

< Building on strengths

Neurodiversity: What You Need to Know



By Peg Rosen



At a Glance

- Neurodiversity is a viewpoint that brain differences are normal, rather than deficits.
- The idea of neurodiversity can have benefits for kids with learning and thinking differences.
- This concept can help reduce stigma around learning and thinking differences.

Neurodiversity is a concept that's been around for a while. In a nutshell, it means that brain differences are just that: differences. So conditions like **ADHD and autism** aren't "abnormal." They're simply variations of the human brain.

For kids with learning and thinking differences, the idea of neurodiversity has real benefits. It can help kids (and their parents) frame their challenges as differences, rather than as deficits. It can also shed light on instructional approaches that might help to highlight particular **strengths kids have**. One such approach is **Universal Design for Learning** (UDL).

Learn more about neurodiversity and what it can mean for your child.

What Is Neurodiversity?

The current concept of neurodiversity has a basis in science. We know from **brain-imaging studies** that there are some differences between kids with learning and thinking differences and their peers. Those differences appear in how the brain is "wired" and how it functions to support thinking and learning.

These findings can explain the source of difficulty for many

kids with learning and thinking differences. But the neurodiversity view is that brain differences are normal. And kids who have them are as mainstream as those who don't have them.

Where Neurodiversity Began

Judy Singer came up with the term *neurodiversity* in the late 1990s. Singer, a sociologist on the autism spectrum, rejected the idea that people with autism were disabled.

Singer believed their brains simply worked differently from other people's. The term was quickly embraced by activists in the autism community and beyond. Advocates have used it to fight stigma and promote **inclusion in schools** and in the workplace.

The movement emphasizes that the goal shouldn't be to "cure" people whose brain works differently. The goal is to embrace them as part of the mainstream. And that means providing needed support so they can fully participate as members of the community.

Neurodiversity and Learning and Thinking Differences

The concept that people are naturally diverse learners is important for kids with learning and thinking differences. It can reduce stigma and the feeling that something is "wrong" with them. And that can help build confidence, **self-esteem**, **motivation** and **resilience**.

It also supports teaching approaches that can benefit kids with learning and thinking differences. UDL, for instance, shares many of the principles of neurodiversity.

UDL recognizes that there's a wide range of students with a wide range of abilities. It uses a **variety of teaching strategies** to remove barriers to learning. The goal is to give all students, of all abilities, equal opportunities to succeed.

Differences vs. Disabilities

Celebrating differences is important. But it isn't enough to get kids with learning and thinking differences the help they need at school. It's important to acknowledge disabilities in order for kids to get **supports and services**.

Kids can't receive **special education** without having **an identified disability**. And without a disability label, they won't be protected by **special education law**.

Acknowledging disabilities has other benefits, too:

- It makes it less likely that kids with learning and thinking differences will be overlooked or fall through the cracks in school.
- It makes it clear they have challenges that require support.
- It encourages research funding for these issues.

That's why it's important to recognize both differences *and* disabilities. Each one can help your child find his own path to success.

Learn how to help your child **discover strengths and passions**. Get tips for **giving praise that boosts self-esteem**. And discover **how schools can use UDL** to help every student succeed.

Key Takeaways

- Neurodiversity can help you and your child frame challenges as differences, rather than as deficits.
- Universal Design for Learning is a teaching approach that supports neurodiversity.
- A goal of neurodiversity is to provide needed support for kids who learn differently.

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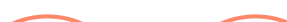


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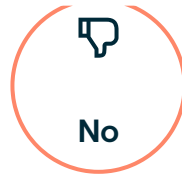
Reviewed by



Mark J. Griffin, PhD was the founding headmaster of Eagle Hill School, a school for children with specific learning disabilities.



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