

Parenting Exceptional Children

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

John Sharry
Session 2

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Embracing Neurodiversity

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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

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Understanding Your Child

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

- Appreciate their **strengths**.
- Compassionately understand their **needs**.

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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.

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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.
- Tune in to your child's sensory needs and how they **regulate**.

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Talking With Your Child About Diagnosis

If your child receives a diagnosis, it is very important to talk to them about this.

- Start with strengths:** "Remember we went to see Dr J ... well, it turns out you are an ADHDer. This means you can have a turbo-charged mind, full of creative thoughts and energy."
- Identify role models:** If you or another family member are ND this is a good time to share this. Share how they cope and thrive with their ADHD.
- Explain challenges:** "The ADHD means that it can sometimes be hard for you to sit still at the table for homework – but there are lots of things that can help, such as sitting somewhere more comfortable, taking stretch breaks, using your wobble cushion, making a plan together..."
- Be creative:** Sit down and go through resources together - books, online resources (quizzes, checklists, tips), social media (infographics, memes, videos), podcasts.
- Let child have their own opinion:** "Dr J thinks you might be autistic.. What do you think?"
– Child does **not** have to agree with diagnosis.
- Discuss who to tell and how to tell** - Remember they can keep it private if they like.

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Managing Challenges and Problems

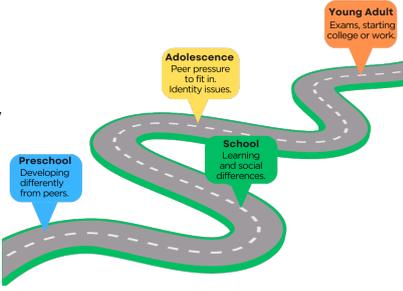


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The Parent Journey

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



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Solving Childhood Problems



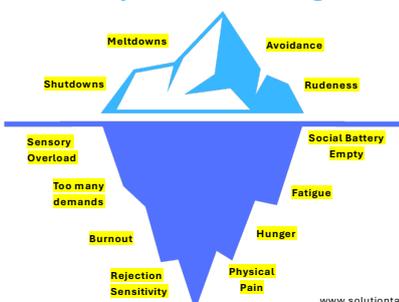
Pause	Tune In	Respond
How am I reacting to the problem? What responses work well already? What responses make things worse?	What is going on for my child? What needs is my child communicating? What is going on for me as a parent? What are my needs?	What is the best way to respond? How can I address my child's needs? How can I address my own needs?

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Tune in to Your Child

Tip of the Iceberg



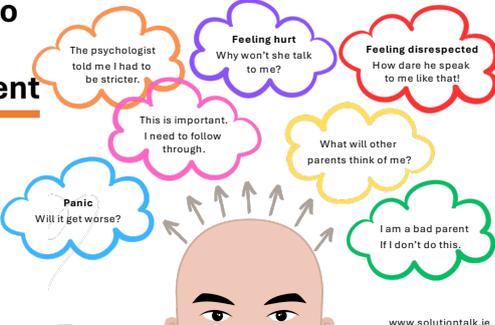
Visible (Tip of the Iceberg): Meltdowns, Avoidance, Shutdowns, Rudeness.

Hidden (Below Water): Sensory Overload, Social Battery Empty, Too many demands, Fatigue, Burnout, Hunger, Rejection Sensitivity, Physical Pain.

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Tune in to Yourself as a Parent



Thought bubbles include: "The psychologist told me I had to be stricter.", "Feeling hurt: Why won't she talk to me?", "Feeling disrespected: How dare he speak to me like that!", "Panic: Will it get worse?", "This is important. I need to follow through.", "What will other parents think of me?", "I am a bad parent if I don't do this."

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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**.



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Struggling at School

Case Example



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**.



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How is each part of the school day?





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Corridors



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



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Breaktime



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



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Homework



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



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Responses to Struggling at School

Co-problem solve with child about 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)



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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**?



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Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)



- Many ND children have a profile of PDA ('Pathological Demand Avoidance')
- This means they might resist parent's **requests, rules and routines**
- They might find it hard and stressful to **'do what they are told'**
- Can be **stressful** for children and parents
- Often **inaccurately framed** as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) Conduct Disorder (CD)

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'Tuning in' to PDA



- PDA can be more empathically framed as a **Persistent Drive for Autonomy**
- **Autonomy** and **being in control** is very important to them
 - this is how PDA children manage stress
- PDA children can experience **demands, requests** and even **questions** as **stressful and anxiety** provoking
- Demands can be experienced as a **threat** and invoke a strong **'fight, flight or freeze'** reaction
 - a **fight** reaction could be resisting or arguing back
 - a **flight** reaction could be refusing or avoiding
 - a **freeze** reaction could be shutting down or becoming mute
- Repeated demands can overwhelm PDA children and lead to **trauma and burnout**
- Remember there are many **strengths** to being PDA
 - independent, authentic, assertive, intrinsic motivation

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Responses to PDA



- **Reduce instructions and rules** – focus only on those that are most important
- Create **'low demand' environments** particularly when your child is stressed
- Focus on **connection** and not compliance
- Understand your child's **preferences and wishes**
- Support your child's **autonomy** and **empower** them to decide, where possible
- **Co-problem solve** and **collaborate** with them to address problems and make decisions
- Provide **options**, make indirect suggestions, and use **non-declarative language**
- **Adjust expectations** to match your child's needs and preferences

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Be Collaborative

In guiding children, be collaborative and give them space to decide

Rather than:	Try:
"Please get dressed now"	"I left your clothes on your bed."
"Show your video games to your cousin"	"Look, your cousin has arrived to play."
"What did you do in school today?"	"I see some of the kids were wearing football jerseys today" and pause.
Giving 'over the top' praise:	Give them a thumbs up or a hug they like or say a soft "thank you".
"Stop annoying your brother"	"Your brother is a little upset, how can we look after him together?"
"Please tidy up today"	"I can't get all the jobs done...I could do with some help"



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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 burntout by school and now need a complete break to recover and recuperate.
- Tilly adjusted her expectations about household chores and let go her resentment that he daughter would not do them, recognising this was not the priority at the moment. Instead, changed household routines to make it easier for all.

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Take and Break...

- Which expectations are **difficult** for your child due to their ND needs?
- Where do these expectations **come from**?
- Which expectations can you **drop** or **adjust** (at least for the short term) to meet their needs?

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Three Types of Responses



Change Yourself
as a **Parent**



Change the
Environment



Support
your **Child**

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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.
- Focus on **collaboration** and not compliance.
- Be **collaborative** and **creative**.
- Understand your stress levels, prioritise your **self-care** and address your own needs.

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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**.

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Support Your Child



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

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Co-Regulation



Managing distress and meltdowns

- **Pause** and notice your own triggers
- **Tune in compassionately** to what is going on for your child
- Be a **warm and calming** presence
- Be **close by** or **giving space** depending on what your child needs
- Show you understand by **body language**, tone of **voice**, what you say (or don't say)
- **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...)

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Co-Problem Solving



Take time to talk through problems with your child to come up with solutions together.

1. Pick a **good time**.
2. First **listen** and **understand**.
3. Encourage your **child's solutions**.



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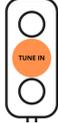
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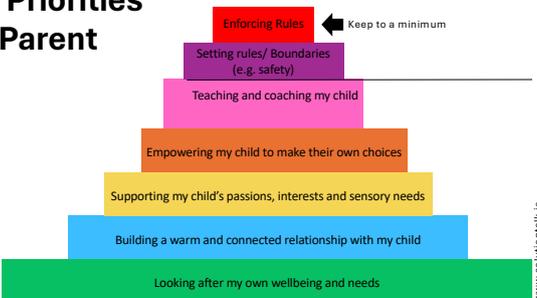
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Your Priorities as a Parent



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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**.

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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**.

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Homework



- Take time to review your **expectations** and **rules** for your children.
 - Which ones are important right now?
 - Which ones meet yours and your child's needs?
- Use the Pause, Tune in, Respond problem-solving model to **create a plan** for a challenge you are dealing with.

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