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June is a Month of Pride!

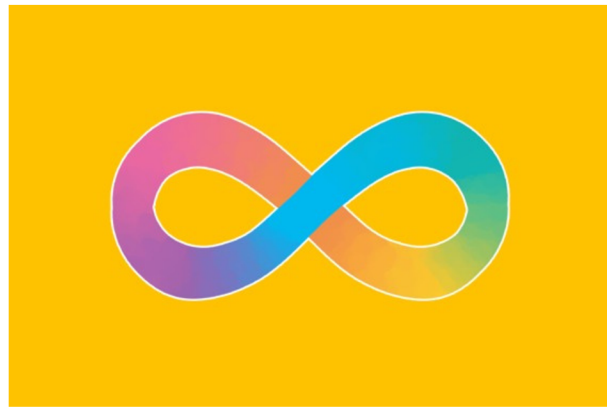
Autistic Pride Day – June 18th



**AUTISTIC
PRIDE DAY**
JUNE 18

On June 18th we celebrated Autistic Pride Day, which was founded in 2005. It is an annual celebration that affirms Autistic identity, promotes acceptance, and highlights the value of neurodiversity. Unlike traditional awareness events, this day emphasizes self-affirmation, equality, and identity, celebrating Autistic individuals for their unique strengths rather than focusing on perceived deficits. It challenges societal misconceptions and ableism, highlighting that many challenges Autistic people face stem from inflexible systems and negative attitudes rather than autism itself. Autistic Pride Day encourages environments that respect communication styles, sensory needs, and self-expression, allowing Autistic individuals to participate fully without changing who they are.

The rainbow infinity symbol is also central to the day's messaging and purpose. It represents the spectrum of Autistic identities and the concept of "Autistic forever," — that autism is a lifelong experience, not something to be outgrown or cured. While the image above used to promote Autistic Pride Day features the rainbow infinity on a white background, this combination is generally considered to represent Neurodiversity Pride (inclusive of other types of neurodivergence, such as ADHD, Dyslexia, and Tourettes). The Autistic Pride Flag features the symbol on a gold background. On the periodic table, the element gold is represented by "Au", and this color playfully references this symbolism, since Autism also starts with Au, and Autistic people are valuable to society.



Since its inception, the holiday has been observed in over 200 organizations across 22 countries, including government departments and councils. It has become a platform for autistic people to demand measurable change in hiring, funding, and policy.

(* A note about language: This article is written using identity-first language because that is often the preference of Autistic people, though this varies from person to person.)

A Neuroqueer Lens in Practice: A Conversation with Appel Farm Arts & Music Center

June is a month full of pride, for both the Autistic and LGBTQ+ communities. While we often think of these groups as distinct, there is significant overlap, with between [30-70% of neurodivergent individuals identifying as LGBTQ+](#), while only 7-8% of the population overall identify in these ways. To learn about the intersection of neurodivergence and queerness, we sat down with [Kristina Hill](#) and [Maera Barker](#), leaders of the [Appel Farm Arts & Music Center's](#) IHC initiative ([cohorts 3 and 4](#)), to learn about how their organization embeds respect for that intersection into how it operates, designs programs, and normalizes non-normativity. Central to this conversation is why they approach their work through a neuroqueer lens and why that matters for organizations working with neurodivergent people.

What Is Neuroqueer?

Extending from [Queer Theory](#), the term neuroqueer emerged from online community conversations in the early 2010s, developed [through the work](#) of scholars and writers including [Nick Walker](#), Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, and Melanie Yergeau. At its core, it is a word that holds two ideas together: being neurodivergent (having a brain that works differently from what society calls "normal," including Autism, ADHD, and sensory processing and other brain-based differences) and being queer (having a gender identity or sexual orientation outside of



straight and cisgender norms). For many people, these are not two separate parts of their identity. They shape and reinforce each other in ways that cannot be untangled.

What makes the neuroqueer framework distinctive is that it does not just describe who someone is. It also pushes back against the systems that decided what "normal" is supposed to look like in the first place. Society sets a standard for how brains should work and how people should love and live, and neuroqueer people fall outside those standards in multiple ways. Rather than treating that as a problem to be fixed, a neuroqueer lens treats it as a position of insight, where authenticity replaces compliance to rules that don't fit the individual's experiences.

The term can be used as an adjective to describe people, identities, spaces, and approaches to work. It can also be used as a verb: to "neuroqueer" something means to actively challenge and disrupt those norms, making room for people who have always been told they do not quite fit.

What a Neuroqueer Identity Means to Appel Farm Staff

For Kristina and Maera, the neuroqueer framework is less a label they applied to themselves than a word that finally captured something they had always known. "I don't know how to exist otherwise," Kristina reflected. The term describes the degree to which both identities challenge normativity, and how, at their intersection, the alienation and the empowerment are amplified together.

Maera put it directly: "The degree to which I feel alienated from a neurotypical society as a neurodivergent person is equivalent to the amount that I feel alienated from a heteronormative society. The intersectionality of the two becomes indistinguishable."

Why This Matters for Programs Serving Neurodivergent People

For organizations doing disability-focused work, the relevance of an LGBTQ-inclusive lens is sometimes treated as optional, or as belonging to a different domain entirely. This is a mistake. A program that is not explicitly affirming of LGBTQ+ identities is not fully serving the neurodivergent population it intends to reach. (And it should go without saying, the inverse is also true, LGBTQ+ organizations should likewise prioritize accessibility and inclusion for neurodivergent and disabled participants.)

At Appel Farm, this understanding is structural, not incidental. The organization collects self-identified gender on intake forms instead of data regarding sex assigned at birth, does not require a formal diagnosis to validate a neurodivergent identity, and has established gender-inclusive bunking across all age groups in its flagship sleepaway camp. Counselor name badges include pronouns as a matter of course. These are not add-ons; they are the baseline from which everything else follows.

"If we're truly going to be learner-led and centered," Kristina said, "then you can't exclude an identity. Queerness is a culture. Neurodivergence is a culture. If we're saying we're culturally responsive, we would never not include someone's entire identity."



Restorative Practices as a Neuroqueer Approach

One of the most striking things about Appel Farm's programming is how naturally its foundational philosophy aligns with a neuroqueer lens, even in areas that might not immediately seem related.

Appel Farm uses restorative practices and collaborative problem-solving as its core approach to community building and conflict. Rather than managing behavior through compliance and hierarchy, the organization invests in building relationships proactively, making space for dialogue, and repairing ruptures through

collaborative, non-punitive processes. Staff are trained to "notice and wonder," to keep a curious mind, and to prioritize relationship over authority.

This approach, it turns out, is also neuro-inclusive by design. When you get to know a person before placing demands on them, when you build trust before expecting compliance, you are creating conditions where neurodivergent people can more fully participate. Appel Farm arrived at this understanding through practice: the organization was restorative-practice-based before it fully recognized how many neurodivergent learners it was serving. "We were making spaces where you can be your whole self, no matter what that is," Kristina observed. The realization came gradually, that this environment was precisely why neurodivergent and queer young people kept choosing Appel Farm.

Maera noted that the same principle applies to their IHC initiative: "It's not rigid, adult-based learning systems. It is learner-based. The structure is flexible enough that there's no barrier for someone who wants to come in and do something a little different."

Two-way Learning

Something else came through in this conversation that is important to highlight: at Appel Farm, the learning moves in both directions. The young people who attend, many of them trans, non-binary, same-gender attracted, neurodivergent, and often multiple of these identities, are not just recipients of a neuroqueer-affirming environment. They are contributors to it.

Maera described being in affinity spaces at camp with ten or fifteen trans and non-binary young people at once, something that does not happen in most adults' daily lives. "I get so much inspiration seeing what they're saying and what they're doing. When I'm at Appel Farm, I feel like the future has hope." Kristina echoed this; young people at camp have expanded her own understanding of what gender can be, offering language and possibilities she did not have access to growing up.

This is part of what Appel Farm's flagship annual tradition, a camper-led demonstration held during the camp's Fourth of July parade, is built on. What started as a camper protest for dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets has evolved into a yearly workshop where young people make signs for causes they care about and march through campus together. The causes range from the silly to the serious, and sometimes they generate real dialogue. The point is not the specific issue; it is the practice of standing up for what you believe in, learning to coexist with people who believe different things, and doing it in community. In this way, celebration and dissent exist side by side — not in contradiction, but in conversation. To hold both at once is, in itself, an act of neuroqueering.

A Note for Other Program Providers

If there is a takeaway from this conversation for other organizations doing disability-focused work in New Jersey, it is this: LGBTQ+ inclusion is not a separate initiative from disability inclusion. It is part of the same work. The populations overlap substantially. An organization that designs its programs around neurodivergent people without attending explicitly to LGBTQ+ identity is not reaching the full community it intends to serve.

What Appel Farm's work makes clear is that a neuroqueer lens in practice does not require a new program or a separate initiative. It requires a set of commitments: center the people you serve, not the systems you have built. Make room for self-identification without demanding it. Build in flexibility before problems arise, not after. Assume that the people in the room know things you do not, and create conditions where they can tell you. These are not radical acts — but they are intentional ones, and they are available to any organization willing to make them. For those of us working in disability inclusion across New Jersey, Appel Farm offers both a model and a challenge: are we making spaces where people can show up as their whole selves, or are we only making space for the parts of them we already planned for?

More About Appel Farm

Appel Farm Arts & Music Center was founded in 1960 when Albert and Clare Appel, both professional musicians and music educators, transformed their 176-acre South Jersey farm into a summer arts community. From the beginning, they believed that all children have artistic talent and deserve a supportive environment in which to grow. Albert was a vocal supporter of the racial integration of American Camp Association member camps during the Civil Rights Movement, with Appel Farm serving as the first racially integrated sleepaway camp. The camp was established under the belief in the inherent goodness of diversity and equal input.

Today, the organization offers a range of [programs](#) centered on the arts, healthy living, and community, including its flagship [sleepaway camp](#) and programming available to schools, libraries, and community centers throughout the New Jersey, Philadelphia, and New York areas. As an IHC Cohort 3 grantee, Appel Farm used grant funding to improve the physical accessibility of its performing arts venue. Now in Cohort 4, their initiative has shifted toward building resources for arts programs serving neurodivergent communities. Working with a ten-person advisory council of neurodivergent people, the organization has developed video trainings, youth advocacy worksheets, and a database of neurodivergent artists spanning the tri-state region. Throughout this work, Appel Farm has aimed to ensure that people with and without disabilities, of every gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and background have a voice in shaping the spaces and resources meant to serve them.