

Schools may not always recognize how the language used in IEP meetings or team discussions shapes perceptions of a child's needs and abilities. With the right preparation, you can guide these conversations toward positive, strengths-focused outcomes. This guide provides practical tips and examples of neuroaffirming language to help you advocate effectively and support your child's growth and success.

Neuroaffirming Practices and Care

Neuroaffirming practices promote inclusion, reduce stigma, and help children feel valued for who they are. For instance, instead of framing a child as "struggling with behavior," a neuroaffirming perspective might emphasize their need for individualized strategies to support emotional regulation.

Instead of...

"Your child is non-compliant."

Neuroaffirming:

"Your child benefits from clear instructions and predictable routines to support transitions."

Instead of...

"Your child has poor social skills."

Neuroaffirming:

"Your child thrives with structured opportunities to build peer connections."

Instead of...

"Your child is easily distracted."

Neuroaffirming:

"Your child engages best in a calm and focused environment with minimal sensory input."

Language Shifts

Instead of...

Try...

Red flags	→	Possible/early signs of
Deficits	→	Challenges
Compliance	→	Co-operative/Co-operation
Special needs	→	Needs or accommodations
A person with Autism	→	Autistic Person
Low functioning	→	High support needs (HSN)
ASD	→	Autism

Every individual possesses their own individual unique preferences in regards to language and terminology. It is always good practice to ask the child/family what language they prefer and honour that / ask the school to honour your family's preference.



Parent-Teacher Collaboration

In a school unfamiliar with strengths-based and neuroaffirming practices, fostering collaboration with teachers and staff is essential. Approach them with a mindset of partnership, acknowledging their efforts while gently introducing your insights as the expert on your child. Share practical, strengths-based strategies that can help your child thrive, even in a less familiar framework. This collaborative effort can help bridge the gap and create a more supportive environment for your child.

Preparing for School Meetings - Toolkit

Before the Meeting:

- **Document Strengths and Needs:** List your child's abilities, interests, and areas where support is required. For example, "My child excels at visual learning and benefits from hands-on activities."
- **Define Goals:** Identify what you hope to achieve during the meeting. Examples might include ensuring access to sensory tools, clarifying accommodations, or adjusting language in the IEP to reflect strengths-based approaches.
- **Create a Strengths Profile:** Develop a one-page document highlighting your child's unique qualities, preferred learning styles, and what helps them succeed. Share this with the team to set a positive tone.

During/After the Meeting:

- Focus on collaboration, using phrases like, "How can we work together to support my child?"
- When concerns are raised, redirect the conversation to strengths. For example, "Yes, transitions are challenging, but they respond well to visual schedules."
- Advocate for language that respects your child's individuality. If someone uses deficit-based language, gently reframe it: "I think what you mean is that _____ benefits from extra time to process instructions."

Key Terms

Strengths-Based: An approach that focuses on the child's abilities and potential rather than their challenges.

Neuroaffirming: Practices that validate and respect neurodivergent experiences without aiming to "normalize" them.

Accommodations: Changes in the learning environment or teaching strategies to support access and success.

Self-Advocacy: The ability to understand and communicate one's needs and preferences effectively.

