

Neurodiversity-affirming practices in early childhood: An empowering guide to diverse development and play by Murphy, K.

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Murphy frames the book as a provocation, intended to challenge the thinking of early childhood educators to consider whether their practices and the education system itself is truly inclusive of neurodiverse children. Whilst the reader may initially associate the term neurodiverse with neurotypes such as autism or ADHD, Murphy, from the outset, addresses this ‘neuromyth’ to emphasise that neurodiversity is in fact the norm. The term, she explains, refers to the wide range of variables that influence the ways we think and learn. It is different that constitutes the commonality itself. Language is an important aspect of this book, used to challenge ableist thinking and provide practice-focused strategies to better support neurodiverse children.

As an autism and ADHD specialist, well versed in supporting neurodiverse children in the early education system, Murphy draws on her practice, research, and lived experiences as an autistic and ADHD person to frame the text. The book considers a range of perspectives from parents, teachers, and specialists to give context to the practices. Whilst these examples often come from an English setting (discussing “red flags” or “progress checks” common in their systems), Murphy’s desire to reframe pathologising perspectives from a credit lens will be familiar to readers working with the learning story model and Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017). Murphy recognises that whilst most teachers have a desire to do better, it is often the complexity of the systems themselves that stop them from doing so.

The book is laid out in six chapters, starting with an introduction to key terms and ideas central to neurodiversity-affirming practice and then scaffolds teachers understanding to see how this can then be practiced with children and represented in curriculums. In Chapter one, much of the focus is on language, as Murphy supports the reader to understand how the use of language defines an individual, the relationship between neurodiversity and disability, and how understanding intersectionality is crucial to understanding the identity of others.

Chapter two opens with a range of statements for the reader to consider. These statements are intentionally provocative, designed to challenge the reader to consider their lived experiences and encounters with others, and to recognise whether they may be unintentionally ableist. Murphy then reframes the concept of being ‘normal’ to demonstrate how society’s agreed upon definition of ‘normal’ pathologises neurodiverse children through a medical lens, often leading to neurodiverse or disabled children being pitied or positioned as requiring a saviour. This lens is further developed in Chapter three, where Murphy uses the neurotype of autism to define other forms of development not often considered in child development literature or teacher education, such as monotropic processing, stimming, or gestalt language processing.

In Chapter Four, Murphy opens our eyes to the infinite possibilities of play, and how play can serve a range of purposes for all children. She recognises that, whilst self-directed play is encouraged in early childhood curricula, the self-directed play of neurodiverse children is often redirected as teachers do not understand its function or view it as valuable. As a result, Murphy provides a tool for teachers to work through when they do not understand play, and offers examples framed through lenses such as monotropic processing or stimming to show how this solitary play is significant to these children.

Lastly, in Chapters Five and Six, Murphy demonstrates how the curriculum can be developed to better support the needs of neurodiverse children. Murphy looks beyond what she refers to as ‘place-based inclusion’ – where children are physically present in a space but not meaningfully included – to explore strategies for more authentic inclusion that respond to diverse needs in the environment. Murphy also considers how teachers’ use of documentation can overcome the deficit lens to empower children and families. Chapter Six ends with advocacy scripts teachers and families can use when interacting with medical professionals to reframe their assessments.

The book blends a range of methods to make the concepts accessible to teachers, like self-audits, companion resources, how to plant seeds for neurodiversity-affirming practices, and sections on parent -carer solidarity sections. And as Murphy admits, their tone changes throughout the book, at times casual and at times academic, which makes the text engaging and easier to comprehend. An extensive bibliography at the end of each chapter is available for the reader to engage in further research.

Whilst Murphy pays homage to the pioneers of child development, she recognises that it is time for teachers’ understandings of diverse development to evolve. Although Murphy encourages readers to recognise that perceptions and practices will change over time, this book provides teachers with the tools to become more neurodiversity-affirming in their practice.

References

- Ministry of Education. (2017). Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa early childhood curriculum. Ministry of Education.
- Murphy, K. (2025). Neurodiversity-affirming practices in early childhood: An empowering guide to diverse development and play. Routledge.