

a u t i s m

**LANGUAGE & SOCIAL
COMMUNICATION**

OUTLINE

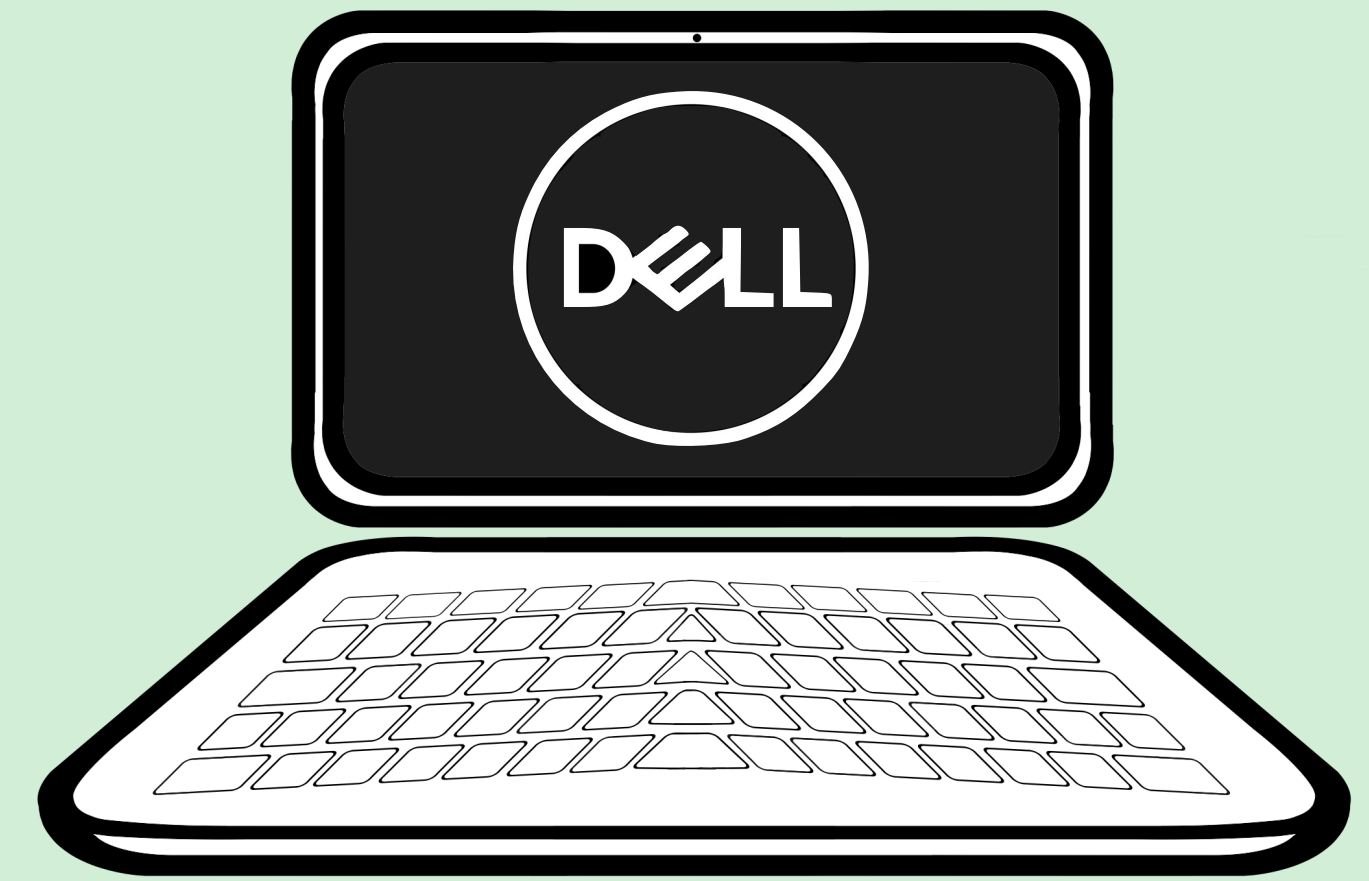
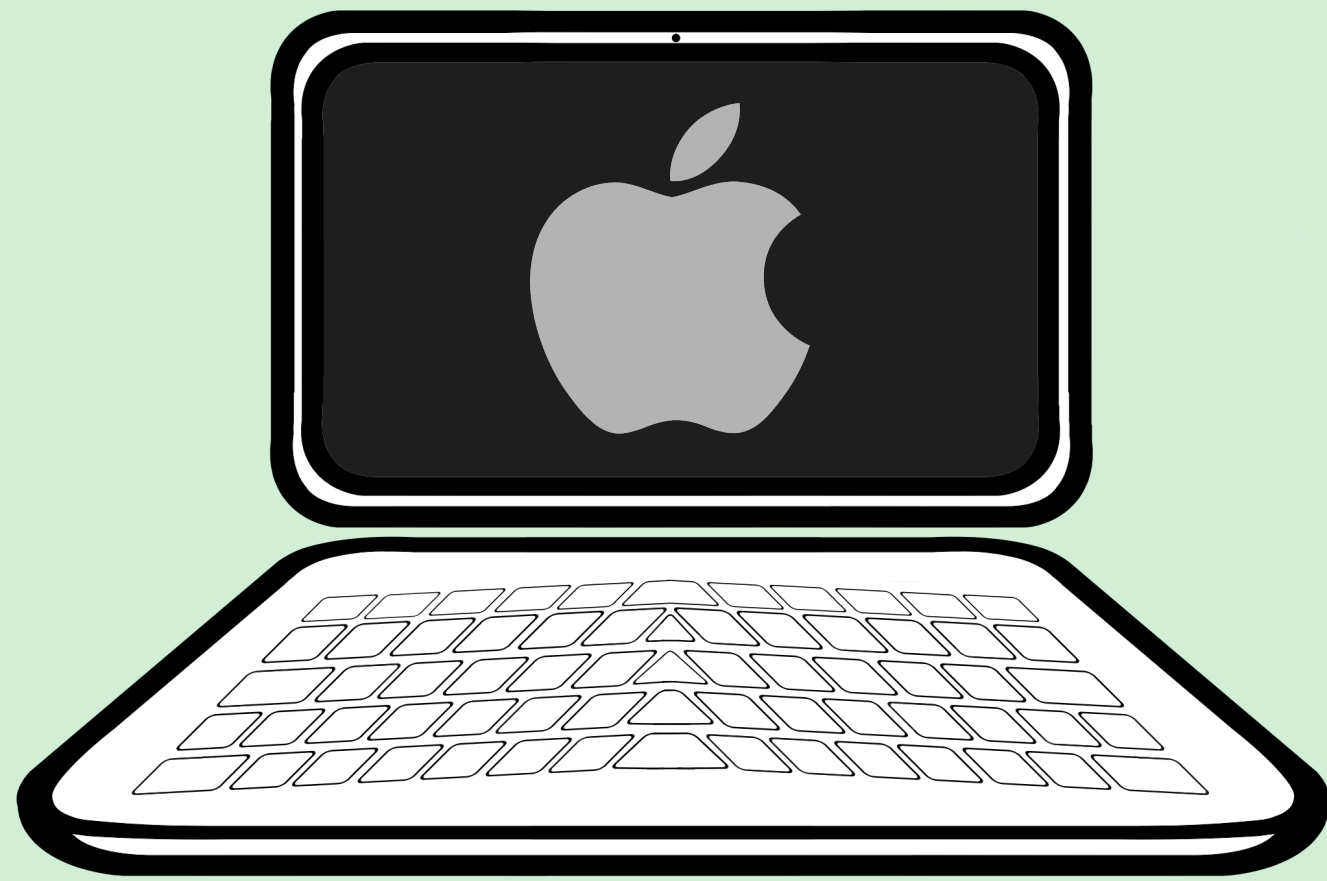
1. What is autism, actually?
2. Cognition
3. Language development
4. Social skills
5. Classroom support

GOAL:

- * Understand differences
- * Learn ways to support autistic learners

What is autism, actually?

Autism is a
different type
of brain



neurodiversity (noun)

individual differences in brain functioning
regarded as normal variations within the
human population

COGNITION:

How our brains
think

WHOLE-TO-PART THINKERS

Neurotypical

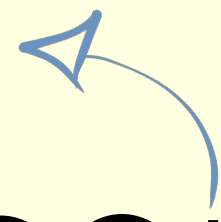
- * Part-to-whole thinkers
- * Have an idea, look for evidence to support it
- * Organize memories as collections of experiences
- * Polytropic - Brain focuses on more interests at a time

Autistic

- * Whole-to-part thinkers (all the parts make up the whole experience, and if you change the parts, the whole feels “wrong”)
- * Look at the data and build opinions from it
- * Organize memories as episodic memories (a specific experience/moment in time instead of a collection of experiences)
- * Monotropic - Brain focuses on fewer interests at one time

PROCESS INFORMATION DIFFERENTLY

ability to hear body's messages



- *May have interoception differences
- *May be extra or less sensitive to sensory input

PROCESS INFORMATION DIFFERENTLY

- *May have motor planning differences

 - * About 87% of autistic children exhibit signs of developmental coordination disorder (DCD) (Bhat, 2020)

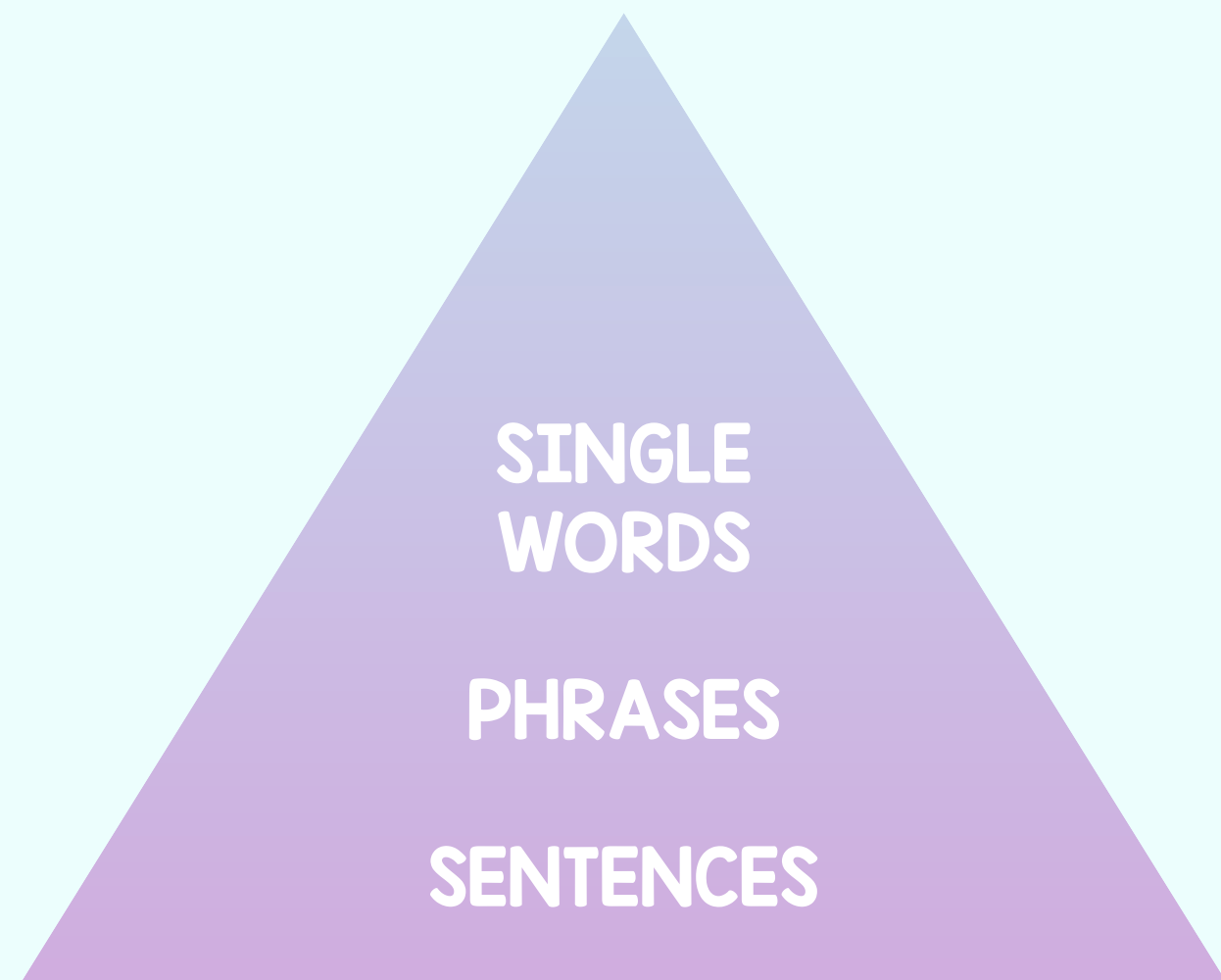
- *When overwhelmed/disregulated, harder to access language



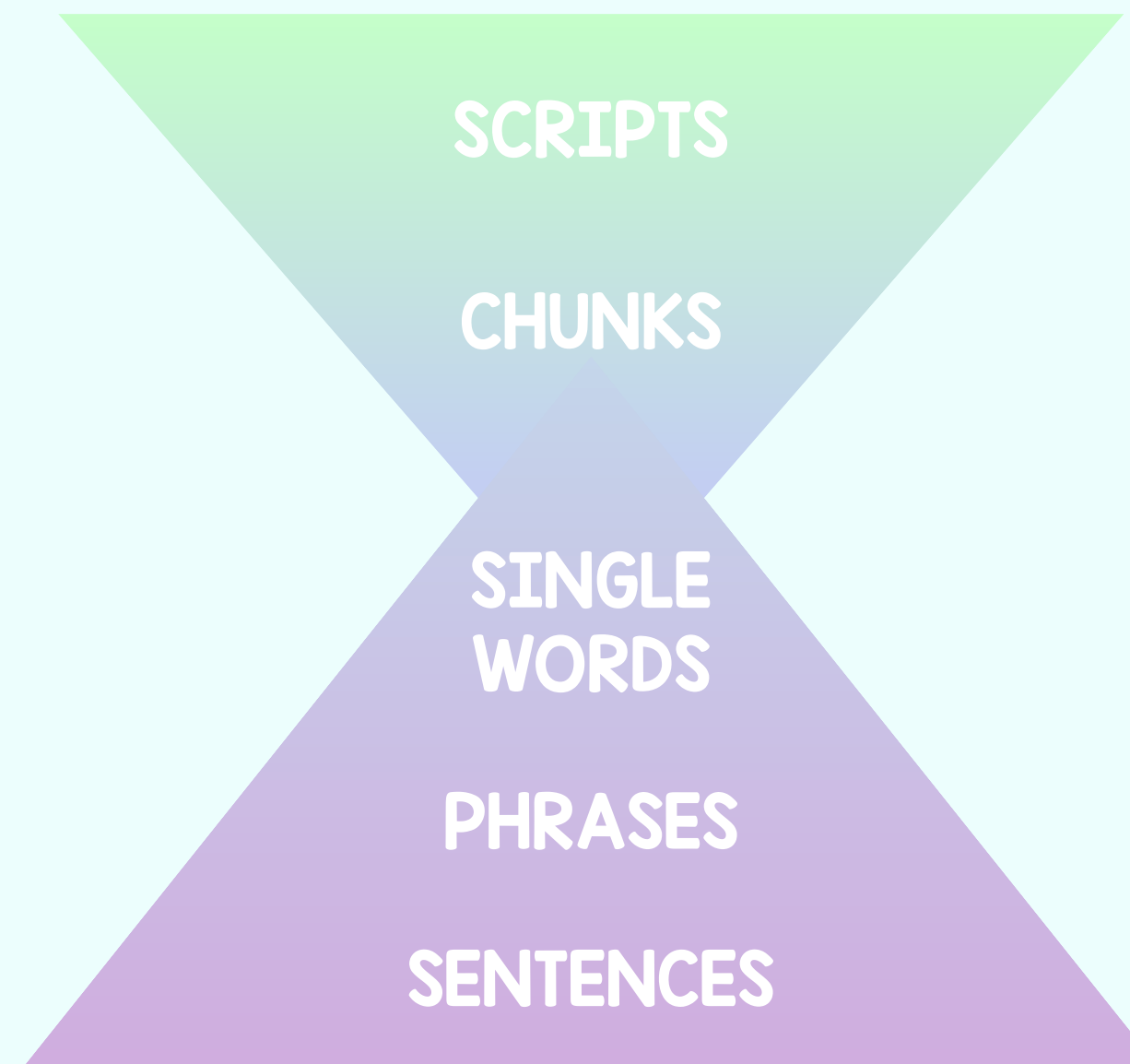
LANGUAGE:

GESTALT LANGUAGE
PROCESSORS

2 TYPES OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS



Analytic



Gestalt

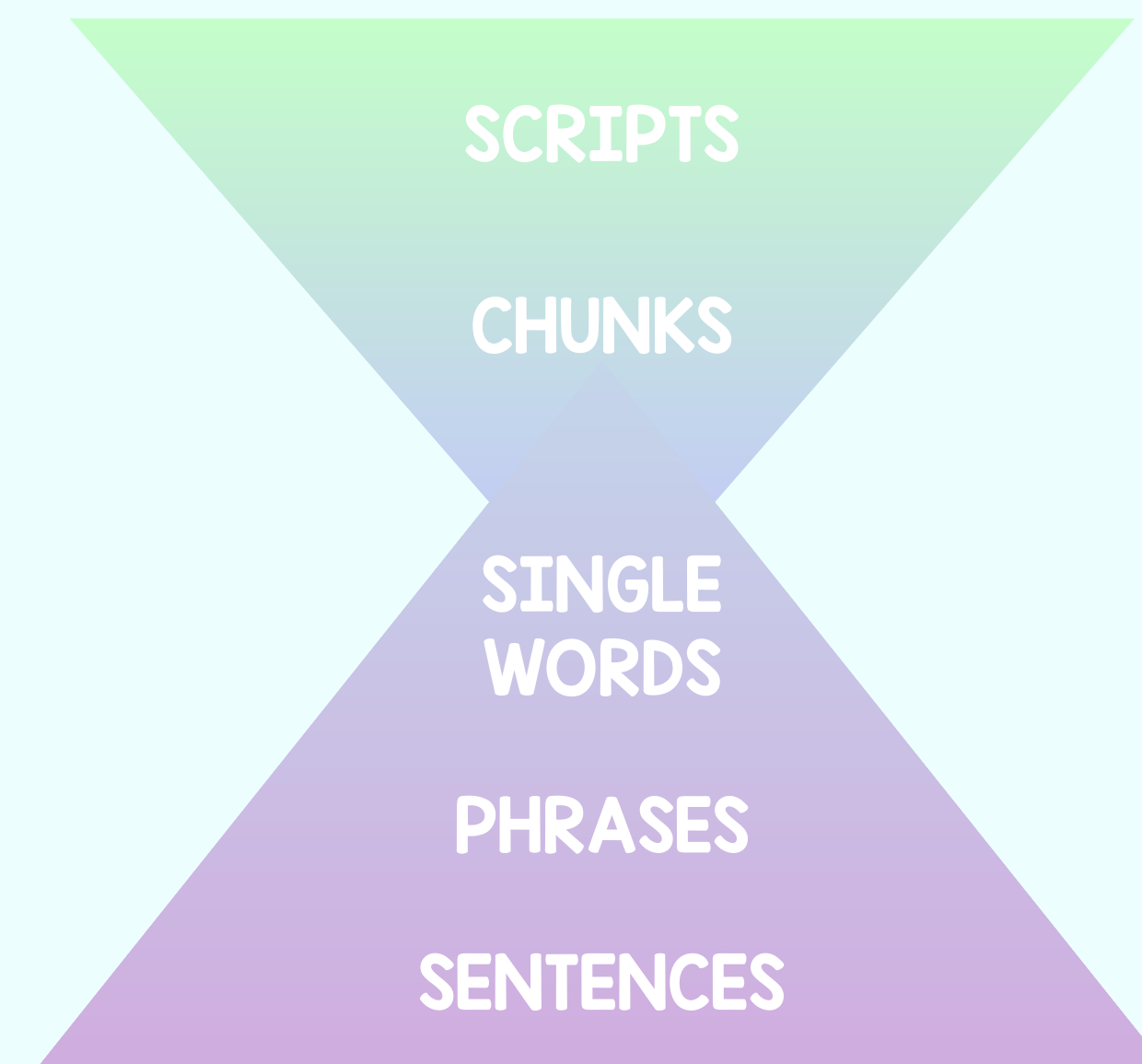
GESTALTS ARE ...

- *“Chunks” or “scripts”
- *Tone is important
- *Often tied to strong emotion
- *Not literal representations

STAGES

OF GESTALT LANGUAGE PROCESSING

- * **STAGE 1:** Scripts
- * **STAGE 2:** Mix and match
- * **STAGE 3:** Single words have meaning
- * **STAGE 4:** My own original phrases
- * **STAGES 5-6:** Improving grammar



COMMUNICATION SAMPLE:

Student "A"

ADULT
STUDENT

Ooooh

What?

It's candy.

Yeah

What's that one?

That's called x x and x x x

x x x x

That's called "candle"

Woah yeah I've got **candle**

That's called gummies. Gumdrops.

Gumdrops

Yeah

This one x x x chocolate

I like chocolate

Something x x xx wrong with this

Oh a **candle** burn more

Oh. More candles?

Three candles.

Red?

blue

purple

yellow

orange

Purple, yellow, orange candle

Yay!

I try

Let's try...frosting?

Candy?

Yeah

I like a strawberry see?

Yeah **I try** x x x

x x x candy

Breaking down
a phrase to a
single word

Using
chunks in
different
ways

COMMUNICATION SAMPLE:

Student "B"

Context: Playing with felt bakery scene

ADULT
STUDENT

Can he eat the pencil?

➤ he's eat the pencil?

no

➤ he's eat the paper?

that's a bakery?

x x a ball?

I love gumball

➤ how cute

➤ how cute the bakery

Using
chunks in
different
ways

want a cupcake?

➤ eat the cupcake

➤ eat the lollipop

want eat the donut ←

want eat the cookie ←

➤ eat the cookie

➤ eat the gumballs

Breaking down
a phrase to a
single word

SUPPORT: LANGUAGE

- **PRE-STAGES:**

- Create language routines
- Work on developing relationship with child

SUPPORT: LANGUAGE

- **ALL STAGES:**

- Don't use "say..." before script, because student might think that is part of the script
- Say the script from the child's perspective if you want her to learn say it herself
- Model full adult sentences (don't leave out function words like "the" and "to")

SUPPORT STAGE I

- **STAGE I:** Gestalts
 - Model new phrases
 - Choose phrases that will be easy to break down later
 - Use varied emotions to provide new scripts
 - Choose phrases for a variety of communicative purposes
 - Aided language stimulation (modeling with core board/AAC device)

PHRASE IDEAS

- * Let's go!
- * I like it!
- * Can I have some?
- * We can do it.
- * That's so fun.
- * I need a break.
- * That's cool!
- * Come here.
- * Look at this!
- * I don't want that.
- * Get some more.
- * I'm done with it.


SUPPORT STAGE 2

- **STAGE 2:** Mitigation

- Model how to break down phrases and switch out parts
- Reduce, replace, expand

Get some more  Get some

Get some more  Get some crayons

Get some more  Get some more crayons

SUPPORT STAGE 3

- **STAGE 3:** Isolate single words and make new 2-word combinations
 - Isolate single words from the child's phrase
 - Add a noun or adjective to child's single word
 - Label things in the environment
 - Avoid sentence strips

AT STAGE 3, YOU CAN...

- * Start working on wh- questions
- * Start teaching phonemes
- * Start teaching prefixes & suffixes

SUPPORT STAGES 4-6

- **STAGES 4-6:**

- Restate child's sentences, correcting grammatical errors
- Model correct grammar in sentences
- Explicitly teach grammar

SUPPORT EACH STAGE

STAGE 1: Scripts



Model scripts

STAGE 2: Mix and match



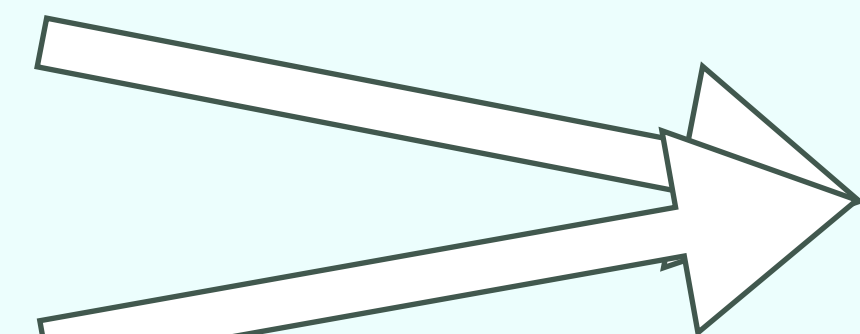
Change part of script

STAGE 3: Single words have meaning



Model single words/2-word combos

STAGE 4: My own original phases



Model sentences with correct grammar

STAGES 5-6: Improving Grammar

AAC + GLP

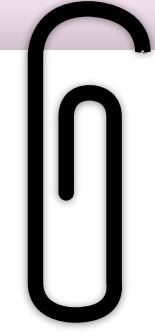
- * No PECS or sentence strips (don't support motor planning, robust vocabulary, or autonomy)
- * Model language using the student's device and your own voice
- * Model without expectation

AAC + GLP: OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- * What if child is “playing” with the AAC?
- * Have we modeled using the device in a variety of contexts with a variety of communication functions?
- * Child might need to “babble” and explore device to learn device
- * Child might be scripting using device to convey a message we are not understanding, to gain sensory input, or because they like the sound of the message
- * What about prompt dependency?
 - * “Prompt dependency is secondary to a lesson design. It has nothing to do with the ability or inability for that individual to learn or to process the language being given to them” (Laura Hayes, SLP and AAC Specialist from November 22 lunch and learn by Meaningful Speech) (see resources for link)

AAC + GLP: OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- * Will AAC stop my kid from speaking?
 - * No, research shows that AAC enhances and supports verbal language skills.
 - * Helps with organizing language because it provides a visual representation
- * When should I switch students' AAC?
 - * If navigational demands are too hard for the child
- * Don't move/rewrite the organization of the device, because you're negating the research-based organization of the device and changing the student's motor plan to find the words



SOCIAL
SKILLS

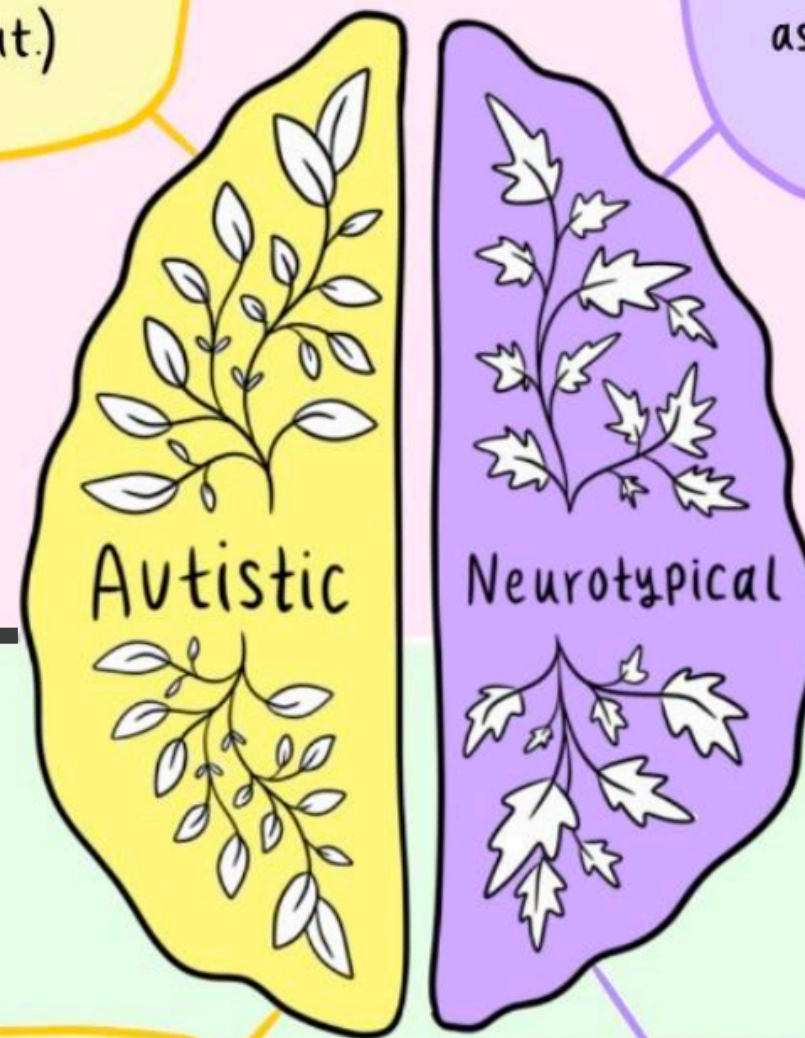
SOCIAL SKILLS

- * Autistic and non-autistic people have different communication styles and expectations.
- * May be the cause of communication breakdowns, not social deficits
(Crompton, Hallett, et al., 2020; Crompton, Ropar, et al., 2020; R. Davis & Crompton, 2021; Heasman & Gillespie, 2019).
- * Non-autistic people's judgements of autistic people hinders autistic-non-autistic communication
(Alkhaldi et al., 2019; R. Davis & Crompton, 2021; Edey et al., 2016; Heasman & Gillespie, 2018; Sasson et al., 2017; Sheppard et al., 2016).
- * Social skills interventions are only minimally to moderately effective, and limited research is available to support them
(Bellini et al., 2007; Davenport et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2013; Williams White et al., 2007).

Social Communication Differences

May not contact/respond to friends promptly (due to Executive Functioning challenges, RSD, or burnout.)

May respond to friends readily. May interpret a lack of response as disinterest, anger or offense.



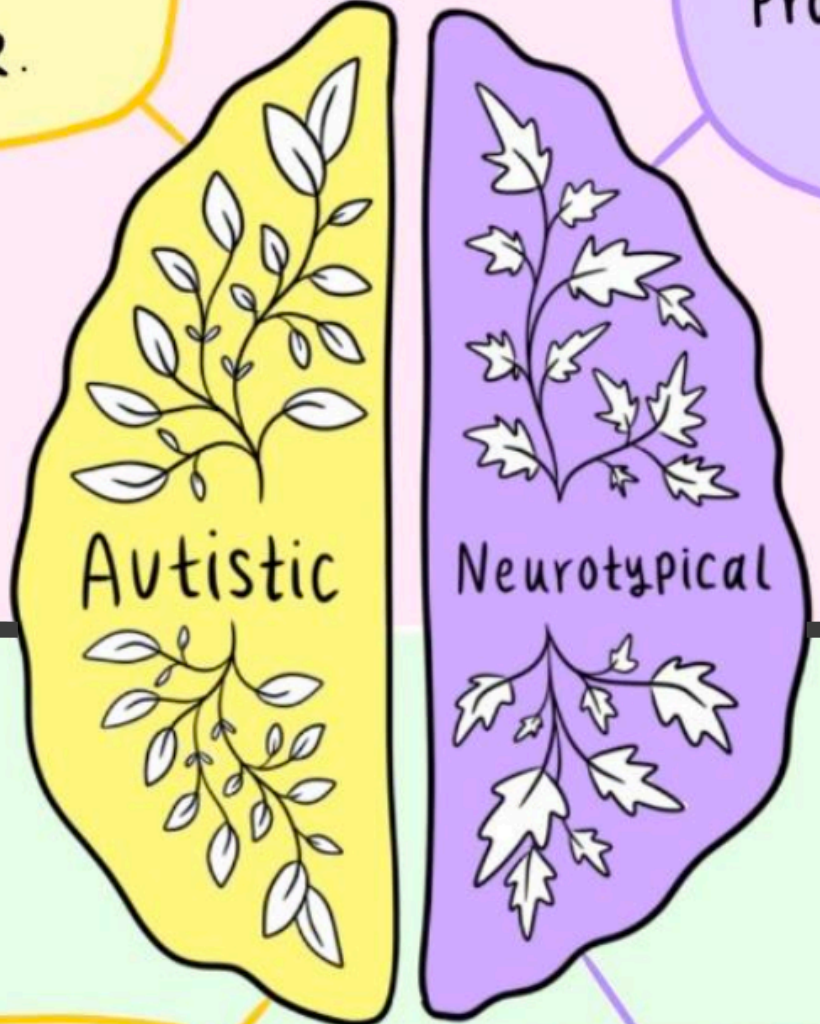
May have deep interests that are intense, long-lasting, & not impacted by social/cultural trends.

Interests may be more casual, & reflect popular opinions of peers.

Social Communication Differences

Often prefer deep, meaningful conversations without small talk.

Often cycle through small talk topics before progressing to deep topics (if at all)



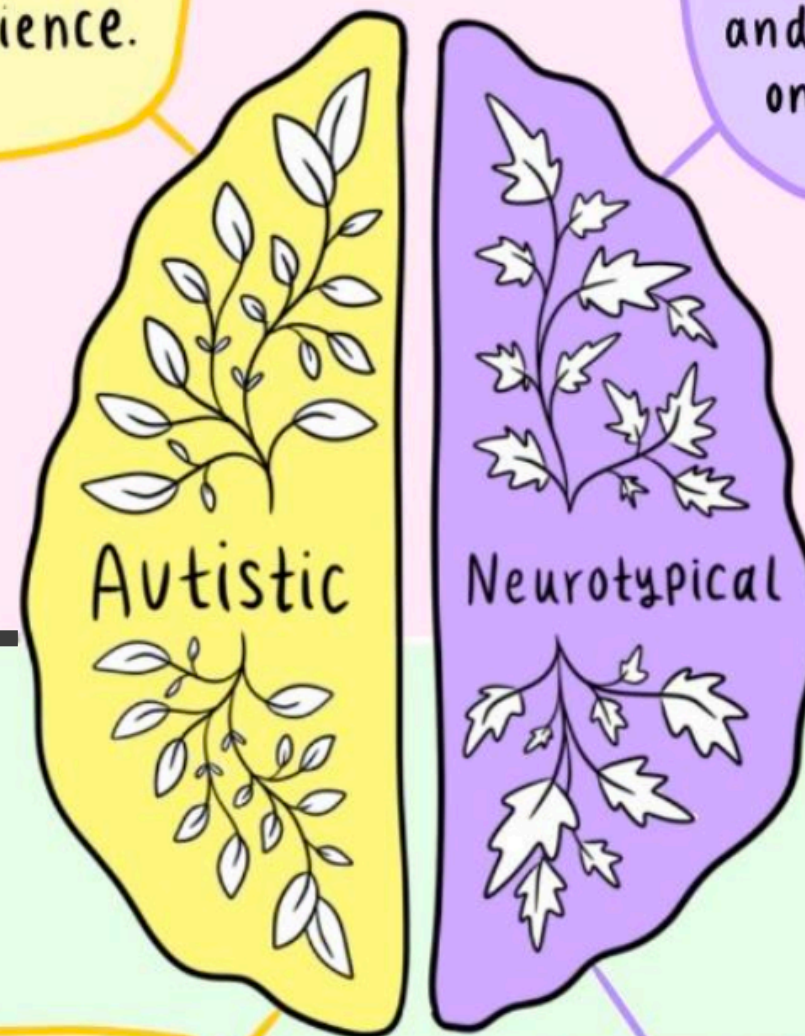
Enjoy spending a long time sharing info about deep interests (info dumping)

Spend short time chatting about each topic, with both people offering info.

Social Communication Differences

May show empathy by telling a personal story that describes a similar experience.

Show empathy by mirroring the other person's emotions and point of view, and keeping the interaction focused on the person who is emotional.



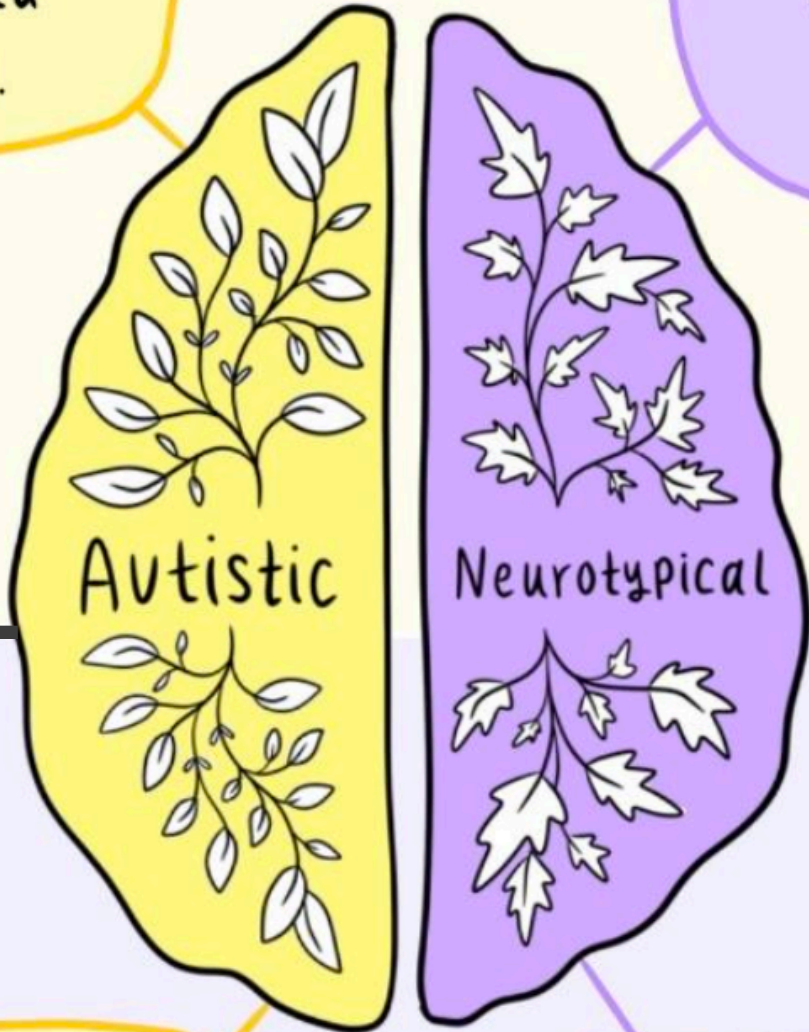
May ask numerous questions to clarify meaning (in conversations + instructions). Place value on accuracy.

Place value on 'figuring it out for yourself,' + 'taking initiative.' Numerous questions often interpreted as a person being difficult or incompetent.

Social Communication Differences

Words carry meaning.
Often can't hear/modulate tone.
Tone/inflection not used to convey meaning.

Tone/inflection conveys much meaning, even cancelling out the meaning of the words.



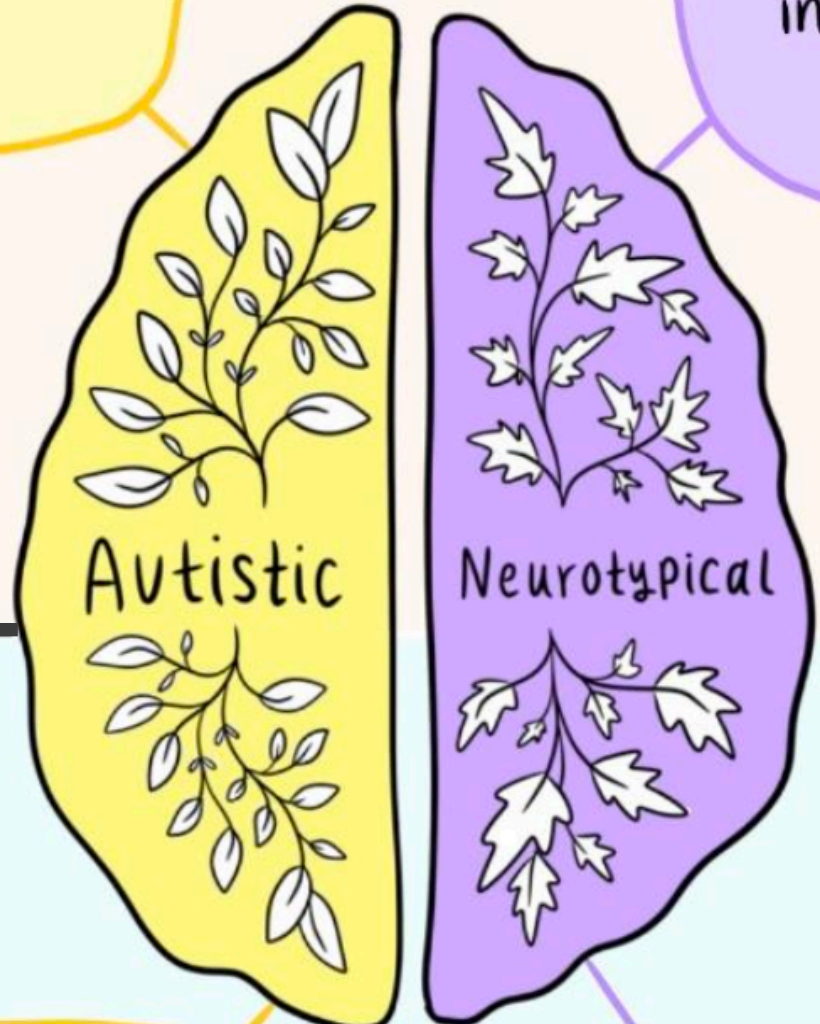
May interpret words literally or as absolutes (i.e. figurative language, sarcasm, instructions.)

Consider tone & context.
May perceive literal interpretation of words to be deliberate impertinence.

Social Communication Differences

May interact without frequent eye contact to ↑ focus & comfort

Use frequent eye contact. Infrequent eye contact often interpreted as dishonesty or disinterest.



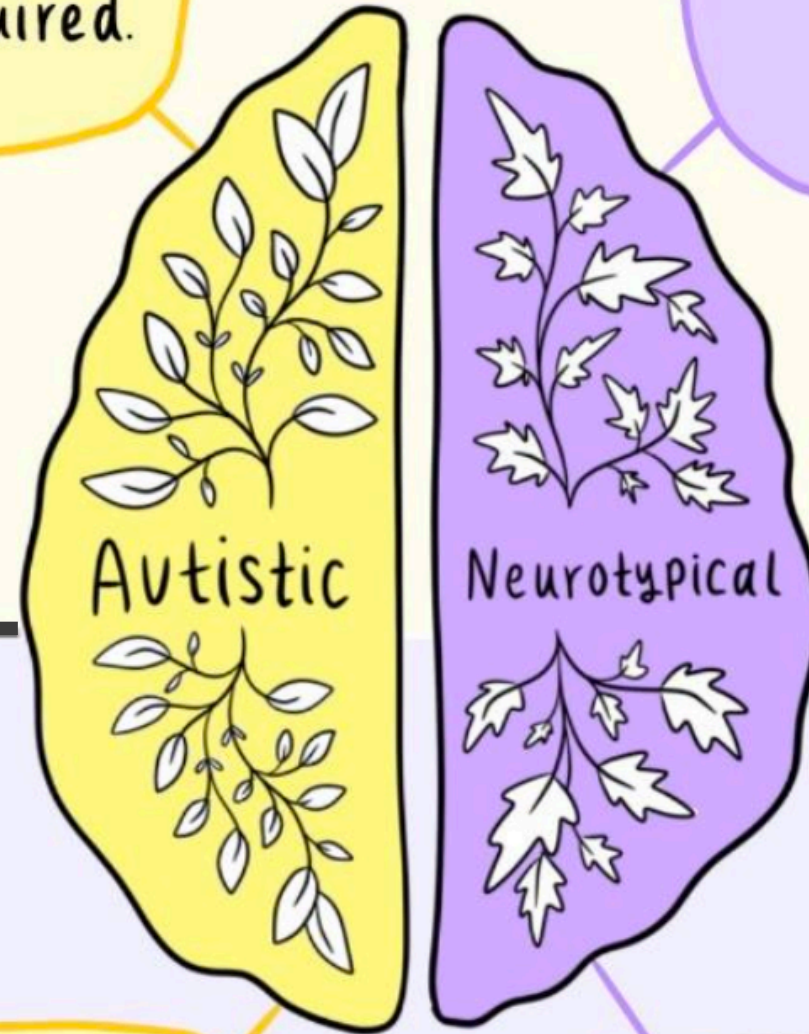
Tend to speak honestly, directly, & without sugar-coating.

Often sugar-coat info. Can be very indirect. Often interpret directness as rudeness.

Social Communication Differences

Limited social battery, shorter periods of use, & more recharge time required.

May seek frequent social connection.



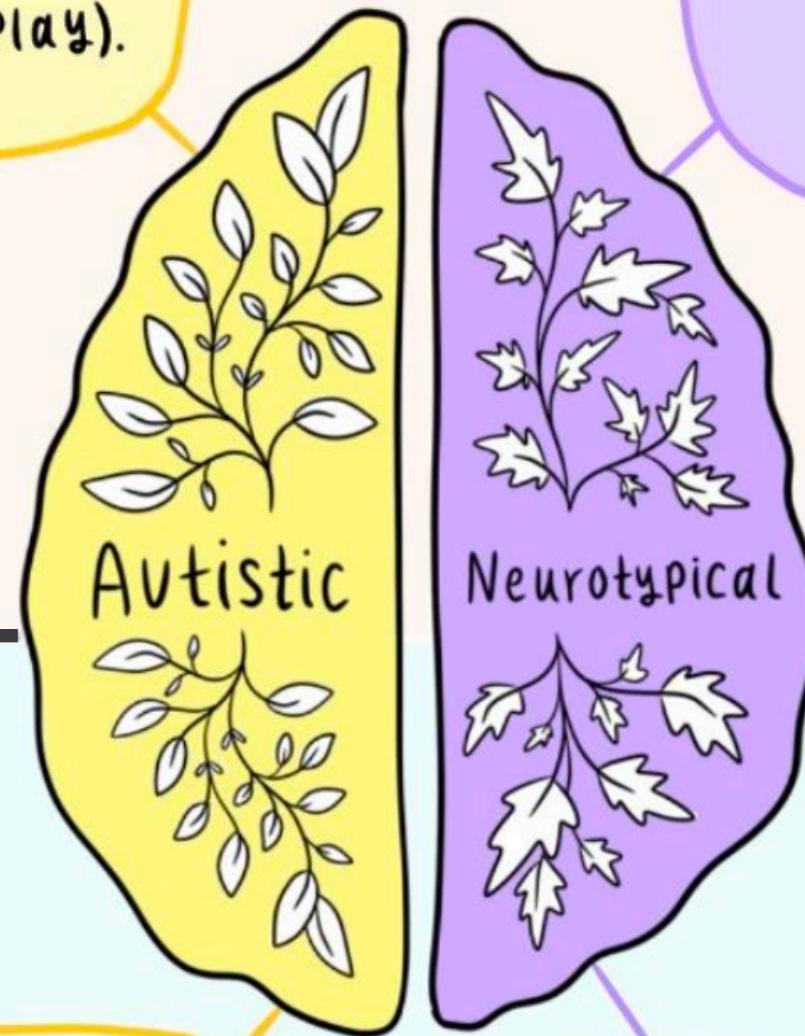
Communication skills may be greatly impacted by environment & internal states. Skills can fluctuate dramatically (and accommodations required).

Communication skills not affected by environment or internal state.

Social Communication Differences

Enjoy engaging in activity alone or alongside others (independent & parallel play).

Enjoy engaging in activities with other people (cooperative play)



Alternative & Augmentative communication may be used. May also communicate using 'chunks' of language, scripts, & echolalia (Gestalt Language Acquisition).

Verbal communication is expected, and any other forms of communication are often seen as less valid & less desirable.

SOCIAL SKILLS

- * Autistic people tend to apply fairness more consistently across people, regardless of relationship
- * Non-autistic people tend to give preferential treatment to people with whom they have close relationships

(Glock, M., & Glock, M., 2023)

- * Autistic people tend to be more generous to strangers (Forbes, et al., 2025)

(This article talks more about the study in layman's terms:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/positively-different/202512/why-are-autistic-people-so-generous-with-strangers>)

STIMMING

Helps
us REGULATE



Can be an
EXPRESSION
of JOY



Is an important
part of Autistic
CULTURE



Neurodiversity-affirming language:

Em was observed to sway from side-to-side

while listening to the story. She often engages

in movement-based stims to facilitate concentration.



SUPPORT: SOCIAL

- * DON'T ...

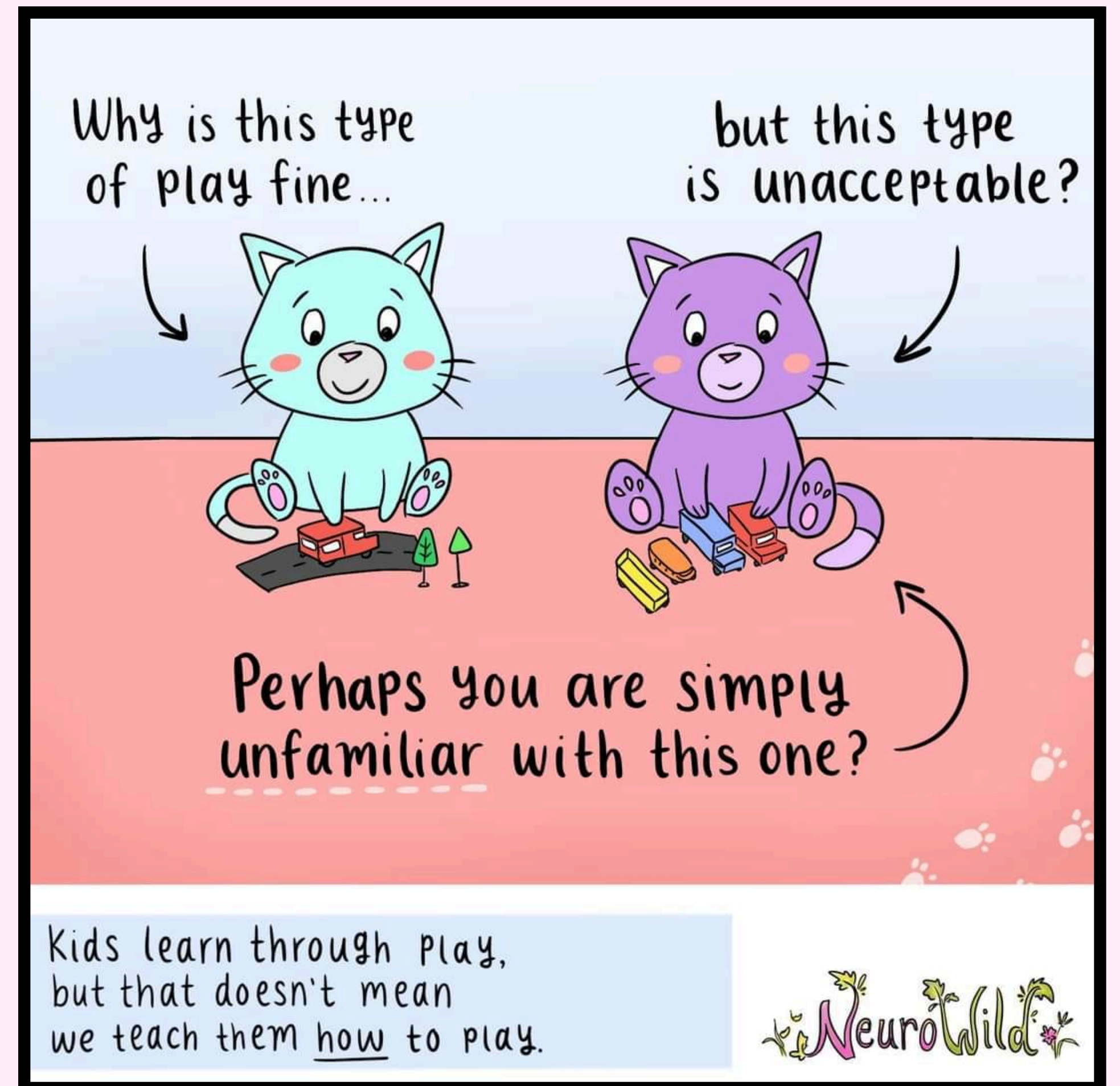
- * Teach size of problem: Problems are different sizes to different people, based on different perspectives, cultures, and values.
- * Require eye contact: Not neurodiversity affirming or culturally competent. Sustained eye contact also registers as painful in some brains. Direct gaze does not elicit approach-motivation related brain activity in young children with autism (Lauttia, et al. 2019).
- * Teach a certain set of social skills as the "only" way: Autistic people have their own set of social norms, as do different cultures. Instead, teach that different groups have different expectations (double empathy problem).
- * Teach autistic people to mask their autistic traits: This leads to high rates of depression and suicide (Cassidy et al. 2018).
- * Teach autistic people to assume that their viewpoint or way of being in social situations is wrong.
- * Teach based on compliance. Autistic people deserve to have autonomy just as non-autistic people do.

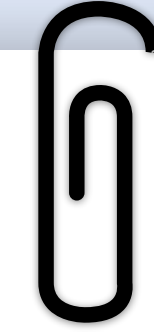
SUPPORT: SOCIAL

- * DO ...
- * Support the person's focused interests. This focus is important in many career paths!
- * Understand that it's difficult for a monotropic brain to shift focus when the person is in a flow state.
- * Help maintain a sense of safety, stability, and routine.
- * Teach neurotypical people about the differences in autistic brains and social skills. Research shows that this has more positive outcomes for the autistic person than teaching the autistic person to act non-autistic.
- * Teach self-advocacy.
- * Teach that they can give consent and retract it when they need to, even if already given. They don't have to please everyone.
- * Teach bodily autonomy.

PLAY

- * Play can look different for different people
- * All forms of play are valid
- * It's okay for kids to spend their leisure time regulating their bodies alone





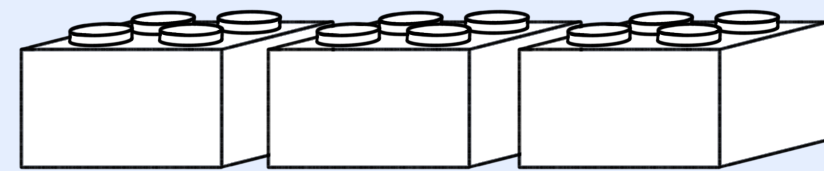
IN THE
CLASSROOM

IN THE CLASSROOM

- * For the littles: Model the language you want them to learn
- * Create a supportive classroom environment.
 - * Teach all students the differences in communication
 - * Make sure all students feel valued
 - * Think “is this a miscommunication or disregulation?” first before “is this child misbehaving?”
 - * Explicitly teach social expectations
- * For the AAC users: Show them how to say sentences on their devices (if they're comfortable) during meaningful interactions

IN THE CLASSROOM: PHONICS

- * Phonics will make more sense once students reach level 3 of language development, in which single words become individual units of meaning
- * Might benefit from teaching whole words first, then identifying the sound patterns in those words
 - * Example activity: “MAT” First sound out the whole word, then give a visual to represent each sound. Help child sound out each of the sounds in the word.



- * Many autistic people are hyperlexic, meaning that reading is a strength for them. They will still need to learn phonics patterns but may benefit from teachers writing out directions/schedules for them to read as a visual. (Ostrolenk et al., 2017)

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