THE DONALDSON TRUST

The National Body for Neurodiversity

How to write and talk about Neurodiversity

A guide for Media Professionals

The Donaldson Trust is committed to amplifying the voices of neurodivergent people.

Our guide to talking and writing about neurodiversity is built on a foundation of respect and insight. We've developed it by listening to the preferences of neurodivergent individuals, their families, and professionals in the field. We also incorporate feedback from our Advisory Board, many of whom are neurodivergent themselves.

Instead of dictating "right" or "wrong" language, our approach is to promote awareness and understanding. We aim to help journalists report on neurodiversity with greater sensitivity. The most crucial principle is to respect personal preference - when referring to an individual or group, always ask how they prefer to be described.

The language used to discuss neurodiversity is constantly evolving, and so is our guide. We update this document regularly to ensure the guidelines remain practical and useful for journalists.

Key Principles

When discussing neurodiversity, it is crucial to use language that is respectful, accurate, and up to date. We recommend that you use language that is:

- widely accepted by neurodivergent people and their families;

- strengths-based, focusing on the social model of disability. The social model suggests that challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals are often due to societal barriers and a lack of inclusion, not an inherent deficit in the person themselves;

- easy to understand;

- reflective of the idea that being neurodivergent is "different, not less".

A guide to Terminology

Neurodiversity: This term refers to the natural variation that exists in the minds and thoughts of all people, whether they are neurodivergent or not.

Neurodiverse: This term describes a group of people, not an individual. A group is neurodiverse if it contains both neurodivergent and neurotypical people, or if it contains neurodivergent people who do not share a common neurodivergence. You cannot describe an individual as "neurodiverse," even if they have multiple neurodivergences.

Neurodivergence: A descriptor for minds that think and process information in different ways to those that are neuro-typical – and that interpret the world around differently as a result. Autism, ADHD, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, dyslexia, dysgraphia and Tourette's are all examples of neurodivergence. Some commonalities among neurodivergent people are differences in sensory processing and social or functional communication. Neurodivergence and the phrase 'neurodevelopmental difference' are often used interchangeably.

Neuro-affirming/Affirmative: This is the principle of embracing neurodivergence as a natural part of society. It means accepting and respecting the lived experiences of a neurodivergent person as valid and relevant.

Neurodivergent: This describes a person who is diagnosed with or self-identifies with one or more neurodevelopmental differences.

Neurodevelopment and Neurodevelopmental: These terms are a reference to brain development. They are primarily used in relation to diagnoses and assessments, especially in reference to lifelong neurodivergences such as ADHD or autism.

Neuro-typical: A person who is not neurodivergent. The term "neuro-majority" can also be used in this context, as neuro-typical people remain in the majority.

Neurotype: This term refers to a group, and the people within that group, whose minds share similarities that distinguish them from the wider population.

Neuro-inclusive/Inclusion: This is the ongoing process of making sure that all neurodivergent people are treated as equal citizens and are enabled to thrive with opportunities for their personal and professional development.

Best Practice

Centre Neurodivergent Voices: Neurodivergent people and their families should lead conversations about neurodivergence and their lived experiences.

Use Person-First vs. Identity-First Language: The standard practice is to use identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") unless a person specifies a different preference. This is often preferred over person-first language (e.g., "person with autism") because it treats neurodivergence as an integral part of a person's identity, not something they "have".

Acknowledge Societal Barriers: When covering the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals, focus on how society can be more inclusive, rather than on a person's perceived "deficits".

Avoid Harmful and Outdated Terms: Avoid using terms that pathologize or dehumanise neurodivergent individuals. Words like "disorder," "condition," or "illness" should be replaced with "difference" or "neurotype". Avoid the terms "high-functioning" and "low-functioning," as they can be demeaning and fail to capture the complexity of an individual's support needs. Instead, refer to an individual as having high or low support needs. Also, "Asperger's" is an outdated term and is now included under the broader autism spectrum.

Stay Informed: The language and terminology around neurodiversity are constantly evolving. We will continue to monitor, review, and update this guide to help ensure your reporting remains respectful.

Contact Information

Our spokespeople are happy to give interviews, background briefings and work with journalists.

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