

Parenting Exceptional Children

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

John Sharry
Session 3

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Solving Childhood Problems

Pause	Tune In	Respond
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How am I reacting to the problem? What responses work well already? What responses make things worse? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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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Responding to Challenges

Prevention Plan

- Address underlying causes
- Reduce stress and demands
- Make environment more supportive
- Access to passions, regulating activities

Response Plan

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

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Intense Meltdowns

"we spoke about meltdowns during the session and there are times when my son is so dysregulated that staying calm, empathising and repeating that hitting/kicking etc is not allowed just don't work. It is so hard in these situations not to despair and feel that nothing I do seems to help him."

"my child follows me and wants to vent at me whether that is shouting or hitting(not as much hitting). No matter what I say it seems to make her more aggressive. When the meltdown is over she is devastated by her actions and hates herself and doesn't understand why she was so angry. I worry more about the self hate after the meltdown."

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Your Priorities as a Parent

- Enforcing Rules
- Setting rules/ Boundaries (e.g. safety) ← Keep to a minimum
- Problem solving/ coaching my child
- Reducing demands/ Empowering my child to choose
- Supporting my child's passions and access to regulatory activities
Understanding my child's sensory and other needs
- Building a warm and connected relationship with my child
- Looking after my own wellbeing and needs

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The importance of regulation

- ND children are sensitive – experience a big threat response/ easily traumatised
- Often in highly stressful environments and experiencing burnout
- Need access to regulatory activities


<ul style="list-style-type: none"> having a cup of tea, chatting, gym equipment, going for run/cycle watching a favourite TV show chatting about a favourite topic fidget toys puzzles music snuggling a blanket animal care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> baking drawing doing a crossword together warm/cold shower clean up blitz trampoline/racing deep pressure/massage/yoga ball massage/blanket burrito change environment: headphone/low lighting/take off socks
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Agenda for this Session


- Managing challenges as a parent
- 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




We would really like advice on how to manage our son when he is being physical with his sister e.g. hitting her etc. He is 6 and she is 3. This is NOT all the time but has been happening more recently at home.

How do we ensure our other neurotypical child feels supported in all this

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'Tuning in' to Sibling Fighting


Sibling disputes, can have many different sources

- Child has substantial needs that take lots of parental time
- A 'velcro child' needs parent exclusively as 'safe person' – finds it hard to share
- A PDA child needs to be in control and manage other sibling
- Child feels neglected or that the parent loves/ favours the other child more

In responding as a parent the key is
 Don't take a side in disputes: Be on both their sides
 Understand both of their perspectives equally.
 Understand each child's individual needs

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Responses to Siblings Fighting

- 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

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

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Advocating With a Teacher



- Affirm what the teacher is doing right:** 'J likes the learning project you set up'
- Listen to the teachers concerns:** 'How is J doing in your class?'
- Explain your child's needs:** 'J can find it hard to sit for long periods.'
'J has sensory needs when he is eating lunch'
- Share diagnosis** if it helps provide understanding and access resources
'J has ADHD. Here is report. What resources can the school provide to help?'
- Agree a positive goal with teacher:** e.g. Helping J settle in class.
- Share what works:** 'How I help J attend at home is ...'
- Explore teachers ideas:** 'What can you do to help J in class?'
- Ask for specific accommodations:** 'Can J have a pass if he needs a break?'
'Can we set a project for homework?'
- Agree a plan and how you will communicate again.**

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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

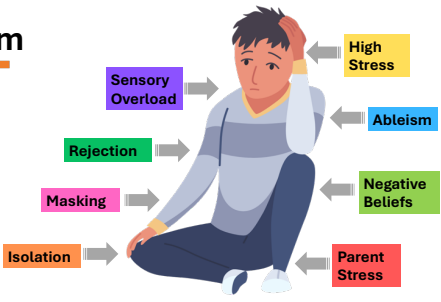


- Think something is **wrong** with you.
 - Feel **weird or different**.
 - Isolated** from people.
 - Depressed**.
 - Self-critical** 'What is the matter with me?'
 - Trying hard to **fit in**.
 - People pleasing**. *Going along with others.*
 - Anxious**.
- Aware of your **strengths**.
 - Love being **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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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**.
- Focus on **compassion** and not **shaming** your child
- 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!**

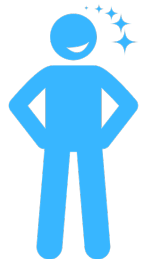


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Reflection

II



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 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 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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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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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

Keep learning

Reach out

Self-care


- 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 ADHD Children and Teenagers

An online workshop with John Sharry




Wednesday 8th April 2026, 7.30-9.00pm

Positive Parenting Pre-Teens and Teens

3 WEEK ONLINE COURSE WITH JOHN SHARRY


Managing conflict, solving problems and building a warm relationship with your teenager.



Tuesdays 7.30-9.00pm, starting April 14th

Helping Your Children & Teenagers Manage Anxiety and Stress

An online workshop with John Sharry



Wednesday 6th May 2026, 7.30-9.00pm

• Irish Times **parenting questions on neurodiversity** – will email link.

• **Follow-up individual session** – for those who attended the course live, email me this week.

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