioner of Wales: <https://bit.ly/NoWrongDoorApproach> (published on 22 March 2023)
- National Neurodivergence Team early years resources - <https://bit.ly/NeurodivergenceResources>



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Factsheet

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We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets

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