

Autism and neurodiversity affirming practice

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Hello and Welcome!

Please note:







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With thanks to the SWAN EP Team



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This morning:

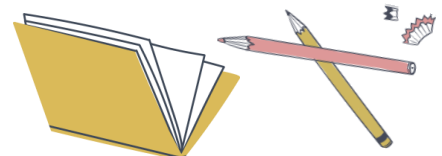
	9:30 – 10:30am:	Neurodiversity Affirming Practice
	10:30 – 10:40am:	Break
	10:40 – 11:40am:	Overwhelm
	11:40 – 11:45am:	Break
	11:45 – 12:30pm:	Advocacy and Reflection time
	12.30pm:	Lunch

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Neurodiversity affirming practice

We will be covering:

- An introduction to neurodiversity, including key terminology
- Some key neurodiversity-affirming frameworks and concepts for understanding neurodivergence:
 - Double Empathy Problem
 - Monotropism
 - Executive Function differences
- Why these are important in a school context



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What is neurodiversity?

We are all different in how we think, feel, and learn, because our brains process information differently.

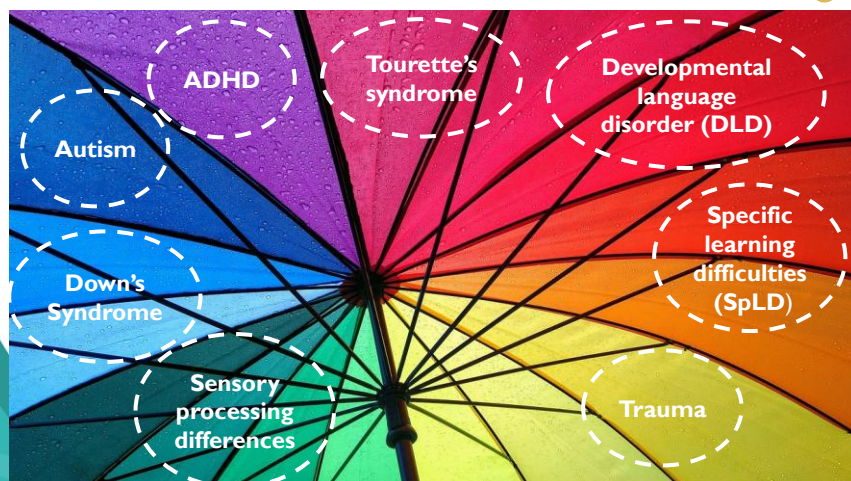
Neuro (brain) + diversity (range of differences)
= The natural diversity of human minds

Growing recognition of neurodiversity

- **Neurotypical** → people who think and process information in a relatively similar way.
- **Neurodivergent** → people who think differently to those who are neurotypical.
- **Neurodiversity** → everyone (we all have unique brains)

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The neurodivergent umbrella



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Terminology

- **Person first language (e.g., Billy has autism)**
- **Identity first language (e.g., Billy is autistic)**

UK survey of autistic people and their families:
Preferred identity-first language: 'autistic' 'on the autism spectrum'
Kenny et al., (2016)

'...person-first language appears to stigmatise, rather than de-stigmatise, persons with disabilities, particularly children and particularly children with developmental disabilities.'
Gernsbacher (2017)

"I am a young person with autism, my autism is a part of me, but it does not define me. I know what it is like to have labels put on me"
Adams (undated)

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PLAY LEARN. CHAT.

NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMING LANGUAGE TO USE & NOT TO USE

Language to Use	Language NOT to Use
A neurodivergent person or a neurotypical person	A neurodiverse person
Identity First Language Autistic child Neurodivergent person ADHDer*	Person First Language* Child with autism Person who has neurodivergence Person who has ADHD
<small>*Note: Language for ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) isn't great and is evolving</small>	<small>*Note: Respect and individual's preferences if they prefer other language</small>
Autistic / Autism	Autism Spectrum Disorder / ASD / On the Spectrum
Autistic person with ___ current support needs and ___ current strengths and abilities	High-functioning / Low-functioning autistic person
Autistic traits	Red flags for autism
Speaking / Non-speaking They sometimes speak She uses an AAC device to communicate	Verbal / Non-verbal They're mostly non-verbal She doesn't use verbal communication

Join me for more Neurodiversity Affirming Info and conversations

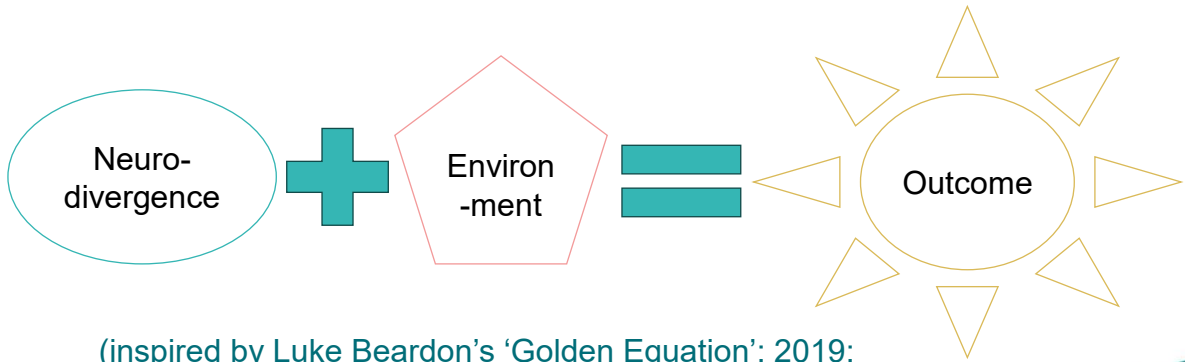
Exploring Neurodiversity Podcast @play.learn.chat on Instagram

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Community Against Prejudice Towards Autistic People (CAPTAP)- 'How to talk about autistic ways of being'

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Neurodivergence + Environment = Outcome



(inspired by Luke Beardon's 'Golden Equation'; 2019:
Autism + Environment = Outcome)

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Double empathy problem

- Theory proposed in 2012 by autistic researcher, Damian Milton.
- Suggests that when people with contrasting life experiences interact, they may struggle to truly empathise with one another.
- Because of different lived experiences, there can be difficulties in building mutual understanding when interacting.
- Emphasises the importance of recognising these differences and finding common ground to foster effective communication and empathy between individuals.

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THE DOUBLE EMPATHY PROBLEM

May struggle to:

- Read "between the lines"
- Overcome other peoples' misconceptions about autism
- Manage sensory distractions

Both parties may struggle to understand each other's thoughts, feelings, behaviour and differences

May struggle to:

- Form positive first impressions
- Recognise and understand autism
- Imagine autistic sensory difficulties

Double Empathy: Why Autistic People Are Often Misunderstood (Crompton, DeBrabander, Heasman, Milton & Sasson; 2021)- <https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frm.2021.554875>

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Why is this important?

“Communication is a shared responsibility- it’s about both sides working towards understanding each other, not just one side doing all the work” (Therapist Neurodiversity Collective)

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Monotropism

- A neuroaffirmative theory of attention (by Murray, Lawson and Lesser, 2005) that describes how some people, particularly many autistic individuals, tend to focus deeply on a small number of interests or experiences at a time.
- This intense focus can bring joy, clarity, and deep learning, but it can also make it harder to switch attention or process multiple streams of information at once.
- Monotropism is not a deficit—it's a different and valid way of experiencing the world.

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Monotropism

"In a nutshell, monotropism is the tendency for our interests to pull us in more strongly than most people. ... In a monotropic mind, fewer interests tend to be aroused at any time, and they attract more of our processing resources, making it harder to deal with things outside of our current attention tunnel."

– **Fergus Murray, Me and monotropism: a unified theory of autism**



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Why it's hard to switch tasks

(Let's call it Tendril Theory)

When I'm focused on something

My mind sends out a million tendrils of thought

Expands into all of the thoughts & feelings

When I need to switch tasks

I must retract all of the tendrils of my mind

This takes some time

Eventually I can shift to the new task

But when I am interrupted or must switch abruptly

It feels like all of the tendrils are being ripped out

That's why I don't react well

Please just give me time

To switch tasks when I'm ready

Image credit: Tendril Theory – eisforerin
retrieved from <https://eisforerin.com/2015/08/10/tendrill-theory/>

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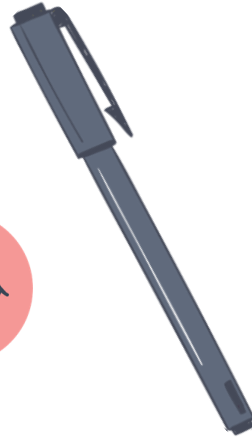
Executive Function

- 1 Impulse Control**
How to control and regulate how you "feel" so you can motivate your self or get yourself into a "learning state of mind" or the right "frame of mind" to do a particular task or manage a particular situation.
- 2 Planning and Prioritising**
Taking the time to think about the information you need, in which order, to create a plan to complete a piece of work.
- 3 Self Monitoring**
Knowing where you are up to with a task and what to do next.
- 4 Working Memory**
Remembering lots of information in the forefront of your mind to complete a task or problem solve.
- 5 Task Initiation**
Getting yourself ready to start a task and finding what actions you need to take in order to start a task.
- 6 Flexible Thinking**
Changing how you think or working to meet the demands of the task.
- 7 Emotional Control**
Managing our feelings to complete the task in hand.
- 8 Goal Setting**
Understanding our motivation what we want to achieve and making a plan to ensure we achieve our goals

Image credit: The ADHD Foundation

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Activity:



How did we
use **Executive
Functions** in
the activity?



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Activity: Reflection



Thinking about your own
setting:

- Where do you notice these ideas (double empathy, monotropism, executive function) in the experiences of the children and young people you work with?
- How might they shift understanding of those children or young people?

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Overwhelm

We will be covering:

- Why school can feel overwhelming for some pupils
- Ways we can better understand overwhelm
- Ways we can reduce overwhelm



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Capacity Cup



- This analogy helps to explain the idea that we all have a finite capacity of challenges and demands that we are able to manage.
- The types of challenges that fill our cup, and the amount of space they take up in our capacity cup, will be different for everyone.
- When the cup becomes too full, it can become very hard to be at our best – to show our strengths and skills, to focus on what we have to do and to manage how we are feeling (in our bodies and with our emotions). When our capacity cup over fills, we experience ‘overwhelm’.

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Activity:

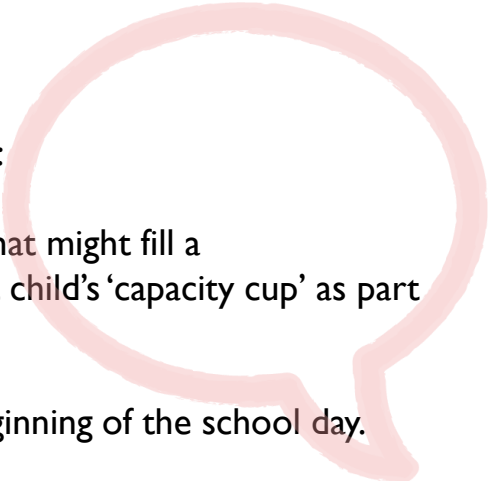


In small groups:

Think about what might fill a neurodivergent child's 'capacity cup' as part of a school day.

Start at the beginning of the school day.

Write a list ...



Sensory Experiences
(that can fluctuate)

Masking

Social Communication
Differences



Cognitive Overload

Low Self-Concept
as a Learner

When the cup overflows...



Fight/Flight/Freeze

Meltdowns

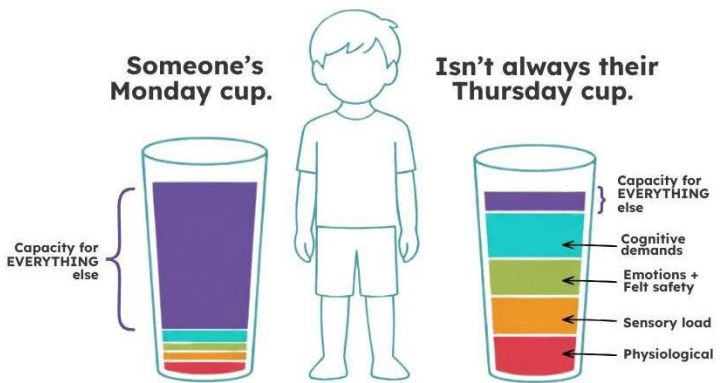
Shutdowns

Reports from home

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Fluctuating capacity

Image credit – [Think Sensory](https://thinksensory.com/) –
Neuroaffirming Education & Support
retrieved via
<https://thinksensory.com/> - refer to
resource in full available here:
<https://thinksensory.com/product/fluctuating-capacity-info-sheet/>



The skill didn't change. Their capacity did.



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What can we do?

Reframe the behaviours we see.

Children 'can' dependent on the environment → "kids do well if they can" (Ross Greene)

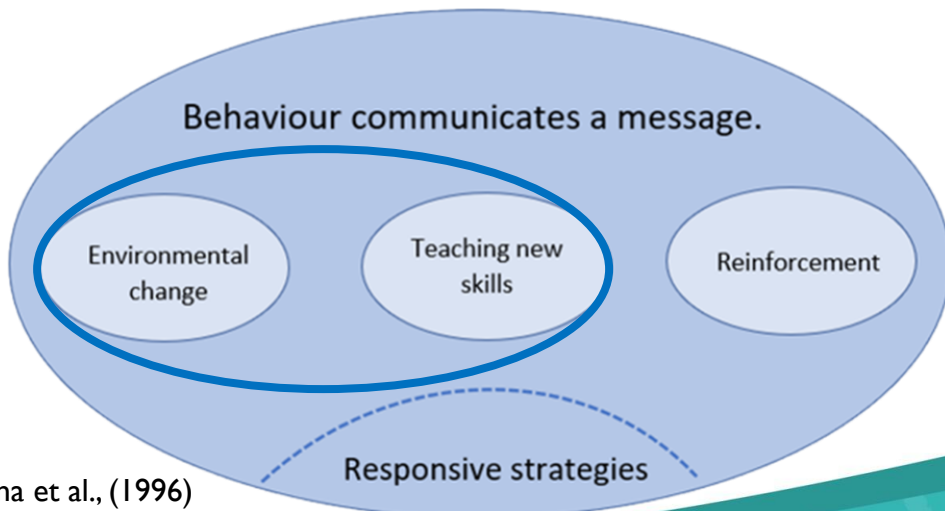
Consider masking.

"Yet"



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Multi-Element Model

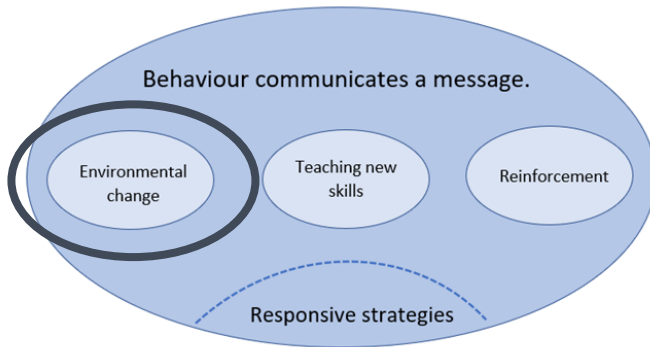


La Vigna et al., (1996)

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Activity: Environmental change

What **environmental factors** do we need to consider?



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Environmental Change

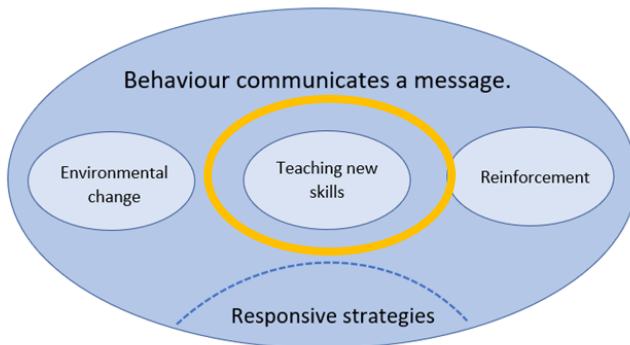
- Sensory environment
- School structure and routine changes
- Social expectations at break and lunch
- Adaptations to learning activities – task design?
- Increasing awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity



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Activity: Teaching skills

What **new skills** may need to be taught to help reduce the amount that is in the child's capacity cup?



EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY



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Teach New Skills

- Ways to manage unavoidable sensory experiences.
- ND-affirming social skills (for everyone!)
- Self-advocacy skills
- Anxiety/overwhelm management skills.
 - Relaxation/calming strategies
 - Energy accounting

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Energy Accounting

Can be used to explore the day-to-day experiences that can ‘drain’ and ‘recharge’ someone’s energy.

This could specifically relate to a certain type of energy, for example someone’s social energy (social battery) or energy for learning, or someone’s overall energy encompassing social and learning elements as well as others such as emotional and sensory energy.



Maja Toudal & Tony Attwood

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‘Alfie’ Aged 10

Things that drain my battery	Things that re-charge my battery
Walking to school	Listening to music
Literacy lessons	Being with my dog, Ella
Wet breaktimes	Minecraft
Lunch in the hall	Playing with my Rubix cube
Music lessons	Walking in circles
Group work	Talking to Mr X about formula 1
ELSA sessions	Jumping on the trampoline

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Activity: Reflection



Thinking about your own setting:

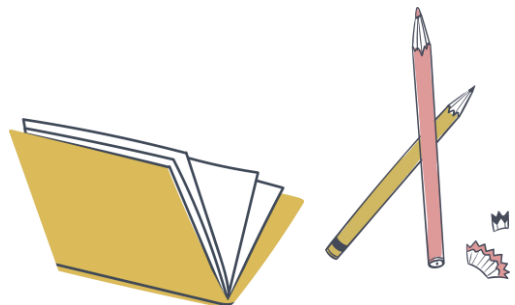
- Where might a child or young person in your setting be experiencing overwhelm (when demands exceed their capacity)?
- What might need to change (e.g., how it is understood, the environment, or the skills being developed) to better support them?

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Advocacy

We will be covering:

- What is self-advocacy
- How can we support young people to develop self-advocacy skills, including resources
- The experiences of others who advocate for neurodivergent young people.



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Self-Advocacy

What does it mean?



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How to support children to self-advocate

I NEED TO TAKE A BREAK.

 calming corner	 fidget	 hug a stuffie	 read a book
 deeps breaths	 drink water	 eat a snack	 go for a walk

“Can I sit next to you to help you?”
 “Would you like a high five?”
 “Can I show you with my hand?”

Lou 🌈 🧡 | Autism she/her
 @ neurodivergent_lou
 ● Finding a place as an autistic in a neurotypical world
 📧 neurodivergent_lou@yahoo.com
 All views are my own
 🌐 linktr.ee/Neurodivergent_lou



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Family Advocates



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Siblings

- Often one of the longest standing relationships
- Strengths, opportunities and challenges
- There are an estimated two children in every classroom who are growing up with a brother or sister who is disabled or has special educational needs or a serious long-term condition (Sibs, 2023)
- If Only You Knew': A report into the school experiences of siblings of disabled children – by Sibs, 2023



*Respect, understand and be flexible,
whilst recognising how we might support.*

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Take aways

- What is one thing you will take away from this morning's input and apply in your setting?



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Reference links and resources

- 'What ND kids need to thrive' - Resource by NeuroWild. available online at <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/store/emily-hammond-neuwild>
- An Introduction to the Double Empathy problem by Kieran Rose - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpXwYD9bGyU>
- An article about The Double Empathy Problem written specifically for young people - [Double Empathy: Why Autistic People Are Often Misunderstood · Frontiers for Young Minds](#)
- An introduction to Monotropism – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUFDAevkd3E>
- Monotropism – the mind as an interest system - <https://monotropism.org/>

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Reference links and resources cont.

- Emily Hammond, Neurowild resource - Regulation and Executive Function Handout available via <https://www.neurowild.com.au/product-page/regulation-and-executive-function-handout-7-page-coloured-document>
- Activities Guide: Enhancing & Practicing Executive Function Skills: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/handouts-tools/activities-guide-enhancing-and-practicing-executive-function-skills/>
- The EPIC Strategy Booklet: a guide for teachers (ed.ac.uk)
- Energy accounting - <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/resources-for-autistic-teenagers>
- Sibs Charity (including Young Sibs website) - <https://www.sibs.org.uk/>