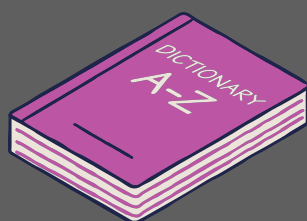
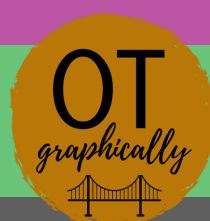


# NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING PRACTICES ARE A MORAL IMPERATIVE FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

(Dallman, A. Williams, K. & Villa, L., 2022)



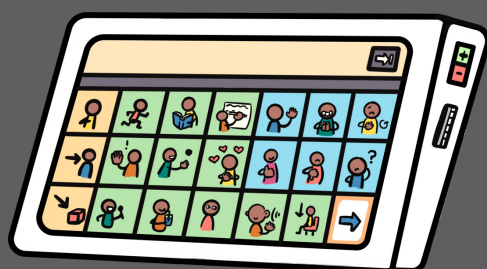
## BACKGROUND



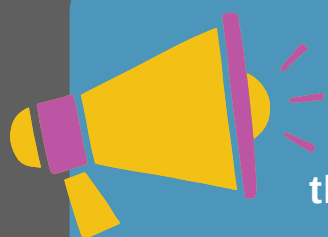
### NEURODIVERSITY

encompasses neurological differences such as clinical labels of autism, learning disabilities, synesthesia, hyperactivity disorders, and more.

Proponents of the **neurodiversity movement** argue that **current therapeutic and medical practices** often attempt to “**normalize**” behaviors and ways of participation that **originate** from these **differences in neurology** and **contribute to an individual's sense of identity**.



Occupational therapists are called to support clients not only to engage in occupations, but also to participate in the ways that are meaningful to them



This paper argues that an ethical and morally just occupational therapy practice should affirm neurodivergent ways of being, and that occupational therapists must be active agents of change by listening to and collaborating with their neurodiverse clientele

## OT ETHICAL MANDATE



### Support well-being

Reducing neurodiverse behaviors could be considered morally unjust occupational therapy practice if it has the effect of discounting autistic identity



### Promote capabilities

Therapists should work toward reducing systemic barriers that prevent recipients from receiving those services in respectful and affirming ways. (I.e. distressing sensory environments)



### Create meaning

Therapists should understand neurodiverse individuals will create, experience, and express meaning in different, but no less valuable, ways. Attempting to replace autistic behaviors reduces autistics' ability to have intrinsically meaningful experiences.

## NON-AFFIRMING



### Past therapeutic practices

Interventions that aim to decrease autistic ways of interacting with world (i.e. working on not flapping hands)



### Micro-aggressions on OT practice

Strengths of neurodivergent people are overshadowed by therapists' personal biases i.e. reinforcing eye contact)



### Behaviorism and Applied Behavioral Analysis

Despite reported to be harmful by the autistic community, these approaches are commonly integrated into OT practice (i.e. compliance through hand over hand)

# NEURODIVERSITY - AFFIRMING APPROACHES

Examples of Behavioral  
Targets in Therapy

**Reducing  
challenging  
behaviors**

**INSTEAD OF**

Planned ignoring,  
rewards/punishments/  
token economies



**TRY**

Supporting co-regulation,  
identifying environmental  
triggers, sensory strategies  
to help return to a calm  
state



**Valuing  
compliance**

**INSTEAD OF**

Using prompts/rewards  
for non-compliant  
activities and  
withholding preferred  
activities



**TRY**

Get "buy in" based on  
child's enjoyment and  
interests and adjust  
activities based on  
engagement



**Social  
skills**

**INSTEAD OF**

Responding only to  
appropriate  
communication



**TRY**

Responding positively to all  
forms of communication,  
adapting one's style to fit  
autistic expressions of  
communication, and educating  
family/friends on this.



## TAKEAWAYS

1

Respect the unique  
neurodiversity of each client  
and do not make  
goals/interventions to  
change these characteristics

5

Think of behaviors as natural  
responses to the environment not  
something that is compliant or non-  
compliant

2

Focus goal areas on  
wellbeing and positive  
engagement vs. compliance

6

Respect autistic individuals to  
move their bodies as they see fit

3

Non-autistic therapists should  
seek out autistic social rules  
and styles of communication

7

All forms of communication  
should be honored

4

Consult with neurodivergent  
individuals to understand  
meaning behind the behavior

8

Therapists should be aware of the  
differences in their own understanding  
of behavioral norms

## ARTICLE

Dallman, A. R., Williams, K. L., & Villa, L. (2022).  
Neurodiversity-Affirming Practices are a Moral Imperative for  
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