

Parenting Exceptional Children

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

John Sharry
Session 3

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Your Priorities as a Parent

Enforcing Rules ← Keep to a minimum

Setting rules/ Boundaries (e.g. safety)

Teaching and coaching my child

Co-problem solving
Empowering my child to make their own choices

Supporting my child's passions, interests and sensory needs

Building a warm and connected relationship with my child

Looking after my own wellbeing and needs

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Solving Childhood Problems

PAUSE

Pause

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

TUNE IN

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

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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Agenda for this Session

- Supporting **Siblings**
- **Co-problem solving** with children
- **Advocating** for your child
- Building your child's **well-being**
- Supporting **Friendships**
- Managing **energy levels** and reducing **stress**
- **Questions** and going forward

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Supporting Siblings

Case Example

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.

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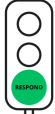
'Tuning in' to Siblings

- Parents can easily attend more to the needs of the ND child and miss out on attending to the needs of siblings
- When disputes happens, parents often take the side of the ND child against siblings
- Taking sides in a dispute usually makes matters worse
- Key is to not take sides. Support and understand both children. Attend to their different needs.

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Responses to Siblings Fighting




- **Don't take a side.** Understand both children's perspectives. **Take both their sides**
- Encourage **mutual understanding** - "I know you like spontaneity, your brother is different he likes plans to stay the same"
- **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, to 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."

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Co-Problem Solve with Your Child



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Co-Problem Solve with Your Child: 3 Steps

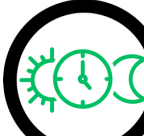




- 1 Pick a Good Time**
- 2 First Listen and Understand**
- 3 Encourage Your Child's Solutions**

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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).

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Co-Problem Solve with your ND 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.**

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2. Listen First

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



- Be careful 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.
A child saying his 'brain went fizzy' to describe a meltdown.

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3. Encourage Your Child's Solutions

Lots of different approaches might work...



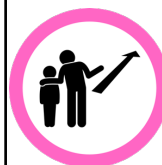
- **Good Questions** - 'What would you like to happen now?' or 'How do you first notice stress building in your body?'
- **Being Indirect** - 'I wonder how you managed in school' or 'it might be good to figure out how stress builds in the body.'
- **Non-verbal techniques** - visual worksheets or using text / email.
- **Third party conversations** - discussing friendship dilemmas between the characters in a movie or video game as you play together.
- **Creative approaches** - quizzes, social stories or comic strips about problem scenarios.
- **Sensory games** - to explore sensations in the body and to discuss how feelings are experienced.
- **Role-playing** different ways of responding.
- **Collaborating/Asking 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?"

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Advocate For Your Child

Be your child's ally and advocate.



- **Explain your child's needs** to others in a way that creates understanding.
- **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.

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Challenges in Schools

There are lots of amazing teachers and a growing number of ND affirming schools.

Indeed, a good teacher who **gets your child** can have a pivotal influence on their well-being

However, many teachers

1. See only **'misbehaviour'** and **blame** child or parent for this
2. Adopt a **one size fits all 'carrot and stick'** approach
3. **Misunderstand ND children's needs:**
 - disruptive rather than under-stimulated
 - lazy rather than 'struggling to self organise'
 - quiet rather than masking/ stressed/ in burnout
4. Are Misinformed (think too many ND diagnosis being made)
Are undertrained and under resource



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Advocating With a Teacher

1. **Affirm what the teacher is doing right:** 'J likes the learning project you set up

2. **Listen to the teachers concerns:** 'How is J doing in your class?'

3. **Explain your child's needs:** 'J can find it hard to sit for long periods.'
'J has sensory needs when he is eating lunch'

4. **Share diagnosis** if it helps provide understanding and access resources
'J has ADHD. Here is report. What resources can the school provide to help?'

5. **Agree a positive goal with teacher:** e.g. Helping J settle in class.

6. **Share what works:** 'How I help J attend at home is ...'

7. **Explore teachers ideas:** 'What can you do to help J in class?'

8. Ask for **specific accommodations:** 'Can J have a pass if he needs a break?'
'Can we set a project for homework?'

9. **Agree a plan and how you will communicate again.**



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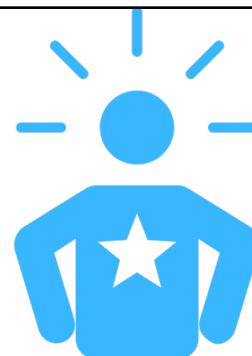
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Take a Break...

- How can you **co-problem solve with your child** at home?
- How can you **advocate for your child** in school or elsewhere?


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Building Wellbeing and Self-Esteem



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Developing a Positive Self-Identity

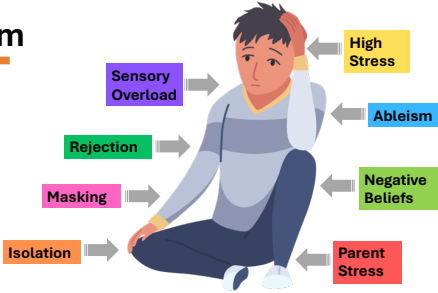


<p>1 Think something is wrong with you.</p> <p>Feel weird or different.</p> <p>Isolated from people.</p> <p>Depressed.</p> <p>Self-critical 'What is the matter with me?'</p> <p>Trying hard to fit in.</p> <p>People pleasing. <i>Going along with others.</i></p> <p>Anxious.</p>	<p>+ Aware of your strengths.</p> <p>+ Love being unique.</p> <p>+ Find your own community.</p> <p>+ Happy with yourself.</p> <p>+ Self-compassionate 'What are my needs?'</p> <p>+ Finding people who accept you.</p> <p>+ Setting your own boundaries. <i>Doing your own thing.</i></p> <p>+ At peace.</p>
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Blocks to Self-Esteem



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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

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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."

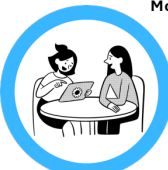
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Nurture Your Child's Passions

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!**

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Reflection




11 What are your child's passions?

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

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Encouraging Passions



- Can take time to find your child's passions.
- Remember some children change passions regularly

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 in sport/homework.

Nature: watching/photographing nature, identifying plants and insects, 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.

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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**.

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Help Your Child Find Their Tribe




- ▶ Julie supported her daughter's decision not to go 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 **aunt** 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 spend 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 this **social group easier** as 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.

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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.

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Keeping Your Battery Charged




Understand your child's capacity and energy levels during the day.

Some activities are **stressful** and **deplete** your child's battery...



- **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 are **enjoyable** and **recharge** your child's battery...



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


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Reflection II

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


YOUR CHILD



—What activities **stress** 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 **stress** and **deplete** your energy during the day?

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

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Some Final Points




- 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).
- Address your **own needs** and focus on parent self care.
- Reach out** and get support (social forums online, meet ups, parent groups).

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Further Support




Motivating Your Children and Teenagers



An online workshop with John Sharry
Wednesday 9th April 2025, 7.30-9.00pm
Bookings: www.solutiontalk.ie

Helping Your Children and Teenagers Manage Anxiety and Stress

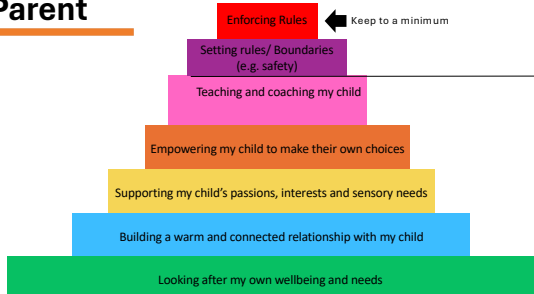


An online workshop with John Sharry
Tuesday 13th May 2025, 7.30-9.00pm
Bookings: www.solutiontalk.ie

- Irish Times **parenting questions on neurodiversity** – will email link.
- Short follow-up individual session** – for those who attended the course live, email me this week.

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Your Priorities as a Parent



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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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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..)

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