

A NEUROAFFIRMING GUIDE TO
SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

NEURO-
AFFIRMING
ADVOCACY

DR. DESTINY HUFF, LPC

Neuroaffirming Advocacy: A Parent and Educator Guide to Special Education Services.

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NEURO-

AFFIRMING

**A Comprehensive Guide to Making Sure Your Learner's
Special Education Services Are Neuroaffirming**

Dr. Destiny Huff, LPC

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Introduction

WELCOME TO NEUROAFFIRMING ADVOCACY

Navigating special education can feel overwhelming, especially when advocating for neurodivergent learners. Traditional approaches often focus on "fixing" perceived deficits rather than supporting a learner's natural ways of thinking, learning, and communicating. This guide is designed to help parents, educators, administrators, related service providers, and advocates shift toward neuroaffirming advocacy, an approach that supports and empowers neurodivergent learners rather than expecting them to conform to neurotypical standards.

Many neurodivergent learners are praised for compliance while simultaneously experiencing chronic stress, masking, sensory overwhelm, trauma, or burnout. Neuroaffirming advocacy asks not whether a learner appears successful, but whether the environment is accessible, sustainable, and emotionally safe.

Neuroaffirming advocacy also recognizes that disability does not exist in isolation. Race, culture, language, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and other aspects of identity can shape how learners experience school, access supports, and are perceived by educational systems. Meaningful advocacy requires us to consider both the learner and the systems around them.

A neuroaffirming approach recognizes neurological differences as natural and valuable forms of human diversity. Rather than emphasizing compliance and normalization, this guide encourages strengths-based, learner-centered practices that foster autonomy, self-advocacy, communication access, belonging, meaningful participation, and well-being.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

In the U.S., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) governs Special education services, ensuring that students with disabilities receive a Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). While IDEA provides the legal foundation for special education, its implementation varies widely across states, schools, and districts. Unfortunately, many neurodivergent learners continue to face systemic barriers, including ableism, exclusionary practices, communication barriers, inaccessible environments, disproportionate discipline, and IEPs that prioritize compliance over meaningful access, participation, and support.

THIS GUIDE WILL EQUIP YOU WITH THE TOOLS TO

- Identify neuroaffirming practices and their implementation in special education
- Understand intersectionality and how it impacts special education access
- Advocate for neuroaffirming language, goals, and accommodations in IEPs
- Communicate effectively with schools and IEP teams to address strengths, autonomy, and self-advocacy

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Each chapter of this guide builds on the foundations of neuroaffirming advocacy, providing practical strategies and real-world examples to help you navigate the special education process. You will find guidance on IEP development, effective advocacy techniques, and ways to foster school environments that promote accessibility, belonging, communication access, regulation, and meaningful participation for neurodivergent learners. The appendices include sample letters, key terms, and additional resources to support your journey.

Whether new to the special education process or a seasoned advocate, this guide empowers you with knowledge, confidence, and strategies to ensure neurodivergent learners receive the affirming education they deserve.

Starting now, build a more inclusive, supportive, and neuroaffirming future.

2

RESPECTING AUTONOMY

Respecting autonomy involves respecting neurodivergent individuals' ability to control their lives, reach the goals they have set, and participate in the world around them to the fullest while also allowing them to be provided with information and make choices themselves.

Autonomy also means recognizing that compliance is not the same as consent. A learner saying "no," disengaging, shutting down, or avoiding a task may be communicating overwhelm, uncertainty, lack of safety, or unmet needs.

WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE WHEN IT COMES TO IEPs?

- Talking through their struggles and providing solutions
- Allowing them to pick those solutions
- Letting them identify when they need breaks and the break options
- Allowing them to identify supports and adults they are comfortable talking with

WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

- Letting them have a say in their accommodations, modifications, services & supports
- Letting them choose accommodations that work for them
- Providing them with the information so that they can choose
- Supporting them in the decisions they make

3

VALIDATING DIFFERENCES

It is essential to recognize, acknowledge, and accept that neurodivergent individuals have different and unique perspectives, communication styles, sensory experiences, and cognitive processes.

HOW DO YOU DO THIS?

- Recognize that there is a difference between neurodivergent and neurotypical approaches
- Recognize and honor different communication styles: verbal, nonverbal, spelling, use of AAC device, use of an AT device
- Recognize that we perceive things differently and interpret situations differently
- Recognizing sensory experiences and the impact they can have on the individual in the environment they are in

4

PRESUMING COMPETENCE

Always, always, always presume competence and presume that we are self-aware, capable, and can make valuable contributions.

Presuming competence also means understanding that competence, communication, and performance are not the same thing.

A learner may understand far more than they can verbally express, demonstrate in structured environments, complete independently, or communicate in expected ways. Difficulty demonstrating a skill does not automatically mean a lack of understanding, intelligence, awareness, or potential.

Difficulty demonstrating a skill does not necessarily indicate a lack of understanding. Communication differences, motor planning differences, sensory needs, executive functioning demands, anxiety, fatigue, regulation, or environmental barriers may impact a learner's ability to show what they know. Presuming competence means recognizing that the inability to demonstrate is not the same as the inability to understand.

Performance can fluctuate based on:

- Sensory overwhelm,
- Anxiety,
- Processing demands,
- Communication access,
- Executive functioning challenges,
- Burnout,
- Emotional safety,
- Environmental expectations, and
- Nervous system regulation.

Neurodivergent learners may communicate knowledge, understanding, distress, preferences, or needs through a variety of methods including AAC, scripting, body language, behavior, movement, gestures, delayed processing, or nontraditional communication styles.

HOW DO YOU DO THIS?

Everyone has different strengths, and everyone's strengths are presented differently but never assume that difference means incompetence.

- Observe our strengths
- Ask us about our strengths
- Ask us where we need support
- Incorporate our strengths to remove barriers

PARENT INPUT STATEMENT

The purpose of the parent input statement is to share your perspective on your learner, their strengths, needs, and how they learn, so the school team can better understand how to support them. As the only consistent member of the IEP team throughout your learner's educational journey, your input is invaluable.* ***The breakdown is a suggestion to stoke fires of what to include.***

Paragraph 1: Who My Learner Is (Strengths, Interests, Communication, Learning Style)

This paragraph should fully capture who your learner is as a person, not just as a learner. Include their strengths, interests, personality, and what brings them joy. Share how they learn best (e.g., visual, auditory, movement-based, repetition, or interest-driven learning). You may also include factors that impact participation and learning, such as sensory needs, communication differences, executive functioning demands, or motor planning differences, which can affect how a learner demonstrates skills, communicates, or completes tasks.

Be sure to describe how your learner communicates across contexts, including:

- Types of communication they use (spoken language, AAC, scripting, gestures, echolalia, etc.)
- How communication may look when they are regulated vs. dysregulated
- If applicable, whether they are a gestalt language processor and what stage of development they are in

You may also include a short anecdote that highlights their strengths, creativity, or how they connect with the world.

Paragraph 2: Academic Learning & Communication Development (Long-Term Vision + Current Support Needs)

Start with a broad statement about the skills you hope your learner develops over time (e.g., communication, literacy, executive functioning, problem-solving).

Then describe:

- Where your learner currently is in their learning
- How their communication and processing differences impact access to academics
- What supports, strategies, and approaches are most effective

Be specific about:

- What helps your learner understand and engage with instruction
- What creates barriers to learning (without framing the learner as the problem)

If relevant, include:

- Communication development (including gestalt language processing stages if applicable)
- Executive functioning needs (initiation, flexibility, memory, etc.)

You may also include helpful resources or frameworks that align with your learner's learning profile.

Paragraph 3: Life Skills, Regulation, and Self-Advocacy (Long-Term Autonomy)

This paragraph focuses on life skills that support your learner beyond academics. This may include:

- Self-regulation and co-regulation
- Communication for needs, boundaries, and self-advocacy
- Daily Living skills and independence

Describe:

- What your learner currently does independently
- Where they need support
- What strategies actually help

Be explicit about:

- What your learner needs when regulated vs. when dysregulated
- How adults can support them in a way that builds safety, trust, and autonomy

You can include tools, supports, or resources that have been effective, especially those that are neurodiversity-affirming and center your learner's voice.

Paragraph 4: Sensory Processing, Regulation, and Support Needs

Provide a clear picture of how your learner experiences and responds to their environment.

Describe:

- Sensory preferences and sensitivities (movement, sound, touch, visual input, etc.)
- Any motor needs (fine motor, gross motor, coordination, fatigue)

Baseline for goal setting - present levels provide the starting point.

Snapshot of strengths, needs, and barriers - this helps everyone on the learner's team understand their strengths, challenges, learning styles, and interests across all areas of development.

Drives Services and Supports - This determines what services, accommodations, and modifications the learner needs to access the general education curriculum.

Ensures Legal Compliance - IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) requires present levels based on data, which includes evaluations and assessments, teacher input, parent input, related service provider input, observations at school, observations related to school (homework, attendance, etc.), classwork, testing, and grades.

Promotes team understanding - the Present Levels should contain input from every IEP team member who interacts and engages with the learner and should accurately reflect the learner's current functioning.

Red Flags in Present Levels

- Strengths missing
- Parent concerns missing
- Disability minimized
- Reliance on grades only
- Missing baseline data
- Missing educational impact
- Missing sensory needs
- Missing executive functioning needs
- Missing communication needs

Present levels should identify not only strengths and needs, but also barriers to access and the supports that help the learner successfully participate, communicate, regulate, and learn.

Preacademic/ Academic/ Functional Skills	Gross/Fine Motor Development	Health
Communication Development	Adaptive/Daily Living Skills	*Social Emotional/ Behavioral

*** This is often the section that executive functioning concerns are put in.**

About the Author

Dr. Destiny Huff, LPC, is an Autistic and ADHD mental health therapist, speaker, author, and special education advocate. As the founder of Destiny Huff Consulting, LLC, she supports families across the United States in navigating special education, IEPs, evaluations, and disability-related advocacy.

Drawing from both professional expertise and lived experience as a neurodivergent parent raising neurodivergent children, Dr. Huff is passionate about helping families and professionals move beyond compliance-based approaches toward practices that promote autonomy, communication access, belonging, meaningful participation, and learner well-being.

Dr. Huff provides trainings, consultations, and resources for families, educators, therapists, administrators, and disability advocates. She is also co-host of The Affirming Village podcast, which focuses on neuroaffirming parenting, education, and advocacy.

To learn more, access resources, or inquire about trainings and consultations, visit:

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