

Parenting Exceptional Children

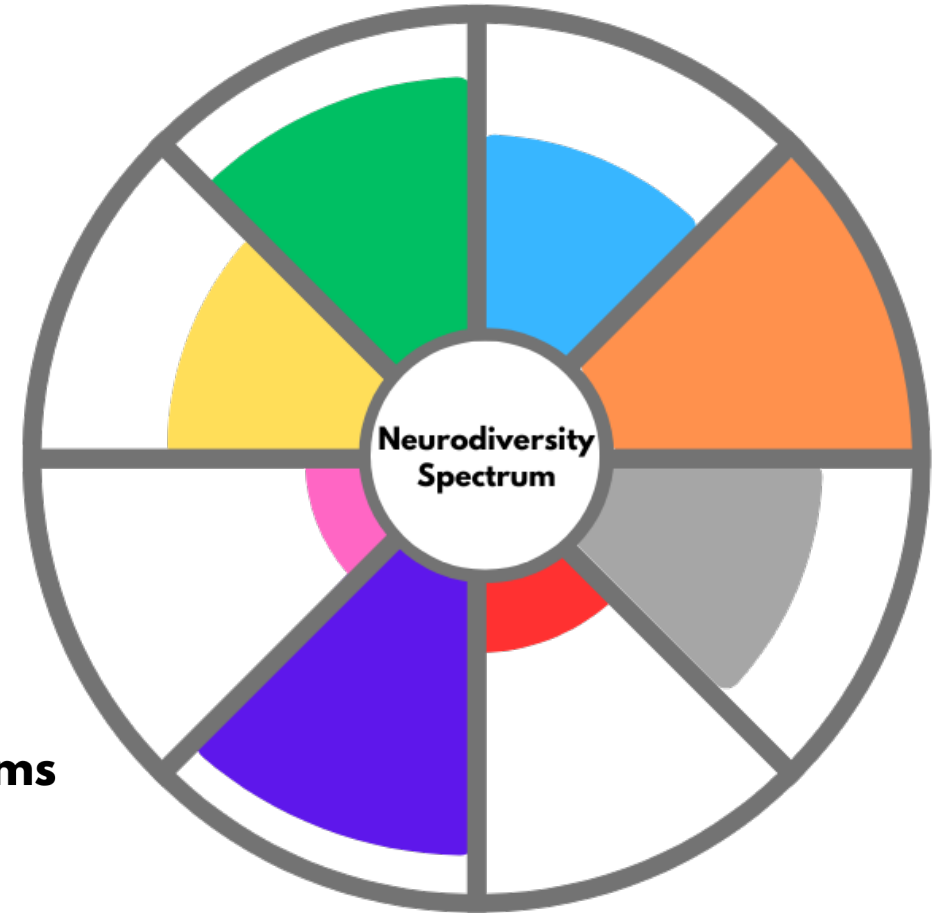
A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, adhd, and other neurodivergent children.

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Session 2




A Spectrum of Needs



 **Communication and Social**  **Sensory Differences**

 **Executive Function**  **Repetitions/Tics/Stims**

 **Attention and Interests**  **Emotional Processing**

 **Impulsivity and Energy**  **Health and Physical**

The Importance of Connection

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.

Homework



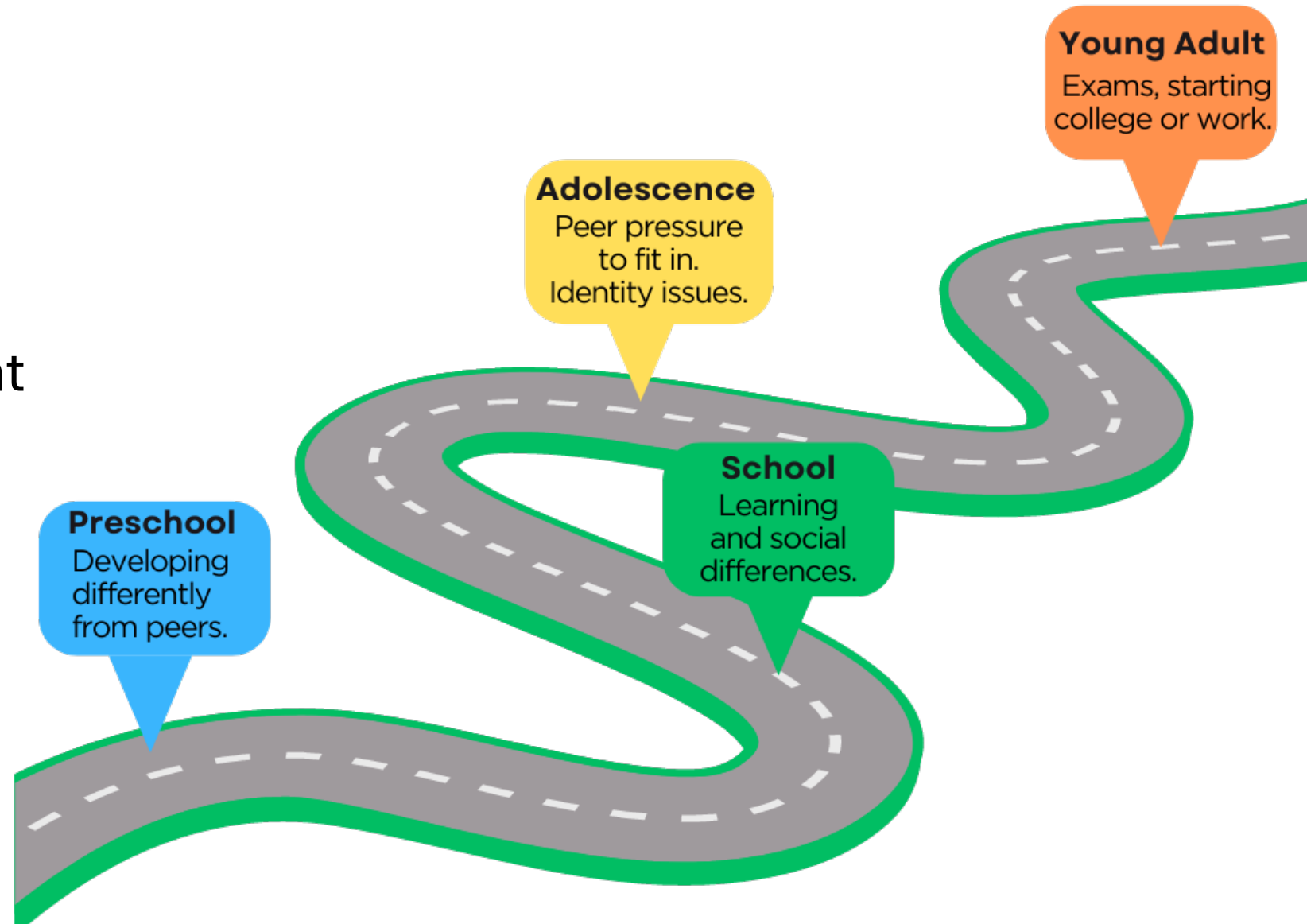
- Prioritise the times you **already enjoy** with your child. Be more available at these times.
- Try to identify **one new way to connect** with your child.
- Build a **'map' of your child's needs**. You can use the worksheet in the handout.

Managing Challenges and Problems

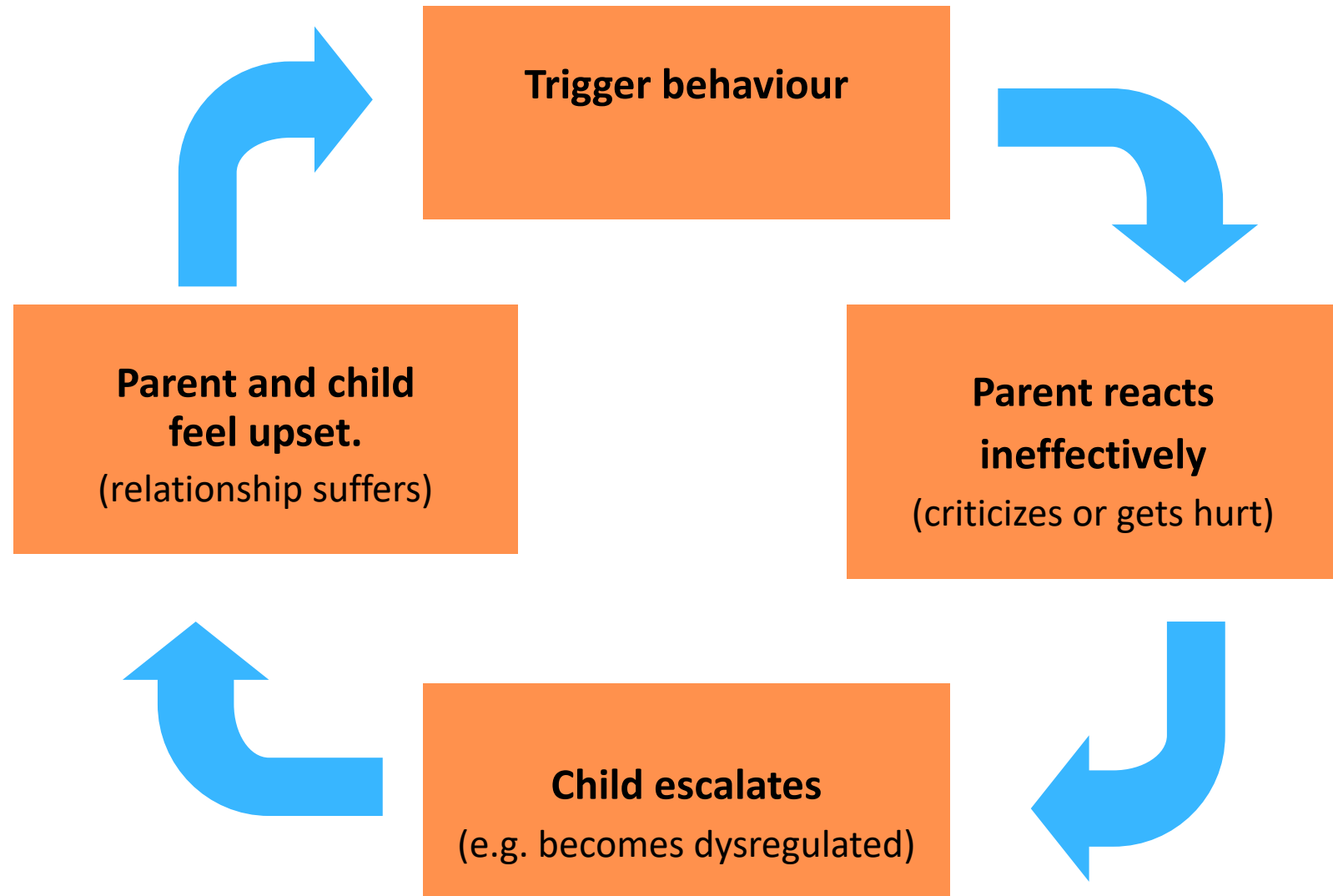


The Parent Journey

Raising a neurodivergent child can feel like a journey with many milestones and challenges...



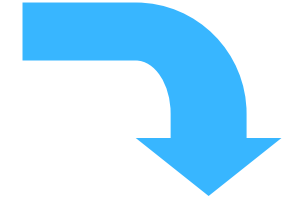
Classic Problem Pattern



Pressing Pause

**Better outcome
Relationship improves**

**Trigger
behaviour**

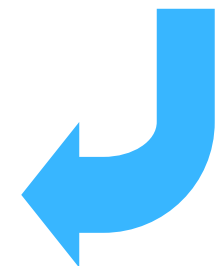
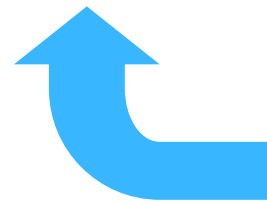


**Parent presses the
pause button**

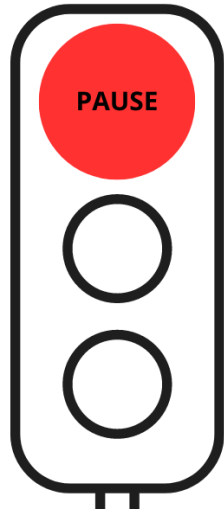
**Parent feels confident
Child feels contained**



**Parent chooses a more
effective response**

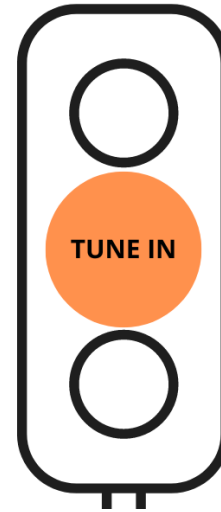


Solving Childhood Problems



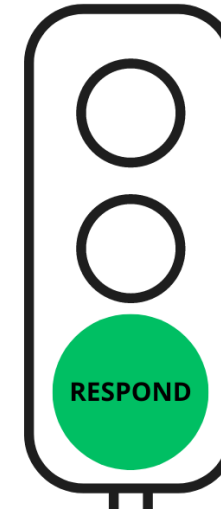
Pause

How am I **reacting** to the problem?
What responses **work well** already?
What responses make things **worse**?



Tune In

What is going on for my **child**?
What needs is my child **communicating**?
What is going on for me as a **parent**?
What are **my needs**?

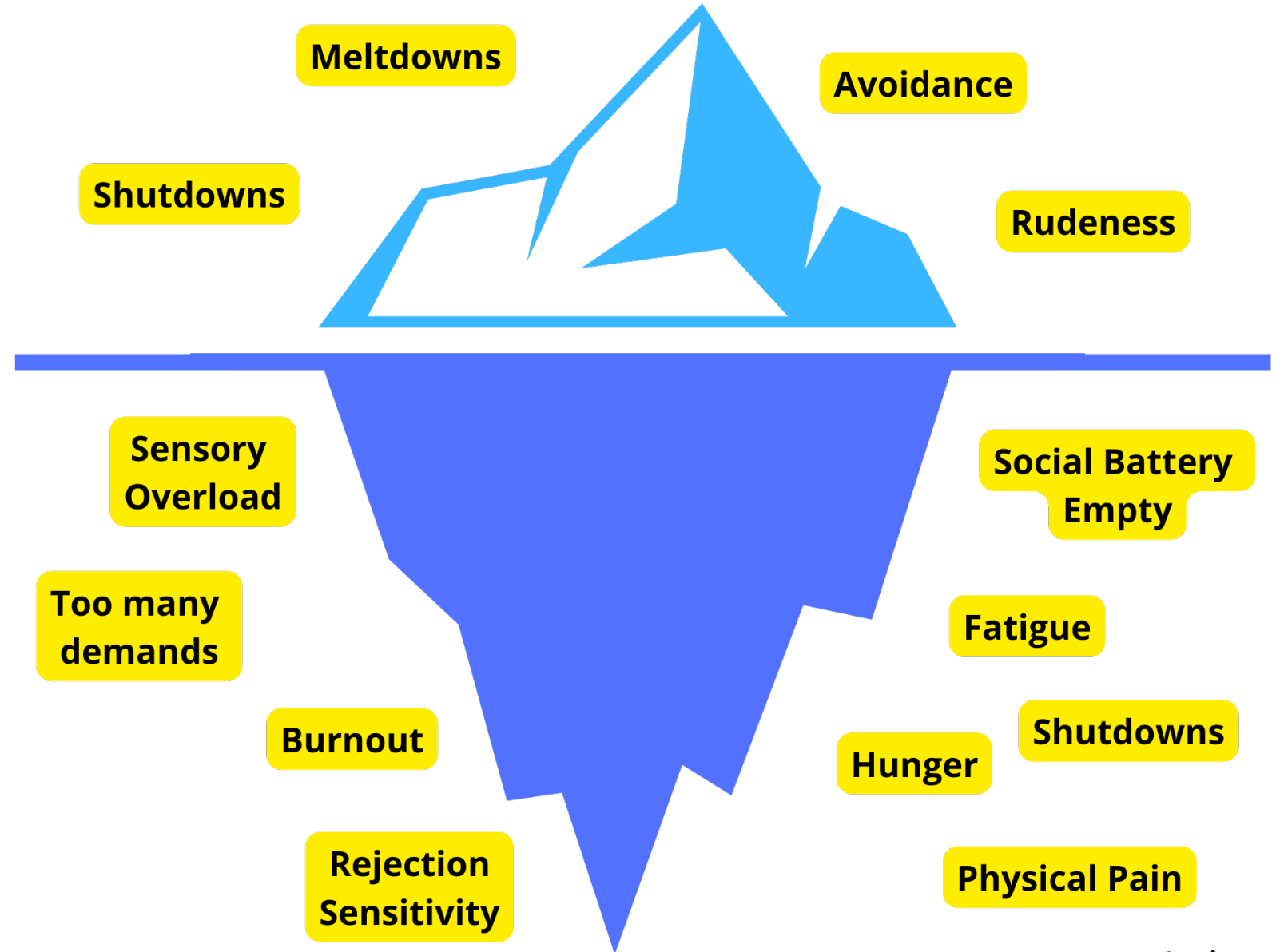


Respond

What is the best way to **respond**?
How can I address my **child's needs**?
How can I address my **own needs**?

Tune In to your Child

Tip of the Iceberg

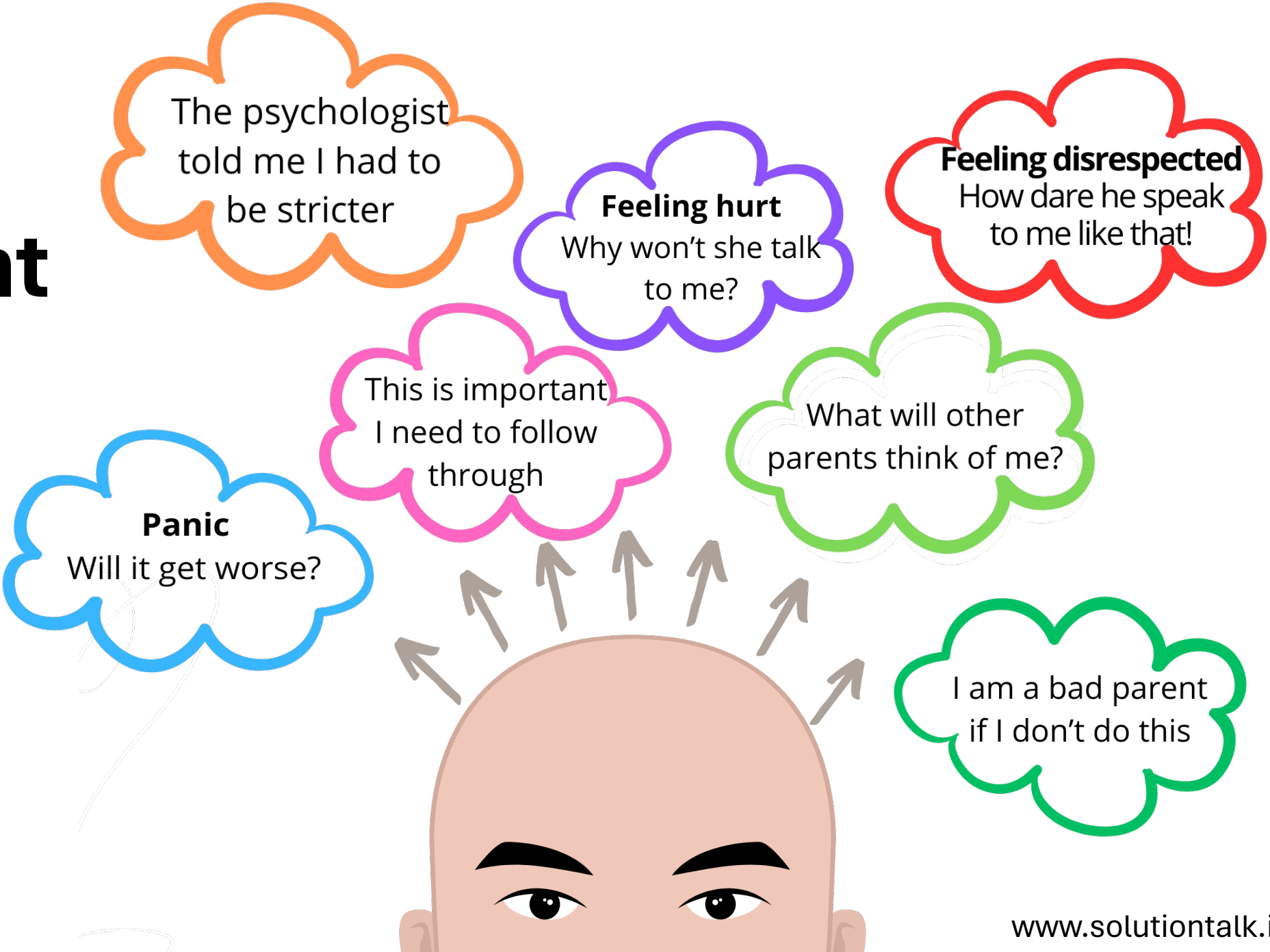


Understanding PDA

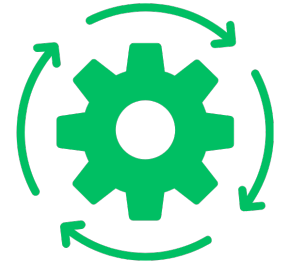
Many ND children have a profile of PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) which can be more empathically framed as a Persistent Drive for Autonomy.

- Being PDA means children can experience **demands, requests** and even **questions** as **stressful** and **anxiety** provoking.
- Sometimes PDA children are unhelpfully described as being ‘oppositional’ or ‘non-compliant’ or ‘having behaviour problems’ which suggests incorrectly that they are wilfully behaving that way.
- More accurately, PDA children experience **repeated demands as a threat to their autonomy** and this invokes a strong ‘fight, flight or freeze’ trauma reaction.
- A **fight** reaction could be resisting or arguing back, a **flight** reaction could be refusing or avoiding and a **freeze** reaction could be shutting down or becoming mute.
- Remember there are many **strengths** to being PDA.

Tune In to Yourself as a Parent



Respond



The best response is....

- The response that works **for you** and **for your child**.

Response Rules:

- Find out **what works** and do more of it.
- If it is not working, do something **different**.
- Focus on **connection** and **relationships**

Three Types of Responses



Change yourself
as a **parent**.



Change the
environment.



Support
your **child**.

Change Yourself As a Parent



- Adjust your **expectations** to match your child's needs and preferences.
- Focus on what is **most important** to you and let go the rest.
- Be **collaborative** and **creative**.
- Understand your stress levels, prioritise your **self-care** and address your own needs.

Adjusting Expectations and Rules

Reducing demands and adjusting your expectations based on your child's needs, can reduce unnecessary stress and create a much more harmonious home.

Rather than battling with his daughter to eat more varied foods, John accepted her more limited diet and gave her a vitamin supplement so he was less worried about nutrition. He realised that her eating the same favourite foods daily, helped her feel safe and contained.

In the morning routine, Alice decided to dress her son in front of TV where he was more relaxed and less aware of the sensory irritation putting on his clothes on.

Julie and Dave decided to travel separately to extended family social events so one could leave with their autistic son before he got too agitated and the other could remain with their other children so they did not miss out.

Tom relaxed his rules about video games as he could see this was when his son really relaxed after school. Tom joined in the video games at the weekends and his son loved to teach him how to play them.

Paul realised that his son was completely burnout by school and now need a complete break to recover and recuperate.

Reflective Exercise



Which expectations are difficult for your child to meet due to their ND needs?

Which expectations can you drop (at least for the short term) to meet their needs?

What things can you let your child decide?

Which expectations are hard for you to drop and why?

Which ones are important for you to keep?

Change Yourself As a Parent



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Be Collaborative

In guiding children, it can sometimes work better to be collaborative and give them space to decide.

Rather than:

“Please get dressed now”

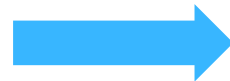
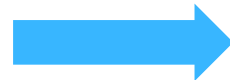
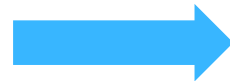
“Show your video games to your cousin”

“What did you do in school today?”

Giving ‘over the top’.

“Stop annoying your brother”

“Please tidy up today”



Try:

“I left your favourite clothes on your bed.”

“Look, your cousin has arrived to play.”

“I see some of the kids were wearing football jerseys today” and pause.

Give them a thumbs up or a hug they like or say a soft “thank you”.

“Your brother is a little upset, how can we look after him together?”

I am feeling sick today and need to get some rest can you help me?’

Change the Environment

Focusing on changing your child's world rather than changing your child in the world.



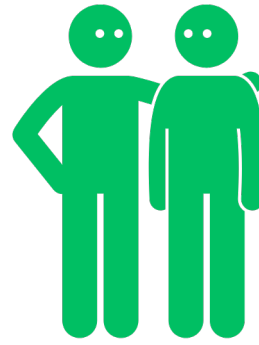
- Build better **routines** that suit your child.
- Include relaxed **sensory spaces** in the day so children can relax, unwind, and feel safe.
- **Sensory props:** noise cancelling headphones, tasteless toothpaste, crash pad, weighted blanket and vests, seamless clothes.
- **Collaborate** with teachers and activity leaders to create the right environment for your child.
- Seek **neuro-affirming services** (e.g. OT or SLT) to provide extra support to address your child's specific needs.
- Provide your child with opportunities to follow their **passions** and meet **other ND children**.
- Encourage others to learn about neurodiversity and to **appreciate different communication and learning styles**.

Support Your Child



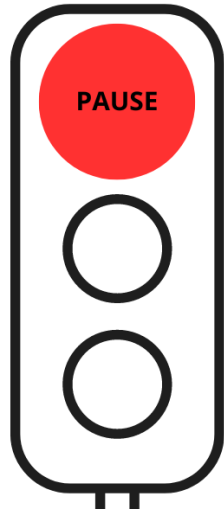
- Co-regulate with them when they are **distressed**.
- Co-problem solve with them and coach them in **how to manage**.

Co-Regulation



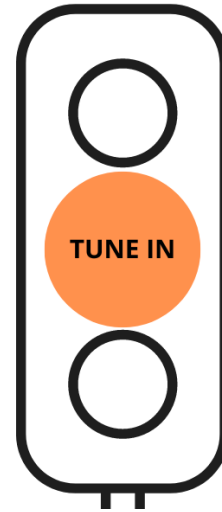
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- Being a **warm** and **calming** presence.
 - Being **close by** or **giving space** depending on what your child needs.
 - Showing you understand by your **body language**, tone of voice and what you say (or don't say).
 - Touching or **physically comforting** your child in a way that soothes them (or not touching them if that works better).
 - Reducing **sensory triggers** in the environment (dimming lights, turning TV off).
 - Creating a **safe environment** that relaxes your child (sitting on bean bags, putting on music, giving them a drink, or a snack).

Solving Childhood Problems



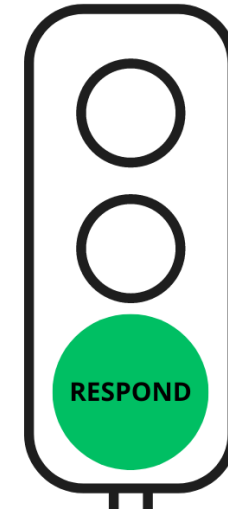
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Tune In

What is going on for my **child**?
What needs is my child **communicating**?
What is going on for me as a **parent**?
What are **my needs**?



Respond

What **changes** can I make in how I approach things to help?
How can I change the **environment**?
How can I **support my child** to cope and manage?
What supports do I need?

Specific Challenges



Case Example: Violent Meltdowns

Tim is autistic with an intellectual disability.

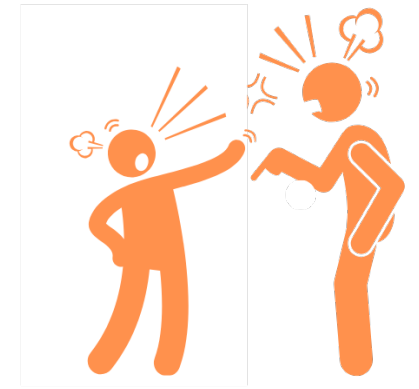
He has regular violent meltdowns at home usually in the evenings.

Often, they are directed his younger sibling which is terrible for his parents to witness.

They have tried everything to stop the meltdowns and end up standing in between the two brothers and getting attacked themselves.

They are at their wits end.

Tuning In: Violent Meltdown



What's it like for the parents?

- Worst problem of all to see your child harming their sibling, can be **terrifying**.
- Can feel really **angry** at child and even hate them for this.
- Your **relationship** is usually at a **low ebb**.
- Feel **guilt** and **despair**.

What's going on for the child?

- **Intellectual disability** and **high support needs**.
- High daily stresses heightened **sense of threat**.
- **Sensory** challenges.
- Damaged **parent relationship**, anxious/avoidant.
- Dynamics with sibling, threat to parent.

Responses: Violent Meltdowns



- Make a **plan** about how to co-regulate when child having a meltdown.
- Get in **early** at low levels of agitation.
- Understand and avoid **triggers**.
- Reduce **demands**.
- Create routine that reduces **accumulative stresses**.
- Provide routine access to **relaxing sensory experiences** and **passions**.
- Protect and support **siblings**.
- Get **support** for the family.
- Build family **relationships**.
- Repair **relationship with sibling**.
- Seek **personal support**.

Specific Challenges



Case Example: Struggling in School

Paul is struggling in school.

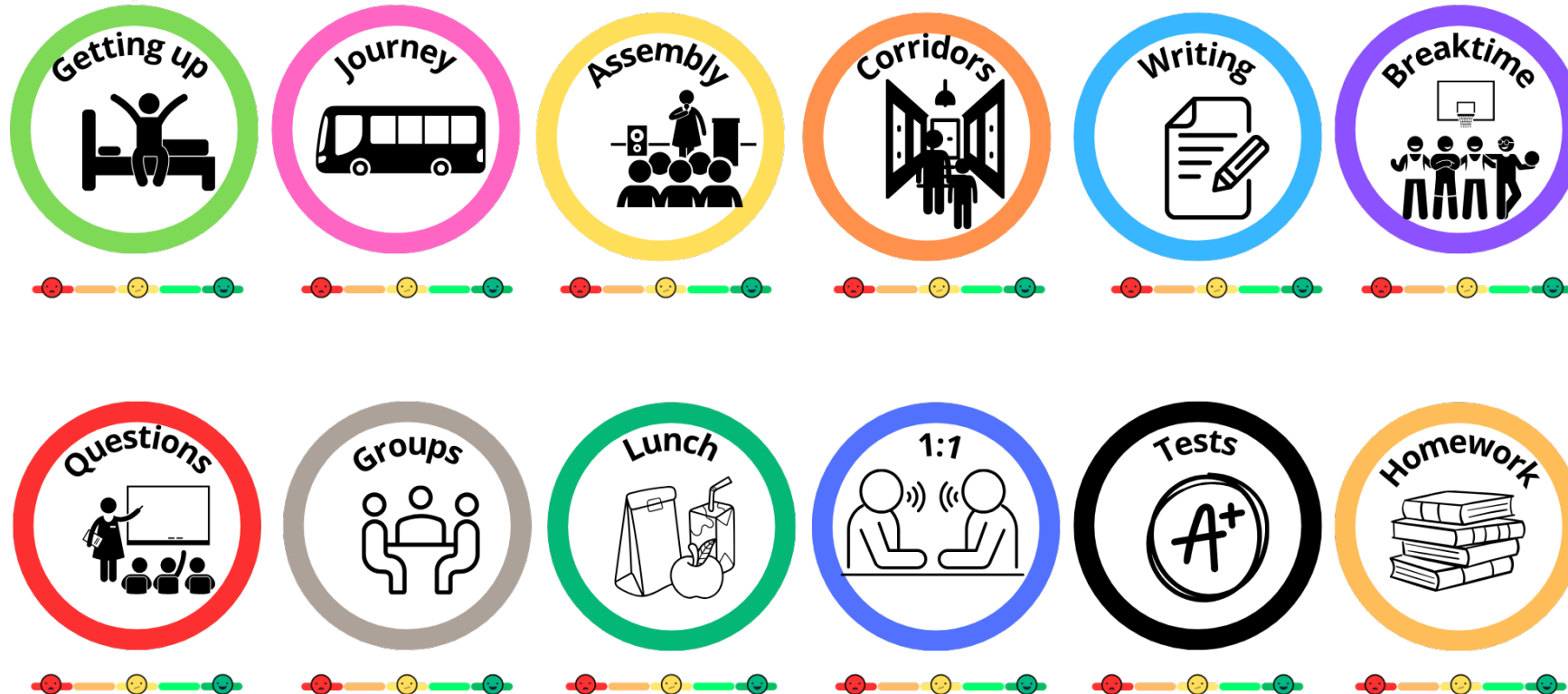
He is agitated and anxious and often refuses going.

His parents manage to cajole him to go most times but wonder for how much longer.

The teachers say he is quiet in school, keeps up academically but is isolated at other times.

When he comes home, he can be very dysregulated and has frequent meltdowns.

How is each part of the school day?



Corridors



- **Transitions can stressful**
- **Fear of bullying**
- **Executive function**
finding next class.
- **Sensory**
noisy, fear of brushing against others, smells.

Breaktime



- **Sensory Issues**
noise, open space etc.
- **Lack of structure**
no defined activities.
- **Social challenges**
joining in groups, prefer 1:1 etc.
- **Rejection sensitivity**
rather than talk, isolates themselves.

Homework



- **Executive function skills**
getting started, prioritising, finishing etc.
- **Sensory issues**
need to move to concentrate, background music etc.
- **Emotional considerations**
bright kid being bored with rote learning etc.
- **Dyslexia** or other specific learning difficulties.

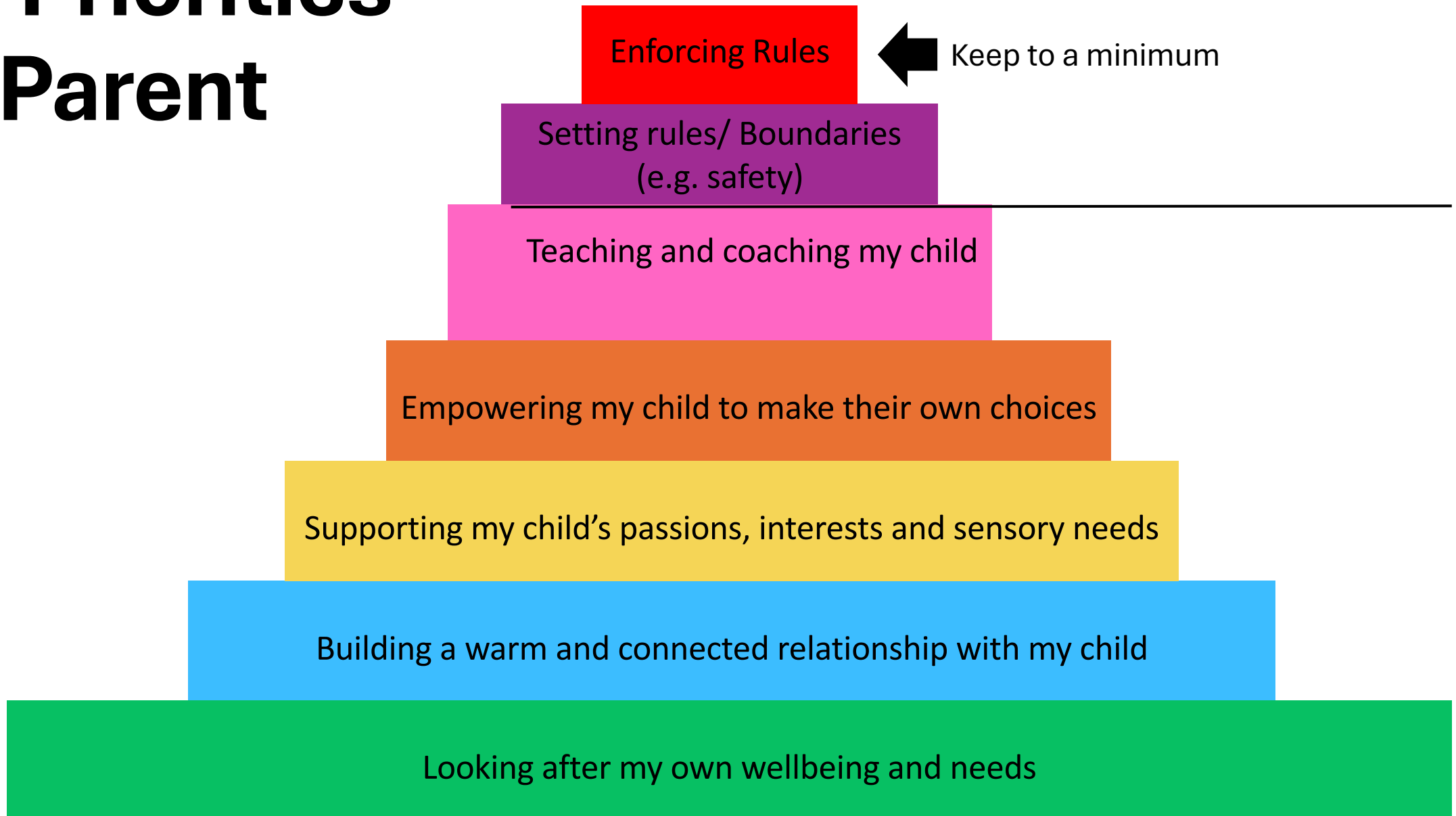
Responses: School Challenges



Co-problem solve with child how to address causes of worry

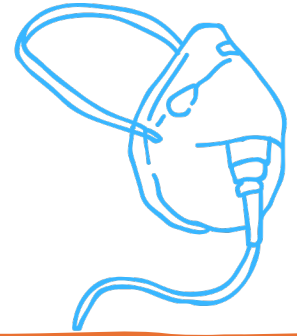
- **Brainstorm** with child about ways to make going to school easier.
(arrival, plan for when anxious..)
- Work with school to create a **plan**.
- Identify **safe place** in school.
- Identify **safe person** in school.
- Give child **meaningful role** in school.
- Emphasise child **strengths** and favourite **activities** in school.
- Set up a **buddy** system in school.
- Give child a **pass** so they leave lessons if need be.
- Meet teachers **outside** school.
- Invite **friends** home to help with schoolwork.
- **Friends walk** to school with child.
- Devise a timetable that **starts small**, builds gradually.
- Seek **professional support** (EWO, NEPS, CAMHS)

Your Priorities as a Parent



Parent- Self Care

In case of emergency put on your own oxygen mask first.



- Focus on your own **care** and **relaxation**.
- Get your **own needs met**.
- Let go expectations **that don't work** for you.
- Prioritise **one** or **two daily things** that relax and recharge you such as:
ringing a friend for a chat, listening to a podcast you love, walking the dog,
cooking a meal you like, spending time in nature, doing ten minutes meditation.
- Seek **support**, counselling, parenting group and neuro-affirming professional support.
- Identify what you need and find out what **works for you**.

Common Challenges



Case Example: Siblings Fighting

Paul 8 is autistic and likely ADHD.

His needs to absorb lots of his parent's time to the neglect of his older brother Pete (11).

Recently there has been lots of fights between the two which is very stressful.

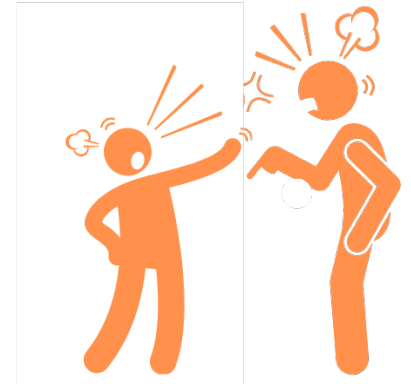
His mother has also observed Pete slugging and putting his brother down, and when she corrected him, he exploded and said he wished his brother had not been born.

Tuning In: Siblings Fighting



- When there are ongoing sibling challenges, the **core issue** is usually that one child feels that the parent loves the other child more.
- Many parents inadvertently reinforce this belief by **taking a side** in disputes.

Responses: Sibling Rivalry



- **Don't take a side** - Understand both of their perspectives equally.
- **Co-regulate with both** - *“Let's all calm down/ let's take a break for a minute”.*
- **Co-problem solve together** - Sit down with both children and help them discuss ways they can get on. The focus is on finding a solution rather than analysing who is wrong.
- **Problem-solve individually** - Sit down with each child, without taking sides, listen to their perspective and help them find a solution - *“How can you get on with your sister?”* or *“I need your help managing your brother.”*
- **Build your relationship with each child** - Set aside one-to-one time with each child, when you can enjoy their company and listen to them alone.
- **Support their relationship with each other** - Set up play/connecting time with both children supporting them playing cooperatively together e.g. put them on the same team.
- **Encourage and affirm together** – *“You are great brothers sharing like that.”*
- **Always encourage both** - *“I put out the plates and B you did the cutlery.”*