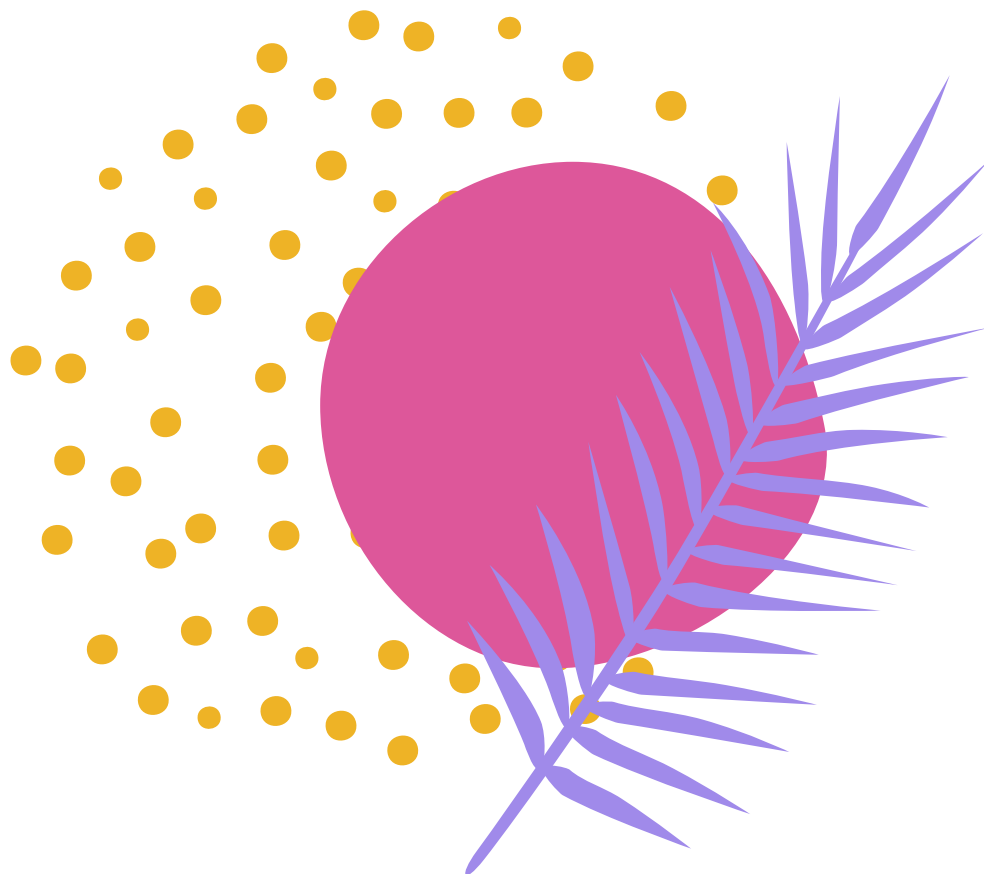


NEUROAFFIRMING SPECIAL EDUCATION AND IEPS

**MOVING BEYOND COMPLIANCE
TOWARD ACCESS, AUTONOMY,
AND BELONGING**

DR. DESTINY HUFF, LPC



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Neuroaffirming Special Education and IEPs

Moving Beyond Compliance Toward Access, Autonomy, and Belonging

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This session explores how neuroaffirming special education practices can move IEP teams beyond compliance and deficit-based thinking toward meaningful access, autonomy, regulation, communication, and belonging. Participants will examine how language, behavior interpretation, goals, accommodations, supports, and learner voice shape the educational experience, while gaining practical tools for digging deeper and creating IEPs that better reflect the whole learner.

Instead of asking:

“How do we get this learner to meet expectations?”

Ask:

“What does this learner need to access, participate, communicate, regulate, learn, and belong?”

Neuroaffirming IEP Quick Reference

What Does Neuroaffirming Special Education Ask Us to Consider?

- Presume competence
- Respect neurodivergent ways of being
- Honor communication differences
- Support regulation
- Protect autonomy and agency
- Identify environmental barriers
- Center meaningful access rather than normalization

Compliance-Focused	Neuroaffirming Question
Is the learner following directions?	Can the learner access what is being asked?
How do we stop this behavior?	What do we need to dig deeper to understand?
They need to tolerate it.	What makes this difficult or inaccessible?
They need to be independent.	What supports create authentic independence?
They know how to do it.	Can they consistently access the skill?

Dig Deeper Before You Intervene

What are we seeing?

Examples:

- shutdown
- leaving
- avoidance
- escalation
- inattention
- refusal
- difficulty transitioning

What could be underneath?

- sensory overwhelm
- executive functioning demands
- communication differences
- anxiety
- processing time
- fatigue
- cognitive overload
- loss of autonomy
- lack of predictability
- inaccessible instruction/environment

Questions to ask before intervening

- What happened before this?
- What was being asked?
- Was the expectation accessible?
- What sensory demands were present?
- What executive functioning skills were required?
- Was there enough processing time?
- Were accommodations actually available?
- What does the learner say happened?
- Is this an access barrier, capacity issue, skill not yet developed/accessed, or some combination?

ROOT Framework

ROOT: A Neuroaffirming Lens for Support

R — Regulation

- sensory support
- movement
- reduced overwhelm

O — Opportunity & Access

- accommodations
- communication access
- executive functioning support

O — Ownership & Autonomy

- choice
- consent
- self-advocacy
- dignity

T — Trust, Connection & Belonging

- relationships
- validation
- identity safety
- collaboration

Before asking a neurodivergent young person to change, ask whether their environment needs to change first.

Reflection: When a learner is struggling, which ROOT area might need attention first?

Digging Deeper Should Change the IEP

What we see:

What we need to understand more deeply:

What might change in the IEP?

- **Present Levels:** What is the actual barrier?
- **Goals:** What meaningful skill supports access or autonomy?
- **Accommodations:** What barrier needs to be reduced?
- **Services/Supports:** What instruction, consultation, or direct support is needed?
- **Behavior Support:** What prevention, regulation, communication, or environmental changes are needed?

If our interpretation changes but the IEP stays the same, we have not actually changed the support.

Neuroaffirming IEP Review Checklist

Present Levels

- Does the IEP describe strengths, needs, barriers, supports, and impact?
- Does it include parent and learner input?
- Does it reflect the whole learner?
- Are masking, compensation, or inconsistent access considered?

Goals

- Is the goal meaningful to the learner?
- Does it address a disability-related need?
- Does it increase access or autonomy?
- Are necessary supports included?
- Does success require masking?
- Are we teaching a meaningful skill, or trying to make adults more comfortable?

Accommodations

- Are supports proactive?
- Are they specific enough to implement?
- Are sensory/regulation needs addressed?
- Are executive functioning supports included?
- Is communication access protected?
- Is autonomy supported?

Behavior Supports

- Does the plan emphasize prevention?
- Environmental modification?
- Regulation?
- Communication?
- Predictability?
- Co-regulation?
- Skill building?
- Autonomy?

PDA Quick Reference

PDA: When Demands Impact Access

PDA is commonly known as Pathological Demand Avoidance, though many PDAers and families prefer language like Persistent Drive for Autonomy because the core issue is not “bad behavior.” It is often understood as a nervous system response to demands, pressure, expectations, and perceived loss of control.

Adults may see:

- avoidance/refusal
- negotiating
- delaying
- humor/distraction
- leaving
- shutdown
- escalation
- inconsistent access to skills

Dig deeper:

- Is the demand creating threat or loss of autonomy?
- Is nervous-system activation increasing?
- Is there demand accumulation?
- Is there flexibility in how, when, where, or with whom?
- Can unnecessary demands be reduced while preserving meaningful learning?

The question is not simply: “Can they do it?”

The question is: “Can they access it under these conditions?”

Five Questions to Take Back to Your Next IEP Meeting

1. Does this document sound like a whole person or a list of deficits?
2. Are we addressing barriers or trying to normalize the learner?
3. Are goals increasing access and autonomy, or compliance?
4. Are accommodations available proactively or only after distress?
5. Would the learner recognize themselves and their needs in this IEP?

The goal of special education should not be to create neurodivergent learners who are easier for systems to manage. The goal is to create access to education in ways that honor their disability, communication, autonomy, regulation, dignity, and humanity.

Resources

- Advocating 4 Kids, Inc. - Cheryl A. Poe
- Autism In Black - Maria Davis-Pierre, LMHC
- Declarative Language Handbook by Linda K. Murphy
- Fighting For My Voice - Jordan LeVan
- Kristy Forbes - Intune Pathways
- Lisa Baskin Wright
- PDA North America
- The Sensory SLP

Get in Contact

For more neuroaffirming advocacy, parent education, and practical IEP support, connect with:

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