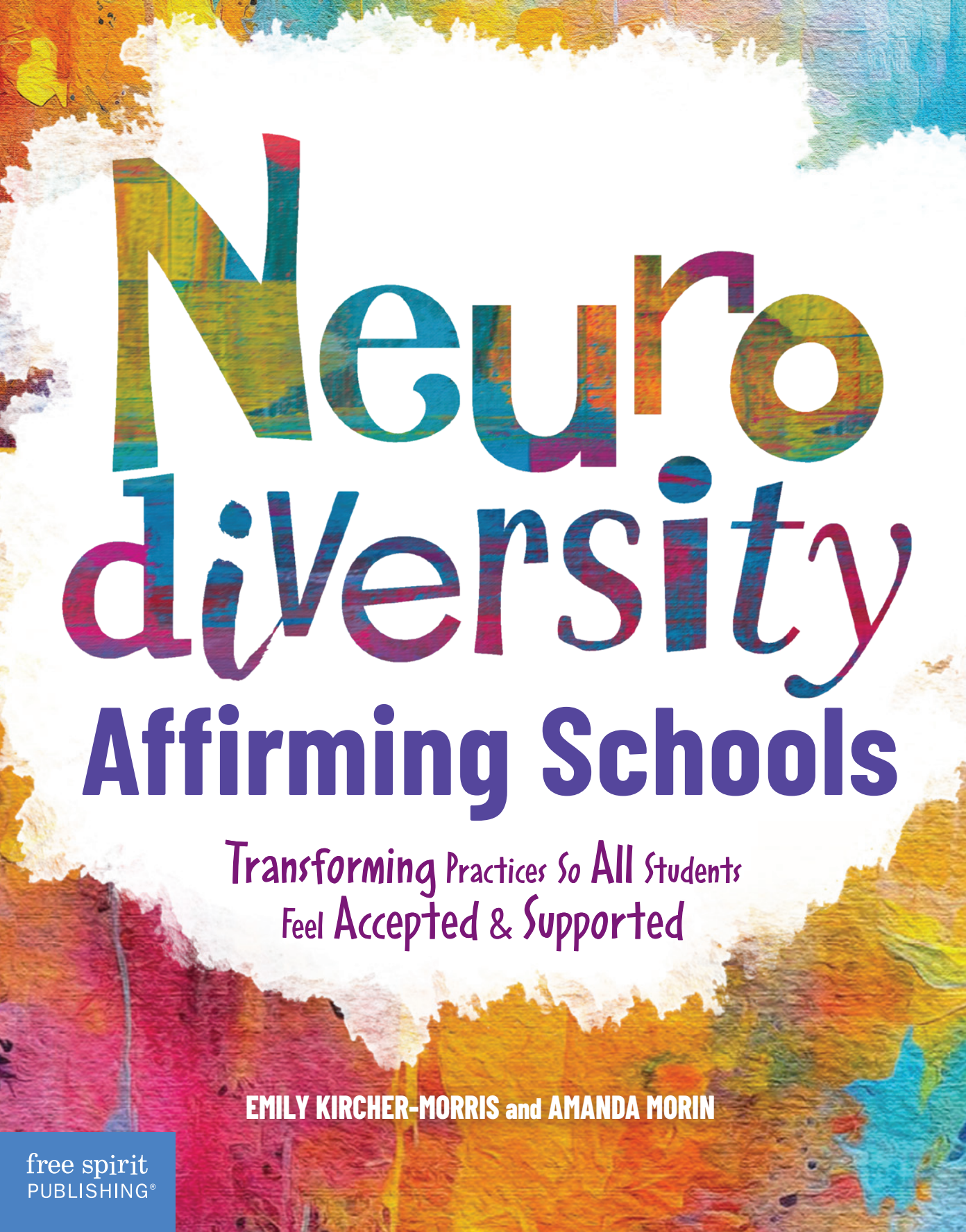
Neuro
diversity
Affirming Schools
Transforming Practices So All Students
Feel Accepted & Supported
EMILY KIRCHER-MORRIS and AMANDA MORIN
free spirit
PUBLISHING®

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Kircher-Morris, Emily, author. | Morin, Amanda, author.
Title: Neurodiversity-affirming schools : transforming practices so all students feel accepted and supported / Emily Kircher Morris and Amanda Morin.
Description: Huntington Beach, CA : Free Spirit Publishing, an imprint of Teacher Created Materials, Inc., [2025] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024027019 | ISBN 9798885543972 (paperback) | ISBN 9798885543996 (ebook) | ISBN 9798885544016 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Children with mental disabilities--Education. | Neurodiversity. | Inclusive education.
Classification: LCC LC4601 .K546 2025 | DDC 371.92--dc23/eng/20241009
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024027019

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Cover design by Courtenay Fletcher
Interior design by Michelle Lee Lagerroos

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An imprint of Teacher Created Materials
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freespirit.com

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Foreword

by Ellen Braaten, Ph.D.

Teaching students is one of the most challenging and important jobs in our world today. And it's a profession that, I would argue, has become more complex and less supported over the decades I have been involved in the field of education. Teachers are expected to be nurturers and disciplinarians, counselors and role models. They navigate systemic issues, complex bureaucracies, and diverse needs—all while striving to give each student the supports they need to thrive. Even so, some students are left out and overlooked, including neurodivergent kids.

Meanwhile, people are discovering the importance of neurodiversity in schools, work, and life. Folks are beginning to see how neurodivergent people bring perspectives and ways of thinking that can lead to new ways of solving problems. And educators are recognizing how neurodivergent students can enhance learning in the classroom, as all students benefit when they have opportunities to learn from each other's skills and experiences.

Imagine a world where educational systems are equitable and where each student, including those who are neurodivergent, has access to the resources and supports they need to thrive. Imagine a resource for educators that offers a scientifically sound foundation for understanding why they should create this type of system and how to do it. This guide would explain how to structure classrooms that embrace students' unique learning styles. It would provide information to help teachers leverage the strengths and understand the needs of a neurodiverse student population. It would be written in an empathetic, collaborative style, understanding the ever-increasing pressures on educators and acknowledging how change is often difficult within educational systems. And it would be clear, engaging, and compassionate—educating and inspiring at the same time.

In *Neurodiversity-Affirming Schools,* Emily Kircher-Morris and Amanda Morin have delivered that book. With decades of professional expertise and personal experience,

Emily and Amanda translate current research on neurodiversity and share practical advice and concrete ideas for how to create neurodiversity-affirming schools where all students can thrive.

Meeting the needs of an entire student body is not an easy task, particularly in a post-pandemic world where students are feeling more anxious, less academically prepared, and less motivated than ever. Many teachers I speak to complain of burnout—due to polarized politics, less autonomy in the classroom, and what seems like a more complex student body, among other reasons. Students, teachers, and parents frequently say they do not feel heard, respected, or valued. Rethinking the one-size-fits-all approach to education in the way this book describes could go a long way in addressing causes of teacher burnout while simultaneously providing students, particularly neurodivergent learners, with the respect they so greatly deserve.

In this paradigm-shifting book, readers will discover how each student has a unique way of processing information and how to remove hurdles in the learning process and accommodate the diverse needs of neurodivergent students. The book offers ideas for how to develop personalized learning plans and strategies, as well as how to foster positive peer interactions. It shows how embracing neurodiversity in the classroom and creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments helps all students thrive.

The book begins by providing a history of the neurodiversity movement, explains how to best understand and talk about neurodivergent learners, and describes how to design schools and systems that are neurodiversity-affirming. Later chapters delve into more specific topics—from neurodiversity-affirming learning plans to neurodivergent communication styles to tips for encouraging student authenticity. Case examples, along with the authors' stories of their own journeys with neurodivergence, help readers make connections to their own situations. Questions to ponder and key takeaways to remember challenge readers' assumptions and encourage critical thinking. This important book offers a comprehensive way of not only understanding neurodiversity in the classroom, but also *thriving* as an educator in an ever-evolving and complex world and navigating the work of creating neurodiversity-affirming schools with wisdom, humility, empathy, and mastery.

This book is a gift to us all.

Introduction

Now Is the Time to Build Neurodiversity-Affirming Schools

The needs of the students in classrooms today are very different from the needs of students even just a decade ago (NCES 2022). In a post-COVID world, students are facing increasing rates of anxiety, and schools are seeing increased absenteeism and the effects of COVID learning loss. As one teacher recently said to Amanda: "At the beginning of the pandemic, teachers were heroes. Now we're zeroes."

Everything from the charged political climate to students with higher needs has increased the pressure teachers feel every day. You may even be feeling like the teacher who said, "I don't know what to do anymore. The twenty-five students in my classroom feel like fifty students. I'm trying to help all of them, but I'm tired, I'm numb, and I don't have the professional development to do it better. I don't feel effective anymore."

It sounds dire, but it's also a moment to reconsider how to construct educational systems so that the burden of change doesn't fall solely on teachers. How *do* you go from feeling like a zero to a hero? What can you do to better understand the needs of all those students, so you can help them *and* feel effective? How can school districts prioritize this work and support your professional development?

It's time to rethink the one-size-fits-all approach to education and embrace the work of creating equitable education systems where each person has access to the resources and supports they need to thrive. It's important work, especially at a time when society

is attuned to everyone feeling heard, valued, and respected, including—and maybe especially—educators. Equity challenges the notion of one-size-fits-all solutions and acknowledges that what works for one learner may not work for another—and that's okay. Transforming schools to be neurodiversity-affirming is part of this work. Here's why it matters now:

- Neurodiversity-affirming practices recognize that individuals have different needs and provide resources and support tailored to those needs. For your neurodivergent learners, this might mean specialized learning tools, flexible work environments, and teachers who have a better understanding of how their students interact with the world.
- Being neurodiversity-affirming means creating environments that are supportive of all neurotypes within a school. This is more equitable than a one-size-fits-all approach because it doesn't force neurodivergent students—or teachers—to conform to standards and practices that do not suit their needs. Instead, it adapts environments to be more welcoming and accessible to all.
- Neurodiversity-affirming practices focus on leveraging the unique strengths and talents of each person. This equitable approach doesn't just aim for equal participation but seeks to empower everyone in a school community to excel in their areas of strength.

By affirming neurodiversity, you move toward reducing stigma and discrimination against those with neurological differences. When your job is to create an environment where everybody feels a sense of belonging, there's no shame in asking for the training, knowledge, and information you need to create it. A neurodiversity-affirming school *demands* that everyone in the school develop a deeper understanding and acceptance of neurological differences—from school district officials, to administrators, to teachers and students. And it ensures that all learners receive appropriate differentiation, not just to support them but also to support you, the educator, and our global community.

We can't talk about creating equitable education systems for neurodivergent students without also acknowledging how discussions about equity and equality are closely tied to topics like race, ethnicity, socioeconomic differences, sexual orientation, and gender identity—to name a few. The intersection of these identities with neurodiversity is an important aspect to consider, and one we don't want to sweep under the rug. We recognize that someone's financial resources are closely tied to their ability to access

an evaluation for a neurodivergent diagnosis and that a person's race or culture may influence how safe they feel to exhibit characteristics of their neurodivergence. The research shows that neurodivergent people are more likely to be nonconforming in their sexual orientation and gender identity, and that this can be weaponized against them (Dewinter, De Graaf, and Begeer 2017; Weir, Allison, and Baron-Cohen 2021; Warrier et al. 2020; Walsh et al. 2018). As you embark on the work of creating neurodiversity-affirming schools, we encourage you to always take a holistic view of each student when adopting new practices and consider how their unique experiences and intersecting identities may be influencing them.

Why We Wrote This Book

We met online, through shared professional learning communities. Emily is the host of *The Neurodiversity Podcast*, and at the time we met, Amanda was director of thought leadership at Understood.org. As we shared more of our own stories in these communities, we realized how much we had in common in our personal experiences as neurodivergent people, parents, and educators. When the pandemic hit, as we each worked on authoring separate books, we had the opportunity to support each other through the isolation of social distancing, stay-at-home orders, and writing a book (which can be a rather solitary activity).

As Amanda appeared frequently on *The Neurodiversity Podcast*, we realized that we had something to say about how schools and society could better support learner variability. As neurodivergent former students ourselves, we recognized the ways we wished we'd been supported by teachers. As parents to neurodivergent children and teens, we recognized the ways we hoped our own children would be supported in school. And we came to realize that our current system isn't there yet.

Our opinions about education were too verbose to be articulated with fidelity within the constraints of the platform-formerly-known-as-Twitter. Our online community grew as more parents and educators began to understand how neurodiversity could be better supported in schools. Then one day, Emily called Amanda while waiting for a plane in the St. Louis airport—Amanda had just left her position at Understood.org and had moved toward consulting in the neurodiversity space—and the idea for this book was born.

We come from different backgrounds in education. Amanda started in early intervention special education, and Emily worked in the gifted education classroom and as a school counselor. Our perspectives complement each other, and our experiences beyond the classroom as a special education advocate and a clinical mental health counselor, respectively, add another dimension to our understanding of how schools can better serve neurodivergent learners.

The resources and tools that are currently available aren't describing the type of paradigm shift we feel is necessary to move the needle toward neurodiversity-affirming practices that will allow the neurodivergent students in our schools to thrive and belong. With this book, we hope to help move that needle.

Working Toward the Ideal

People often wonder why "all of a sudden" there are so many more neurodivergent people. The truth is that they've always been here. The perception of a growing population of people with labels like autism, ADHD, or dyslexia is due to a few factors:

- The diagnostic processes for and understanding of neurodivergent diagnoses have improved. There is earlier identification of neurodivergence, and assessments are catching those who may have gone unidentified in the past.
- The stigma surrounding neurodivergent diagnoses is (very) gradually waning. Many people are no longer afraid to disclose their diagnoses and are talking about them publicly, bringing awareness of neurodivergence to expanding circles of influence, whether that is their family and friends or a broader audience through social media or other avenues.
- The "first wave" of neurodivergent children who were diagnosed in the 1990s and 2000s are reaching adulthood and leading the charge on the frontlines of the neurodiversity movement (Leadbitter et al. 2021; Kapp 2020). They are the parents, teachers, researchers, and advocates who have the voice and power to get people to listen. And behind them are the younger neurodivergent Gen Zs and Gen Alphas who have grown up with a greater understanding of themselves and an expectation of acceptance.

While, overall, acceptance and understanding of neurodivergence is growing, some environments are more progressive than others when it comes to neurodiversity-affirming practices. The tech industry, for example, leads the way with neurodiversity hiring initiatives and an understanding of the strengths of folks who learn and think differently. The education system, however, is lagging. Schools often value conformity. Curriculums are created to teach to the middle. And neurodivergent students fall through the cracks, especially students who don't qualify for special education services. They have "spiky" cognitive and affective profiles, with strengths and struggles that are, at times, difficult to understand.

Schools often have a hard time adapting to the needs of neurodivergent learners. They tend to view difficulty with staying organized or "reading between the lines" as a moral failing. "Have you tried using color-coded folders?" is code for "You are lazy." "How did you not understand what I meant?" often means "You are self-centered." When these difficulties are viewed through the context of neurodiversity, however, it is easier to understand that the way a person's brain is wired drastically impacts how they operate in the world. Part of being neurodiversity-affirming means understanding that it is much more effective to work *with* a person's differences than it is to try to change the way their brain works.

The ideal of a neurodiversity-affirming school (and world) is one that we all can work toward. We can work to remove the behavior management practices that teach neurodivergent learners to mask and camouflage their traits. We can understand that communication is a two-way street and that those with nonnormative styles of communication aren't the only ones who should modify the way they communicate. We can work with students' strengths and use them as a starting point for support, rather than isolating students and focusing solely on their areas of difficulty. By doing these things, we can empower neurodivergent students and help them grow into independent adults who recognize and understand their strengths and struggles and who live authentic, contented lives.

Small Changes, Not Seismic Shifts

The push toward neurodiversity-affirming schools is relatively new and has been a ground-up movement (Carey, Block, and Scotch 2019; Armstrong 2012; Armstrong 2017; den Houting 2019; Kapp et al. 2019; Shaw et al. 2022). Parents are advocating for

accommodations for their neurodivergent children. Neurodivergent teachers are using self-disclosure as a tool to connect with students and bring about change in their schools. And a greater understanding of Universal Design for Learning provides a framework for thinking about different ways to support learners.

But change happens gradually, and you might face resistance from systems that are not used to big change or mindset shifts. It is important to know that the path toward neurodiversity-affirming schools is not all-or-nothing. Small changes in your classroom practices or short conversations with your colleagues lay the groundwork for bigger ones.

You may feel frustration as you pursue these small changes. We know we have—patience in these two neurodivergent people is in short supply. (From a strengths-based perspective, we would reframe this as an eagerness for progress.) But keep going. Your students will notice, their parents will trust you, and the system will begin to accommodate differences.

A Word About Terms

Throughout this book, we talk a lot about the language of the neurodiversity movement and the terms neurodivergent individuals use and prefer. However, we want to make a few notes about language up front, particularly around the use of the words *different*, *differences*, and *neuro-normative*.

The language surrounding neurodiversity is complex and evolving, and preferences can vary widely among individuals. The words *different* and *differences* can be perceived and used in varying ways by neurodivergent individuals. Some use these words to describe feeling on the periphery or left out, and some use them as a way to describe their neurodivergent traits.

There are strong opinions about whether these words are euphemistic terms for *disorder* or *disability* or are used for neurodivergent traits that are viewed as inherently problematic or less desirable. Using *differences* can be seen as unnecessarily highlighting distinctions between neurodivergent and neuro-normative traits, fostering a sense of otherness or separation. Adding to this sense of otherness is the common use of the word *neurotypical* to describe people and traits that aren't neurodivergent. Because *neurotypical* implies that there's a way of being that is usual or ordinary, we've chosen to use the word *neuro-normative* throughout this book instead. It advances the idea that there are standards

or societal "norms" that are widely thought to be the way people should think or act but challenges the concept that those norms should be adhered to by a "typical" person.

Some neurodivergent individuals prefer to use the words *different* and *differences* to describe themselves, instead of using terms like *neurodivergent*, *neurodiverse*, or even specific diagnostic labels. For some, embracing *differences* is a form of personal empowerment, and it gives them a way to positively own their unique traits and experiences and acknowledge them as integral parts of their identity.

We use the words *different* and *differences* in this book because they avoid pathologizing and instead acknowledge that we all have variations of experiences. They're terms we use neutrally to describe the unique cognitive and perceptual experiences of all individuals. We think that respecting individual preferences around terms and language is crucial, and we believe that different is simply different, not less. The box below shares other neurodivergent terminology we use in this book.

Neurodivergent Terminology

allistic: Often used by members of the #ActuallyAutistic community, *allistic* (sometimes used interchangeably with *nypical*) refers to all nonautistic people, including both those considered to be neuro-normative and neurodivergent people who aren't autistic.

affirm: To affirm something means to validate it or to show a belief in or dedication to it. An affirming environment is one that accepts an individual as they are and works to help them operate within the world as their authentic self, rather than trying to change them to fit into certain situations or environments. An affirming relationship allows a person to express themself in a way that feels comfortable to them.

AuDHD: *AuDHD* (or *AuDHDer*) is a term used to describe people who are both autistic and diagnosed with ADHD. Since it's estimated that anywhere from 30 to 80 percent of autistic people also have symptoms of ADHD, and up to 50 percent of people with ADHD may also have symptoms of autism, this overlap in terminology makes sense (Kernbach et al. 2018).

identity-first language: Many neurodivergent people have reclaimed the label of their neurodivergence, asking to be called an autistic person, a dyslexic student, or an ADHDer to acknowledge how their neurodivergence is a part of who they are and that, without it, they would no longer be themselves. Using identity-first language embraces a person's neurodivergence. Though we default to using identify-first language in this book, we know that some neurodivergent individuals prefer person-first language instead. It's important to always respect individual preferences, and we implore you to default to following your students' lead in how they speak about themselves.

neurodiverse: All of humanity is neurodiverse; the concept of neurodiversity encompasses the varied ways the human brain can be wired. It recognizes that there are many ways for a brain to function and that variation does not mean a person is mentally ill or broken. Rather, it means that their brain operates in a way that is different from the majority. No single person is neurodiverse; only a group of people can be neurodiverse.

neurodivergent: Sometimes abbreviated as ND, *neurodivergent* is used to describe a person who experiences one or more variations of functioning in their brain, such as (but not limited to) autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or Tourette syndrome.

neuro-spicy: This portmanteau of *neuro* (as in neurodivergent) + *spicy* (as in strong and spirited) has taken off on social media as a self-descriptor for people who consider themselves neurodivergent. It's used both as a rejection of the perceived deficit of being identified as neurodivergent and as a way for people who identify as ND but don't have an official diagnosis to share their allegiance.

social model of disability: The social model of disability (see page 71) asks people to reconsider how they understand disability and the way the environment interacts with a person's needs. It posits that a person isn't disabled until society fails to make accommodations. *(Note: The social model of disability is useful in the context of a conversation about neurodiversity; however, like anything, it is an imperfect model to apply to all situations.)*