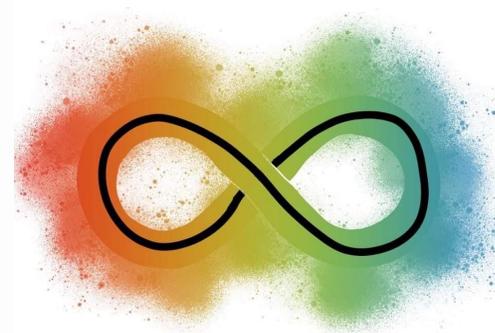


Neurodiversity Affirming Practice



Speech Pathology Intervention: schools

Cath Fernando – Neurodivergent Speech therapist

Speech Pathology for Schools (SPS) Winter Conference

1st July 2024

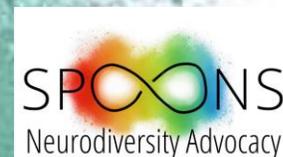


Cath Fernando

Spoons Advocacy

Neurodivergent Speech Pathologist

(MSP, BEng, BA, CPSP)



Overview

The Neurodiversity Affirming Paradigm

- How do we approach intervention?

Intervention: the client

- Identity and Self esteem
- Self advocacy

Intervention: the environment

- Distress
- Misunderstandings
- Dysregulation
- Friendship

A few terms...

Neurodiversity (noun): The concept that there are many different types of brains among humanity, which think, feel, perceive and process the world uniquely (Singer, 1996)

Neurodivergent (adj): A term to describes an individual whose brain works differently to the “majority” of brains (Asasumasu, 1999)

Neurodiverse (adj): A term used to describe a group with different neurotypes in it

Neurotypical (adj): refers to an individual whose brain that is not neurodivergent. This represents the most common type of brain.

NEURODIVERGENT UMBRELLA*

ADHD

BIPOLAR

ASPD

DID & OSDD

AUTISM

EPILEPSY

BPD

NPD

GAD

OCD

ABI/TBI

DYSLEXIA

CPTSD

TIC DISORDERS

DYSPRAXIA

HSP

SCHIZOPHRENIA

SENSORY PROCESSING

MISOPHONIA

HP

PTSD

DYSCALCULIA

DOWN SYNDROME

DYSCRAPHIA

Also Consider:

Stuttering

Aphasia

CAS

Dysarthria

Source: Sonny Jane Wise
www.livedexperienceeducator.com

Formal Guidelines

SPA position statement Autism (2022):

2.4 The Association recognises that it is essential for speech pathologists to work in ways that are neurodiversity-affirming.

Autism CRC guideline for supporting the learning, participation and wellbeing of autistic children and their families in Australia (2024):

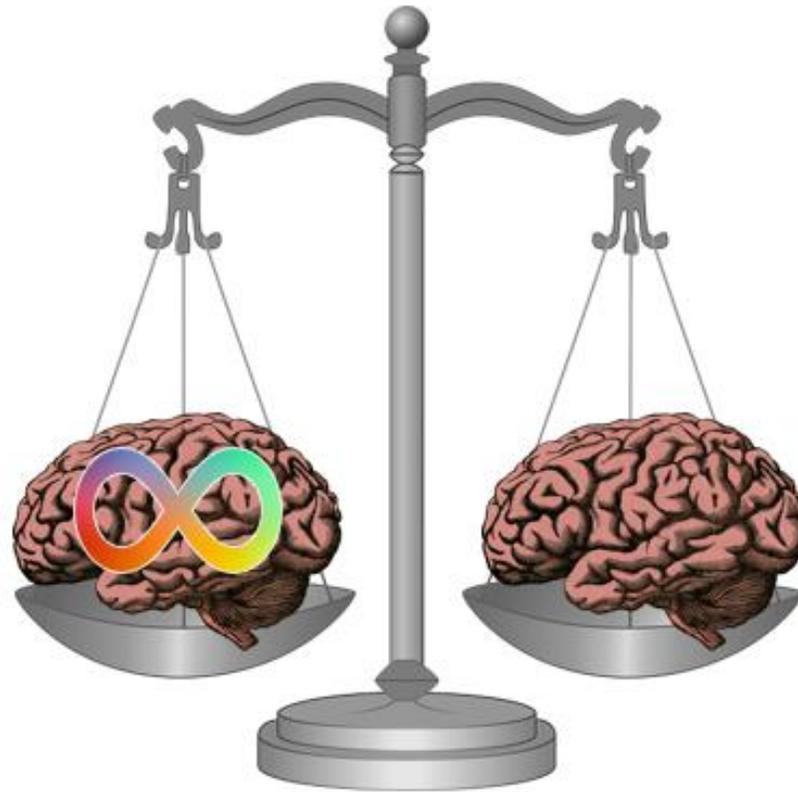
Recommendation 14:

“Supports should be neurodiversity-affirming, embracing each child’s unique understanding of other people and the world around them, without seeking to “cure” Autism”. CRC Guidelines

The Neurodiversity Affirming Paradigm

**All brains
are equal**

**Value different
thinking**



**Reject
neuronormativity**

**Know other ways
of being**

Neurodiversity Affirming Practice: what is it?



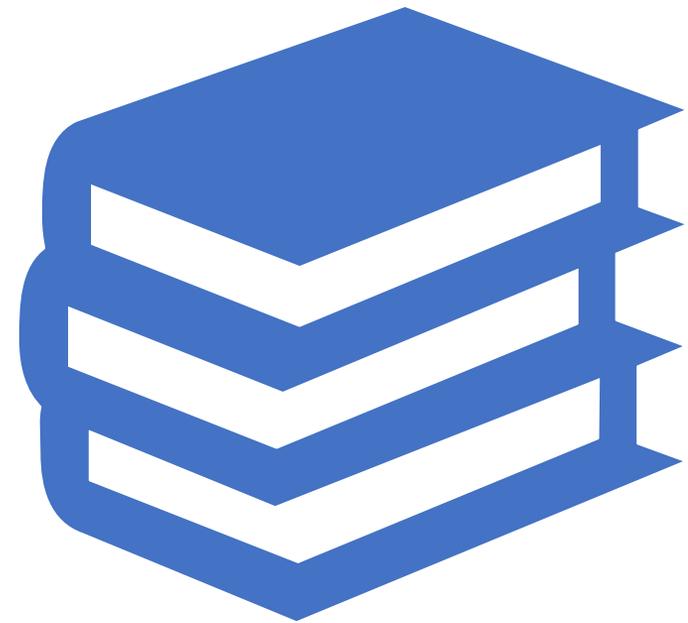
An interpretation and practical application of the NDA paradigm



Applicable to healthcare, classrooms, workplaces, policy, society

NDA practice principles (Naylor, 2023)

- **NDA practice is philosophy, not a “what to do”**
- **NDA Practice means expanding the definition of “normal”**
- **Epistemic Justice is a fundamental underlying value of NDA Practice**
- **NDA Practice is about building a culture of acceptance**
- **NDA Practice is about a genuine desire to help and reduce Autistic minoritisation**



How do we know what to do in intervention?

1. What has gone wrong in formative years (schools) for Autistic people? What are adults telling us would have benefitted them?
2. What have Autistic researchers learned over the past 30+ years?
 - What Autism FEELS like
 - The Double Empathy theory and communication differences
 - Monotropism
 - Masking, trauma
 - Many, many positives too!
3. My take: NDA practice means implementing the things Autistic adults wish they had and preventing repeating negative outcomes for the next generation

What has happened to our Autistic Adults?

History of bullying and exclusion at school (up to 97% report bullying)

Microaggressions, “the death by 1000 cuts”

Critical, frustrated or unaccepting parents/ family

Authority figures taught implicitly taught them they were not ok as they are (ADHDers internalise over 20,000 negative messages by the age of 12)

School environment is too distressing to form friendships

Both Distress behaviours and Happy behaviours are punished.



Social blunders are UNINTENTIONAL and TRAUMATIC

“As a late diagnosed AuDHD person... I must have asked “What did I do wrong?” at least a thousand times...

The mood would shift suddenly, and my communication partners would look and behave as though I had slapped them...

From my perspective, everything was fine. From their perspective... it warranted a shocked, angry or hurt response...”

– The Articulate Autistic (from the book Where Did I go wrong?)

... So we mask as though our lives depend on it (our lives do depend on it)

"Am I holding my hands still?"

"Am I saying the right thing at the right time?"

"Am I too loud?"

"Am I talking too fast?"

"Am I interrupting?"



"Am I making eye contact?"

"Is my face showing the right expression?"

"I mustn't cover my ears even though the music is hurting"

Autistic Adult clients – common concerns

- Are fundamentally unempowered and lacking confidence
- Severe rejection sensitive dysphoria – trauma around socialising
- Masking and Fawning
- Socially isolated and few/no reliable friendships
- Family difficulties due to neurodivergence
- Unemployed/ underemployed
- Internalised ableism
 - Think they need to learn how to be neurotypical to improve quality of life



Reminder that autistic joy
is beautiful



Autistic joy is magic 🧙‍♀️

🔊 loé Hayden · Original audio

Autistic people
want to *unmask*

Therapy approaches

Internal – the person

Support the Autistic person to understand themselves and build a positive self-identity as a base to form meaningful connections with others

External – the environment

Change the physical and attitudinal environment to enable the Autistic person to behave authentically, remain regulated, and to be treated with respect by others

Therapy approaches

Internal – the person

Support the Autistic person to understand themselves and build a positive self-identity as a base to form meaningful connections with others

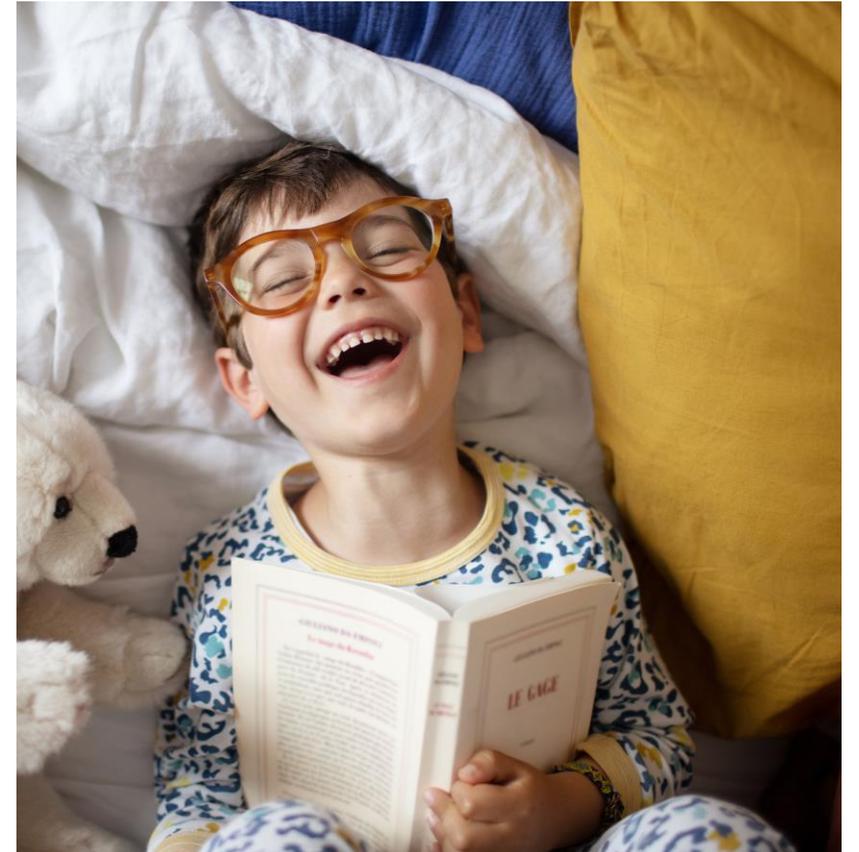
External – the environment

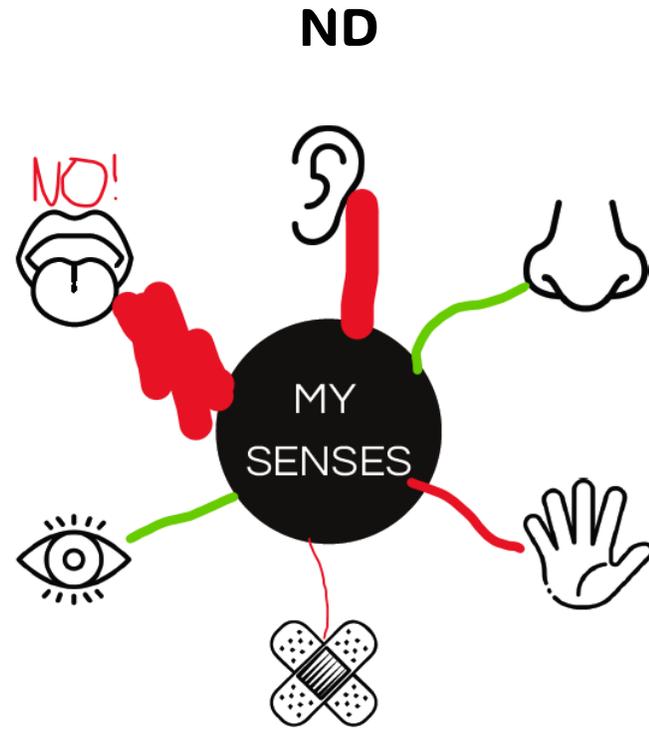
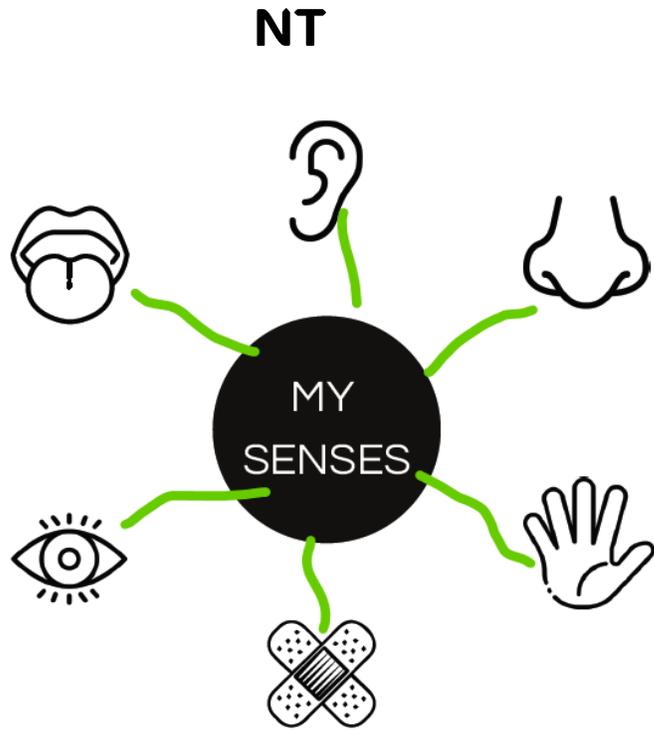
Change the physical and attitudinal environment to enable the Autistic person to behave authentically, remain regulated, and to be treated with respect by others

Build up the person

Self Knowledge

- **Why am I different** to the other children? (senses, stims, Splns)
- How do different people communicate?
- How can I manage my energy? (Spoon theory)
- How do I find my tribe?





Exteroception (sensing the outside world)

Proprioception and Stims



Always accommodate stimming!

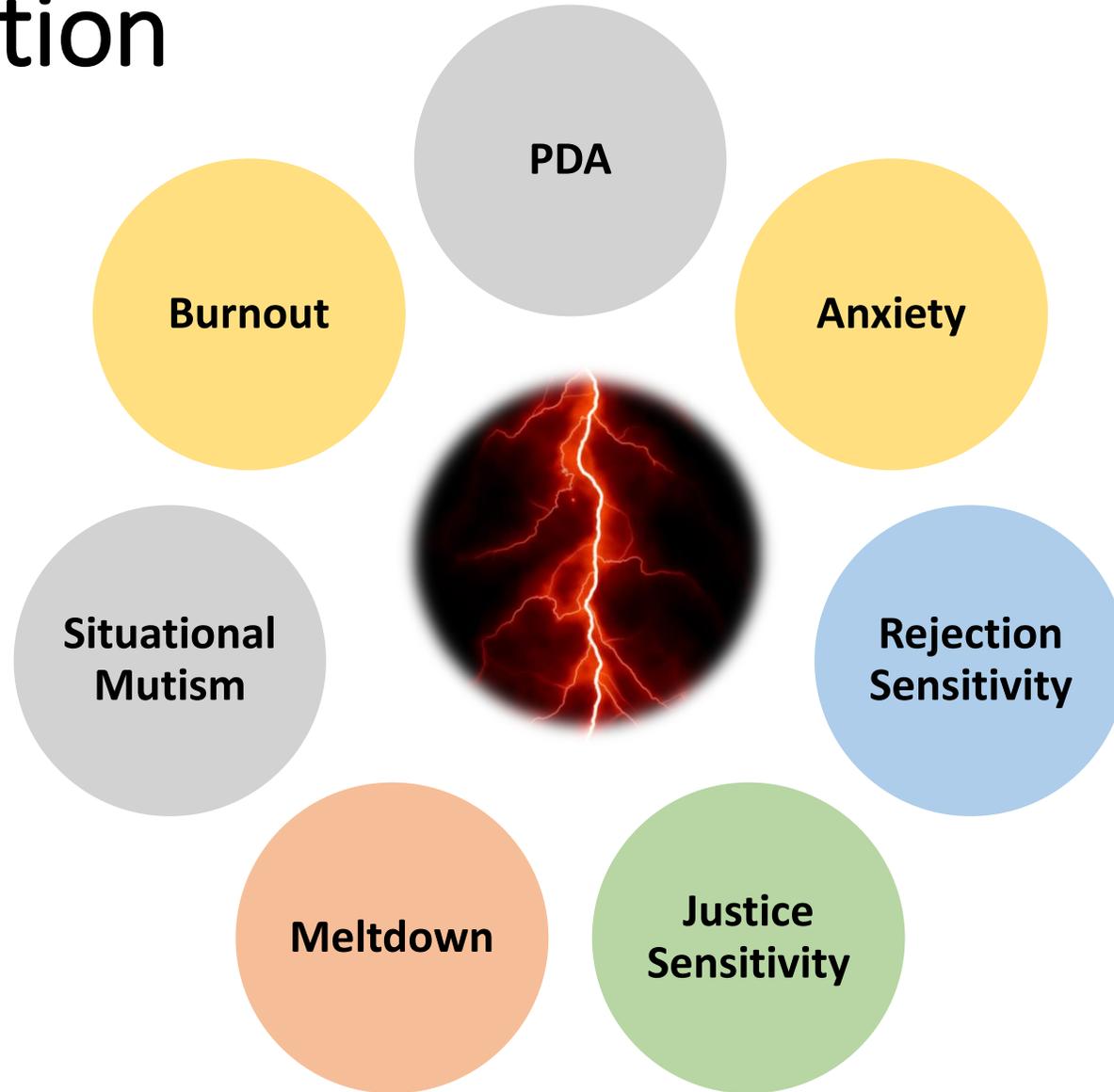
It is natural and keeps our bodies regulated.



Kids' bodies naturally do what they need to be regulated, to focus and learn. It is our job to pay attention and provide opportunities



Neuroception



Splns

- Hunger for information
- Expertise
- Deeply felt joy!
- Monotropism

“I feel quite high for an extended period (weeks), get obsessed by whatever that’s gripping me. There’s a euphoria and increased energy and capacity” – Kate (Autistic Researcher)



**Use Splns to encourage
and engage kids!**

Autistic Joy

- *“Autistic people often experience the sensory world with hyper-attunement, creative alliance and whimsy” – Source: The ND OT*
- *“I love my brain. I’m very sensitive. For example, when I close my eyes, I can really see music with colours” – Sarah (Autistic Speech Pathologist)*



Neurodiversity Affirming Resources

- Sea Bridges (ages 4-8)
<https://bridgeslearningsystem.com/sea-bridge/>
- LEANS: This is a fantastic school wide program which is 100% free:
<https://salvesen-research.ed.ac.uk/leans>
- Pandas Program to support 8–14-year-old children with self identity/positive Autistic identity
<https://www.pandasonline.org/>
- Konfident Kidz: a set of perspective taking activities for all primary school levels - the one called “Include” on this website:
<https://konfidentkidz.ie/social-skills-books/>

Self-
advocacy:
what do I
say when
they don't
understand
me?

"I'm Autistic and"

"I need a break now"

"I talk over people sometimes. I still want to listen to you"

"My brain didn't listen. But I still care".

"No hugging please"

"It's not an overreaction. I am much more sensitive to pain/sounds/light than you"

"I don't feel like playing right now. But I'm still your friend."

Speech pathology therapy approaches

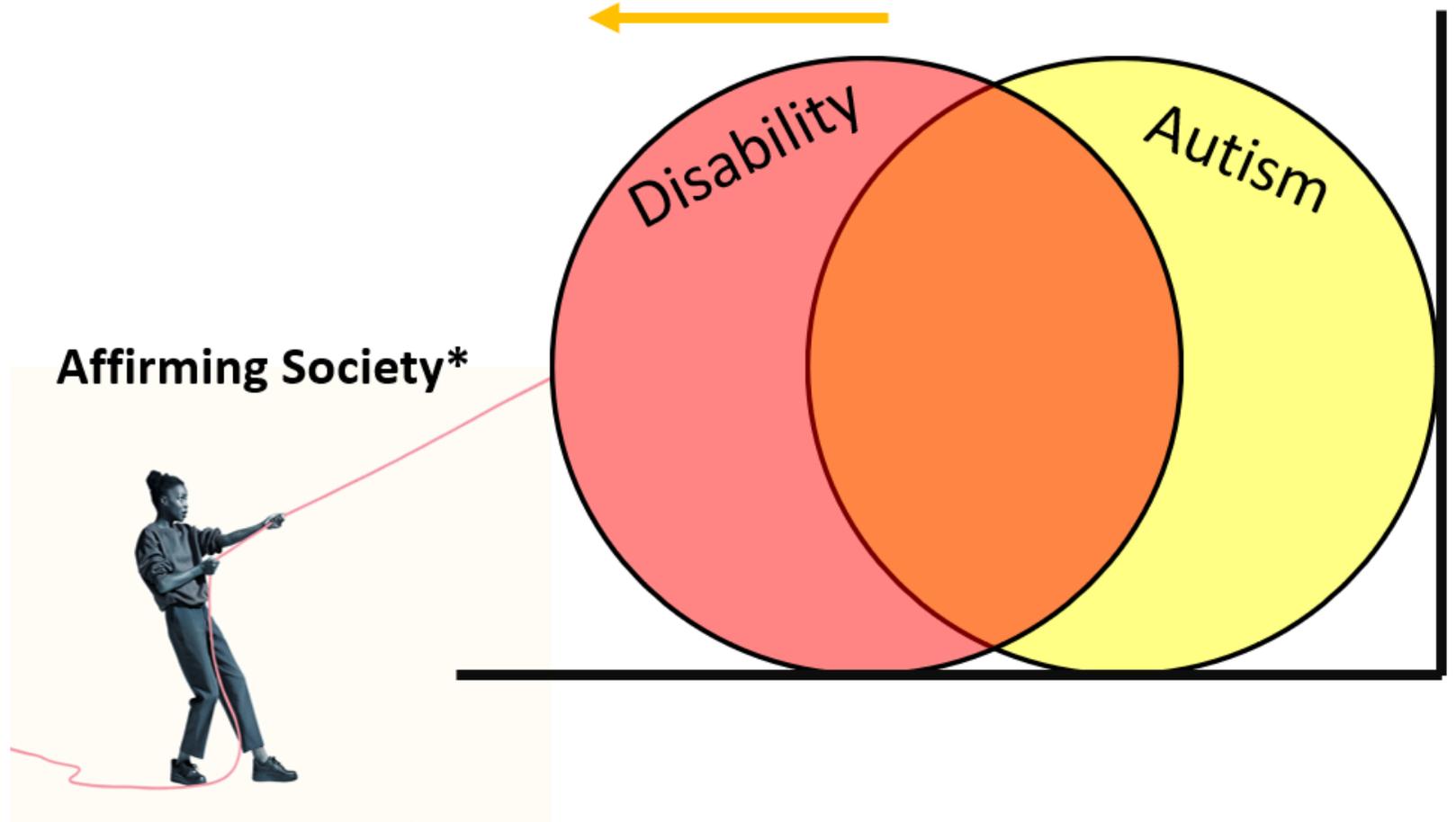
Internal – the person

Support the Autistic person to understand themselves and build a positive self-identity as a base to form meaningful connections with others

External – the environment

Change the physical and attitudinal environment to enable the Autistic person to behave authentically, remain regulated, and to be treated with respect by others

Change the environment,
not the child



Note: Some Autistic and ADHD people do not identify as disabled

External – the environment

Facilitate stronger relationships

Educate parents, teachers about the perspective of the neurodivergent person

Promote explicit acceptance and respect for Autistic behaviour and communication styles in classrooms

Change the physical environment to maximise regulation and minimise triggers

Address specific conflicts from all perspectives; “all needs must be met”





Key intervention strategies

1. Supporting distressed or anxious children
2. Intervene in misunderstandings
3. Support development of true friendships

A red plastic pencil case is open, revealing a variety of school supplies. Inside the case, there are several pens in blue, yellow, and purple, along with pencils in yellow and blue. A pair of blue-handled scissors is prominently placed in the center. Other items include a pink eraser, a pencil sharpener, a pink pencil holder, and several colorful paper clips. The case is resting on a calendar page, with dates like 12, 19, 16, and 10 visible. The text "Intervention for school distress" is overlaid in white on the central part of the image.

Intervention for school distress



Most behaviour considered “antisocial” at school is distress (accommodate environment urgently!)

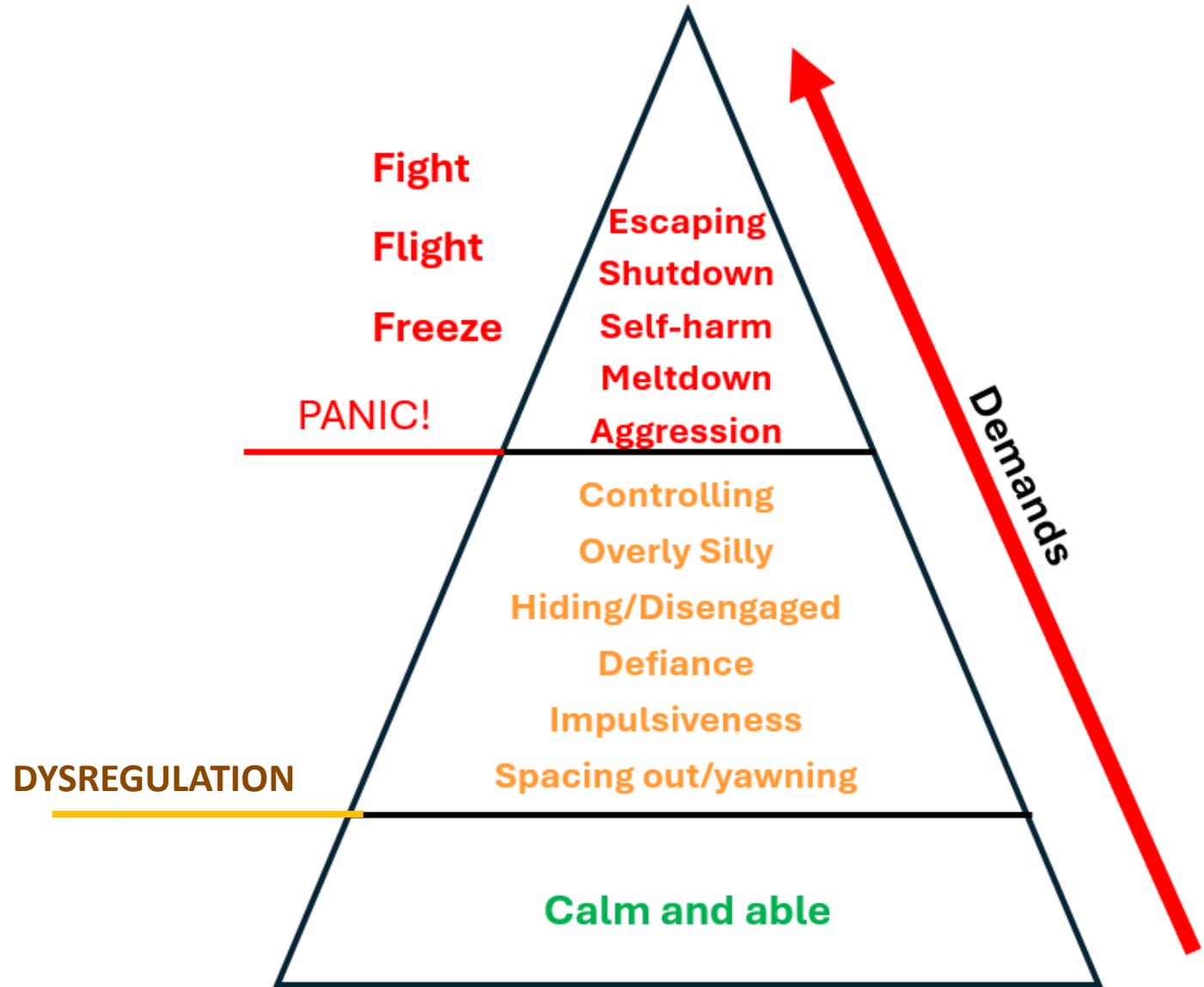
High anxiety kids: the PDA profile

- 'Pervasive Drive for Autonomy' (aka Pathological Demand Avoidance)
- A lived experience definition: "an involuntary and irrational drive to avoid anything and everything, even things that would benefit me and/or that I'd enjoy" (- Sally Cat)

“can’t”,
not “won’t”

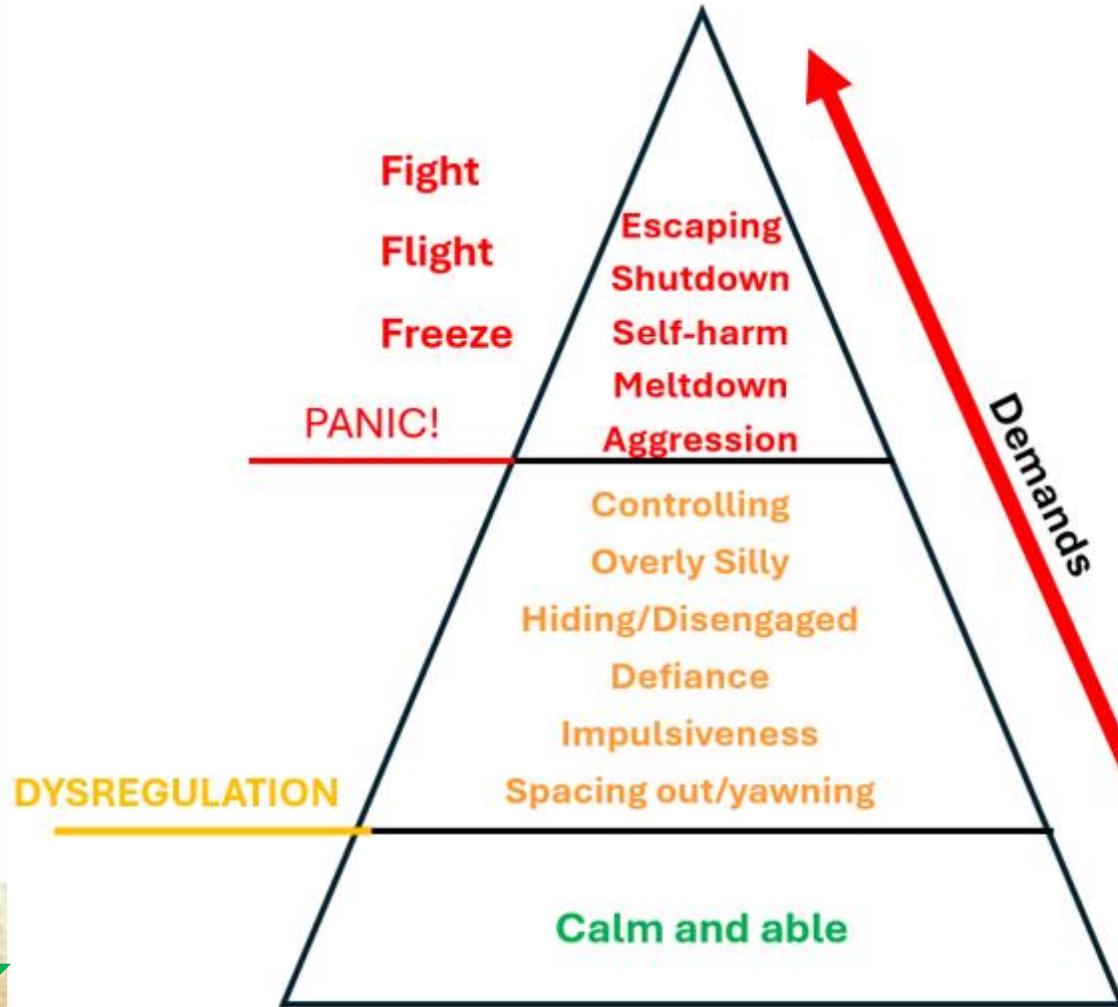
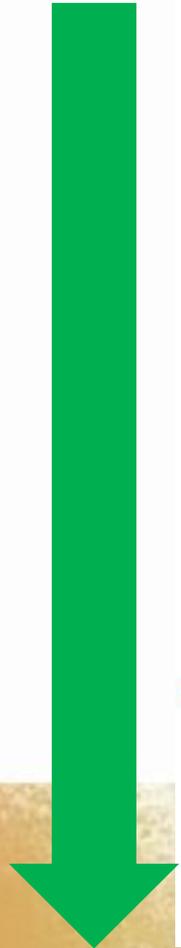
- The neuroception of threat in the moment impedes access to taking an action
- Need to be in control of play and activities
- Everything needs to be perfect
- Demands may trigger strong anger response or shut down
- Child gets more resistant and heightened with increased demands and boundary setting
- Can feel like “walking on eggshells” around them

Not “bad
behaviour”!



“Kids do well when they can” – Dr Ross Green

Connect
Understand
Build trust
Calm and Able: now you can
set boundaries



Bringing child back to calm

- Coregulation with a safe adult
- Movement or calm
- Special interest and flow
- Dopamine – distraction, novelty and sensory seeking opportunities



PDA – tips

- Build trust with the child
- Pick your battles!
- Use implication, not command (“let’s see what’s on your desk”, not “finish your maths!”)
- Set up for success (get out the work and set up the desk for the child)
- Low demand school: child is allowed to say no to some school activities



Calm and Able

- Child will become **more compliant** when they feel understood

About Frank...

- Very bright, curious, active
- AuDHD
- “Extreme” PDA profile = low threshold for dysregulation + very high reactivity
- “out of nowhere” hits meltdown and goes into fight mode (hitting, screaming, throwing things)
- Cannot be in the classroom for long periods
- Needs to be in control, perfectionist

How does his teacher manage?



Frank's first day of prep (mum's account)

“Morning! I thought I’d share how the first two days for my prep, Frank, have gone.

Frank has basically had a SWAT team around him 🤖 🎨

They’ve had two aides who take turns to be with him all day, and [Welfare coordinator] and [Vice Principal] have been more-or-less shadowing him to make sure the first days all go smoothly.

They’ve had some bumps in that he basically just doesn’t do what other kids are doing and go where they’re going, but they’re letting him lead until he’s not so anxious. For instance, on the first morning all the other kids were in the classroom but that was too overwhelming, so he loaded paper into the photocopier with his aide instead. And he collected sticks for wands at playtime and they couldn’t let him bring them inside and he was getting SO upset so they’ve made him a wand spot where he can keep them all.

And they had two specialist classes on the first day, but it caught him by surprise that they were going across the school to a new room, and he started losing it..., so we gave them our own countdown visual timer from home with a picture of what was coming up. They said it was amazing and actually it helped all the kids!

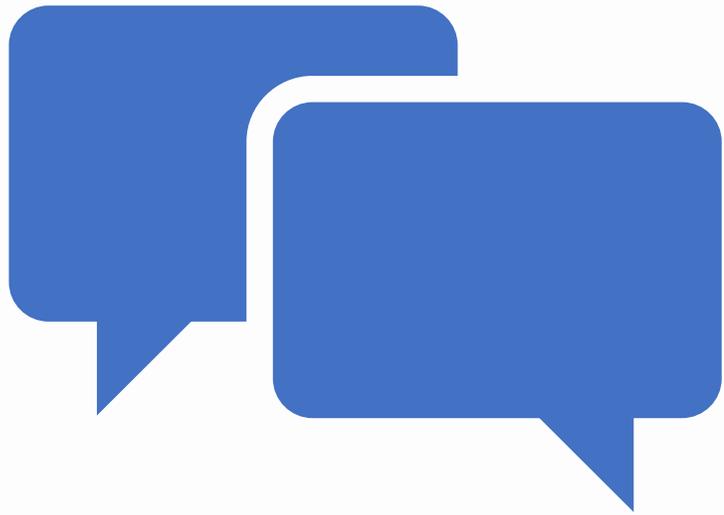
So, there have been no meltdowns or explosions, they’re super invested in helping him (for everyone’s sake!) and he’s had two really happy days! I just asked him what his favourite thing has been so far and he said “they let me draw poo” 🎨 🧑 🐛”

Top tips for including PDA children school

1. Be prepared before school starts: add “too many” supports and reduce, not scrambling to add supports
2. Relationship with the teacher is critical: check in regularly with the child, don’t assume they’re ok
3. Relationship with the parents is essential: what are their strategies?
4. Always provide choices, including the choice not to participate
5. Reduce hierarchy: teacher and student are equal
6. Let the child go first, even “be the teacher” sometimes
7. Normalise differences and role model unconditional positive regard
8. Have an aide to support the child or the rest of the class
9. Neurodivergent parent network

2. Intervention for misunderstandings





Autistic communication differences

Autistic people share a communication style



Neurotypical people share a communication style



**Communication Differences: The Double Empathy Theory
(Milton, 2012)**

Infodumping (talking excitedly in a monologue on a topic of interest, sometimes in great detail)

Autistic

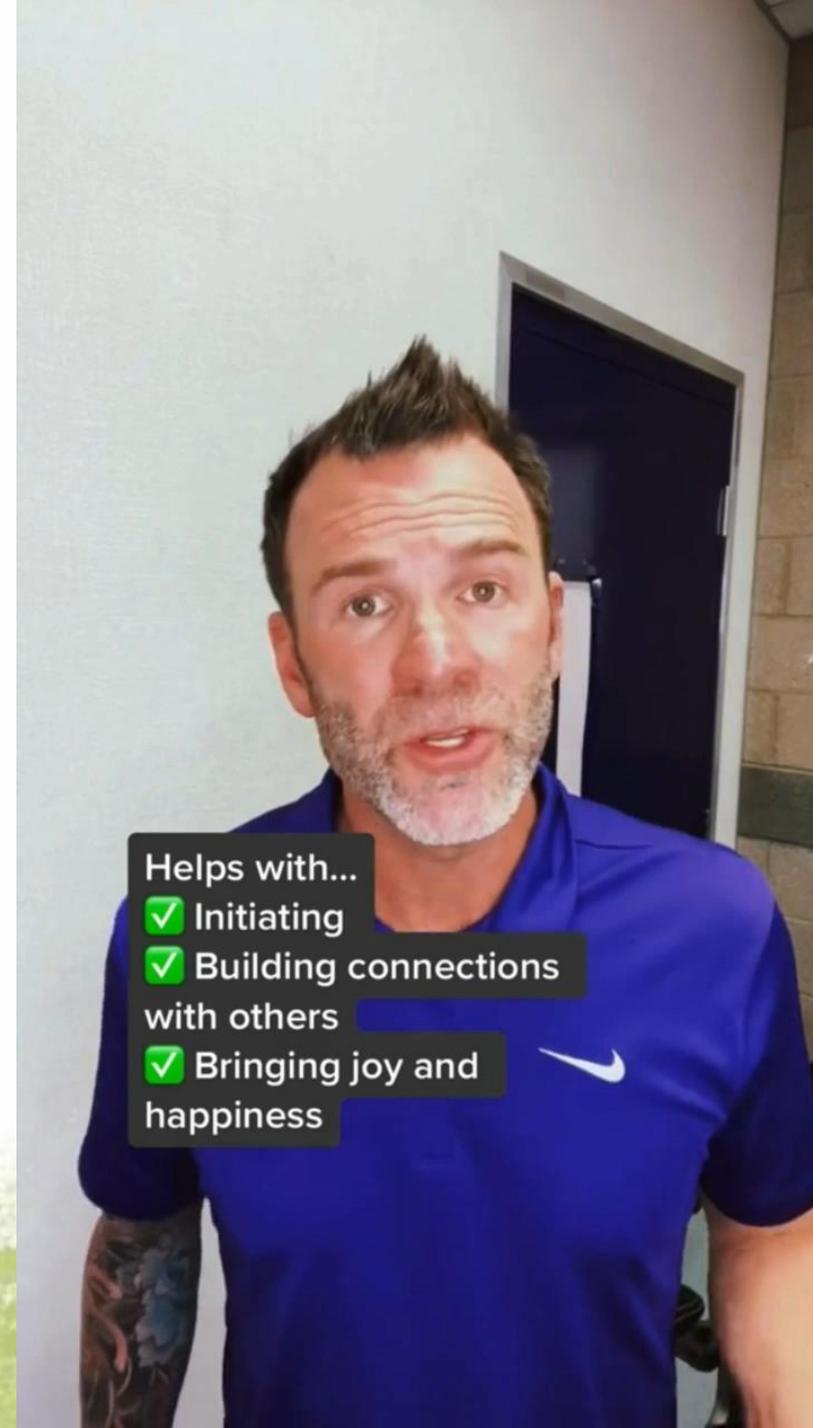
- “Autistic love language”
- Enjoyable – desire to share excitement about the information
- Enjoy infodumping and receiving infodumping together
- Builds bonding and trust between conversation partners

Neurotypical

- Do not infodump (maybe if they win the lottery?)
- May experience the opposite – boredom
- May misinterpret as ego-centric

Autistic Communication Differences: Infodumping

- Neurotypical tips:
 - Don't shut it down/ treat it as a disorder
 - Provide a time and place to do it in classrooms
 - You don't always have to listen: ask
- *Video: The Speech Dude – TikTok: infodumping*



Helps with...

- ✓ Initiating
- ✓ Building connections with others
- ✓ Bringing joy and happiness

Plain speaking

Autistic

- Prefer to say exactly what they mean, without nuance or hinting
- Value honesty and accuracy
- Give their opinions directly, without sugar coating
- Prefer literal language
- Value clear information and instructions
- Perceive nuanced language to be inefficient
- Dislike (and can sense) inauthenticity

Neurotypical

- Value being perceived as nice over being honest
- Use lots of strategies, tone and nuance to “soften” the truth, or simply lie to protect the other person’s feelings
- Misunderstand plain speaking as “blunt” or “rude”
- Use tone and facial expressions to alter the meaning of the words

Neurokin Conversation

Autistic

- Longer conversational turns
- Non-linear / “roller coaster” conversation: throwing in thoughts
- Overlapping talk is normal
- Abrupt topic change is normal
- Topics may be deeply personal or in-depth
- May enjoy having the same conversation again
- Different listening and monitoring (less face to face and eye contact)
- Find shallow conversation or small talk boring and a waste of time and efficiency

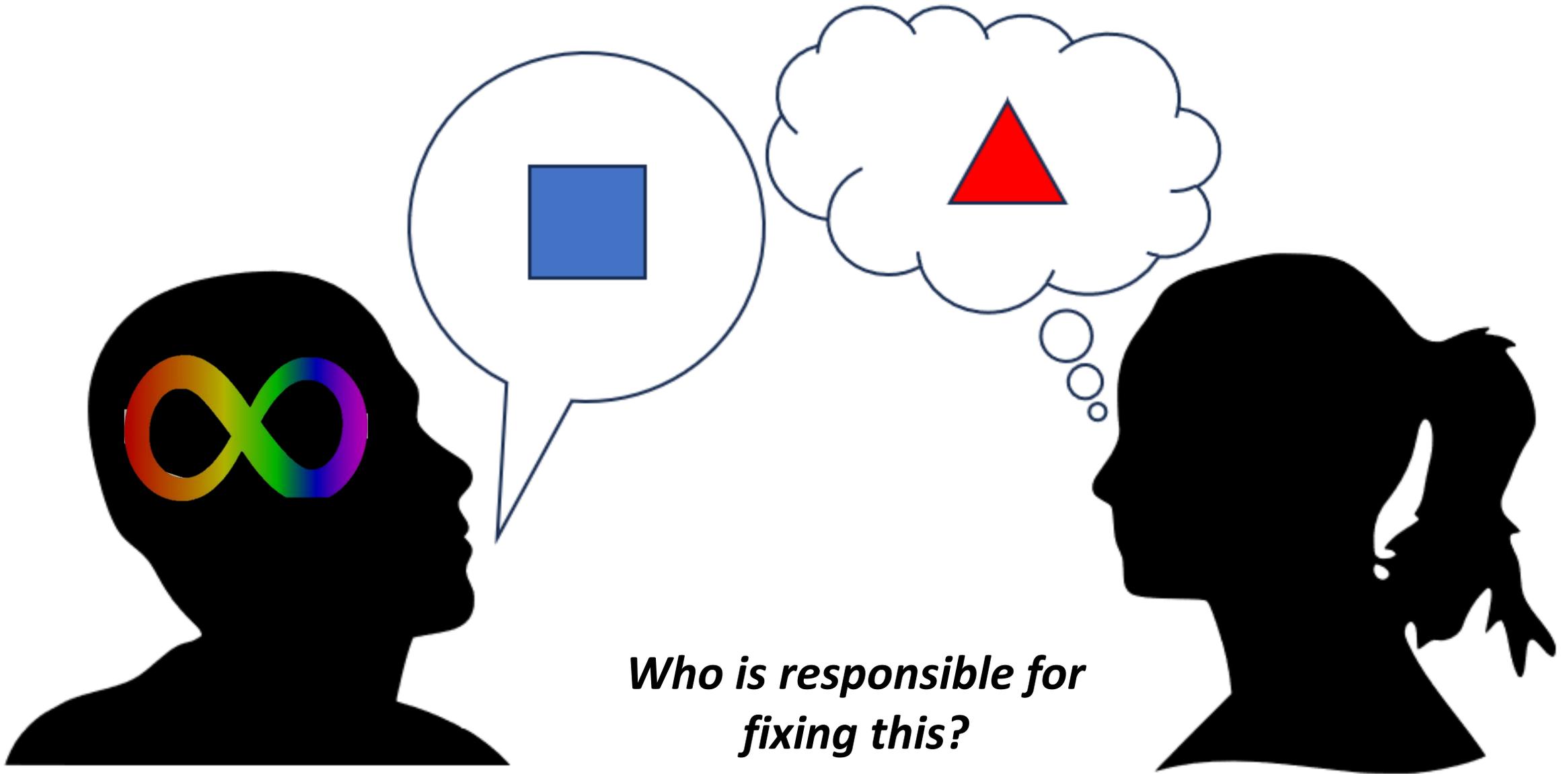
Neurotypical

- Being talked over causes frustration
- Ask and answer questions to link the conversation together, to get more information and listen actively
- Talk for longer on more surface level topics unless they know each other well
- The purpose of the conversation is to build connection and trust, rather than what they are actually talking about
- Value feeling equally included

Autistic Communication Styles

- Non-linear conversation (weavers and concluders)
- Throwing in thoughts
- Repeating
- Overlapping talk
- Verbal stims (sound effects, accents, humming etc)
- Different listening and monitoring
- Natural but “seemingly delayed” responses
- Not much eye contact
- Gestalt Language Processors
- Sharing about self to empathise





*Who is responsible for
fixing this?*

“Plain Speaking”

- Jenny told her friends that they are not real Taylor Swift fans because they only like the “popular” songs. She knew this was true from reading an online forum for “real” Swifty Fans. Now the friends are aren’t talking to her.
- Stacy was excited about meeting her favourite Essendon players on the weekend. She told her friends about it all lunchtime. Now they aren’t talking to her.

“Infodumping”

Handling misunderstandings:

- 2-way perspective taking
- The Autistic perspective is valid
- The NT perspective is valid
- ... Parents and teachers **need** information about Autistic communication styles in order to handle this fairly!

Explaining the neurotypical perspective to an Autistic teen:

- Delivery needs to be extremely **tactful** and **sensitive**, e.g.:
 - Regulated, calm and able (not upset)
 - Prepared to listen (“Is now a good time to give you some information about neurotypical kids”)
 - Talk about “them” in general terms, not “you” (“Neurotypical people value having more equal turns to talk”)
 - Don’t ask them to do anything different (unless there is no choice)

Other misunderstandings

Year 9 Paul (Autistic and cooccurring mild ID) keeps staring at Linda in class because he likes her. Linda is uncomfortable and reports him to the principal.

Start perspective taking in Early Intervention

- Talk about other perspectives regularly, in the moment (not just about Autistic differences)
- Use neutral language (no way is better)
- Keep it unremarkable (a casual aside)
- Don't request that either side change their behaviour (unless it's dangerous)

Kindergarten age – normalising differences

Difference	To Autistic child	Say to NT child
Infodumping	Jaxon doesn't listen to infodumping. Maybe he doesn't get excited about trains like you do. Mummy always loves you infodumping about trains	Dave enjoys talking about trains. He likes it when people listen
Sound sensitivity	You hear things much louder than the other kids – that's why you wear headphones	Dave hears sounds much louder than other people can so he has to protect his ears with headphones
Impulsivity / not noticing consequence	I don't think Amy likes getting sand on her clothes	Dave's brain goes so fast he can't stop and check no one is in the way sometimes
Stimming	Most of your class is neurotypical. They feel ok sitting still. You need to move your body and stim to feel good sitting here.	Dave has to move his body and wiggle a lot because it helps him to concentrate. He doesn't sit still.

Lack of social skills or dysregulation?

The case of Chris, grade 2:

- Chris has been in trouble this week for “not keeping his hands to himself”
- He threw sand at another child in the sand pit
- He grabbed someone’s jumper tore it
- He “leans” on other children at floor time
- He seems “happy” when these things happen

What is regulation?

- **Dysregulation (a definition): the child's internal state does not match the current environment or activity**
 - e.g. Child can't sit still or focus in classroom learning when the expectation is to focus and learn
 - e.g. Child is feeling sleepy and lethargic during sports class when the expectation is to run around

A 5-point plan for impulse control

Step	Example
1. The child needs to understand what the rule is and why	“Don’t throw sand at other children in the sandpit because it can get into their eyes and hurt them.”
2. Can the child follow the rule right now?	If dysregulated, the child has no choice but to break the rule
3. Teach the child what they can do, not just what they can’t do	Keep the sand within arm's reach
4. Rescue the situation with compassion for both sides and act to keep all children safe	“I can see you’re having trouble keeping the sand in your space, so let’s go for a walk”
5. Upskill the other children in compassion and boundary setting	“If you don’t like it, say “no! Stop throwing that! Remember Tom’s brain goes too fast for him to stop sometimes.”



Encourage real friendships

What is friendship?

- Definition from keynote speech by Dr Erna Alant, AGOSCI, 2022:
“a voluntary and reciprocal relationship in which two students exhibit mutual attachment to one another, frequent proximity and companionship and evidence of enjoyment or affection”
- Social closeness is about the development of **new nuances** of meaning:
 - Look for: level of enjoyment, level and range of responses, attentiveness, evidence of nuanced meaning (“in-jokes”, moments of mutual understandings – gestures, looks)
 - There is an ease of moving between seemingly superficial exchanges to more serious exchanges
- Voluntary and reciprocal – what does that mean?
 - There is no IQ or language pre-requisite for friendship
 - There is NO social skills intervention needed to make friends



The power of real friendship

- A real friend:
 - Provides me a lens through which to view other relationships: being with you feels different to being with others
 - Makes me know that being myself is ok – even just with this person
 - Real social skills are exposed when a child feels safe: they may not ‘lack social skills’ at all!

Supporting development of friendships

- Semi-structured, adult lead, supported play during school breaks
- Child may prefer 1:1 friend
- They may need alone time sometimes
- They may prefer a child a different age
- There is no “wrong” way to play
- Encourage parents to support potential friendships outside of school



“Once I started feeling comfortable in my own skin... I began to find friendships in the most beautiful places... and in groups ... catering to autistic people., where my flappy hands and excited rambles and lack of eye contact was mirrored – many of these people have become lifelong friends. I found friendships when I was no longer forced into communicating the way the world wanted me to; instead I was allowed to simply be me.”

- Chloe Hayden, Australian Actress (Heartbreak High)

Please continue your journey ...



Social media:

Follow #ActuallyAutistic people on social media

Find the neurodiversity affirming groups for your profession



Research:

Seek out research by neurodivergent people (see also “Neurodiversity” research magazine)

Seek out research that has included the viewpoints of neurodivergent people and prioritised their concerns over neurotypical priorities



Podcasts:

The Neurodiversity Podcast

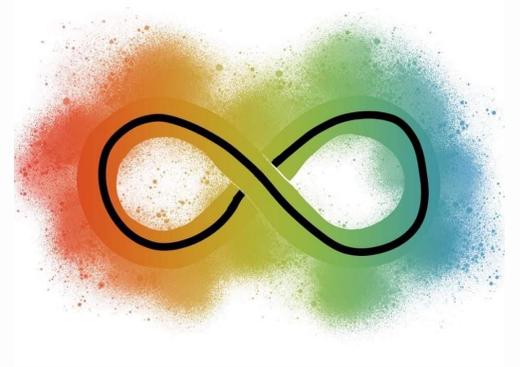
Uniquely Human

Square peg Round hole

The neurodivergent woman

At peace parenting (on PDA)

You can find me at:



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