

Neurodiversity Affirming Goal Writing

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Abstract

Introduction: The rise of the neurodiversity movement has started to question social communication and pragmatic therapy as we know it today. This movement started in the 1990s when Autistic people were able to connect and share ideas in online forums. These groups went on to create a social-justice movement for Autistic self-advocacy along with their own Autistic culture. This community has pointed out that some forms of pragmatic therapy can promote masking.

Method: A review of the published literature and lived experiences via blogs using search terms such as “neurodiversity” and “neurodiverse response to social communication therapy” was completed to better understand this movement. A total number of 12 articles were reviewed.

Results: By creating goals that are neurodivergent affirming and strength-based this can lead to greater motivation and communication successes, reduced behaviors, and help teach self-advocacy for clients with Autistic clients.

Introduction to Neurodiversity

- **Main idea:** there are variations in neurological development and autism is a natural variation existing among humans (Baumer, 2021)
- There is no right way of thinking and Autism is seen as a difference rather than a disorder (Baumer, 2021)

Why social language therapy can be harmful

- Autism does not need to be “fixed.” Social skills and language training are interventions that try to train autistic people to conform to neurotypical norms which goes against the neurodiversity movement (Roberts, 2022).
- Social training is viewed to attempt to “cure” autism (Dorsey, 2020) when it is impossible to due this due to autism being an innate neurological difference (Leadbitter, 2021).
- Social skills training can promote masking which occurs when autistic people camouflage their autistic traits.
- Masking is detrimental to autistic individual’s mental health and can cause greater risk of depression, suicide, and anxiety (Hull, 2017).

Goals that do not align with neurodiversity paradigm

- Goals that require an autistic person to hide their autistic traits and appear unrecognizable from peers, and therefore seem more neurotypical, go against the neurodiversity paradigm and should not be used in therapy (Roberts, 2021)
 - **Goals that require the client to:**
 - Use rote phrases and scripts
 - Force turn taking
 - Imitate body language or facial expressions that is not typical for that person
 - Maintain eye contact
 - Interact with peers appropriately
 - Eliminate stimming or echolalia
 - Initiate with peers when solo play is preferred
 - Comply with no complaint
 - These goals are based in subjective standards made by neurotypical people in an attempt to teach autistic people to hide their unique autistic traits to be more neurotypical (Roberts, 2021)).



Staywell Occupational Health, 2022

Ways to promote neurodiversity

- **SLPs should:**
 - Not focus on reducing behaviors but serve as a behavioral interpreter and seek to understand where the behavior is coming from (Dethorne, 2020).
 - Find specific strategies that work for the individual
 - Become allies in advocacy and educate non-autistic people on autism acceptance (Dorsey, 2020).
 - Understand the difference between therapy and cure (Randall, 2021).
- **Use Strength – based approaches**
 - Strength- based approaches focus on the client’s internal strengths rather than weaknesses, failures, or shortcomings. It is based on the idea that building on positive traits help reach goals (Psychology Today, 2022).
 - Strength-based approaches are supported by the neurodiverse community when targeting skills regarding communication, social interaction, and motivation (Donaldson, 2017).

Neurodiversity affirming goals

- Therapy goals should

- Improve quality of life based on clients needs rather than normalization (Dorsey, 2020).
- Target self-advocacy (Leadbitter, 2021).
- Empower students to learn to communicate their needs as independently and effectively as possible (Roberts, 2022).
- Provide neutral information for navigating social situation so the individual can interpret social situations in their own way (Roberts, 2022).

- Examples of neurodiversity affirming goals

- The student will generate possible outcomes to a social situation or problem and determine
 - Which outcome would be most positively received and why
- The student will develop insight regarding other’s perspectives as well as their own, as presented in visual material or verbal stories by:
 - Inferring why a particular person may say or do the things in a presented situation
 - Identifying and expressing what they might feel or do in a similar situation
- With the ability to self-determine their communication choices the student will be able to
 - Successfully describe their perception of events and situations
 - Describe the possible motivation and perceptions of others
 - Understand how their communication choices both speaking and behavioral may be perceived by those around them

Conclusion

The neurodiverse community has expressed its concerns with social language training. With close attention to the needs, preferences, and priorities of autistic people, SLP’s can begin to move past harmful therapy approaches to a place that values autistic client’s strengths and promotes neurodiversity affirming intervention.

- Goals should:

- Be strength-based
- Empower autistic people
- Align with the ideals of neurodiversity movement

- Goals should not:

- Promote masking
- Force the client to act more neurotypical
- Try to “cure” autism

By creating goals that are **neurodivergent affirming** and **strength-based** this can lead to greater motivation and communication successes, reduced behaviors, and help teach self-advocacy for clients with Autistic clients.

References

