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The Conversation Around Autism is Changing: How Best to Support Your Autistic Child or Clients (Part 2 of 2)

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Ditch the “neurotypical social skills” goals and groups.

Many Autistic adults report that therapies and social skills programs that promote different forms of masking are psychologically damaging to neurodivergent people. “Masking” is the process of purposefully-suppressing Autistic or “atypical” patterns of behavior in an attempt to fit in socially. Masking can be very harmful to neurodivergent individuals because it promotes the idea that inherently-Autistic personality traits are wrong or abnormal and should be hidden or changed. There are a lot of ways that Autistic individuals can be encouraged to mask, including the promotion of the following behaviors.

- **Suppression of stims:** Many neurodivergent individuals exhibit “stims”—or self-stimulatory behavior—such as hand-flapping, clapping, jumping, body posturing, rocking, chewing/mouthing, or creating visually-interesting movement patterns. Stims promote self-regulation and may increase in frequency or intensity if the individual is stressed, excited, or even during periods of acute focus. Autistic self-advocates say that when they are forced to suppress their stims, it feels physically uncomfortable or even impossible. If stimming becomes dangerous or self-injurious, it is appropriate to gently attempt to redirect the stim to a similar but safer alternative.



- **Forced eye contact:** For many Autistic individuals, eye contact with others can be intensely uncomfortable, distracting, or may even feel painful. Allowing people to direct their visual gaze wherever they feel most at ease can promote comfort and improve conversational focus.



focus on attempting to consistently redirect their interests or force their conversations away from preferred topics. This can be stressful and upsetting for Autistic individuals. In fact, research shows that when Autistic people are allowed or encouraged to discuss and cultivate their specific interests, their behavior, communication, social, and emotional skills improve.

- **Preferred topic avoidance:** It is very common for Autistic individuals to have intense and focused interests. These interests can vary greatly and may last for an individual’s entire life or may evolve and change over time. Neurodivergent people are often very passionate about their interests which can lead to expertise, mastery, and skilled career development. They often want to share their interests and passions with others, but some “social skills” training programs



- **Forced mixed peer groups:** Some well-meaning social skills training groups purposefully pair neurotypical and neurodivergent peers together in an attempt to build friendships and promote more “typical” social skills among the Autistic participants. While friendships and relationships absolutely can and do become established between people of different neurotypes naturally, these forced groups can feel very uncomfortable and contrived



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and can actually contribute to masking behaviors. See *Recognize the “double empathy problem”* in Part One of this series for more information regarding this dynamic.

- **Whole body listening:** Young children are often encouraged in classroom and group settings to engage in “whole body listening”. Children are expected to sit quietly without fidgeting with their hands in their laps, making eye contact with the teacher or speaker. Autistic and other neurodivergent individuals often focus and learn best while moving or when allowed to fidget, avoid eye contact, sit in a more comfortable or natural position, or doodle on paper. Allowing for these natural variations in learning and listening styles has been called “whole body learning” to challenge the notion that quiet students who sit perfectly still are the only ones who are ready to learn.



- **Develop skills that can transfer into the workplace:**

Focused interest groups, clubs, camps, or classes can also help Autistic individuals expand their interests in ways that may later translate to professional skills. For example, an adolescent who is passionate about video games can start learning early software development, graphic design, or character development skills via in-person or online camps or courses.



Take a strengths-based versus deficits-based approach.

- Autism is often thought of and described as a series of personal deficits rather than simply as a natural variation in the human genome—as a neurotype that is different than, but not inferior to, the “norm.” There is a lot of stigma surrounding autism for this reason. It is very important to focus and build upon an individual’s strengths versus their perceived delays. After all, nobody builds a life based on their personal deficits and challenges!
- If you are a clinician (OT, SLP, PT, clinical psychologist, etc.) or teacher, it is vital to establish a strengths-based mindset when it comes to evaluating, treating, or teaching your clients or students. This can—at times—be difficult due to the deficits-based evaluative nature of standardized assessments. However, maintaining a strengths-based approach can help decrease burnout, promotes positive Autistic self-identity, and can greatly improve outcomes for clients and families.



Embrace interests.

- **Focused interest groups with peers:** Help Autistic children and adolescents grow their skills and peer friendships by encouraging them to join interest-related groups with others who have similar passions. For example, you can search for community-based or online train or space enthusiast groups, robotics or Lego clubs, art classes, or music groups. It can also be very beneficial to find peer groups or socialization opportunities with other Autistic or neurodivergent individuals which can lead to lasting and meaningful friendships.



Meet their sensory needs.

- Sensory processing differences are very common in the Autistic community. When sensory needs are not met, it can lead to extreme stress and even “neurocrashes” or “meltdowns” as overwhelmed Autistic individuals become unable to self-regulate. Whenever possible, it is important to meet the sensory needs of Autistic individuals to help promote optimal participation in daily occupations and social interactions.



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- Clinicians or caregivers can also help by teaching younger Autistic children to recognize and advocate for their own sensory needs across various environments and settings. For example, someone who is easily overwhelmed by loud environmental sounds may benefit from using noise-canceling headphones in busy environments; or children who are vestibular sensory-seekers can be taught to recognize when they need to ask for movement breaks throughout the school day.



- Many adult Autistic self-advocates who received an autism diagnosis later in life report that they always felt “different” when compared to many of their peers, but they never knew why. This can lead to poor self-esteem, insecurity, or issues with self-identity, especially in adolescence and early adulthood. For this reason, it is important to support any family member or friend who identifies as Autistic or neurodivergent and always help people recognize their personal strengths regardless of their neuro-identity.



Help Autistic people develop a positive self-identity.

- There are a lot of misconceptions and stereotypes about autism. Sometimes, this can lead parents or caregivers to avoid seeking a diagnosis for their child out of fear that the child will struggle with having the “label” of autism. However, it is often this pervasive fear that adds to the stigma surrounding neurodivergence.
- If people receive a diagnosis of autism early in life, they are more likely to be eligible for and receive services at school and in the community that may help promote communication, independence, participation in meaningful occupations and relationships, and learning. They can also work toward building a positive Autistic self-identity, especially with the support of neurodiversity-affirming family members, teachers, clinicians, and fellow Autistic friends and acquaintances.



Decrease the stigma.

- One way to decrease the stigma and limit damaging stereotypes around autism is to follow the advice in this two-part series (see [Handy Handout® #658](#) for *Part One*). It is also important to continue the process of learning more about autism while spreading that knowledge among friends, family, and coworkers in a gentle but persistent way. Neurodiversity-affirming supporters can help to challenge the long-held stereotypes of others by amplifying the voices and promoting the work of Autistic self-advocates whenever possible.
- And the very best way to decrease the historically-negative stigma around autism is to befriend Autistic people in your community, share in their interests, learn from them, and work together to help educate others about the importance of accepting and embracing the beauty of human neurodiversity.



Related Handy Handouts®:

- [658 – The Conversation Around Autism is Changing \(Part 1 of 2\)](#)
- [630 – Autism—the Basics](#)
- [643-645 – Exploring Autism in Girls and Women: How is it Different? \(Parts 1-3\)](#)

References:

- How to promote “Whole Body Learning” vs. “Whole Body Listening” from Autism Level UP!®: <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/p6bm7moz/production/99d189ab413e0ccab0329aaa52658ad68b2f7875.pdf>
- “Nurturing Special Interests as Career Foundations”: https://www.exceptionalneedstoday.com/post/nurturing-special-interests-as-career-foundations-when-there-are-different-abilities?utm_campaign=0561b970-63f5-4fdf-b6db-ce8a881303ef&utm_source=so&utm_medium=mail&cid=85450ec8-df98-4703-9866-03beec149bf1
- OTR/L Meg Proctor’s neurodiversity-affirming courses on how best to support Autistic clients: <https://learnplaythrive.com/approach/>
- Stimming: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/behaviour/common-concerns/stimming-asd>
- The double empathy problem: <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/double-empathy-explained/>
- Whole body listening: <https://theotbutterfly.com/whole-body-listening/sws-podcast/>

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