

Parenting Exceptional Children

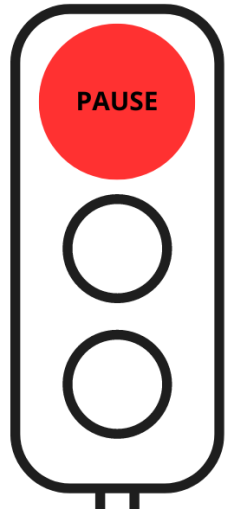
A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, adhd, and other neurodivergent children.

John Sharry

Session 3

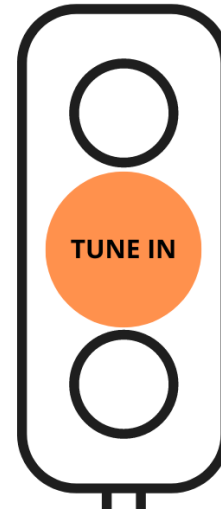


Solving Childhood Problems



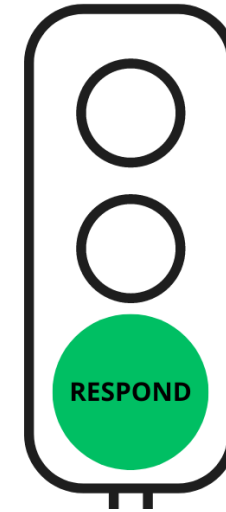
Pause

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**?

Specific Challenges



Case Example: Struggling in School

Paul is struggling in school.

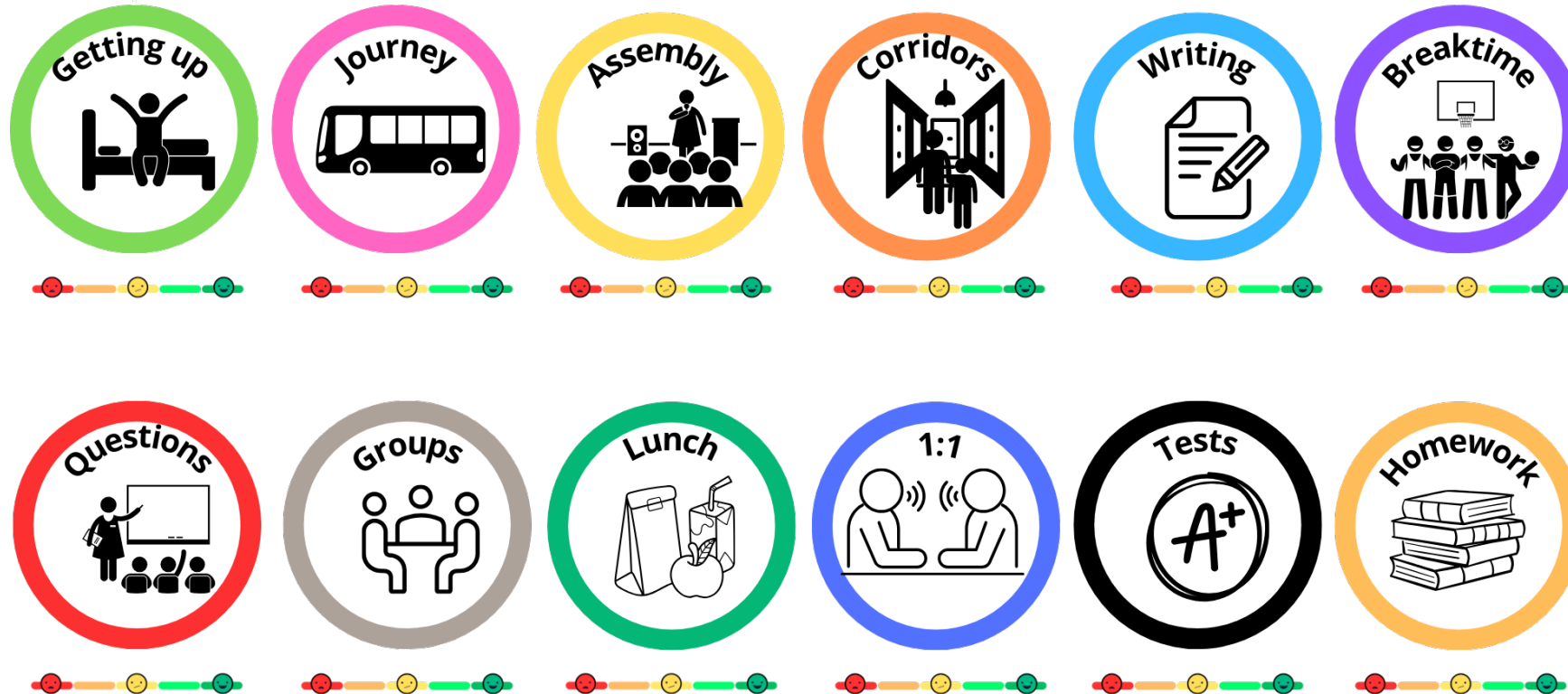
He is agitated and anxious and often refuses going.

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.

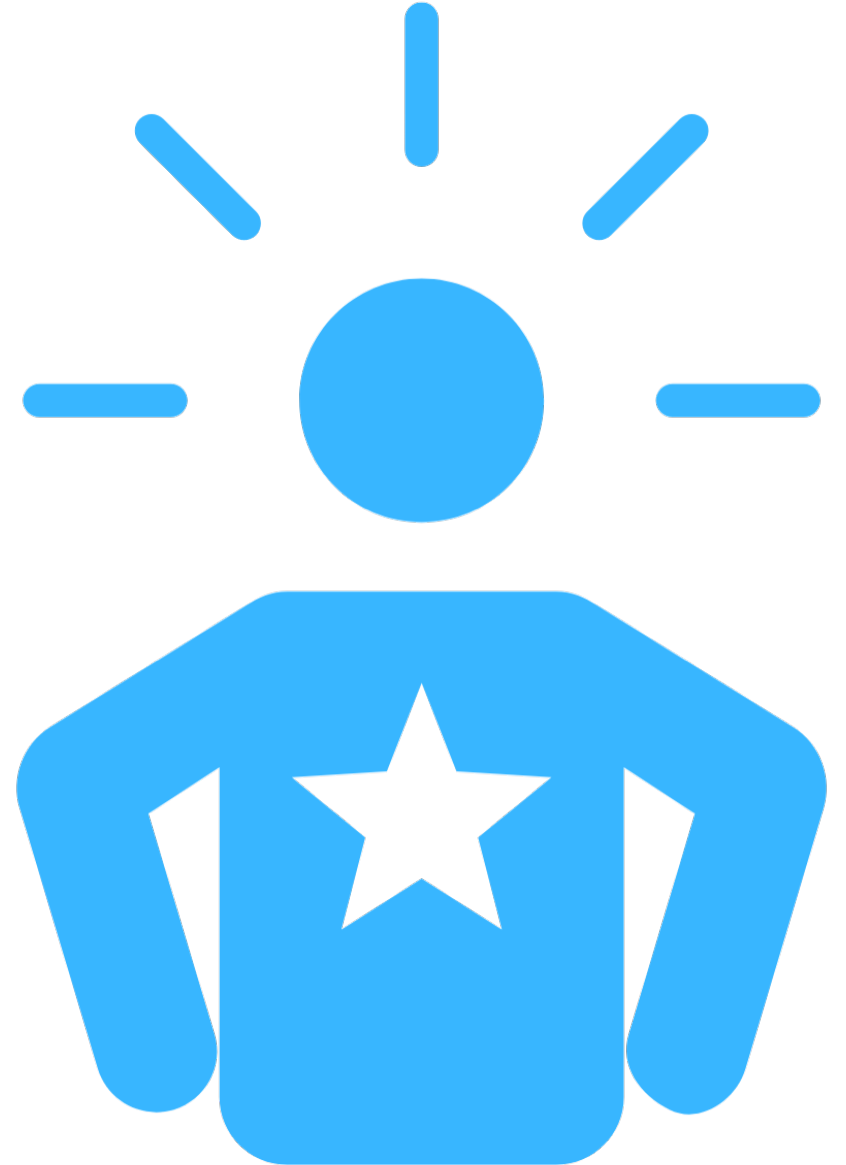
Responses: School Challenges



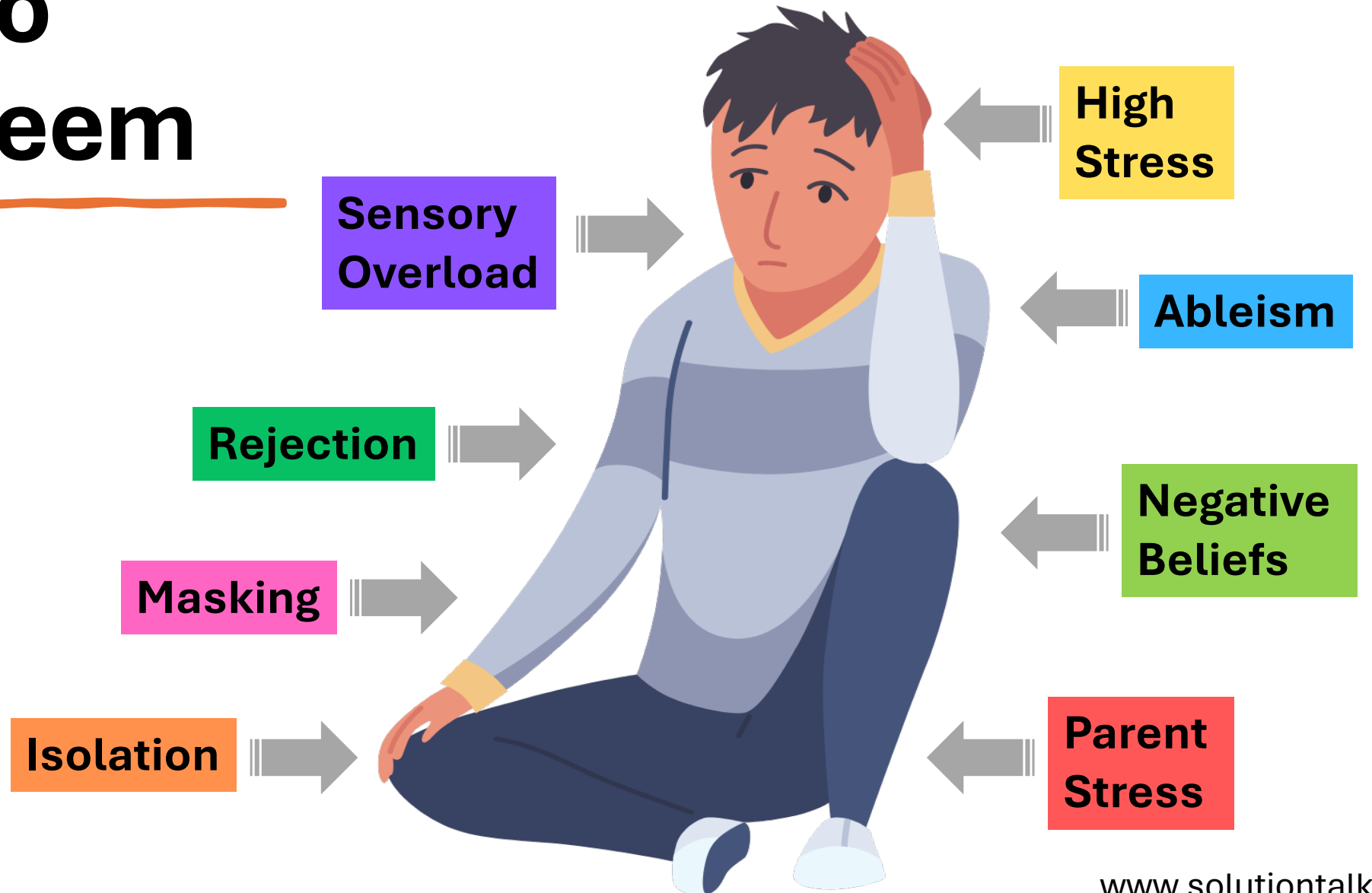
Co-problem solve with child how to address causes of worry

- **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).

Building Wellbeing and Self-Esteem



Blocks to Self-Esteem



What You Can Do As a Parent



Become An Affirming Parent



Nurture Your Child's Passions



Help Your Child Find Their Tribe



Manage Stress and Energy Levels



Advocate For Your Child



Co-Problem Solve

Become An Affirming Parent



- Prioritise **relationships, connection** and **fun**.
- Create a **safe place** for your children in the **home**.
- Talk **positively** about their **differences** and **compassionately** about **challenges**.

“ Your ADHD brain gives you loads of great ideas, though sometimes it makes it difficult to pick the best one. ”

“ Being highly sensitive means you sometimes become overwhelmed, but also means you are empathetic to others when they are. ”

“ Your autistic brain, means you really focus when you are in your routine, though sometimes it can be stressful when things change unexpectedly. ”

Nurture Your Child's Passions

The antidote to stress is passion and enjoyment.

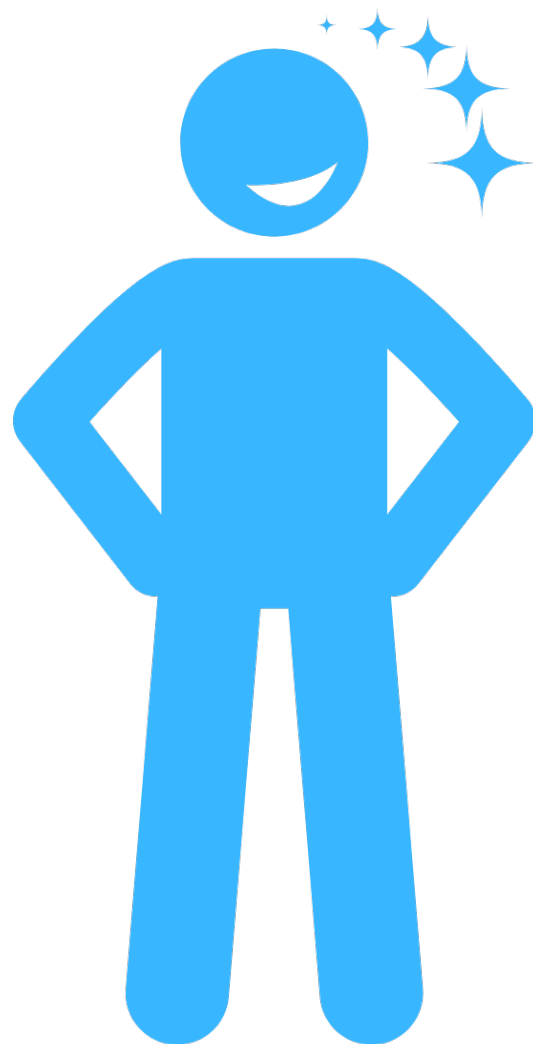


Most ND children have passions and special interests that:

- Are a source of **joy**.
- Provide **rest** and **recreation**.
- Allow them **escape** and get into a 'state of flow'.
- Help them **recuperate** and **recover**.
- Let them **learn new things** them.
- Provide **meaning** and **long-term purpose**.
- Can be a future **employment!**



Reflection



What are your child's passions?

- 1. What activities bring them joy?**
- 2. What activities do they get completely absorbed in?**
- 3. What activities to do they learn most from?**

Encouraging Passions

- Can **take time** to find your child's passions.
- Remember some children **move on** or change passions.



| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Action: | running, cycling, kickabouts, skateboarding, martial art, team sport, hikes, dance. |
| Learning: | quizzes, competitions, new languages, dog training, politics, documentaries. |
| Planning: | budgets, holidays, special events, family projects, day trips. |
| Creative: | journaling, crafts, photography, DIY, drawing, choir, cooking, creative writing |
| Social: | scouts/girl guides classes, community groups, helping vulnerable people, mentoring children in sport/homework. |
| Nature: | watching/photographing nature, identifying plants and insects, nature projects, citizen science, raising awareness about an issue they are passionate about. |
| Entertainment: | films, books, following music, sports fan. |
| Digital: | podcasting, graphic design, video editing, organizing photos. |

Help Your Child Find Their Tribe



ND children can make friendships differently...

- **small** rather than big group (1:1 or 3-4).
- formed around a **passion** or **interest**.
- can prefer **structured** groups (e.g. girl guides, team sport or community group).
- be **intermittent** or **intense**.
- friends can be **different ages** or **family members**.
- tend to get on better with **other ND children like them**.

Supporting Your Child's Friendships



- Get to know your child's **current friends** and groups.
- Get to know their **social networks** (e.g. which children are potential friends in school).
- Help them **join groups** around **passions** and **interest**.
- Facilitate them to meet other **ND children**
- Reach out to parents of **potential friends**.
- **Facilitate** social contacts (setting up play dates or trips with other children).
- Be **creative** (involve cousins and other family members).
- **Co-problem solve** with your child around friendship issues (how to approach children, how to maintain friendships..)

Help Your Child Find Their Tribe



- Julie supported her daughter's decision not to go to the school disco even though she was under a lot of FOMO pressure. She hated the idea of having to dress up, the loud music and the busy social situation. As an alternative, they planned a **board games night** at home with her **cousin** and **aunty** which she loved.
- Peter's son used to visit his **elderly neighbour** daily. He would do her shopping and spend time **chatting** with her and playing with her **dog**.
- Julia's son spends hours learning **hurling** skills in the garden and as a result was always selected for the GAA team. His team-mates respect him and he finds this **social group easier** as he is focused on his passion.
- The structure of the **scouts** group really worked for Alice's daughter. She thrived mixing with children of **different ages** and having a **specific role** in her patrol. She particularly got on well with one of the young adult leaders who shared her love of hiking in the mountains.
- When Sean got his 10-year-old son into his **singing** and **drama** group it made a huge difference to his life – he loved the **performance** on the stage and really got on with the other children – he loved going each week and it became a long-term passion.



Reflection



Think about your child's friendships and the groups they belong to...

- 1.** What is **going well** for them?
- 2.** Who are they **connected** to?
- 3.** What is more **challenging** for them?
- 4.** What **supports** might they need?

Advocate For Your Child

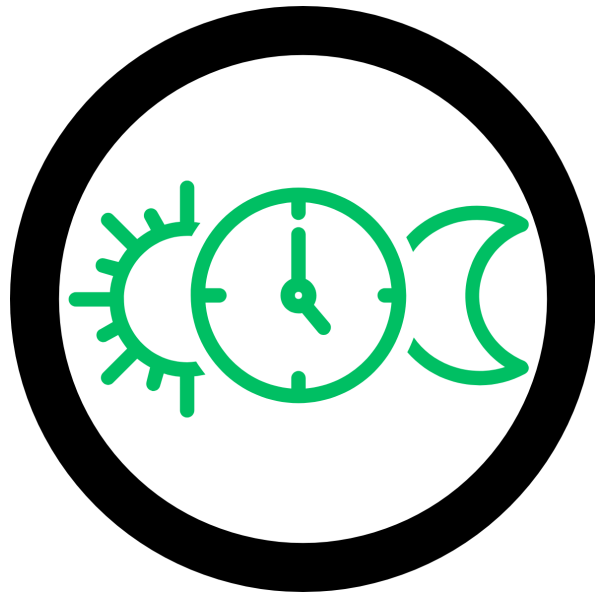


It is important to be your child's ally and advocate.

- **Explain your child's needs** to others in a way that creates understanding.
- **Change the environment** to meet their needs where possible.
- **Collaborate with schools** to create a learning environment to suit your child.
- **Anticipate challenges** to minimise any disadvantage they experience.
- Support your child how to **advocate for themselves** and to ask for what they need.
- Join with others to **campaign** for a more neurodiversity affirming world.

Co-Problem Solve with Your Child:

3 Steps



1

**Pick a
Good Time**



2

**First Listen
and Understand**



3

**Encourage Your
Child's Solutions**

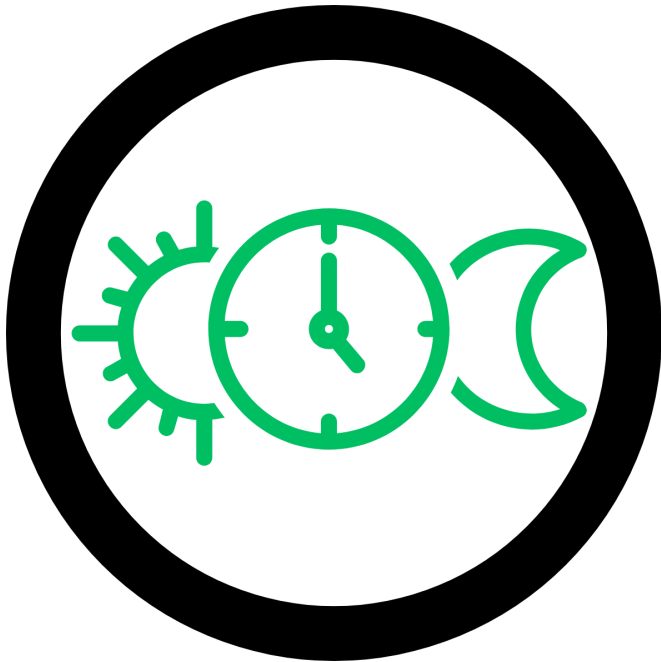
Co-Problem Solve with your Child



ND children communicate differently so you might have to adapt how you communicate about problems. They might...

- be less verbal and prefer **other ways of communicating**.
- have executive function differences making it more difficult to **plan** and **follow through**.
- have alexithymia and experience and **process feelings differently**.
- be PDA where they might initially experience co-problem solving as a **threat to their autonomy** and you have to work hard to ensure you are focusing on **their** own goals and preferences.

1. Pick a Good Time



- During the problem or in the **heat of the moment**. (though may need to co-regulate first).
- A **scheduled time**.
(“Let’s talk after dinner or when we go for a walk”).
- When **child comes to you** about problem
(you choose to drop tools and listen).
- **Spontaneous opportunity**
(e.g. when a dilemma comes up during a TV show you are watching).

2. Listen First



Often the different perspective of ND children is misunderstood and not validated.

- Be careful about about **mis-labelling** - ‘you must be anxious’, when in fact they are experiencing sensory overload.
- Be **curious** and invite your child to **describe their experiences** ‘Your face looks tense, I wonder what that means’.
- Be **curious** about **positive experiences** - ‘You love wearing that tee shirt, I am wondering what makes it so comfortable’.
- Help them find **language** for what they need “*I see you are upset, what do you need?*” or “*I see you are upset, I am here for you on the bed*”.
- Use your **child’s language** to describe what is going on. One child I worked with said his ‘brain went fizzy’ to describe a meltdown.

3. Encourage Your Child's Solutions

Lots of different approaches might work...

- **Good questions** - *'What would you like to happen now?' or 'How do you first notice stress building in your body?'*
- **Being indirect** - *'I wonder how you managed in school' or 'it might be good to figure out how stress builds in the body'.*
- Using **non-verbal** techniques - visual worksheets or using text / email.
- **Third party conversations** - discussing friendship dilemmas between the characters in a movie or video game as you play together.
- Using **creative** approaches - quizzes, social stories or comic strips about problem scenarios.
- Playing **sensory games** - to explore sensations in the body and to discuss how feelings are experienced.
- **Role-playing** and acting out scenarios whereby you show different ways of responding.
- **Collaborating**/Asking your child for help – *"I need to get some rest today, can you help me?" or "Your brother is a little upset, how can we look after him together?"*



Manage Stress and Energy Levels



Neurodivergent children are prone to burnout, exhaustion and shutdown.

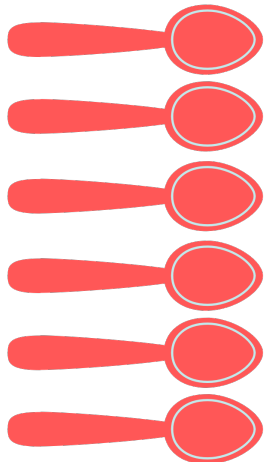
- An ADHD child might be **hyperactive** during the day and then crash in the evening with a **meltdown**.
- An autistic child might be in a **high state of stress** during the school day and then **shutdown** and be unable to speak.

Manage Your Spoons

Many people use the metaphor of ‘**spoons**’ to explain how to spend energy during the day. You start each day with a ‘drawer full of spoons’ - the amount of daily energy you have.



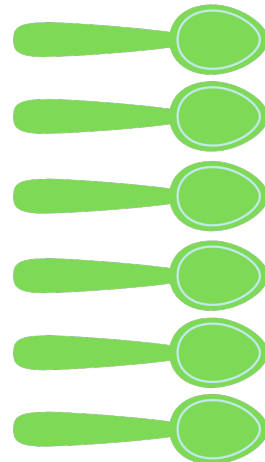
Some activities are stressful and **deplete** your child’s spoons...



- Sitting** at desk in school.
- Yard time**, worried about how to fit in.
- Homework.**
- Talking about** the school day.
- Tidying up** at home.



Some activities **replenish** your child’s spoons...



- Sensory break** at lunch.
- Stimming.**
- Chatting** to a friend.
- Reading** in a quiet room for ten minutes.
- Engaging in a **passion** or **special interest.**



Reflection



Take a moment to reflect about your child's energy levels during the day...

YOUR CHILD

What activities are **stressful** and **deplete** your child's energy during the day?

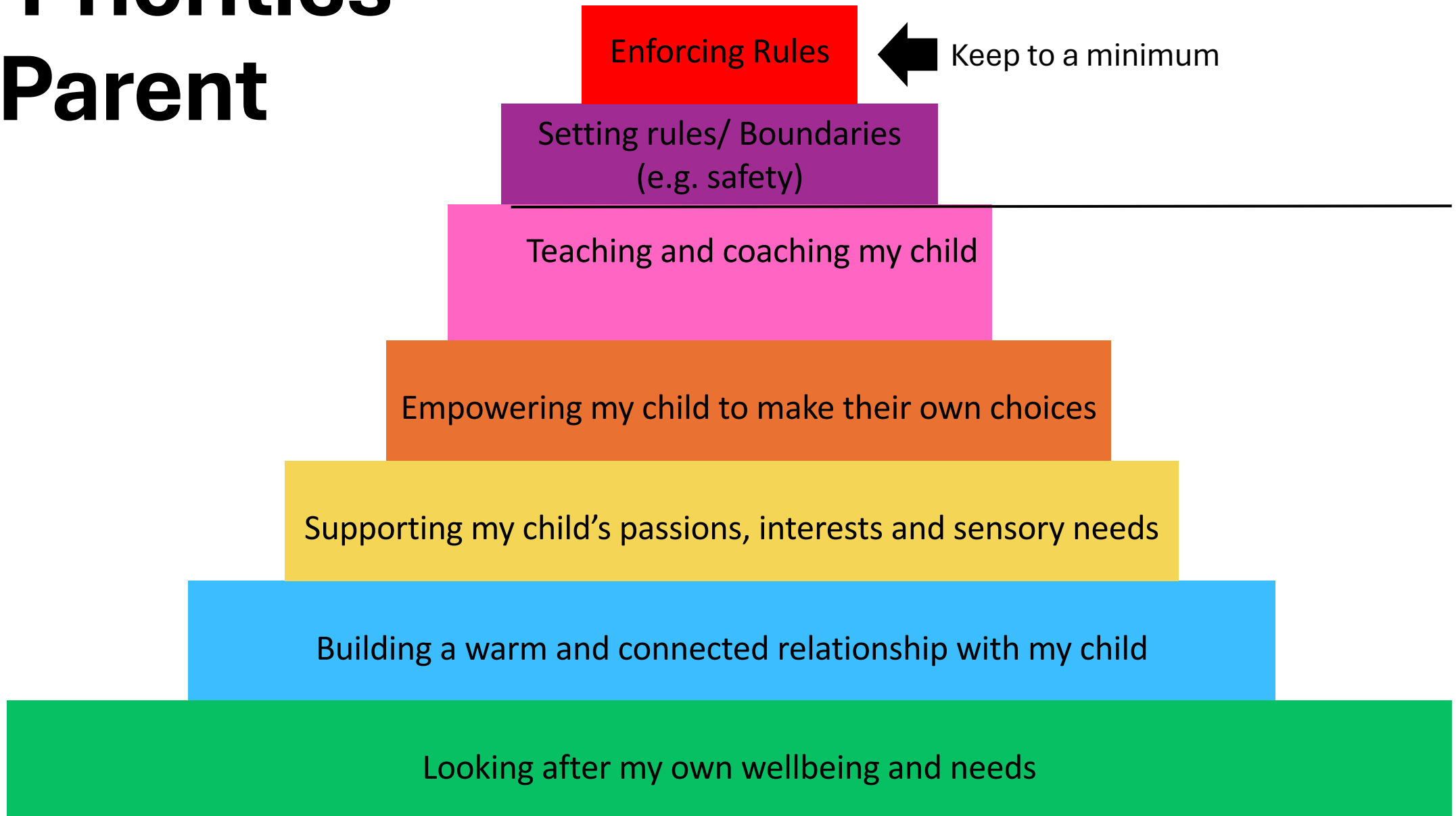
What activities **replenish** and **restore** your child's energy levels during the day?

YOURSELF AS A PARENT

What activities are **stressful** and **deplete** your energy during the day?

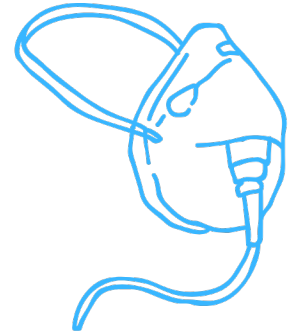
What activities **replenish** and **restore** your energy levels during the day?

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**.

Some Final Points



Going forward

Getting support

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- Understand your child's **individual needs** (rather than just diagnosis).
- Get the **right supports** to address needs (OT to help sensory issues, SLT to support communication, or physio to help with hypermobility/ fibromyalgia) etc.
- Prioritise your **connection and relationship** with your child.
- Embrace **neurodiversity in the family**.
- **Learn and inform yourself** about ND needs (lived experiences through books, interviews, talks, social media)
- **Reach out** and get support (social forums online, meet ups, parent groups).
- Address your **own needs** and focus on parent self care.