

# Parenting Exceptional Children

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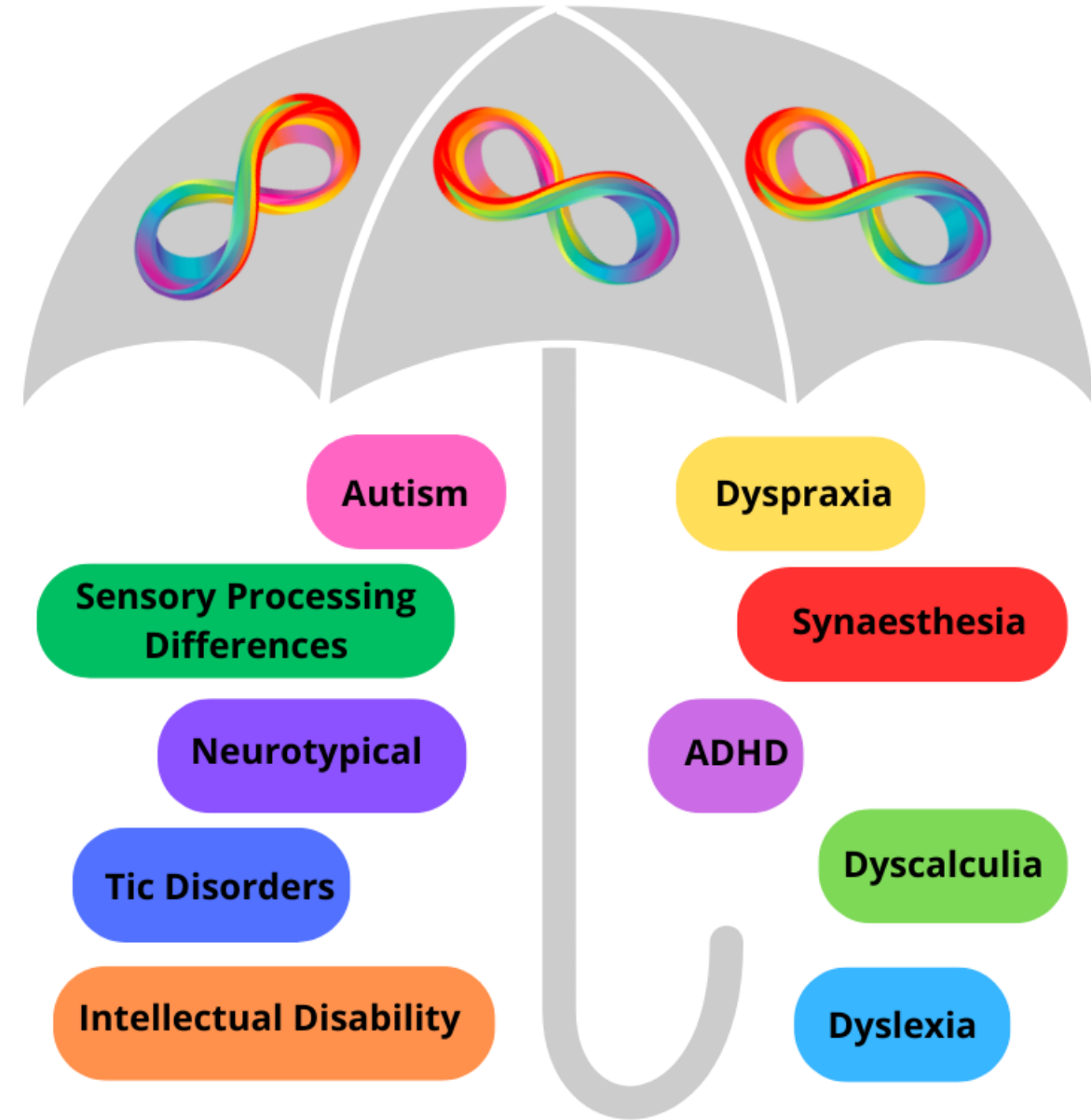
A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, ADHD and other neurodivergent children.

**John Sharry**



# Embracing Neurodiversity

- About 20% of all children are neurodivergent (ND).
- The majority do not have a formal diagnosis.
- Great overlap between ND conditions.
- Many ND children meet the criteria for more than one. For example, an estimated 50% to 70% of children with autism also meet the criteria for ADHD.



# A Note on Language...

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**“Neurodivergent”** or

**“Neurodiverse”** or

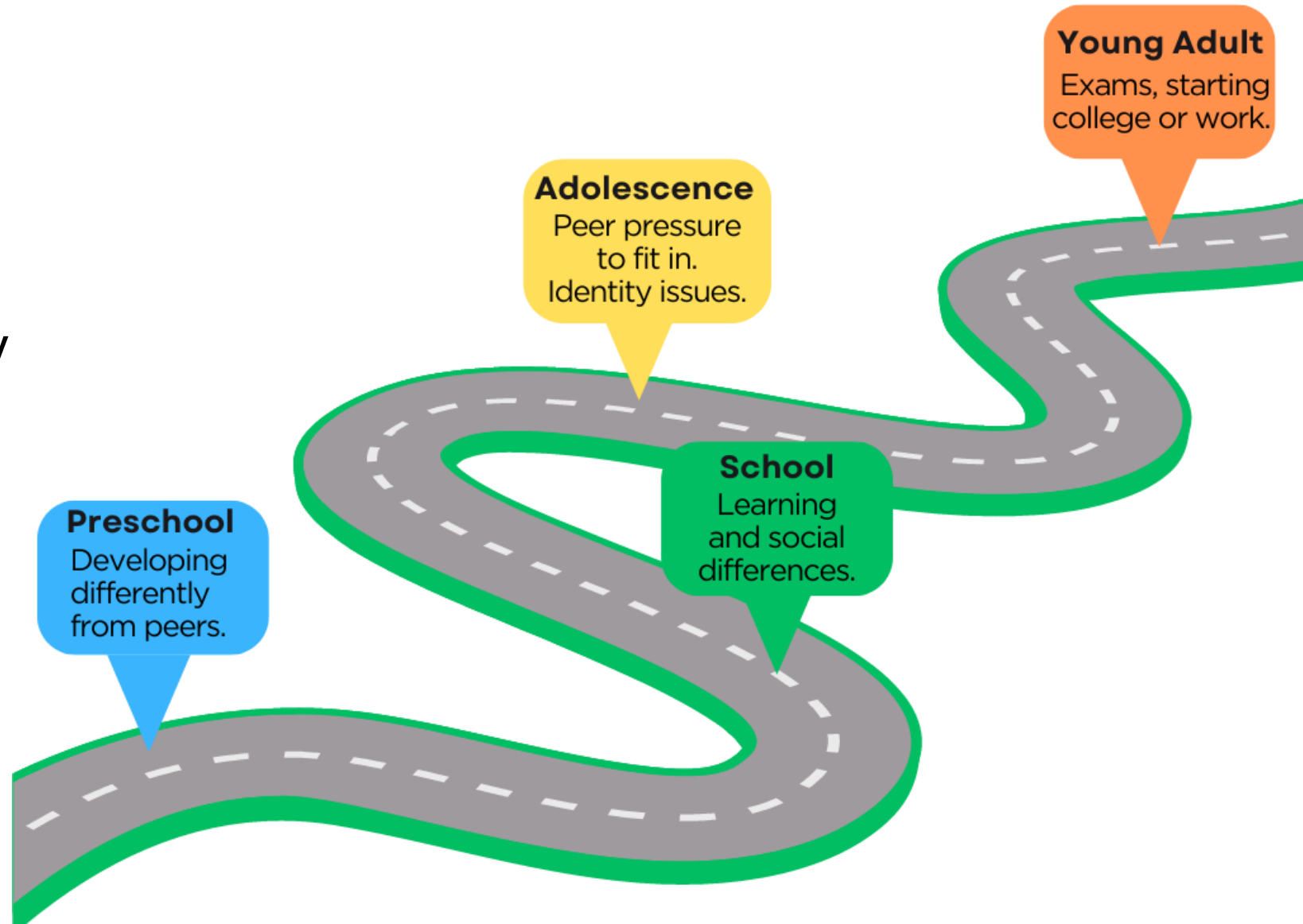
**“Neurodistinct”**

# A Neurodiversity Affirming, Strengths-Based Approach

- A shift away from pathologising autism, adhd and other ND conditions.
- Neurodivergence comes with strengths as well as challenges.
- Embracing neurodiversity as beneficial for humankind.
- Many challenges for ND people caused by society and environment.
- Providing appropriate accomodations to ND people to meet their needs.

# The Parent Journey

Raising a neurodistinct child can feel like a journey with many milestones...





# Seeking Professional Help and Diagnosis

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## Advantages of Diagnosis

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- Can clarify your child's needs.
- Necessary to gain many supports (e.g. SNA) treatments (e.g. medication for ADHD).
- May give you and your child a positive way to understand.
- May increase access to supports.
- Growing positive identity around some diagnoses.



## Disadvantages of Diagnosis

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- Long waiting lists and high costs.
- May be a pathological process.
- Mixed professional expertise.
- Some neuro-affirming profiles not recognised (e.g. PDA).
- You and your child may disagree with diagnosis.
- May be more useful to focus on your child's needs rather than their label.
- Child may not have consented to process.

# Seeking Professional Help and Diagnosis

- You don't need a diagnosis to gain **self-understanding** and to reach out for **support**.
- Seek diagnosis when your child **needs** it.
- Seek **neuro-affirming** professionals and services.
- Learn from experience of **neurodivergent adults**.
- Focus on getting the right **supports** for you and your child.



# Understanding Your Child

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As a parent, the most important thing you can do is to understand your child:

- Appreciate their strengths.
- Compassionately understand their needs.



# Neurodiversity and the Family

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Neurodistinct children are much more likely to have neurodistinct parents, siblings or extended family.

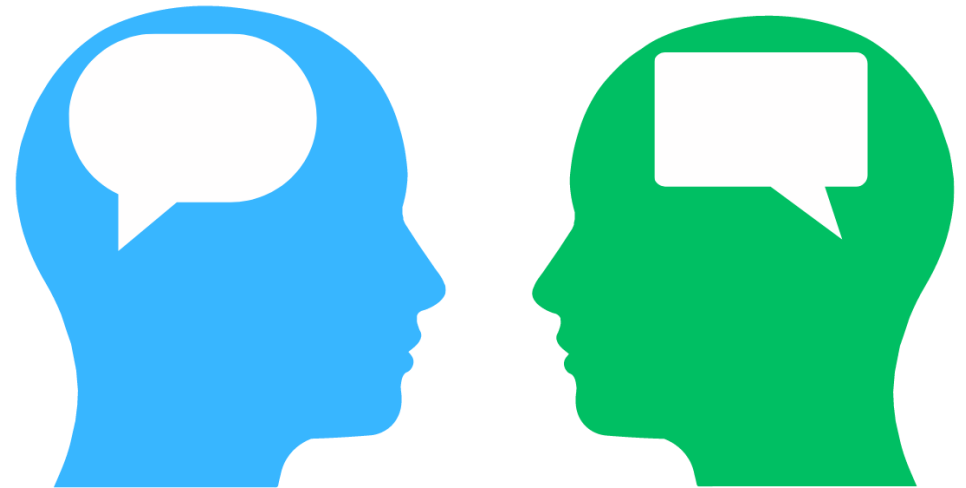


# Double Empathy Challenge

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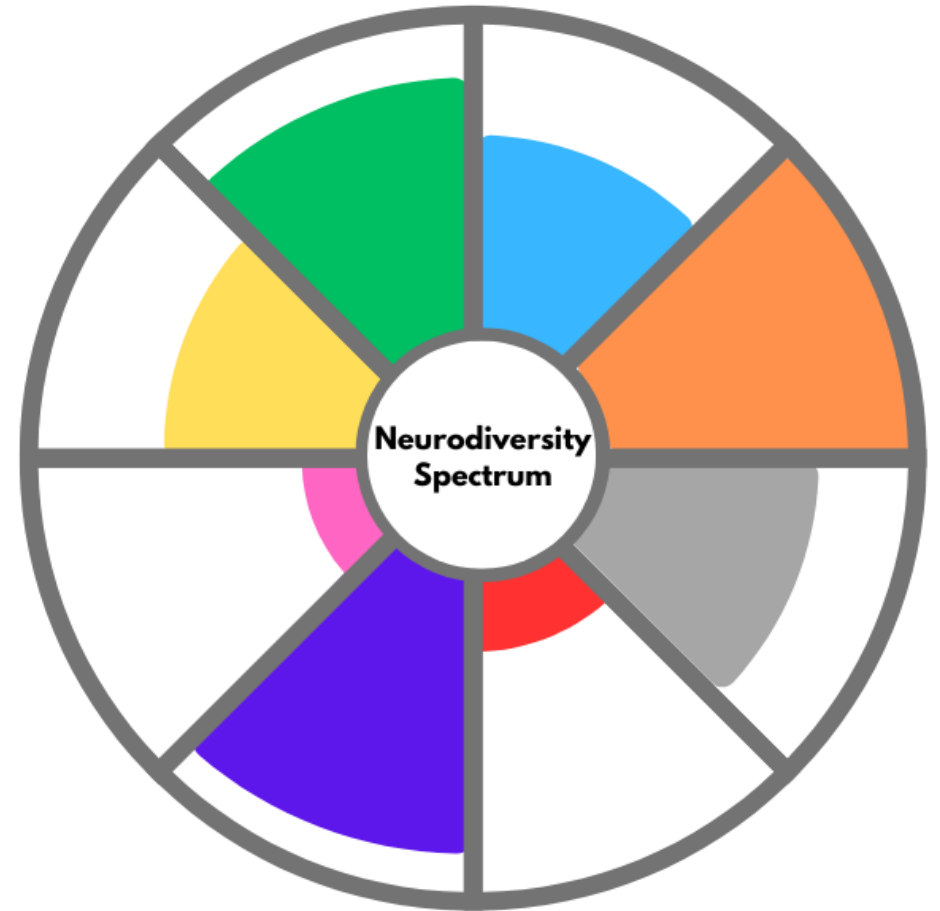
It is more difficult to understand someone who feels and thinks differently to us.

- Neurodistinct people can find it hard to understand neurotypical people and vice versa.
- Two neurodistinct people can also find it hard to understand one another if 'neurodistinctly' different.



# A Spectrum of Needs

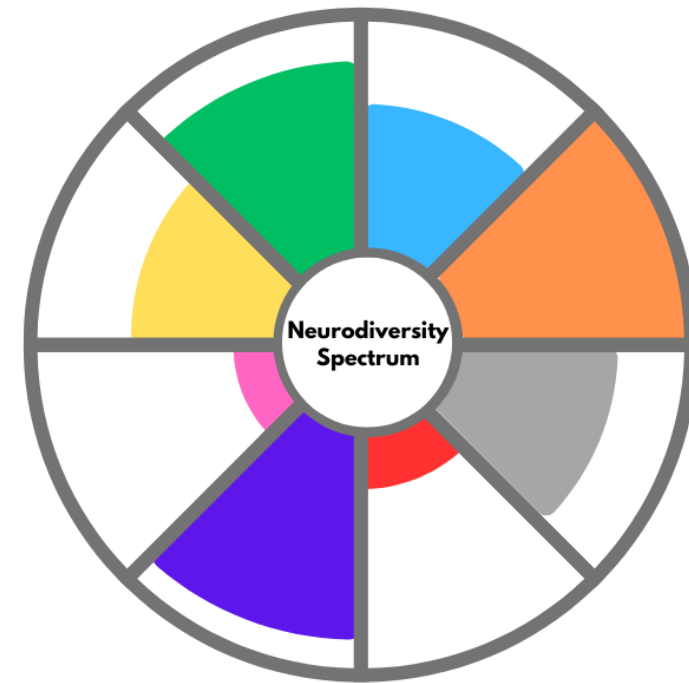
- ▶ **Communication and Social**
- ▶ **Executive Function**
- ▶ **Attention and Interests**
- ▶ **Impulsivity and Energy**
- ▶ **Sensory Differences**
- ▶ **Repetitions/Tics/Stims**
- ▶ **Emotional Processing**
- ▶ **Health and Physical**

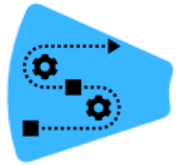




# Communication and Social

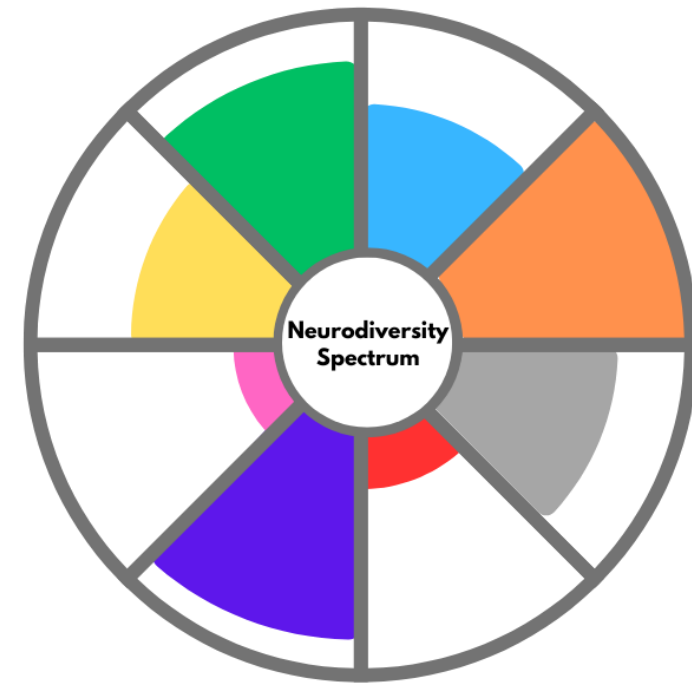
- How does your child communicate with you?
- How do they get on with others socially?





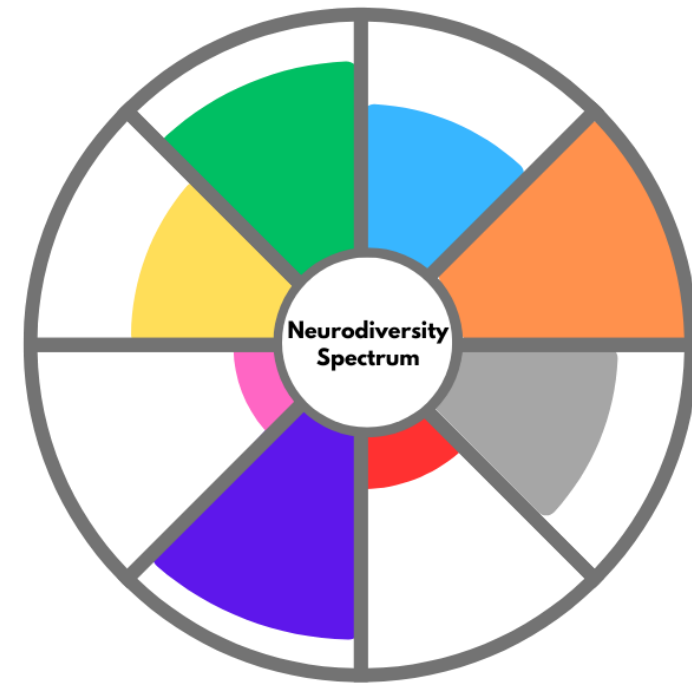
# Executive Function

- How does your child plan and organise themselves?
- How do they start and complete tasks?





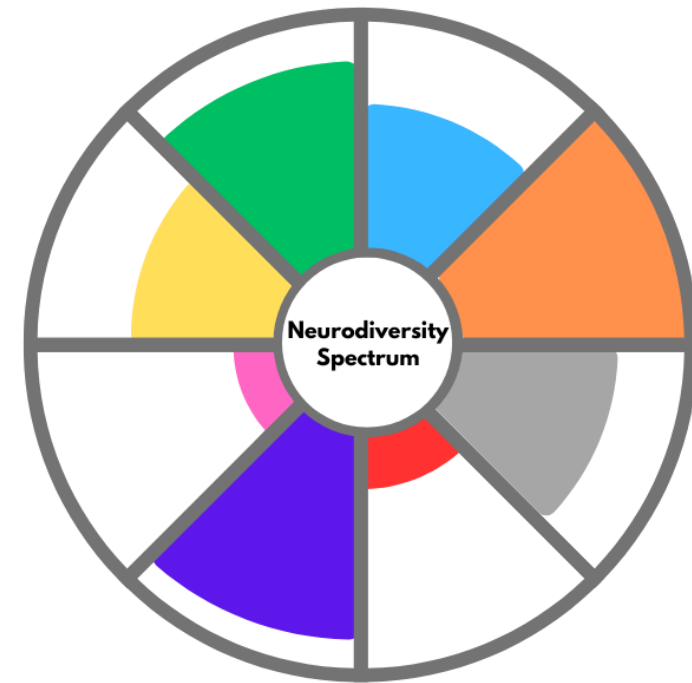
# Attention and Interests



- What subjects and activities capture your child's interest?
- What do they find hard to pay attention to?



# Impulsivity and Energy

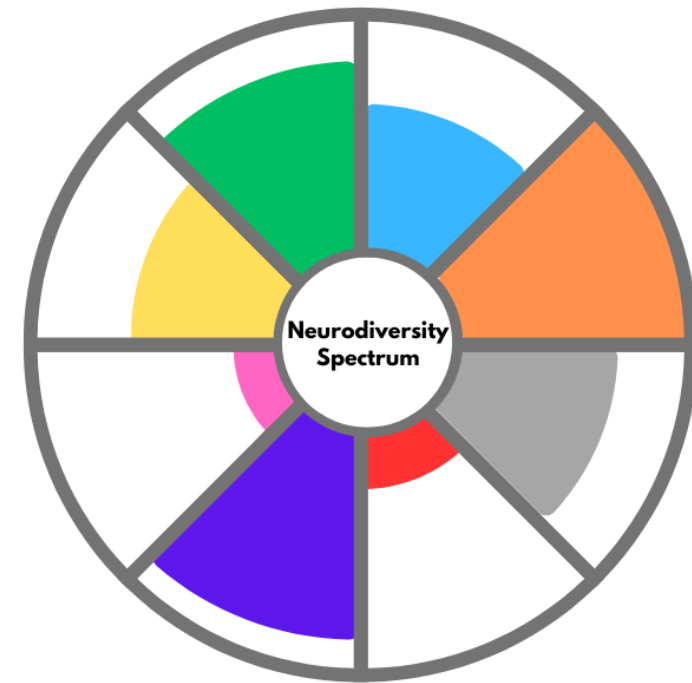


- Is your child impulsive or reserved?
- How active and full of energy are they?
- Do they experience burnout?

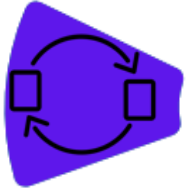




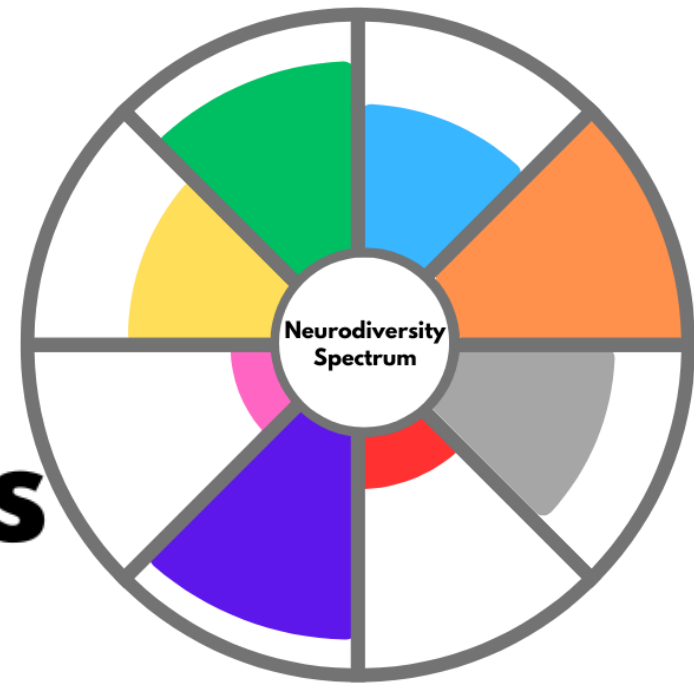
# Sensory Differences



- What sensory experiences does your child **like**?
- What sensory experiences do they find **distressing**?



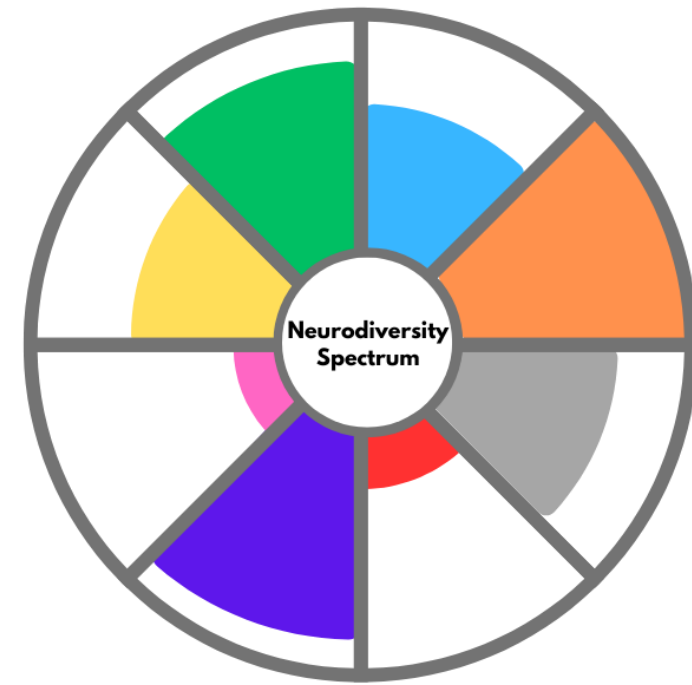
# Repetitions/Tics/Stims



- What repetitive behaviours and habits does your child have?
- What routines do they need?



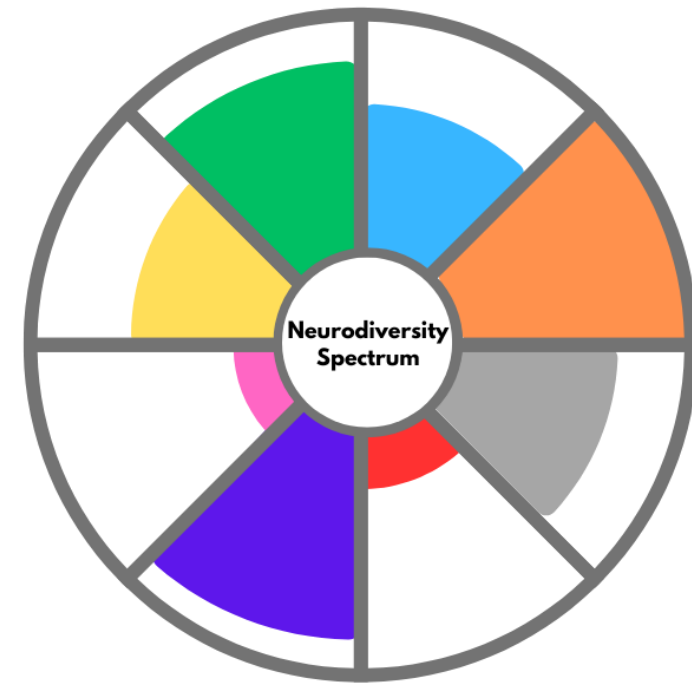
# Emotional Processing



- How does your child communicate their feelings?
- How do they regulate their emotions when upset?











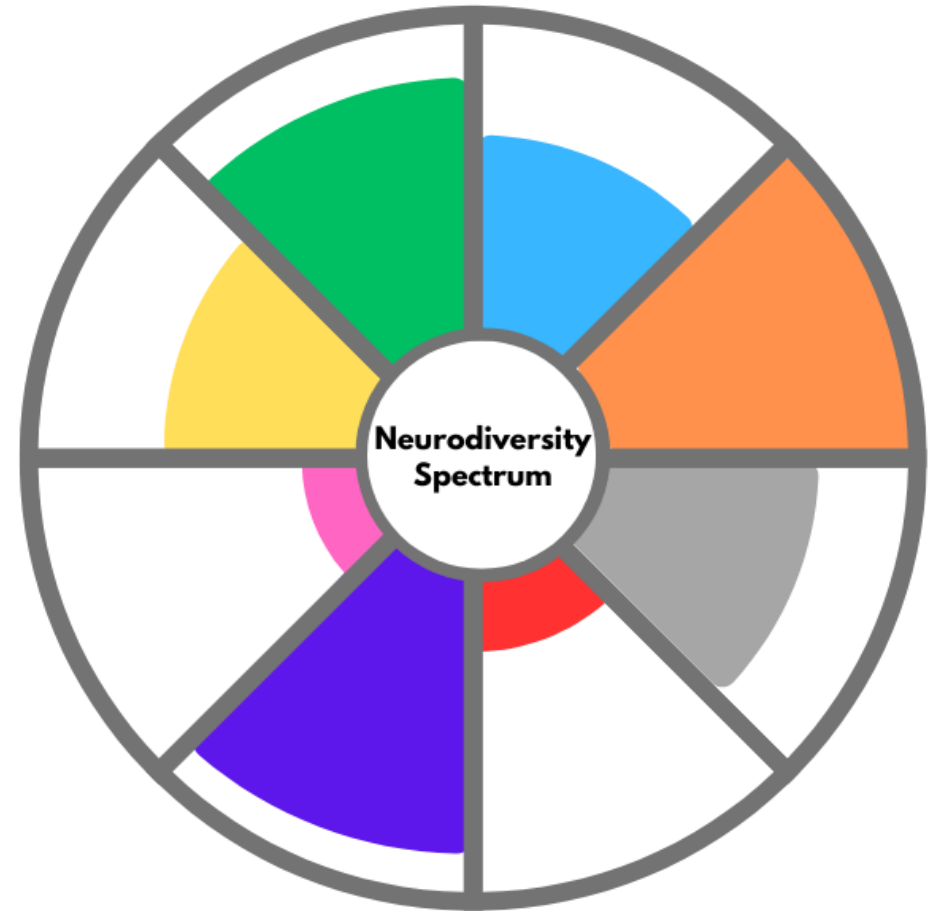
# Health and Physical



- Does your child have health and physical needs?
- What specific supports might they need for these?

# A Spectrum of Needs

-  **Communication and Social**
-  **Executive Function**
-  **Attention and Interests**
-  **Impulsivity and Energy**
-  **Sensory Differences**
-  **Repetitions/Tics/Stims**
-  **Emotional Processing**
-  **Health and Physical**



# Take a Break...

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Think about all the different needs your child might have...

- Which ones do you think they **need some support** with?
- What are your child's **strengths**?

# Tuning In To Your Child's Sensory World

Much behaviour can be explained by trying to

- Avoid unpleasant or agitating sensory experiences.
- Seek out energising, relaxing, or enjoyable sensory experiences.

Julie finds **tags** and **seams** on clothes intensely irritating.

Peter sleeps better when he uses a **heavy blanket** and **night light**.

Joe needs to keep his hands active when studying. Using a **fidget spinner** or a **squeeze ball** helps.

Light touches make Aoife flinch. She prefers **deeper hugs**.

Grace has a strong aversion to the **smells** in certain **food shops** and can feel sick.

Going swimming is a nightmare for Dan. He hates being **damp** and **cold** in the changing room.

# Many Neurodistinct Strengths Flow From Having a Unique Sensory World...

Robert is attuned to **sounds in nature** and can distinguish various bird calls.

Darragh loves cooking. He can discern **flavours and tastes**. It's a wonderful sensory experience for him.

Painting is Sarah's passion. Her **unique perception of colour** and texture allows her to really express herself.

Roisín enjoys herbal tea. She can distinguish between dozens of different types.



# How Many Senses Are There?

There are the five external senses:

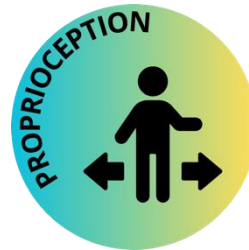


There are also three internal senses:



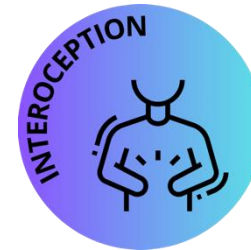
## **Vestibular (Balance)**

This allows us to notice any change in position or movement of the head. It helps us maintain our balance.



## **Proprioceptive (Movement)**

This tells us where our body is in space. It allows us to judge what force and pressure is needed to carry out tasks.

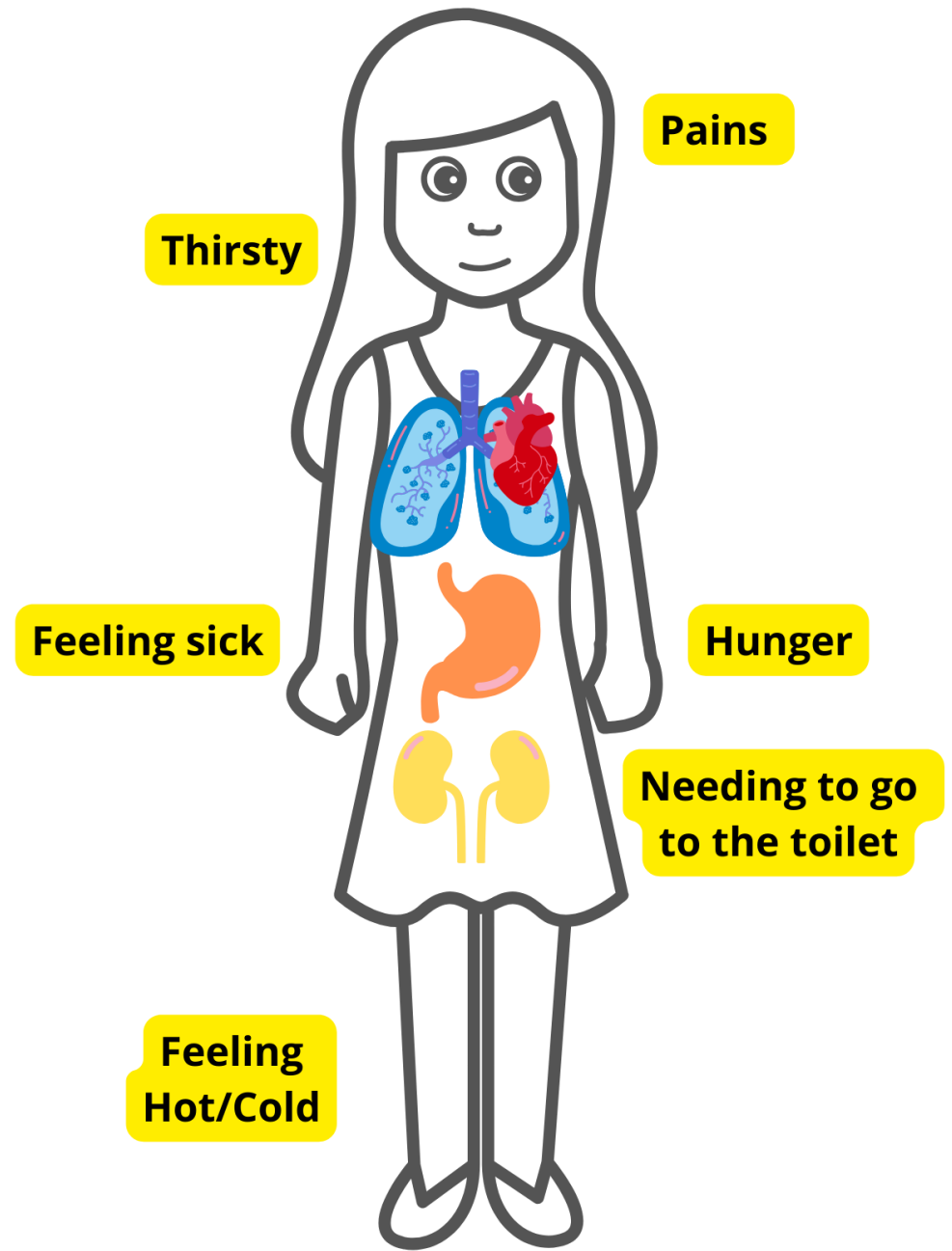


## **Interoceptive (Internal Feelings)**

This allows us to feel what is happening inside our bodies (hunger, pain) and to notice our emotional states.

# Interoception: The most important sense?

Many neurodistinct children are hyper- or hypo-sensitive to their **internal body states**  
e.g. temperature, hunger, pain.



# Sensory Regulation

- **Relaxing and rebalancing** the sensory system, especially when **over-stimulated** or **agitated**.
- **Energising** the sensory system when you are **under-responsive** or **need to focus**.

## Sensory regulation is:



**Stimming** – sensory habits  
e.g. pacing, hand rubbing,  
hair twirling.



**Rest and relaxation**  
or **exercise and movement**.



Engaging in **passions**  
and **special interests**.



**Positive sensory**  
experiences.

- **What works for each person is different, Find out what works for your child.**



# Reflective Exercise

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- What is **your child's** favourite sensory experience that they really enjoy?
- What is **your** favourite sensory experience that you really enjoy?

# The Importance of Connection

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Good parenting is primarily about establishing warm connected relationships and this is no different for neurodivergent children.



You want your child to feel:

- **understood, affirmed** and **loved** by you.
- **listened to** and that they can **communicate** with you about anything.
- that you are their **ally**, on their side and there for them no matter what.
- that you are a **safe** person for them.

# Blocks to Communication

**ND children frequently experience blocks to connected relationships with their parents.**

- Sometimes, children are so stressed by sensory overload, school and outside world that this leads to challenging meltdowns at home.
- Sometimes parent feels hurt by child's behaviour or get angry in response.
- Sometimes, child communicates differently or has different passions to their parent.
- Sometimes, parents feel their role is to correct their child's different behaviours which sets you up as a critical parent.

# Daily Moments

- What do you **enjoy doing most** with your children?
- When do you have the **best chats**?
- When do you **connect** most to your child?

# Creating a Connected Relationship

- Making sure you have **daily connecting times** when you enjoy each other's company.
- Learning to **pause** and reduce the times you communicate negatively to your children
- Make it your priority to **connect**.
- Adjust your expectations. Let go of pressures and prioritise your **relationship**.





# Building Unique Connections

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- **Join in an activity that your child really enjoys** - playing games, shopping, penalties, craft.
- **Take an interest in one of your child's passions** - video games, music, films, craft, sport.
- **Let your child teach you** - video games, a craft, dance, hairstyle.
- **Teach them something they want to learn** - cooking, magic trick, make-up, grow food, skim stones.
- **Learn something new together** - attend a course, watch videos, read books together or in parallel.
- **Go somewhere together** - visit a friend, relative, go for a meal, sporting event on a walk together.
- **Build rituals** - daily crosswords, bedtime reading, daily cycle.
- **Plan family projects that interest them** - design/repair/build/decorate together.

# Homework

- Prioritise the times you **already enjoy** with your child. Be more available at these times.
- Try to identify **one new way to connect** with your child.
- Build a **'map' of your child's needs**. You can use the worksheet in the handout.

# Developing a Positive Self-Identity



Think something is **wrong** with you.

Feel **weird** or **different**.

**Isolated** from people.

**Depressed**.

**Self-critical** *'What is the matter with me?'*

Trying hard **to fit in**.

**People pleasing**. *Going along with others.*

**Anxious**.



Aware of your **strengths**.



Love being **unique**.



Find your own **community**.



**Happy** with yourself.



**Self-compassionate** *'What are my needs?'*



Finding people who **accept you**.



Setting your own **boundaries**. *Doing your own thing.*



At **peace**.