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SHARE

FRAMEWORK

DEVELOPING CONNECTION
OVER COMPLIANCE

Neurodiversity-
Affirming

Play
Protagonist

Child-
Led

Anti
Bias

SHARE FRAMEWORK

When I was a SENCO, the words SMART made me run for the hills. While they can come in handy for experienced practitioners, they are not always welcomed as a means for planning for SEN(D) support. SMART targets tend to force compliance over connection and can be too structured. While this can make us feel more productive in SEN(D) support, they aren't always child-centred. In an ideal situation, children with SEND would benefit from our everyday planning systems, but there can be a tendency to think we need to have very specific targets, when in truth, it will be a combination of things.

By following SMART, I was once advised to do the following over six weeks;

Child (A) to thread three beads, using string twice a day.

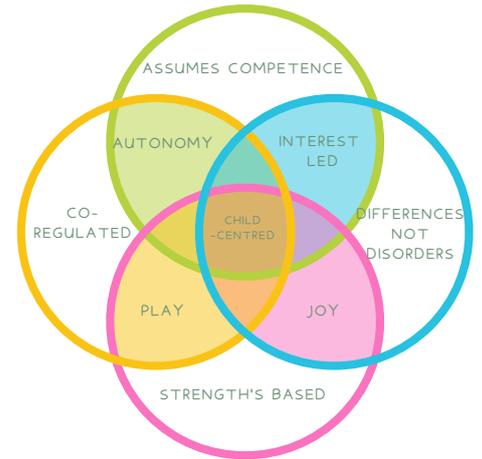
The child in question was under occupational therapy and developing fine motor strength. Like me, you are probably thinking of the very many ways in which this can be supported, and the above SMART target is likely not one of them unless the child is fascinated with beads and strings.

While acronyms can become quite tokenistic, over recent years, I have moved away from SMART and i now use SHARE which takes a neurodiversity-affirming approach...



DEFINITION: NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING

Neurodiversity is a part of human diversity. Those who identify as neurodivergent don't need to be shaped by neurotypical norms. To be neurodiversity-affirming means that you embrace and acknowledge the variations in learning and development, and you do not prescribe to dominant deficit narratives



Being neurodiversity-affirming means that you focus on children's strengths and interests, while appropriately supporting their areas of need through child-led and play rich approaches.



1 SUITABLE

It is vitally important that when we decide upon a goal or target that it is suitable and matches diverse and individual learning needs, also referred to as neurodiversity Affirming. For example, consider whether you think the below targets are suitable for an autistic child under the SMART framework...

1. To support Adam to sustain eye contact for up to sixty seconds at least twice daily when his key person is providing information or instructions (suitable/unsuitable)

- What are the benefits of this target?
- What are the challenges?
- Is this target ableist?

2. To support Adam's joint attention skills during play, by mirroring his actions and introducing provocational resources linked to his interests (different types of vehicles). (suitable/unsuitable).

- What are the benefits of this target?
- What are the challenges?
- Is this target ableist?



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SUITABLE GOALS COMBAT ABLEISM

It is important to acknowledge that the appropriateness of SEND planning will be individual child dependent. For example, you may have a neurotypical child with some minor difficulties in speech, that you can support, or you could have a neurodivergent child whose form of communication is atypical and this needs to be understood and respected before it can be inclusively supported.

The suitability of the above goals is explained below:

1. To support Adam to sustain eye contact for up to sixty seconds at least twice daily when his key person is providing information or instructions (suitable/unsuitable)

This target is unsuitable. It is well known that eye contact as a form of communication isn't preferable for those who are autistic or have other neurodivergent traits. This target promotes neurotypicalism and can lead to a child simply being trained to mask their autistic traits. Attentional skills are not dependent on eye contact. Many children will actually reduce eye contact in order to focus.

2. To support Adam's joint attention skills during play, by mirroring his actions and introducing provocational resources linked to his interests (different types of vehicles). (suitable/unsuitable).

This target is suitable. The key person recognises that joint attention can be developed without an insistence on eye contact, and they are prepared to meet the child where they are at, so using mirroring initially rather than modelling.

This target also focuses on the child's interests.

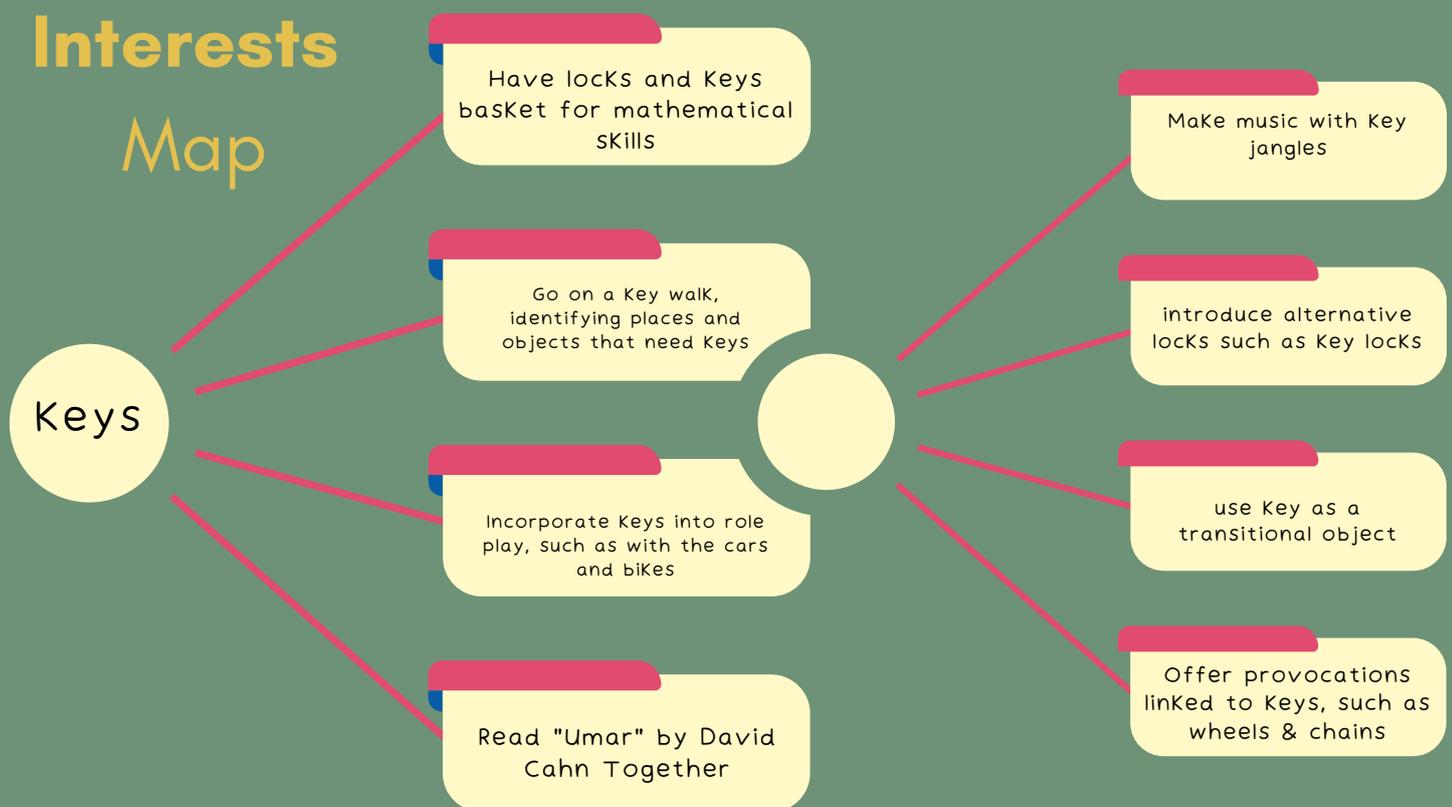
Top Tip

When specialists are deciding upon goals and targets, it is important to have discussions to ensure that they are neurodiversity-affirming. If you believe a target mimics neurotypical skills or trains a child in masking, do question this and ask for the goal to be adapted to be more neurodiversity-affirming.



2 HOLISTIC

When planning for children, it is important that we consider the whole child, and not just the areas of need, or the areas of difficulty. For example, if a child has speech and language differences or delays, we consider how this interconnects and impacts on their other experiences. Targets should be transferable to other play and everyday experiences, otherwise they become isolated and do not necessarily offer "hooks" for learning. Try a Special Interests Map to get you started...



You can read **more**
about Umar [here!](#)



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ADAPATABLE

Goals can often be quite structured and rigid, but it is important to be adaptable and flexible when planning for children who are neurodivergent or disabled. Important things to consider:

- *is it developmentally responsive, if not, adapt*
- *is the child showing signs of interest or engagement, if so continue*
- *does the child show signs of resistance, if so, adapt*
- *Have your interpretations changed of what the child needs changed, if so, adapt*

Consider the **below example**;

I was originally advised to use a strategy where I added a word when my key child made attempts at language, for example, if he said "car", I would say, "red car". However, after working with the speech and language therapist, we noticed that the child engaged in a lot of delayed echolalia and was on the diagnosis pathway for autism. So we adapted the goal as he clearly wasn't building language in single words but in gestalt stages. We decided to focus on identifying the function of each gestalt, for example, whether he was using language to label or request. Our neurodiversity-affirming goal became:

1. Acknowledge echolalia with verbal and non-verbal responses
2. Look for and note down any obvious meaning
3. Use declarative language rather than direct questioning to establish meaning

If you want to learn more **about Echolalia and declarative language**, follow **@meaningfulspeech on instagram**



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RELATABLE



If we think back to my earlier example about threading beads, what we can see is that goals can be quite non-contextual or out of sync for the child. Anything we plan needs to hold meaning and purpose for the child, otherwise we are *doing to them, rather than with them*. Goals in the most part should be planned for across a child's play experiences and routines. We should avoid taking children away from their play spaces so that we can build evidence of measurable targets.

Child's Voice

We should find ways to ensure that the child's voice is included in any goals, for example, using visuals so that they can indicate what they would like to learn or do, or by talking to them about their goals or hopes. We will also gather this information through discussions with parents.

Interests

If, for example, you are carrying out a language game such as "What is in the Box" where a child names the items, include something personal or of interest. Or give ownership in some way to the child, for example, their picture on the box or letting the children decorate the box. Where possible do this in-class and include buddies.

Remember that it is not the neurodivergent or disabled child's responsibility to learn how to behave more neurotypically, so consider how your goals promote a child's inherent traits, their self-advocacy and the understanding of others. If there are other neurodivergent children within your space, plan for quality times between peers, where communication styles may be more compatible.



5 ENGAGING & ENJOYABLE

Often strategies and interventions can feel very much like they are done 'to' the child rather than 'with' them. Being taken away from a safe space to look at flashcards can feel quite boring, and many children will only be engaging with the tasks as a means to an end. It sounds harsh, but it is a practice that continues to be adopted for children with SEND and the long-term impact is worrying.

As advocates of a child, we should seek to support high levels of involvement and engagement, and the child should experience enjoyment from their experiences. Reflect on whether you would enjoy threading three beads twice a day, every day for six weeks? We might be able to tick a box to say "achieved" but will it have cultivated high levels of engagement? Probably not.

Think of the things that spark joy, pleasure and wellbeing. While it is the last part of the acronym, it is actually the most fundamental goal for any child!



EXAMPLE

Suitable

Hattie is enthusiastic and eager to engage in her play, but if she is unsure of how things work, she can become upset and loses confidence in herself. She appears to process information at a different pace and needs more time to think things through.

It is important for Hattie to know that there are different ways of doing things, and to support her confidence as she navigates her way through information processing.

Holistic

It is important to use the “chunking” strategy when supporting Hattie, so that she has time to process information, activities and sequences within play.

Achievable and adaptable

Deconstruct information:

- Use waiting time when providing verbal instructions or prompting.
- Introduce some sequence visuals so she can see how particular resources or toys can be played with.
- Demonstrate and model how to use certain toys and resources and take turns in completing steps.
- Be more explicit in the possible uses of toy, for example, use a visuals and photographs
- Acknowledge and provide meaningful praise when Hattie is able to work through different sequences.

Relatable

Ensure that experiences are linked to her interests so that she can build confidence by things that motivate her. Gradually transfer this to occupational skills, such as during snack time.

Enjoyable & engaging

- Hattie is particularly interested in using the bead and threads and she talks a lot about wanting to make clothes. Set this up as an activity.
- Hattie likes to follow dance routines. Do some dance circle times with visuals, videos and instructions.



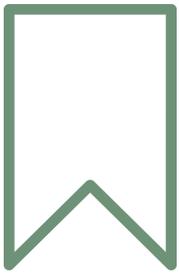
DO NOT FORGET THAT ONE OF THE BEST GOALS IS TO SIMPLY PLAY

When educators favour structured activities over open-ended play, the opportunities for executive function and divergent thinking are lost. Children's thinking becomes narrower rather than more expansive.

Many play-based interventions follow structure. Yes, the child might need predictability and familiarity but this should be matched with child-led rhythms and child-led play.



FURTHER SUPPORT



Pre-Order A Guide to SEND in the Early Years

Access my OneDrive for further reading

Visit my website **for more resources**

Bookmark this resource and share with colleagues.

Awareness can lead to action.

Book me for training. Enquiries **can be made at**

www.eyfs4.me.com

