

Play and Neurodiversity
in Early Childhood

Diverse Pathways
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

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- Early Childhood Specialist (lecturer, author, consultant and trainer).
- EdD Student exploring how neurodiversity-affirming CPD can disrupt neuronormativity in early childhood practice.
- Lived experience of being multiply neurodivergent (autistic, ADHD, Mad identifying).
- A learner and un-learner.
- **My Play Patterns:** Object Personification (everything has feelings), Collections (Tanuki's, Russian Dolls, Monchhichi's), Traveller's Notebook, Swimming, **Penguin Pebbling.**
- **What are your Play Patterns?**

NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING PRACTICES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
An Empowering Guide to Biome, Development and Play
KERRY MURPHY


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Lineage Statement

Before we start, I want to name a lineage. None of what I am sharing appeared out of nowhere. This session is rooted in Black feminist thought and intersectionality, in the work of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. It is rooted in Disability Justice and collective access, with huge gratitude to Patty Berne, Alice Wong, and Talila A. Lewis. And it is grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm and autistic scholarship, shaped by Nick Walker, Robert Chapman, Sonny Jane Wise, Abi Miranda, Warda Farah, and Sid Mohandas. I am also guided by critical early childhood scholars who disrupt developmental common sense, including Mariana Souto-Manning, Oona Fontanella-Nothom, and Erica Burman, and by abolitionist education work from Bettina Love. I am grateful for these lineages, and while not every single influence is named, it is important to acknowledge the labour of others.

Goals of the Session

Visit www.diversepathways.org for lots of information




- Goal One**
Troubling Play
- Goal Two**
Neurodiversifying Play
- Goal Three**
The neurodiversity-affirming play framework
- Goal Four**
Play Patterns



Goal One
Troubling Play

Play that diverges can be viewed as deficit rather than developmental
especially non-speaking play




If Jamel was neurotypical conforming, how might his lining things up be perceived?

- Problem solving
- Meaningful
- Playful
- Repetition
- Pattern recognition
- Purposeful
- Schema

If Jamel was autistic, how might his lining things up be perceived?

- Symptom
- Rigid
- Restrictive
- Obsessive
- Limiting
- Non-functional

Most of what we know about play is based on research that centers neurotypical and non-disabled play and learning, and that then becomes the definition and measure of accepted play (Mulder, Carter and Graf, 2019).



Play is used as a mechanism through which children with developmental differences are then judged incompetent, deficient or unskilled in their "typical development" (Conn, 2015). Play patterns may also go into hibernation (Axelsson, 2023)

Conn, C., 2015. "Sensory input 'load overbearing' and 'intensive steering' children's play values and experiences of preschool in autism, developmental disability & learning, 2015, pp.118-120.
 Axelsson, L., 2023. The Original Learning Approach: Weaving Together Play, Learning, and Teaching in Early Childhood. Berlin: Peter.
 Mulder, J., Carter, L. and Graf, M., 2019. Right to Play for Children with Disabilities. Canadian Journal of Children's Rights Review on disability and justice and welfare, 4(1), pp.10-22.


It could be argued that children are deprived of opportunities to engage in self-directed play and experience further disadvantages to their development due to an intervention, corrective and ableist approach to play that is not considered valuable.



Play becomes sanitised into purposeful, appropriate or functional play whereby the child performs their play for the benefit of fitting into the developmental norms expected in that space. Play becomes masked in spaces where it is unwelcome.

Neuronormativity in Play

- Neuronormativity imposes on early educators, teachers & specialists a notion of a "right" way to play, which must conform with typical and non-disabled behaviours. For instance, there is an assumption that social play is inherently superior, and if children do not advance through specific stages of play, it signifies a problem.
- This bias is evident when adults assume they have the authority to define children's play as meaningful, functional and/or purposeful. Often then disregarding or intervening in play that does not make sense to them or needs more time to unfold. Furthermore neuronormativity implies learning through play which is often linked to neuronormative and prescribed learning experiences and outcomes is the only valuable way to play.
- And yet play is infinite, chaotic and is a form of resistance, not compliance. Over time, play has become a productivity measure of a child's worth but play serves many human functions including being utterly pointless.




Grady, D., 2014. On ability studies: Theorizing disability and autism. Routledge.
 Lewis, T. A., 2021. January. 15. Working Definition of Autism. Tella & Lewis. <https://www.tella-lewis.com/blog>


Undefine Play

One of the most liberating things an early years educator or teacher can do is resist the pressure to neatly **define, stage, or categorise** play which ultimately reinforces the message that there is a **right or ideal way to play**. The truth is that only the person who is playing can truly define what play is according to their own context. When we step back from the urge to mould play, we open space for the infinite, expansive possibilities of play. Trying to reduce it into tidy descriptions risks narrowing its meaning and centering only the kinds of play that **conform to neuronormative expectations**. This is not to suggest that there aren't play patterns that might feel uncomfortable for us or that reduce our bandwidth (others play can be dysregulating). Rather, we have to acknowledge that play is a complex process with many functions beyond learning.

Examples of neuronormativity in play

- Believing that play must follow fixed stages, with social play seen as the 'gold standard' and ultimate goal.
- Labeling play as immature or delayed when it does not align with age-stage based norms. For example, viewing a child as 'behind' because they remain motivated by exploratory rather than so-called 'functional' play.
- Insistence on **learning through play** by dismissing play that appears purposeless or not obviously linked to learning outcomes or emerging academic skills.
- Policing play that feels messy, embodied, or uncomfortable for adults. For instance, insisting children 'play nicely' instead of honouring how they choose to express themselves and ensuring attuned environments.
- Treating play primarily as a developmental checkpoint, presuming deficits when a child does not engage in expected ways and then using play-based interventions to correct play.
- Valuing play only when it produces observable results (language, numeracy, social skills), which marginalises children whose immersive play is meaningful but not easily measured.







Moment of Reflection




Goal Two Defining Neurodiversity


Eco-system of Human Difference
 Just as every plant species sustains the balance of an eco-system,

- every human difference sustains the balance of our communities.
- A forest cannot thrive with only one kind of tree.
- A garden cannot bloom with only one type of flower.
- Likewise, education cannot flourish if it only values one way of thinking, learning, or being.




Defining Neurodiversity


- Neurodiversity is the **inevitable and biological fact** of human differences
- **No human is inherently inferior or superior based on their differences**
- Rooted in "neurological pluralism" which means means recognising that there is no single "right" way to think, learn, or experience the world. Instead, there are many valid ways of being, and all of them should be respected and valued.
- Neurodiversity affirming practice is **affording** all children a **holistic understanding** where the right conditions are optimised for everyone to have a good **quality of life** and **meaningful outcomes**



Walker, N. Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions. Retrieved at: <https://neurodiversity.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>
 Neri, M.A. Neurodiversity 101
 Bolla, Michelle, Robert Chapman, Marilisa Cruz Ornelas, Steven K. Kopp, Abi Stannard Ashley, and Nick Walker. "The neurodiversity concept was developed collectively. An overdue correction on the origins of neurodiversity theory." Autism 26, no. 6 (2014): 1591-1594.



Disability and neurodivergence is a teacher. It disrupts our conventional views of what is considered "normal" or "the right way to be". When we reimagine human difference as the "disruption" only then can our beliefs and practices become the the rich and fertile ground from which we can cultivate the desire to **understand difference** rather than to **eliminate it** (adapted from Michalko, 2008. P. 414)



What is your Care Label?

We all **deserve** to be in environments that **take care of us** and help us to **grow and belong**. Embracing our unique strengths, and accepting our struggles, we need **spaces that enable our wilding ways to grow in deeply human ways**.

Explore our resources →

Goal Three
The neurodiversity-affirming play framework

Play Culture



Stenros (2021) suggests that play creates new types of **social behaviour**, **ways of playing**, and **ways of being in the world**. In essence, the more opportunities children have to engage in play, the more diverse their play patterns become, which enhances our understanding of human nature and play culture. And so, when we do not understand the play patterns of children, that does not mean that the play is wrong, or inappropriate, rather we have yet to make sense of it.

Play culture refers to collective values, attitudes, patterns, practices and beliefs within a particular group or context. It encompasses the ways in which play is understood, encouraged, and structured in various contexts, including families, schools, and broader societal settings. Play culture involves the beliefs about the importance of diverse play, how children engage in play, what types of play are valued, and how play influences social relationships, learning, and development.

Play Pattern


Play patterns refer to the unique ways children engage in play. In the context of neurodiversity, this includes recognising that children may have divergent rhythms, preferences, and intentions in play that might not align with neurotypical conforming play types or stages. We have a lot to learn about diverse play patterns.

Neurodiversity-Informed Play Framework

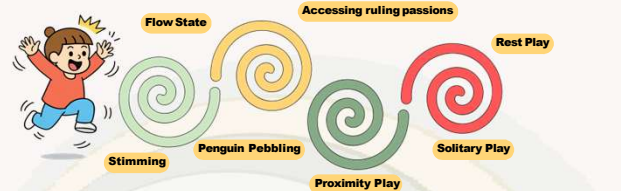



Let's bewilder ...Stage theories

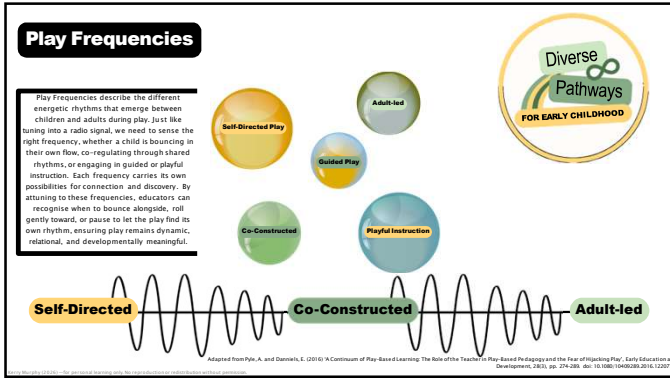
- Most early years educators will, at some point, have learned about stage theories, whether in relation to developmental milestones or types of play.
- For many years, the mantra "stages not ages" shaped how we thought about a child's developmental progress.
- However, these models are increasingly being questioned for their neuronormative implications, as they assume children will move sequentially through stages, often in a hierarchy that places certain skills or traits at the "highest" level.

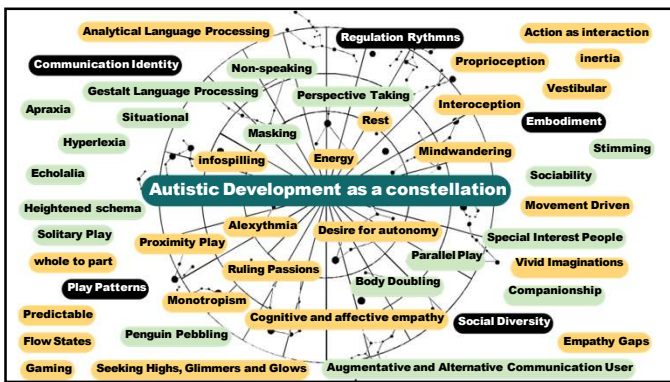


The Spiral Approach to Play



The Spiral Approach to play recognises that children loop in and out of play patterns via a spiral approach based on what they might need in that moment. For example, an autistic child may be highly sociable but benefit from bursts of solitary play in order to recover from the social demands. Stage theories lead to pathologisation and regression whereas Play Spirals enable us to recognise the many functions of play.

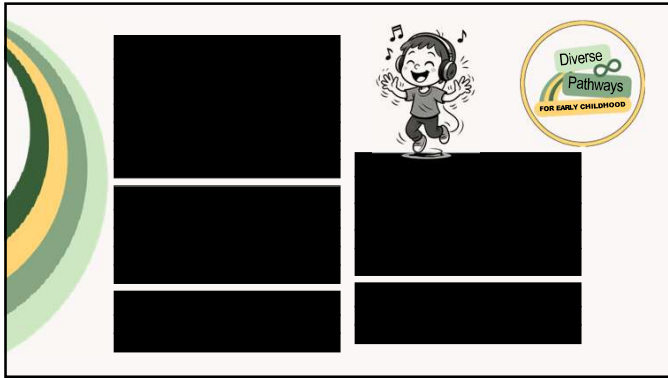


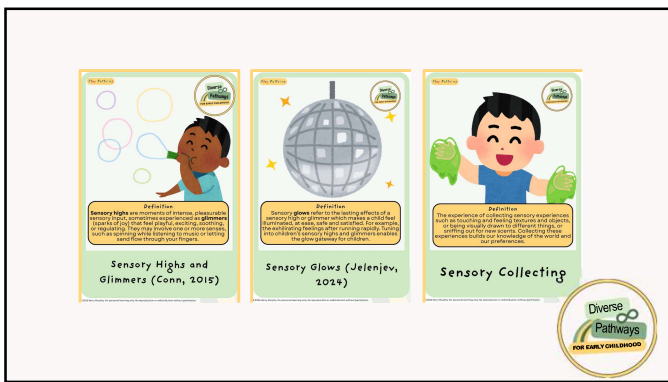


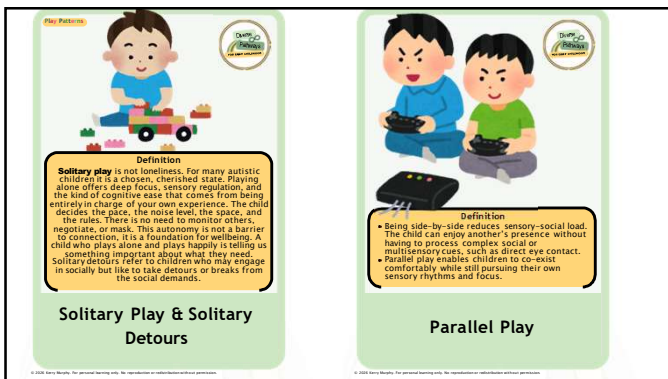
Goal Four Play Patterns

Access our full play guidance here

Diverse Pathways FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD







Play Patterns



Definition
Penguin pebbling in play is the spontaneous, heartfelt act of bringing something to a person you care about, not because of an occasion, but because it made you think of them. A stone from the playground, a particular leaf, a drawing, a favourite object held out in a small hand. For autistic children this is a profound and valid form of social connection and can be a way of initiating play without words.


Penguin Pebbling
(Amythest Schaber)

Access to Play patterns

To access and download our full play patterns guidance, please scan the QR code below:





Play Patterns




Definition
Deep, sustained focus on a single play activity or interest, often to the exclusion of other stimuli. This can often lead to flow states (and stuck states). This immersive state, sometimes lasting long periods, can bring joy, comfort, and regulation, with the child fully absorbed in the play.

Monotropic Play (Edgar, 2023) and Flow States (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014)



Play and Attention



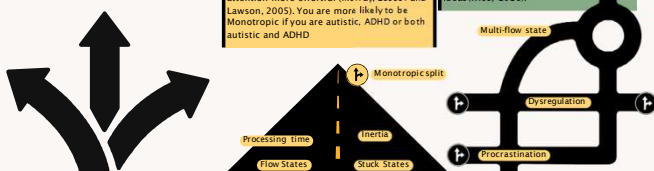
Normative assumption: Children are expected to develop attention *polytropically*—that is, by eventually shifting cognition between different tasks with ease including paying sustained attention to an external source.

Diverse assumption: Attentional control is now understood as a diverse process that can follow multiple developmental pathways. However, children often find themselves in environments that work against their attentional style.

Polytropic attention refers to attention that can be spread across multiple things at once. It allows for shifting between tasks, contexts, or stimuli with relative ease.

Monotropic attention refers to focused, deep, and sustained style of attention where energy is concentrated on a narrower range of interests or stimuli, often making shifting attention more effortful (Muray, Lesse r and Lawson, 2005). You are more likely to be Monotropic if you are autistic, ADHD or both autistic and ADHD


Intertropism is a lived experience explanation for those whose attention switches between different ideas or tasks quite rapidly connecting different ideas (Wise, 2025).



Meaningful Monotropic Spaces



I AM SO HAPPY

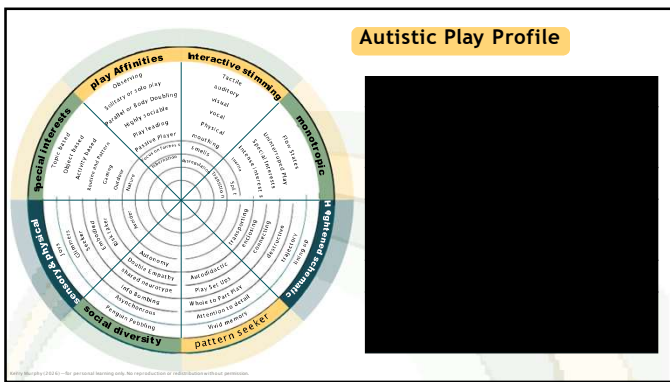


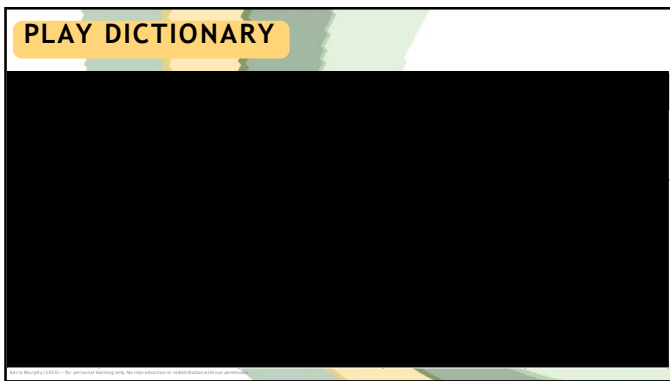



Explore the Play Patterns











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