Changing the story: 7 ways to support a neurodiversity perspective

WHY IT MATTERS

Clinicians usually explain what autism means to a family first. The story of autism that clinicians tell stays with parents and forms the basis of how the child will understand themselves. Emphasizing both the strengths and the challenges often associated with autism gives families an accurate picture of what autism is and a place to start. Remind families that their child is more than a diagnosis and remains the same child they have always known.

MOVE AWAY FROM		MOVE TOWARD
A deficit-only, medical-model story	→	**A balanced story of strengths and challenges**

1 Words are powerful

How a clinician explains autism matters. Use respectful, neurodiversity-affirming language when talking about the child and their autism diagnosis. For example, instead of using words like

MOVE AWAY FROM	MOVE TOWARD
deficit	→ **area of challenge**
co-morbid.	→ **co-occurring**
at-risk	→ **high probability of autism**

2 Partner with and support parents

- Ask how they feel and what they already know about autism.
- **Set the agenda together.**
- Fill the gaps: why their child fits the diagnosis and what's next.

3 Set a supportive and warm tone

Warmth, respect, and empathy can help families feel supported as they process an autism diagnosis. Acknowledge parents' feelings and concerns while helping them recognize their child's strengths and their **own strengths as parents.**

4 Be honest and remain hopeful

Discuss challenges openly and honestly so families feel heard. At the same time, emphasize that **these challenges are only one part of who the child is** and **often the result of environments** that were not designed with Autistic people in mind. Recognize their strengths and identify where support may help.

5 Be thoughtful about how interventions are presented

After an autism diagnosis, families may feel pressure to pursue increasingly intensive services aimed at "curing" their child. Although early support can be helpful, **evidence does not show that highly intensive, structured intervention leads to "recovery"**. Instead, describe intervention as a way to support communication, everyday skills, relationships, play, and quality of life

6 Share an autism diagnosis in a culturally responsive and sensitive way

Some families may mistrust healthcare systems because of past discrimination or experiences of feeling dismissed or unheard, particularly when their early concerns were not taken seriously. In some communities, autism may also carry stigma or lead parents to blame themselves. Clinicians should **approach these conversations with additional care, respect, and reassurance**

7 Address caregivers' support needs

Parents of Autistic children may experience high levels of stress, often related to limited support, negative judgment, stigma, and added financial pressures. Many caregivers need **timely support and reassurance that their experiences are valid**. Promoting positive, affirming views of autism does not mean overlooking the real challenges families face within society

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