



Neurodiversity Affirming Constructs in Play Therapy

1. Recognize that neurodiversity means there is no such thing as a “normal” brain. Variation in neurology is natural, and none is more right or wrong than another.
2. Understand that Neurodivergent children (autistic, sensory differences, ADHD, etc.) are not in play therapy because they are neurodivergent. They are in therapy because they have needs such as anxiety, regulation challenges, trauma issues, social needs, parent/child relationship issues, etc. Being Neurodivergent is understood as awareness of the child which may require different methods of implementing play therapy to match the child’s neurotype. Navigate from the perspective - “I’m not going to work with you on changing who you are, I’m going to work with you on how to help you get what you want or need.”
3. Honor the child’s play preferences and special interests. All Neurodivergent children play and there are multiple types and ways to play. Each child’s play preferences should be respected and Neurodivergent children should not be forced to play a specific way.
4. Encourage children’s voices to be heard and valued in deciding on processes, needs, and goals. Children should have a say in what needs they want to address.
5. Avoid play interventions that promote masking and camouflaging. Instead, focus on strengths and helping children recognize what they already do well; help them utilize their strengths to address their needs.
6. Respect body autonomy and presume competence.
7. Value and allow for multiple methods of communication.
8. Recognize that different is okay, different is not bad, wrong, or a problem, navigating differently is supported. The focus is never on trying to change a neurodivergent child to “look” like a neurotypical standard.
9. Value relationship development as a core process in Play Therapy. Therapeutic relationship is key to working with Neurodivergent children and their families and should begin with first contact and continue until termination.
10. Understand that play is the natural language of children. The therapeutic powers of play are a grounding principle in play therapy. Play is the change agent and not a manipulative to get to a change agent. Play is not withheld or used as a reward to gain compliance.
11. Realize the play therapy process will involve advocating for inclusion, addressing self-worth, understanding identity, awareness of the social model of disability, the double empathy problem, ableism, and self-advocacy development.
12. Conceptualize that the play therapy process may involve nondirective methods, directive methods, or an integrative or prescriptive approach. The therapy approach and process should be individualized to the unique neurotype of each child understanding their Neurodivergent spectrum of presentation.