Neurodiversity-Affirming Goals
Social Engagement and Participation

Setting and achieving skills and goals are the hallmark of our education and clinical settings. We won’t debate the right or wrong of that here but, rather, will offer support as you work within the existing system to create goals, including the ability to collect data, that are neurodiversity-affirming.

One of the challenges with the goals that are often used with Autistic and neurodivergent students is that they focus solely on changing the student without consideration of the environment or context in which the student exists. In order to move to a more neurodiversity-affirming approach, two things must be in place: a supportive physical environment and a supportive social environment.

1. A supportive physical environment considers and accommodates student’s needs, including:
   • Sensory and regulation needs (e.g. lights, sounds, space for stimming, etc.)
   • Communication needs (e.g. access to AAC, especially important for non-reliable speakers)
   • Activity and interest needs (e.g. time in the routine to be alone, for their favorite game or book, to explore their passions, or whatever else they need)*
     *These needs are often overlooked or not considered as needs and are crucial to success.

2. A supportive social environment is made up of allies, educators, caregivers, and peers, who:
   • Recognize the unique needs of the student as valid and deserving of being met
   • Don’t expect the student to tolerate uncomfortable situations
   • Respect the student’s ways of being, interacting, and participating
   • Use the students’ interest to create context for goals

On the next pages, you will find examples of how to shift from a conventional approach to goals to a neurodiversity affirming approach that better meets the real needs of your students.
**Conventional Approach:** The conventional approach to social engagement and participation is to change the student. Expectation is adherence to neurotypical social standards in order to prioritize compliance. These goals do not build on strengths but rather are designed to fix perceived deficits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLE GOALS:</th>
<th>PROBLEMS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES:</th>
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</table>
| By the end of the goal cycle/reporting period, when given **unstructured social time** (e.g. recess), student/client will maintain proximity to peers for at least five minutes, in 80% of opportunities, as measured by clinical data collection. | • **Self-advocacy.** Reinforces compliance during unstructured time instead of allowing the student to advocate for what they need.  
• **Self-regulation.** If solitude is supportive for the student, the goal takes away an opportunity to self-regulate by themselves.  
• **Benefit.** What benefit does “proximity” have in this goal?                                                                 |
| By the end of the goal cycle/reporting period, when given a **teacher-selected game with a peer**, student/client will participate in at least two turns with the peer, in 80% of opportunities, as measured by clinical data collection. | • **Play type.** The goal only recognizes one type of play (i.e. turn-taking) as valid. Doesn't recognize other types of play, such as parallel play.  
• **Wellbeing.** Prioritizes compliance over wellbeing, particularly if the student has anxiety or discomfort with this type of play.  
• **Benefit.** What benefit does “teacher-selected” have in this goal?                                                                 |
| By the end of the goal cycle/reporting period, when given a **non-preferred activity**, student/client will **attend to the activity for ten minutes**, in 80% of opportunities, as measured by clinical data collection. | • **Ignores full picture.** The goal does not examine or touch on the underlying reasons why it might be challenging for the student to attend. Instead, only asks for compliance that they do attend.  
• **Attending style.** The goal does not acknowledge that attending might look different with the student outside of neurotypical expectations of eye contact, posture, play style, etc.  
• **Special interest.** The goal invalidates interest-based elements of authentically interacting as a neurodivergent or Autistic student. |
| By the end of the goal cycle/reporting period, when given **group project work time**, student/client will remain in physical proximity to their group and interact appropriately with group members, in 80% of opportunities, as measured by clinical data collection. | • **Word choice.** What constitutes an “appropriate” interaction is subjective and often dictated by neurotypical preferences (i.e. small talk, eye contact, etc.).  
• **Self-advocacy.** Reinforces compliance during group time instead of allowing the student to advocate for what they need.  
• **Benefit.** Does the student need to participate in group work in order to demonstrate their knowledge? |
# Neurodiversity-Affirming Goals | Social Engagement and Participation

## Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach

A neurodiversity-affirming approach to social engagement and participation is to support the child and change the environment. Expectation is that the child will learn to identify their way of engaging and participating and will advocate for their individual needs.

## Compliance Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPLIANCE GOALS</th>
<th>NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING GOALS</th>
<th>RATIONALE:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Given unstructured social time (e.g. recess), student/client will maintain proximity to peers</td>
<td>By the end of the goal cycle/reporting period, student/client will be able to <strong>identify their individual needs during unstructured social time</strong> when queried by their allies 4 out of 5 times as measured by observation/report.</td>
<td>Unstructured time provides an optimal environment to support students in determining their individual needs without conflicting with others individual needs or classroom expectations. Use this time to start supporting students in identifying needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Given a teacher-selected game with a peer, student/client will participate in at least two turns with the peer</td>
<td>By the end of the goal cycle/reporting period, <strong>student/client will advocate for their [insert individual needs] when engaging in a mutually enjoyable activity</strong> with an ally 4 out of 5 times as measured by observation/report.</td>
<td>There is no “right” way to play, except for the way that works for those involved in the game. Being neurodiversity-affirming means that we don’t assign value to a specific way of playing or interacting with others, but rather prioritize what is experienced as valuable to the individual. Plus, it’s not just during unstructured time that students should learn how to identify and advocate for their needs. Incorporate self-advocacy goals during playtime, too!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given a non-preferred activity, student/client will attend to the activity for ten minutes</td>
<td>By the end of the goal cycle/reporting period, <strong>student/client will advocate for their [insert individual needs] in multiple contexts [insert contexts]</strong> 4 out of 5 times as measured by observation/report.</td>
<td>When we move away from neurotypical expectation of “appropriate” social behavior, we are able to find value in the student’s unique way of being. Reframe goals away from making those around the student more comfortable and instead focus on how the student uses self-advocacy skills to attend and participate in a way that feels authentic to them.</td>
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<td>Given group project work time, student/client will remain in physical proximity to their group and interact appropriately with group members</td>
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