



TERM 04 TOPIC

Parents Newsletter

Marijana Filipovic-Carter
Family Engagement & Support Lead

CELEBRATING NEURODIVERSITY

This week is Neurodiversity Celebration Week, so what better time than to recognise and celebrate neurodiversity in our children.

What is neurodiversity?

The term refers to the wide range of **neurological differences among individuals**, including conditions such as **autism**, **ADHD**, **dyslexia**, and **dyspraxia**. It also recognises that these differences are a natural part of human variation and should therefore be celebrated, instead of being viewed as a deficit. This “deficit” focus has sadly been a dominant viewpoint in the modern society for a while now and it can have a big impact on neurodiverse children. Often, their confidence and self-esteem are impacted, sometimes resulting in mental health issues.

As a society, we clearly need a change. Instead of focusing on the things that neurodiverse children can't do, how about celebrating all the wonderful skills, characteristics and things that they excel in? If we focus on helping neurodiverse children to feel respected, validated and accepted, this is likely to have a more positive impact on their social and emotional development.

To achieve this, we all have a role to play. Fundamentally, if we all play our part in making our society kinder, more accepting and less judgemental, then we all benefit enormously. This is exactly what we are trying to achieve with this newsletter: raise awareness and encourage us all to reflect on our own role in this regardless of whether we have a neurodiverse child or not.

Masking – just trying to fit in

To ‘mask’ or to ‘camouflage’ means to hide or disguise part of oneself to better fit in with those around us. It is an unconscious strategy that we all develop as we are growing up to help us connect with other people. Neurodiverse children are particularly known to mask their “true self” in many different situations. For example, some children with autism are aware that the world around them has one set of rules that might be different to their own preferences. To fit in, they learn to “act” in a way that suits society around them. While doing that, they suppress their personalities and true selves. As you can imagine, this is exhausting and can cause problems with their mental health. Mimicking others in social situations and suppressing certain behaviours e.g. stimming, due to a desire ‘to fit in’ is also likely to impact a person’s self-esteem and self-confidence. Masking is more common in girls than boys, which may result in making spotting the signs more difficult and/or underestimating how much effort a child may be putting into just fitting in with their peers.

What can we do to celebrate neurodiversity?

If you are the parent of a neurodiverse child, consider the following:

- encourage them to be themselves and to be proud of who they are. Even better, embrace and celebrate their differences! For example, if your child is hypersensitive to sound, this could be a sign of being very musical so why not explore this avenue with them? They might be very detailed-oriented which can translate into an incredible asset in so many aspects of life.



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Find examples of famous people who are neurodiverse and explore their lives together: talk about their struggles and how they managed to overcome them.

- Accept your children for who they are and show them this through your actions and words. Try and spend quality 1:1 time with your child whenever possible and let them decide what you do during this time. Have no agenda and just allow yourself to be led by them. This is one of the best ways to build a child's self-esteem.
- Be curious and try not to rush in to "rescue" your child from uncomfortable situations. We are all hard-wired to want to protect our children when they come across a difficulty but that doesn't always help as it can rob the child of the opportunity to learn new skills. Instead, step back, ask curiosity questions and listen: "What happened just now that made this situation tricky for you?", "What would help you to feel better in this situation in the future?", "How can we work together to find a solution that works for everybody?"
- Help your child to improve their emotional intelligence, their ability to recognise emotions in themselves and others- and to react appropriately. You could start by 'Naming the Emotion' and saying to your child, "I feel frustrated because..." and then encouraging your child to do the same. The more you can model this, the better. Tell them when you are feeling angry and that you are going to count to 10 to help you feel better. Understanding oneself helps build resilience and self-esteem.
- Focus on their strengths. Regularly appreciate and compliment your neurodiverse children on all the wonderful abilities they have. For example, if you have a child who is dyslexic, focus on their creativity with junk modelling. If you have a child who has ADHD, compliment their ability to really focus on a task that excites them.
- Beware of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Be mindful of the labels and language you use around your neurodiverse child, even if you think that they are not listening. The language we use to describe them and their neurodiversity can have an enormous impact on their self-image. They might even internalise these "labels" making them part of their identity. For example, words like "disorder" or "disability" can have negative connotations and detrimental impact on self-esteem.

For parents whose children are neurotypical, there is a hugely important role to play in creating an environment in which neurodiverse children, and adults, can thrive. How can this be done?

- From a very young age, talk to your child about how everyone is different, how we all look different, how we all have different interests and activities we enjoy. Tell them that, although we all have similar brains, they are not quite the same and that they work in different ways. Celebrate the fact that they are different to you, to their siblings and their friends and marvel on how great that is. Try using everyday situations to really embed this e.g. when you are out shopping, watching TV together, listening to music from different cultures etc.
- If your child talks to you about how a child was behaving in class or at playtime that they found challenging, or different to how they would behave in a similar situation, use this as a wonderful opportunity to put themselves in someone else's shoes and teach empathy. Have them think about what they would want from others if they were in that same position and finding something difficult. Would they want their classmates to be kind, patient, understanding?

Finally, there are many resources out there to help your child- neurodiverse or not- to learn and talk about neurodiversity and acceptance. Here are some suggestions:

-Neurodiversity- What's that? (An introduction to neurodiversity for kids) by Nadine Arthur

-Wonderfully Wired Brains by Louise Gooding

[Neurodiversity Celebration Week \(neurodiversityweek.com\)](https://neurodiversityweek.com)

[Neurodiversity for Children - Part 1 - Different Brains \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

[Neurodiversity for Children - Part 2 - What is Neurodiversity? \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)