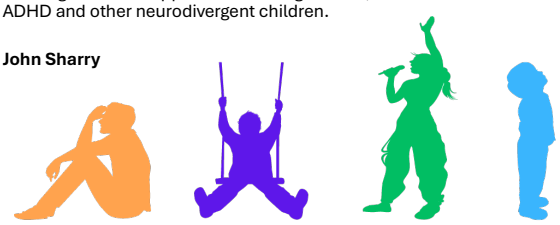
Parenting Exceptional Children

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

John Sharry



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Exceptional Children

Children who **think**, **communicate** and **experience** the world **differently**.....

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A Note on Language...

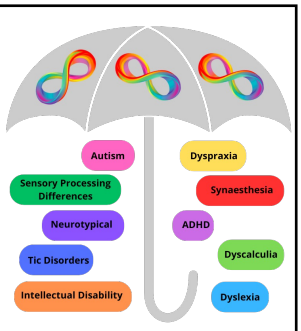
"Neuro*divergent*" or "Neuro*diverse*" or "Neuro*distinct*"

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Neurodivergent Diagnoses

- About 20% of all children are neurodivergent (ND).
- The majority do not have a formal diagnosis.
- Great overlap between ND conditions.
- Many ND children meet the criteria for more than one. For example, an estimated 50% to 70% of children with autism also meet the criteria for ADHD.
- ND children experience higher rates of physical health and mental health problems
- In studies two thirds of children attending CAMHS are likely ND



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A Neurodiversity Affirming, Strengths-Based Approach

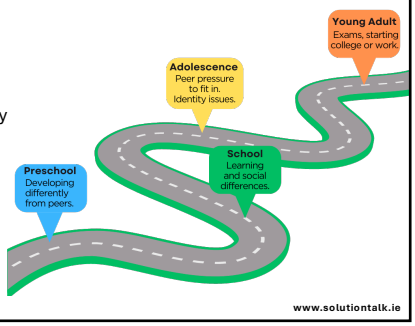
- A shift away from pathologising autism, adhd and other ND conditions.
- Neurodivergence comes with strengths as well as challenges.
- Many challenges for ND people caused by society and environment.
- Providing appropriate accomodations to ND people to meet their needs.
- Embracing neurodiversity as beneficial for humankind.

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The Parent Journey

Raising a neuro-distinct child can feel like a journey with many milestones...



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Seeking Professional Help and Diagnosis

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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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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**.
- Use diagnosis as part of a **journey** of compassionate self-understanding
- Focus on getting the right **supports** for you and your child.

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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.

Goal is to love, accept and compassionately understand your child ...
so they understand, accept and love themselves.



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Double Empathy Challenge

It is more difficult to understand someone who feels and thinks differently to us.

- Neuro-distinct people can find it hard to understand neurotypical people and vice versa.
- Two neuro-distinct people can also find it hard to understand one another if 'distinctly' different.



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Appreciate your child's strengths



Hyperactive/ always on go.	Great energy, drive and enthusiasm
Overtalks and becomes obsessed with certain subjects	Has deep interests and passions/ becomes an expert in a subject
Says wrong thing/ Rude and blunt	Direct and honest / does not tell lies
'Too much'/ Loud'	High energy, fun, life and soul of party
Impulsive	Takes risks/ tries new things
Won't do what they are told	Independent, values autonomy, sets own boundaries

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Question

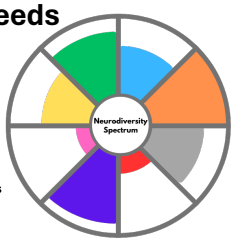
Please share in chat

- What are your child's **strengths**?
- What are the strengths they have related to being ND?

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Understand your child's needs

ND children have a spectrum on needs
Most have a 'spikey profile'



- 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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Communication and Social



- How does your child **communicate** with you?
- How do they get on with others **socially**?
- Are they 'high energy/ impulsive' socially OR 'reserved/ awkward'?

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Executive Function



- How does your child plan and organise themselves?
- How do they start and complete tasks?
- Are they a 'perfectionist'/ 'overthinkers' OR 'disorganised'/ 'under-thinkers'?

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Attention and Interests



- What subjects and activities capture your child's interest?
- What do they find hard to pay attention to?
- When do they need support to regulate/ calm and
  When do they needs support to 'get going'/ re-energise?

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Health and Physical



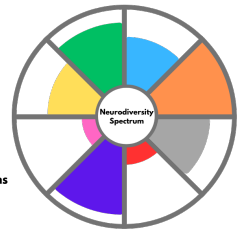
- Does your child have health and physical needs?
- What specific supports might they need for these?
- How do they manage stress? Do they experience burnout?

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A Spectrum of Needs

Most ND children have a 'spikey profile.'



- Communication and Social
- Executive Function
- Attention and Interests
- Impulsivity and Energy
- Sensory Differences
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- Health and Physical

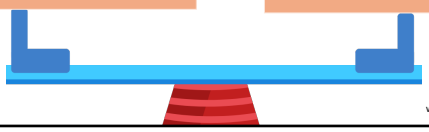
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Parenting
Getting the Balance Right

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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Take a Break...

Think about all the different needs your child might have...

- Which of their needs are under-appreciated or not noticed?
- Which needs do you think they **more support** with?

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Neurodiversity and the Family

Neuro-distinct children are much more likely to have neuro-distinct parents, siblings or extended family.



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Sensory Differences



- What sensory experiences does your child **like**?
- What sensory experiences do they find **distressing**?
- How do your **own sensory preferences** differ from your child's?

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How Many Senses Are There?

There are the five external senses:



There are also three internal senses:



Vestibular (Balance)
This allows us to notice any change in position or movement of the head. It helps us maintain our balance.

Proprioceptive (Movement)
This tells us where our body is in space. It allows us to judge what force and pressure is needed to carry out tasks.

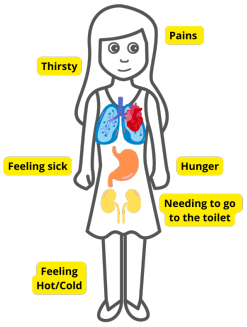
Interoceptive (Internal Feelings)
This allows us to feel what is happening inside our bodies (hunger, pain) and to notice our emotional states.

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Interoception:
The most important sense?

Many neuro-distinct children are hyper- or hypo-sensitive to their **internal body states**
e.g. temperature, hunger, pain.



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Tuning In To Your Child's Sensory World

Julie finds **tags** and **seams** on clothes intensely irritating. Her parents cut them off

Peter sleeps better when he uses a **heavy blanket** and **night light.**

Joe needs to keep his hands active when studying . Using a **fidget spinner** or a **squeeze ball** helps.

Light touches make Aoife flinch. She prefers **deeper hugs.**

Grace has a strong aversion to the **smells** in certain **food shops** and can feel sick.

Going swimming is a nightmare for Dan. He hates being **damp** and **cold** in the changing room.

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Many Neuro-distinct Strengths Flow From Having a Unique Sensory World...

Robert is attuned to **sounds in nature** and can distinguish various bird calls.

Darragh loves cooking. He can discern **flavours and tastes**. It's a wonderful sensory experience for him.

Painting is Sarah's passion. Her **unique perception of colour** and texture allows her to really express herself.

Roisín enjoys herbal tea. She can distinguish between dozens of different types.

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Sensory Regulation

- **Relaxing** and **rebalancing** the sensory system, especially when **over-stimulated** or **agitated**.
- **Energising** the sensory system when you are **under-responsive** or **need to focus**.

Sensory regulation is:



Stimming – sensory habits e.g. pacing, hand rubbing, hair twirling.



Rest and **relaxation** or **exercise** and **movement**.



Engaging in **passions** and **special interests**.



Positive sensory experiences.

- What works for each person is different, find out what works for **your child**.

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Reflective Exercise



- What is your child's **favourite sensory experience** that they really enjoy?
- How does your child **self-regulate** when distressed?

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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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Blocks to Communication

ND children frequently experience blocks to connected relationships with their parents.

- Sometimes, children are so stressed by sensory overload, school and outside world that this leads to challenging meltdowns at home.
- Sometimes parent feels hurt by child's behaviour or get angry in response.
- Sometimes, child communicates differently or has different passions to their parent.
- Sometimes, parents feel their role is to correct their child's different behaviours which sets you up as a critical parent.

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Daily Moments

- What do you **enjoy doing most** with your children?
- When do you have the **best chats**?
- When do you **connect** most to your child?

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Creating a Connected Relationship

- Making sure you have **daily connecting times** when you enjoy each other's company.
- Learning to **pause** and reduce the times you communicate negatively to your children.
- Make it your priority to **connect**.
- Adjust your expectations. Let go of pressures and prioritise your **relationship**.



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Building Unique Connections

- **Join in an activity that your child really enjoys** - playing games, shopping, penalties, craft.
- **Take an interest in one of your child's passions** - video games, music, films, craft, sport.
- **Let your child teach you** - video games, a craft, dance, hairstyle.
- **Teach them something they want to learn** - cooking, magic trick, make-up, grow food, skim stones.
- **Learn something new together** - attend a course, watch videos, read books together or in parallel.
- **Go somewhere together** - visit a friend, relative, go for a meal, sporting event on a walk together.
- **Build rituals** - daily crosswords, bedtime reading, daily cycle.
- **Plan family projects that interest them** - design/repair/build/decorate together.
- **Go on a day-long adventure** - camp out, hike, fishing.

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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.

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