CELEBRATING PLAY AND FINDING JOY IN NEURODIVERSITY IN THE FAMILY DAY CARE ENVIRONMENT: NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMING PRACTICE

By Ashton Posch

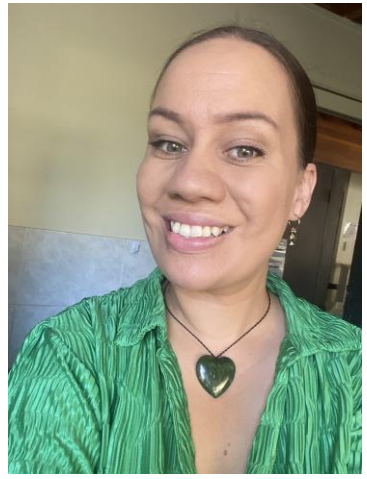
EXPLORING NEURODIVERSITY AND PLAY IN FAMILY DAY CARE

- neurodiversity affirming practices
- Ice breaker activity
- What is neurodiversity
- Neurodiversity affirming practice in play
- Strengsth based approach
- Relevant theorists
- EYLF V2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

ABOUT ME


Celebrating Play and Neurodiversity in the Family Day Care environment
Play in curriculum, pedagogy and praxis
By Ashton Peeds

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ICE BREAKER ACTIVITY

On a post it, write what you think Neurodiversity affirming practice is

What does *neurodiversity* mean in the context of my family day care service?

What assumptions do I hold (consciously or unconsciously) about "typical" vs "atypical" ways of thinking, communicating, learning, or behaving?

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

🌱 Understanding Neurodiversity in FDC

idea that there is *natural variation in the human brain*-in how people think, feel, learn, communicate, and interact. It reminds us that neurological differences such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, Tourette's, and sensory processing differences are not problems to be fixed, but part of human diversity-just like cultural

The term was first introduced by Australian sociologist Judy Singer, who wanted to move away from the medical model and towards an understanding of difference, not disorder.

In Family Day Care, this means we honour each child's unique way of being -including how they play, regulate emotions, socialise, and experience the world.

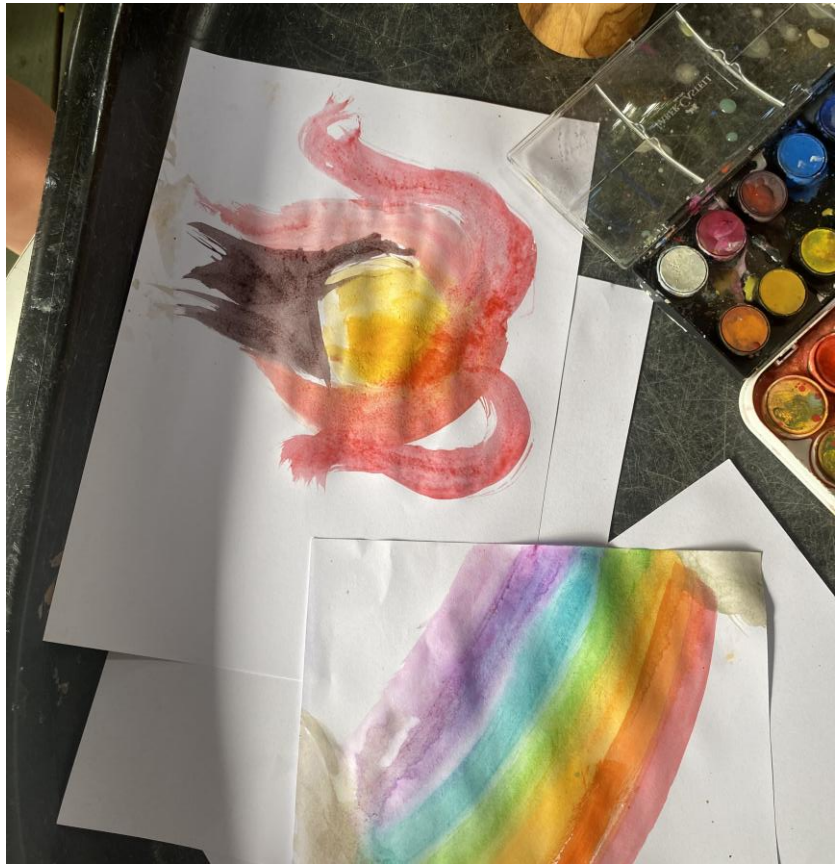
NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMING PRACTICE

Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice

Core idea: Neurodivergence is a natural form of human diversity, not a deficit (Singer, 1998; Walker, 2021).

Application in FDC: Educators design environments where autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, and other neurodivergent children's differences are celebrated as strengths.

EYLF v2 link: Principles of *equity, inclusion, and diversity* → educators adapt environments, not children.



NEURO-AFFIRMING ELEMENTS

- Children choose how to express themselves (drawing, speaking, showing).
- Focus is on **what children can do and enjoy**, not on challenges or deficits.
- Peer celebration helps normalise difference and affirm neurodivergent identities.
- Educator actively validates all contributions (e.g., "That's wonderful that you love lining up cars. That's a strength in noticing order and patterns").

NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING PRACTICE IN PLAY:

Supporting Every Child's Right to Play
in Australian Family Day Care Settings

- Department of Education (Australian Government, 2022).

  Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, Version 2.0.

Play is positioned as central to learning and wellbeing, with an emphasis on tailoring experiences to individual strengths and ways of being.

Outcome 1: *Children have a strong sense of identity* – explicitly links to celebrating individuality and diverse ways of learning.

IN A FAMILY DAY CARE CONTEXT...

- Family Day Care Australia (FDCA).
  My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care (updated alongside EYLF v2, 2022).
- Affirms small group, relationship-based pedagogy in FDC as an opportunity for tailored, neurodiversity-affirming practice.
- FDCA publications and professional learning modules stress valuing educators' and children's diverse strengths, supporting inclusion in flexible FDC settings.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLES

- Art as Communication
- A child with limited verbal language is provided with clay and paint as an alternative way to express ideas.
- The educator documents the child's artwork and later revisits it with the child to co-construct meaning.
- Outcome: The child's voice is honoured, and play becomes a bridge to communication and identity.

- Small-World Play for Social Strengths
- Two children (one with ADHD, one neurotypical) create a small-world construction with blocks and figurines.
- The educator scaffolds turn-taking by encouraging them to narrate what their characters are doing, rather than enforcing strict rules.
- Outcome: Social play builds naturally, with strengths in imagination and storytelling affirmed.

- Outdoor Risky Play for Autonomy
- A child with sensory processing differences seeks climbing challenges in the outdoor area.
- Instead of stopping them, the educator introduces safe but challenging options (rope ladder, tree logs, balance boards).
- Outcome: The child's need for vestibular input is met, confidence grows, and peers are inspired to try.

- 1. Music & Movement for Regulation
- A 4-year-old autistic child who seeks sensory input through movement is offered music and dance time each morning.
- The educator joins in, sometimes with scarves or ribbons, turning it into a group rhythm game.
- Outcome: The child is regulated, peers enjoy moving together, and the child's love of music is valued rather than seen as "too much."

WORKSHOP ACTIVITY: REFRAMING TOGETHER

AIM

TO PRACTICE IDENTIFYING NEURODIVERGENT BEHAVIOURS IN FAMILY DAY CARE AND REFRAMING THEM THROUGH A NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING LENS.

SCENARIOS

Scenario 1

- *Ella refuses to join messy play activities like finger painting.*

Scenario 2

- Max rocks back and forth when he is waiting for transitions.

REFRAME AND PLAY RESPONSE

Reframe: Ella knows her sensory preferences and demonstrates self-awareness.

Play Response: Provide alternatives like brushes, sponges, or digital drawing; respect her choice and allow other creative outlets.

REFRAME AND PLAY RESPONSE

Reframe: Max is self-regulating and calming his body with rhythmic movement.

Play Response: Add transition rituals that include movement (songs with actions, clapping games); provide a rocking chair or balance board as a regulation tool.

STRENGTHS BASED APPROACH

- **What is a Strengths-Based Approach?**
- Focuses on what children *can do* rather than what they cannot.
- Recognises each child's unique abilities, interests, and ways of being (including neurodivergence).
- Sees educators and families as partners, each bringing their own strengths to children's learning.
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- **Why It Fits FDC**
- Family Day Care settings are uniquely positioned to apply a strengths-based approach because:
- **Small groups** allow educators to deeply know each child.
- **Home-like environments** provide flexible opportunities to embed children's strengths in everyday routines.
- **Close partnerships with families** ensure educators learn about strengths from the child's world outside care.
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- **Examples in Practice**
- **Child-led projects:** A child who loves dinosaurs inspires a group excavation play in the sandpit, integrating literacy (naming dinosaurs), science (fossils), and art (dinosaur drawings).
- **Sensory strengths:** A child who seeks deep pressure is given heavy work jobs (carrying watering cans, moving cushions) that build confidence rather than being redirected away.
- **Creative expression:** An autistic child who scripts movie lines is invited to turn those into a puppet play for peers, building communication skills while celebrating their passion.
- **Family strengths:** A parent who is a keen cook shares a recipe; the educator invites children to cook together, linking learning to culture and family identity.
- **Educator strengths:** An educator skilled in storytelling uses oral stories to connect with children who have limited attention for books, making literacy accessible in flexible ways.
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- EYLF v2 Links
- **Principle: Equity, inclusion and diversity** → All children's strengths and identities are acknowledged.
- **Practice: Responsiveness to children** → Educators adapt programs to children's strengths, rather than expecting children to adapt to rigid routines.
- **Learning Outcomes 1&2:** Children feel a strong sense of identity and connectedness when their strengths are affirmed.

STRENGTHS-BASED PRACTICE + MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

Strengths-Based Practice + Multiple Intelligences

Why this fits FDC:

Small group settings make it easier to notice and build on each child's unique "intelligences."

Neurodivergent children often show strong abilities in specific domains (e.g., musical, bodily-kinesthetic) that may be overlooked in mainstream settings.

A strengths-based lens affirms these as *assets* for learning, rather than focusing on "deficits."

HOWARD GARDNER'S THEORY OF MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

- **Linguistic:** A child who loves telling stories is invited to co-create group books or record voice stories.
- **Logical-Mathematical:** A child who lines up cars is offered patterning games or sorting challenges that affirm this way of thinking.
- **Musical:** Singing routines for transitions (packing up, handwashing) make daily rhythms predictable and joyful.
- **Bodily-Kinesthetic:** Outdoor risky play, climbing, and movement games support regulation and confidence.
- **Spatial:** Providing loose parts for design and construction (blocks, recycled boxes) allows visual-spatial thinkers to shine.
- **Interpersonal:** A child who is naturally empathetic is given "helper" roles (welcoming peers, feeding pets).
- **Intrapersonal:** Quiet spaces, journals, or drawing time affirm children who are reflective and need calm.
- **Naturalistic:** Gardening, caring for animals, and exploring bush spaces build on children's connection to nature.

TO SUMMARISE..

Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences

Core idea: Intelligence is not a single measure (IQ) but a spectrum of capacities.

Relevance to neuro-affirming, strengths-based practice:

Affirms that children learn and express themselves in different ways.

Validates children's "islands of ability" (often seen in autistic children).

Offers practical entry points for inclusive play design in FDC (e.g., music, movement, nature).

EYLF V2 CONNECTION

Principle: Equity, Inclusion and Diversity → Recognising and affirming different intelligences is inclusive practice.

Practice: Responsiveness to Children → Programs are adapted to children's strengths.

Outcome 1 (Identity) & 4 (Confident and Involved Learners): Children's unique capabilities are seen, valued, and extended.

👉 In short: ECEducators can embed neurodiversity-affirming practice by using Gardner's Multiple Intelligences as a practical tool to recognise strengths, and EYLF v2 provides the framework to link this to curriculum outcomes.

ACTIVITY: STRENGTH-BASED LEARNING PROGRAM CREATION

- Step 1: Identify Strengths
- Each group member shares one personal strength (e.g., singing, storytelling, organisation, drawing, gardening, technology).
- Record these on a large sheet of paper.
- Step 2: Imagine as Children
- Pretend each group member is a 3-5-year-old child in Family Day Care who brings that same strength.
- Step 3: Design a Play Experience
- As a group, create one simple learning experience that integrates everyone's strengths.
- The experience should be:
    - Play-based
    - Inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming
    - Realistic for a Family Day Care setting
- Step 4: Share Back
- Groups present their activity idea to the room in 2-3 minutes.

REFLECTING ON STRENGTHS-BASED PRACTICES

- Reflection Questions for Educators
- 1. Seeing Children Differently
- Do I focus first on what each child *can do*?
- How do I notice strengths in play – creativity, problem-solving, leadership, humour, persistence?
- Am I valuing neurodivergent children's unique ways of engaging as strengths?
- 2. Designing Play Experiences
- How do I plan experiences that build on the strengths I've observed?
- Do I use a child's hyper-interest (e.g., dinosaurs, music, Lego) as a gateway to broader learning outcomes?
- Do I allow for multiple pathways of participation so every child's strengths can shine?
- 3. Educator & Family Strengths
- How do I bring *my own strengths* (e.g., music, gardening, storytelling) into play experiences?
- How do I invite families to share their knowledge, culture, and strengths with the group?
- 4. Environment & Relationships
- Does my environment offer open-ended materials that let children show their strengths?
- Do I see challenging behaviours as unmet needs rather than deficits, and respond with curiosity?

REFLECTING ON NEURODIVERSE AFFIRMING PRACTICE IN FDC

Reflecting as FDC Educators

How do I celebrate every child's uniqueness?

Am I seeing behaviour as communication, not "misbehaviour"?

Do my play experiences affirm all learning styles?

How can I keep growing in neurodiversity-affirming practice?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Takeaways

Neurodivergence is identity, not deficit

Strengths and interests are valid learning pathways

Adapt environments, not children

Play should have multiple entry points for all learners

Language matters – choose affirming, strengths-based words

FDC settings are uniquely placed to celebrate every child's uniqueness