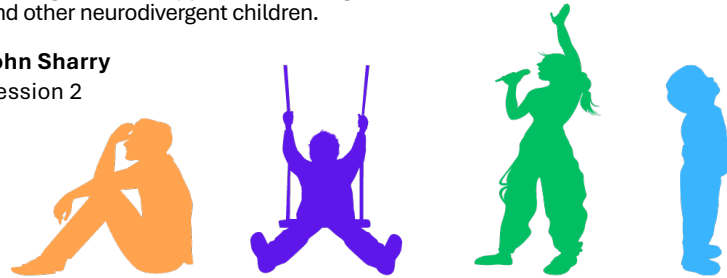


# Parenting Exceptional Children

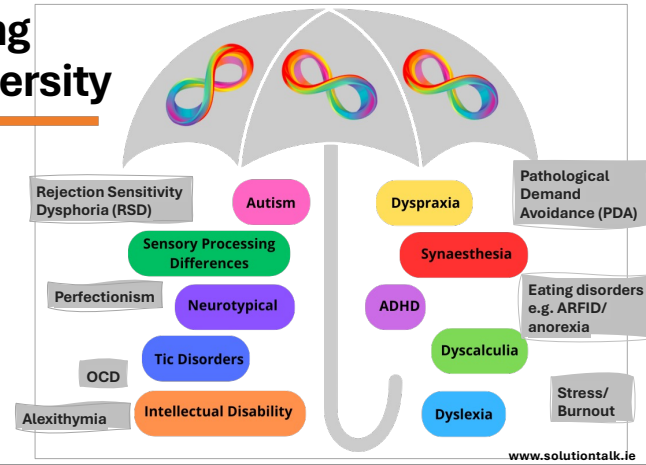
A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, adhd and other neurodivergent children.

John Sharry  
Session 2



1

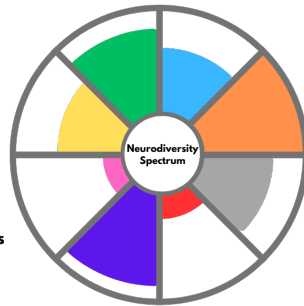
# Embracing Neurodiversity



2

# 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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## Parenting Getting the Balance Right

### Disability

- Understand your child's needs
- Appreciate what support they need
- Provide accommodations and support

### Ability

- Understand your child's strengths
- Encourage their ability
- Provide challenge and opportunity




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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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## Seeking Professional Help and Diagnosis

8

### + Advantages of Diagnosis

- 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

- 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.

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9

## 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.

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10

## Talking With Your Child About Diagnosis

**If your child receives a diagnosis, it is 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..."
- **Diagnosis is one step on journey of self-understanding:** 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. – "you can decide how you like to identify"
- **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...

**Preschool**  
Developing differently from peers.

**School**  
Learning and social differences.

**Adolescence**  
Peer pressure to fit in. Identity issues.

**Young Adult**  
Exams, starting college or work.

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13

## 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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14

## Tune in to Your Child

**Tip of the Iceberg**

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

**Below the Water (Underlying Causes):** 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

**Thoughts and Feelings:**

- 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!
- This is important. I need to follow through.
- What will other parents think of me?
- Panic: Will it get worse?
- I am a bad parent. If I don't do this.

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16

# 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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17

# 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.

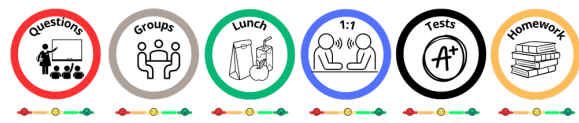
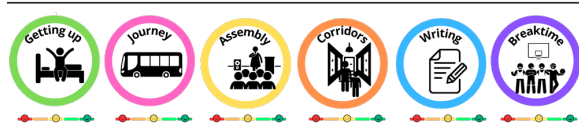
When he comes home, he can be very **dysregulated** and has frequent **meltdowns**.



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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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23

## Solving Childhood Problems




**Pause**

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 What responses **work well** already?  
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**Tune In**

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**Respond**

What is the best way to **respond**?  
 How can I address my **child's** 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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26

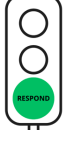


## Responses to PDA

- **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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27



## 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 burnout 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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29


## 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?

30

## Intense Meltdowns

### Case Example



Many parents are dealing with intense meltdowns which might include

- Screaming shouting kicking etc
- Self harm
- Attacking parents
- Attacking siblings

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31

## Tuning In: Intense Meltdown

### What's it like for the **parents**?

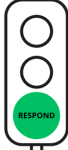
- Worst problem of all to see your child being violent, can be **terrifying**.
- Your **relationship** is usually at a **low ebb**
- Can feel really **angry** at child and even hate them for this.
- Feel **guilt** and **despair**.
- Feel stress and burnout as a parent

### What's going on for the **child**?

- High accumulation of stress. May be **in burnout**
- Might **have PDA profile** – need to feel in control
- **High support needs**
- **Sensory** challenges
- Feeling isolated, guilty, low self esteem
- Dynamics with siblings,

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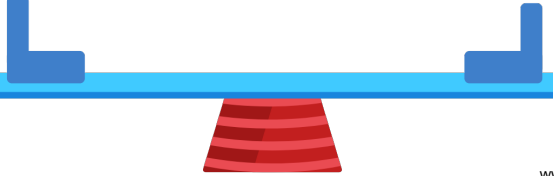
## Responses to intense Meltdowns

### Prevention Plan

- to address underlying causes


### Response Plan

- A step by step plan to get through a meltdown in a calm, safe way as possible



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## Response Plan

*Remember you can only control your own actions, not your child's.  
Goal is to de-escalate and reduce agitation*

- **Get in early** at low levels of agitation ‘lets take a break now’
- **Adjust expectation** in moment – ‘you are too tired now, mummy will tidy up today’
- **State important rule calmly** – ‘ you must not hit Mum, keep your hands to your self’
- **Set your boundary** - ‘ I am going to sit over here and wait until things are calmer’

34




## Response Plan - Coregulation

**Find ways to help child manage feelings and to manage your own**

- Be a **warm, safe** 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)
- Reduce **sensory triggers** in the environment (dimming lights, turning TV off)
- Create a **safe environment** that relaxes your child (sitting on bean bags, putting on music, giving them a drink, or a snack...)

35



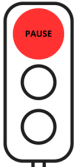
## Prevention Plan

- Address **underlying stresses and issues**.
- Understand and **avoid triggers**
- **Co-Problem solve** with child.. How can we make things easier? What can you do to relax when you feel frustrated?
- Create routine that reduces **accumulative stresses**
- **Reduce demands** and adjust expectations
- Increase access to **relaxing sensory experiences** and **passions**
- Increase child **autonomy and choices** during the day
- Seek **personal support as parent**
- Build your **relationship with child**

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36

## Solving Childhood Problems



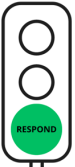
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## Your Priorities as a Parent



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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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39

## 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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40