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# Introduction to Neurodiversity and Strengths-Based Ways of Seeing Autism



By Sara Woods, PhD

February 8, 2024



# Land Acknowledgement

The University of Washington Seattle campus acknowledges the Coast Salish peoples of the land, the land which touches the shared waters of all tribes and bands within the Suquamish, Tulalip, and Muckleshoot nations. In addition, the UW Tacoma campus is situated on the traditional territory of the Puyallup. And, since we're gathered virtually, we also want to acknowledge the lands of the Nisqually, Duwamish, and all other traditional lands we may be on. As people on these occupied territories, we have a responsibility to acknowledge the land, the ancestors who have cared for this land since time immemorial, and all our Indigenous connections today.







# Who Am I?

- Sara Eileen O'Neil Woods, PhD
- Licensed Psychologist
- Working with autistic people for 20 years
- Specialize in assessment across the lifespan
- Therapy, Training, Consultation, Research





Source: <https://education.macleans.ca/school/university-of-windsor/>



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UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

## The meaning of autism: beyond disorder

Sara O’Neil\*


Department of Psychology, Un  
(Received 13 September 2007;

THE CLINICAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGIST  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13854046.2021.1971767>

REVIEW ARTICLE



## A review of executive functioning challenges and strengths in autistic adults

Tanya St. John<sup>a,b,c</sup> , Sara Woods<sup>b,c</sup>, Tammar  
Annette Estes<sup>a,b,c</sup>

 frontiers | Frontiers in Psychiatry

TYPE Opinion  
PUBLISHED 06 October 2023  
DOI 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1264516

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### OPEN ACCESS

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CITATION

## Toward a more comprehensive autism assessment: the survey of autistic strengths, skills, and interests

Sara Eileen O’Neil Woods<sup>1,2,3\*</sup> and Annette Estes<sup>1,2,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Autism Center, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, United States, <sup>2</sup>Institute on Human Development and Disability, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, United States, <sup>3</sup>Discover Psychology Services, Lacey, WA, United States, <sup>4</sup>Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, United States



# What is autism?







<https://www.fox13seattle.com/news/seattle-childrens-pulls-autism-bus-ads-after-criticism>

**When I was four, a team of psychologists  
said this about me:**

“Abnormal behaviour, and developmental  
delay associated with delayed speech.”

“Poor eye contact, interaction with peers is poor.”

“Comprehensive language skills function at the  
three year level, with significant delay in  
expressive language skills, which function at the  
2.5 year level.”

“He acts much younger than he is.”

“I think Chris is very content to be a loner.”

**Twenty years later I became a teacher.**

**I'm now an international speaker.**

**OUR FUTURES ARE NOT WRITTEN  
AT AN EARLY AGE.**

Autisticnotweird.com  
www.facebook.com/  
autisticnotweird



Chris Bonello



# What kind of messages are we sending?





Doctors have the power to have a profound impact on how people see autism.





How many autistic or potentially autistic children do you think you see per week?



# The Neurodiversity-Affirming Way of Seeing Autism is:



Kind

Accurate

Effective



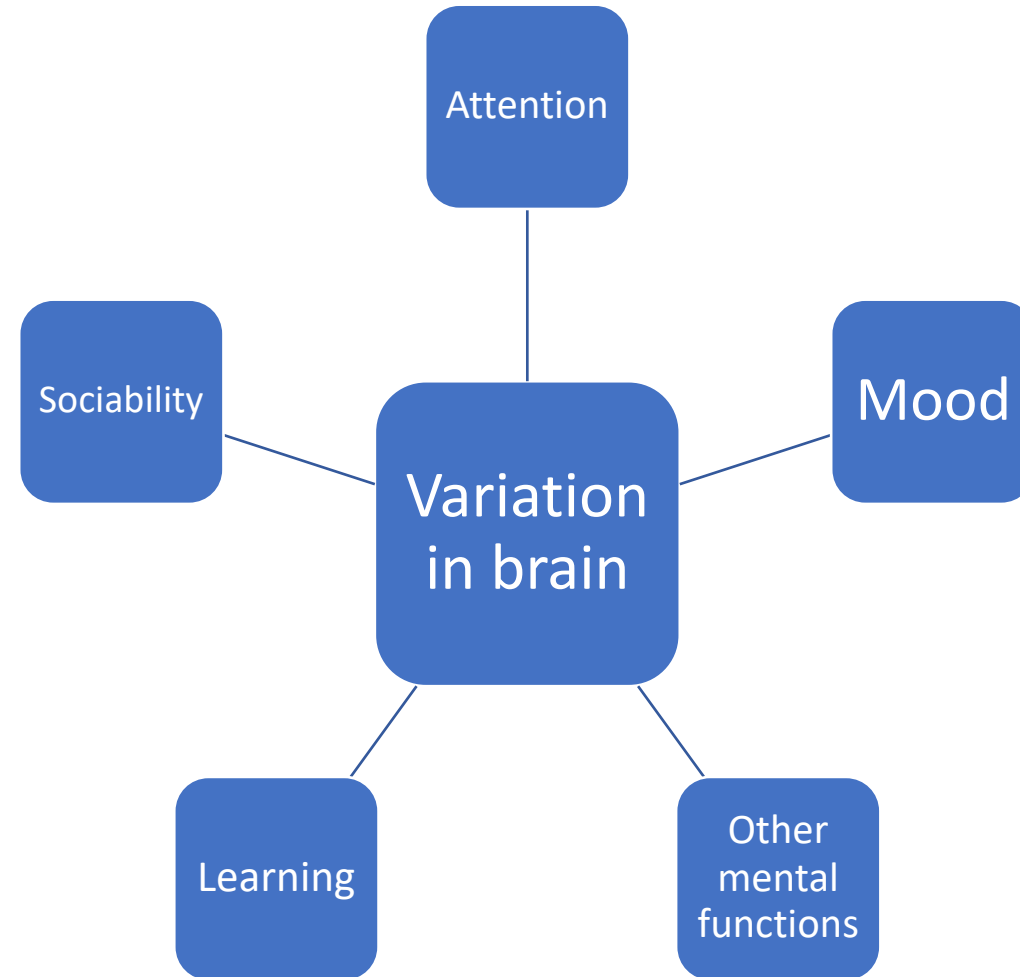


# What is neurodiversity?

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# Neurodiversity



# Neurodiversity paradigm

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- Neurodivergence as a different way of being



Walker, N. (2014). Neurodiversity: Some basic terms & definitions.

*Neuroqueer*. September, 27.

<https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>



# Neurodiversity Paradigm

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- 1) Neurodiversity:
  - Natural
  - Valuable part of human diversity

Walker, N. (2014). Neurodiversity: Some basic terms & definitions. *Neuroqueer*. September, 27.  
<https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>

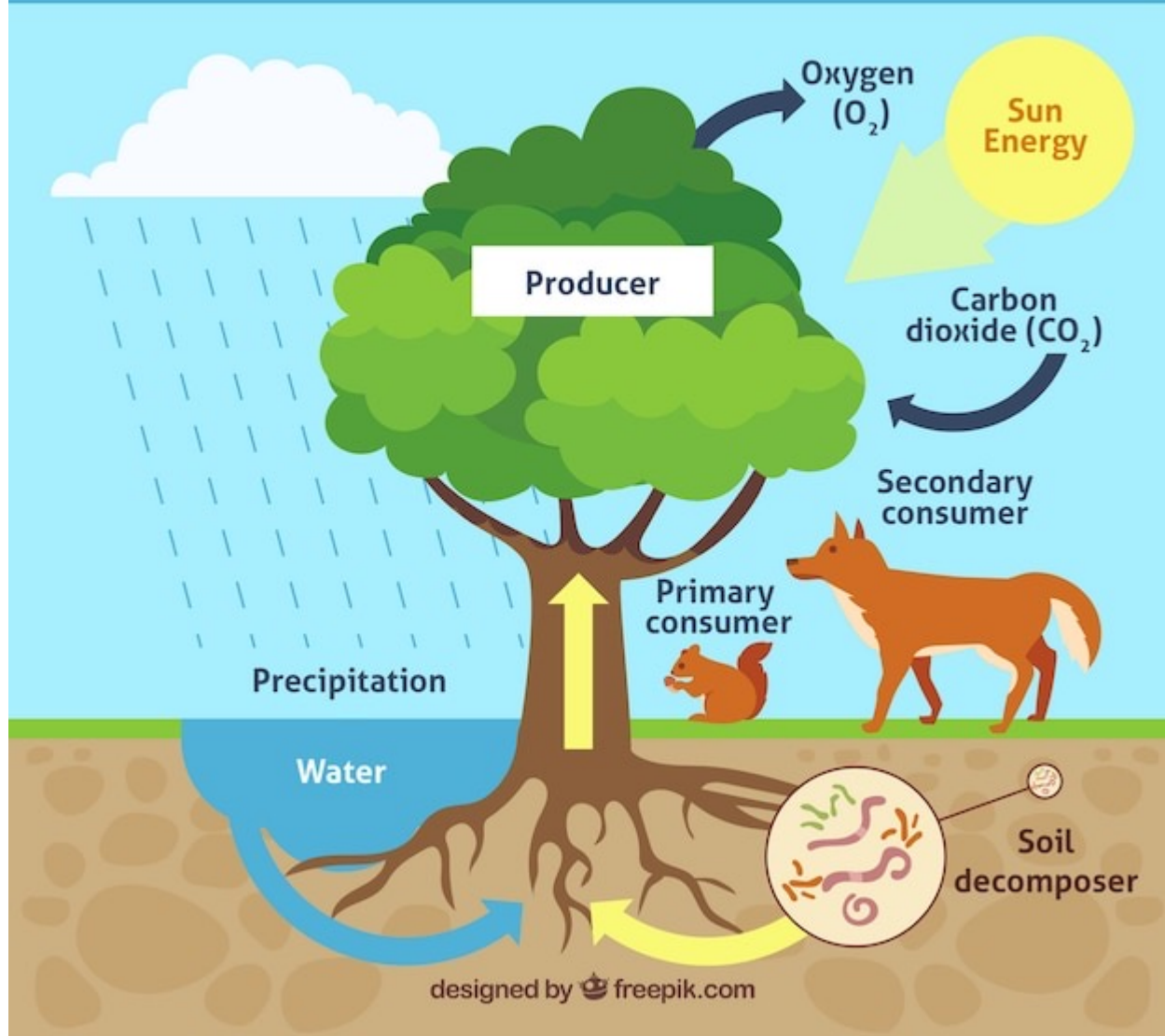








# ECOSYSTEM INFOGRAPHIC





# Neurodiversity Paradigm

2) The idea of one “healthy”  
“normal” mind or brain is culturally  
constructed

(Walker, 2014).





# Neurodiversity Paradigm

- Social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., gender, culture):
  - social power inequalities
  - diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential

Walker, N. (2014). Neurodiversity: Some basic terms & definitions.

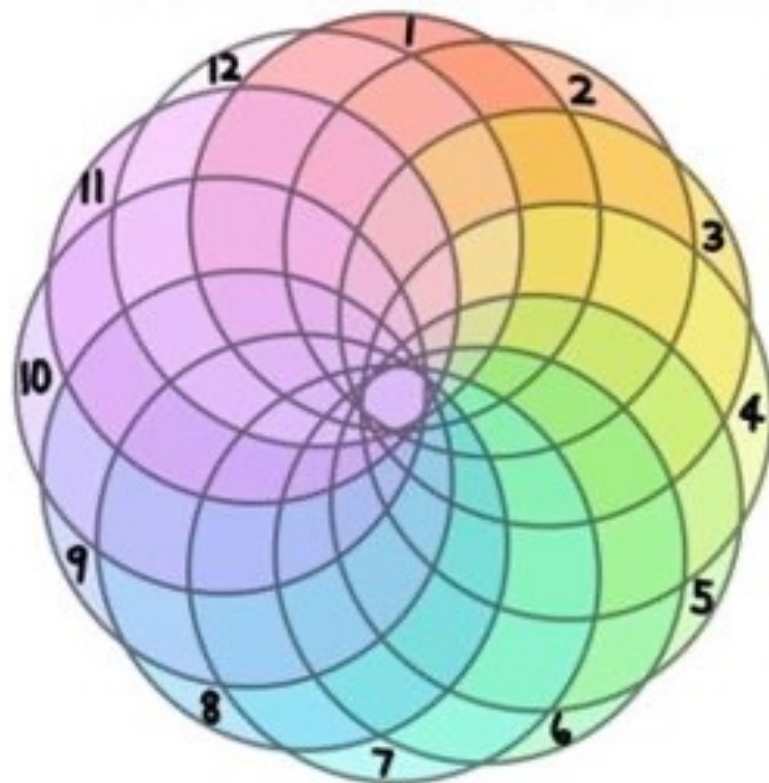
*Neuroqueer*. September, 27. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>







# INTERSECTIONALITY



- 1 Race
  - 2 Ethnicity
  - 3 Gender identity
  - 4 Class
  - 5 Language
  - 6 Religion
  - 7 Ability
  - 8 Sexuality
  - 9 Mental health
  - 10 Age
  - 11 Education
  - 12 Body size
- (...and many more...)

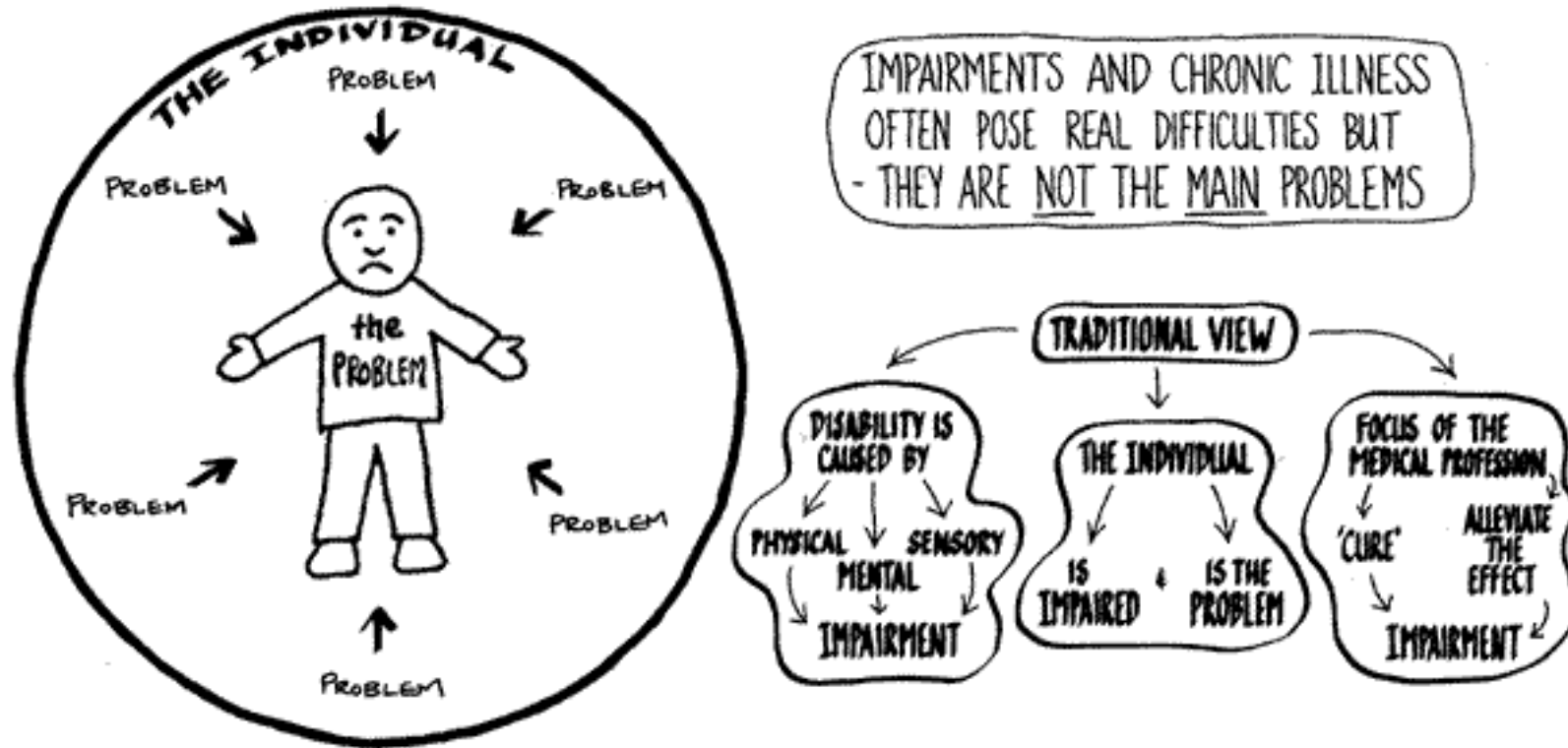
Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it locks and intersects. It is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and privilege.

- Kimberlé Crenshaw -

@sylviacluckworth



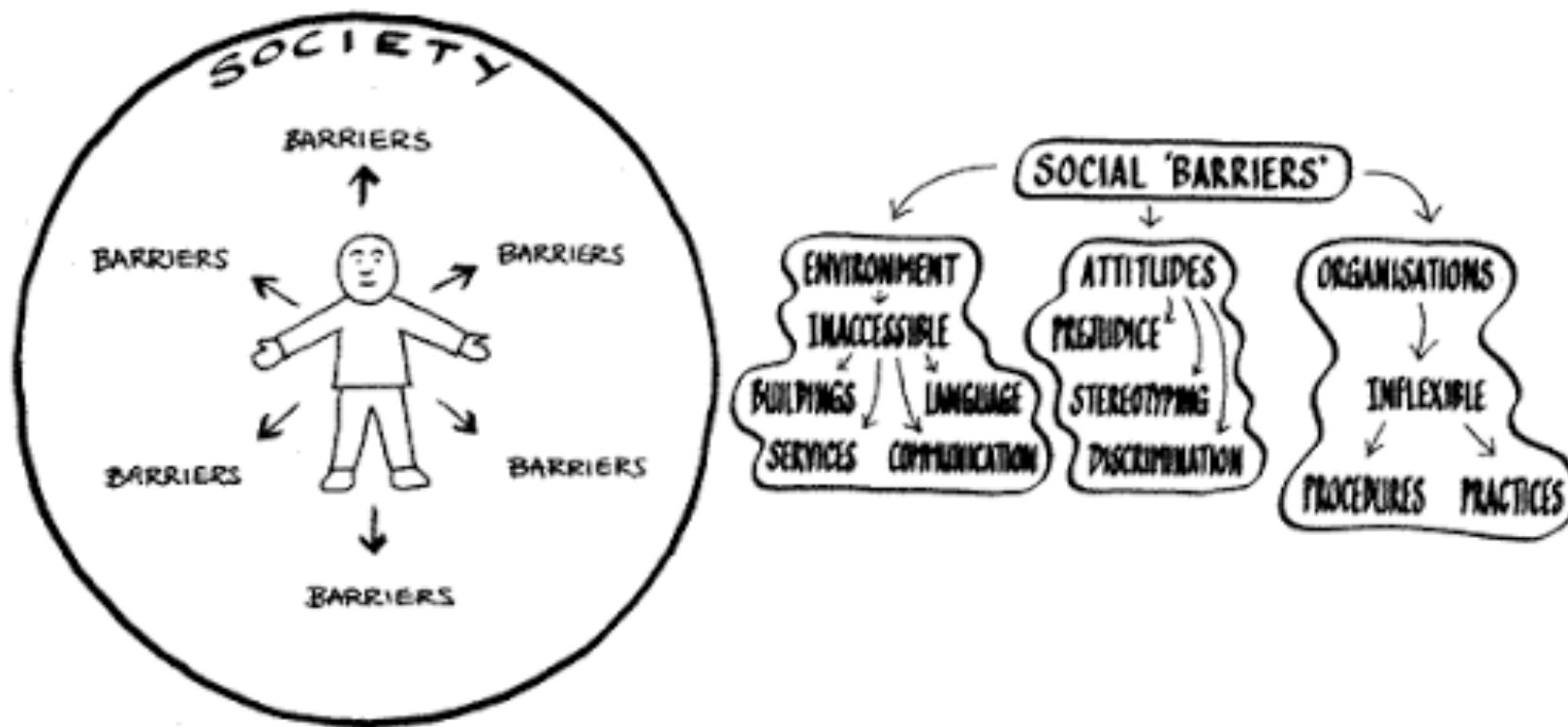
# THE MEDICAL MODEL OF DISABILITY



Source: <http://ddsg.org.uk/taxi/medical-model.html>



# THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY



Source: <http://www.ddsg.org.uk/taxi/social-model.html>





🌟 Cheshire Cat ଚଢ଼ଠ, @autismsupsoc · Nov 25, 2023

...

The Social Model of Disability states that “people are disabled by barriers in society”

An example we often use is that a tall person would be disabled in a setting designed for short people ...

This is very effectively demonstrated in Elf ...



<https://x.com/autismsupsoc/status/1728338606950175142?s=20>



# Social vs Medical Model of Disability For Autism: Some Examples

Social	Medical
Autism as a disability	Autism as disease/illness
Environment needs to be modified	Individual needs to be cured/treated
Research focused on making life better for autistic people and celebrating their strengths	Research focused on preventing autism and changing autism
Parents celebrate and advocate for their kids	Parents mourn their kids' illness
Autistic people actively included in advocacy and research, valued for their expertise	Autistic people excluded or treated as subjects to be examined/studied





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Canadian versus person from  
Canada

---

Mother versus person with  
children

---

Psychologist versus person  
with a psychology degree

---

Autistic person versus person  
with autism

Traditionally,  
different = wrong  
in autism research



# Brain Examples

- Review of 226 studies
- No reliable differences in brain structures



Whenever a difference  
was found, it was counted  
as a deficit



# Example: Hippocampus

6 studies	Bigger	Autistic Deficit!
3 studies	Smaller	Autistic Deficit!
1 study	Same	Autistic Deficit!

Gernsbacher, M. A. (2015). Diverse brains. *The general psychologist*, 49(2), 29.

# Diagnostic Criteria



# Autism – DSM Criteria

Social Communication:	Restricted Interests/Repetitive Behaviors
Deficits in Social-Emotional Reciprocity	Repetitive Behavior/Speech/Play
Deficits in Nonverbal Communication	Insistence on Sameness/Inflexible Adherence to Routines/Rituals
Deficits in Understanding/Developing/Maintaining Social Relationships	Restricted/Fixated Interests
	Hyper/Hyporeactive to Sensory Input/Unusual Interest in Sensory Aspects of the Environment

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.).

<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787>



Are the differences really all deficits?



Example:  
“Poor” eye contact?







- Eye contact

- Facial expressions



- Liking

- Friendship

Granieri, J. E., McNair, M. L., Gerber, A. H., Reifler, R. F., & Lerner, M. D. (2020). Atypical social communication is associated with positive initial impressions among peers with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 24(7), 1841-1848.

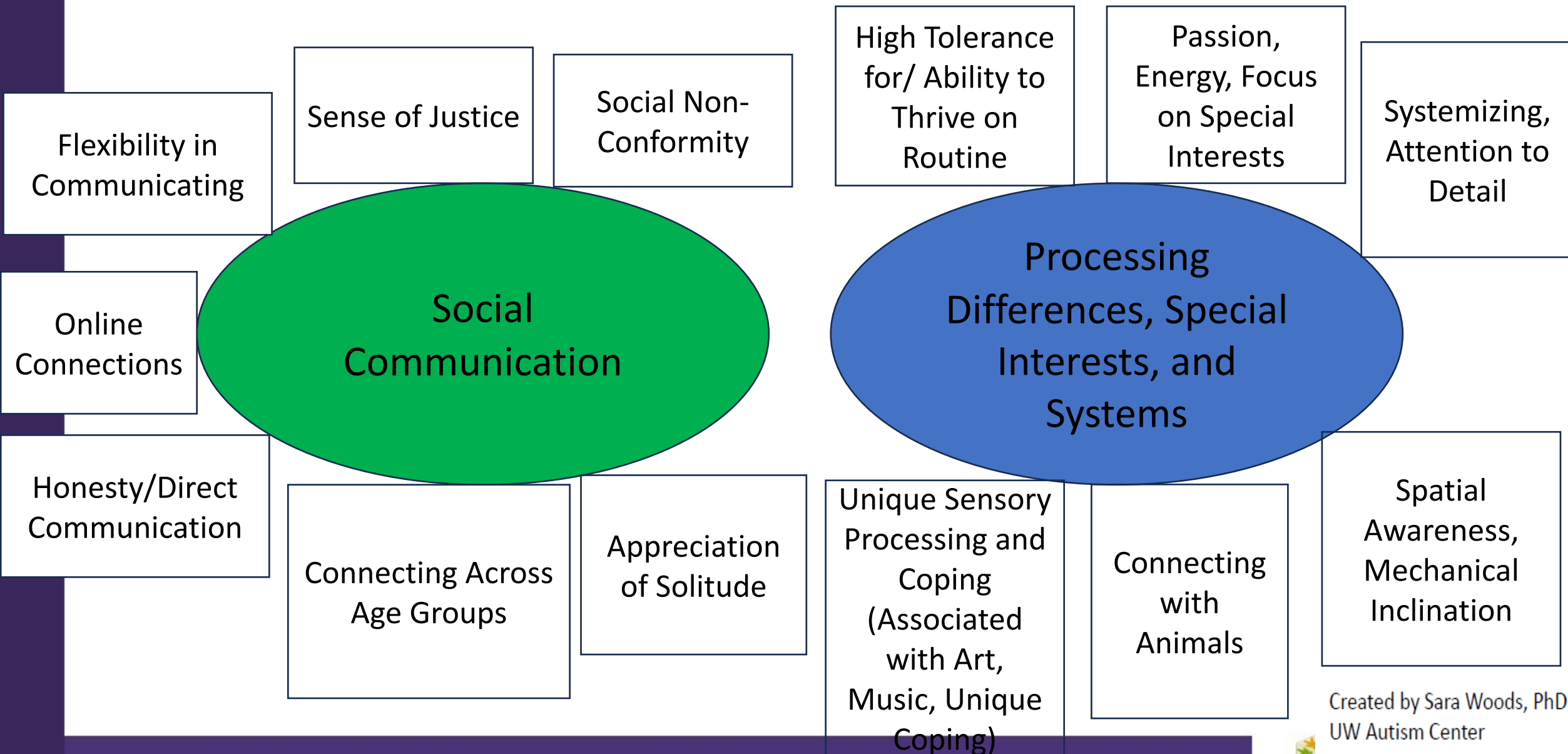


# Autism – Neurodiversity-Informed

Social Communication	Interests and Processing
Differences in Ways of Connecting (e.g., infodumping, connecting through interests)	Stimming
Differences in Nonverbal Communication (e.g., reduced eye contact)	Preference for Routine and Predictability
Different Social Rules and Expectations (e.g., direct communication, penguin pebbling)	Focused Interests
	Sensory Differences



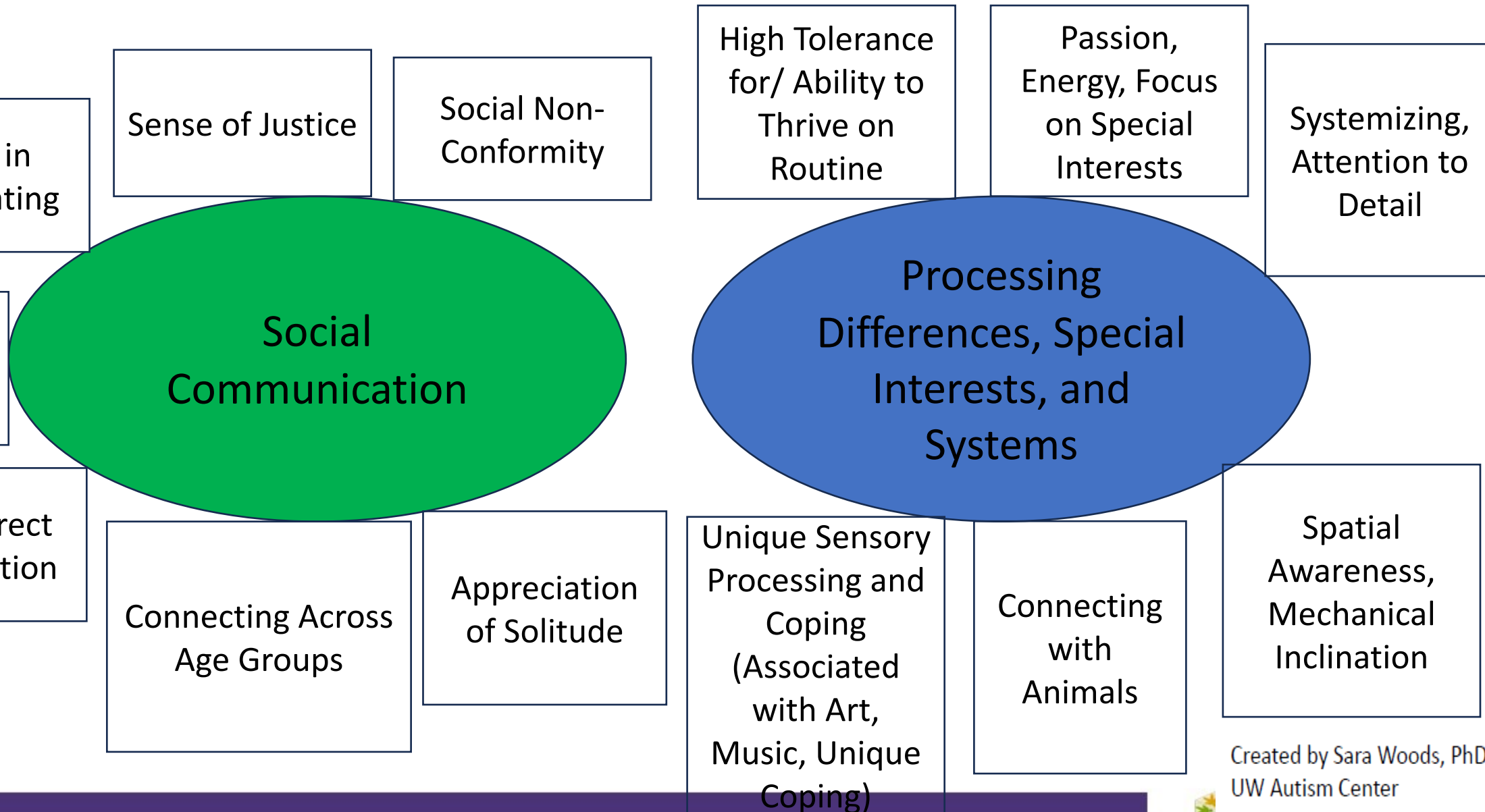
# Strengths Associated with Autism



Have you noticed some of these autistic strengths in your patients?



# Strengths Associated with Autism





# Chatting and Infodumping

**EITHER WAY IS  
A-OKAY!**



**IF YOU LIKE TO TALK ABOUT  
LOTS OF THINGS, THAT'S  
CALLED "CHATTING."**

**IF YOU LIKE TO TALK ABOUT ONE  
THING VERY DEEPLY, THAT'S  
CALLED "INFODUMPING."**



**MOST PEOPLE PREFER TO CHAT,  
WHICH CAN MAKE IT HARD FOR  
PEOPLE WHO LIKE TO INFODUMP.**



Daisy, I found this flower. Can you tell me what kind it is?

I love to talk about flowers!

**YOU CAN HELP THEM TO FEEL  
INCLUDED BY BRINGING UP THEIR  
FAVORITE TOPIC.**

<https://neuroclastic.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/chatting-and-infodumping.pdf>



# Problems with Social-Emotional Reciprocity



Who has a problem with empathy?

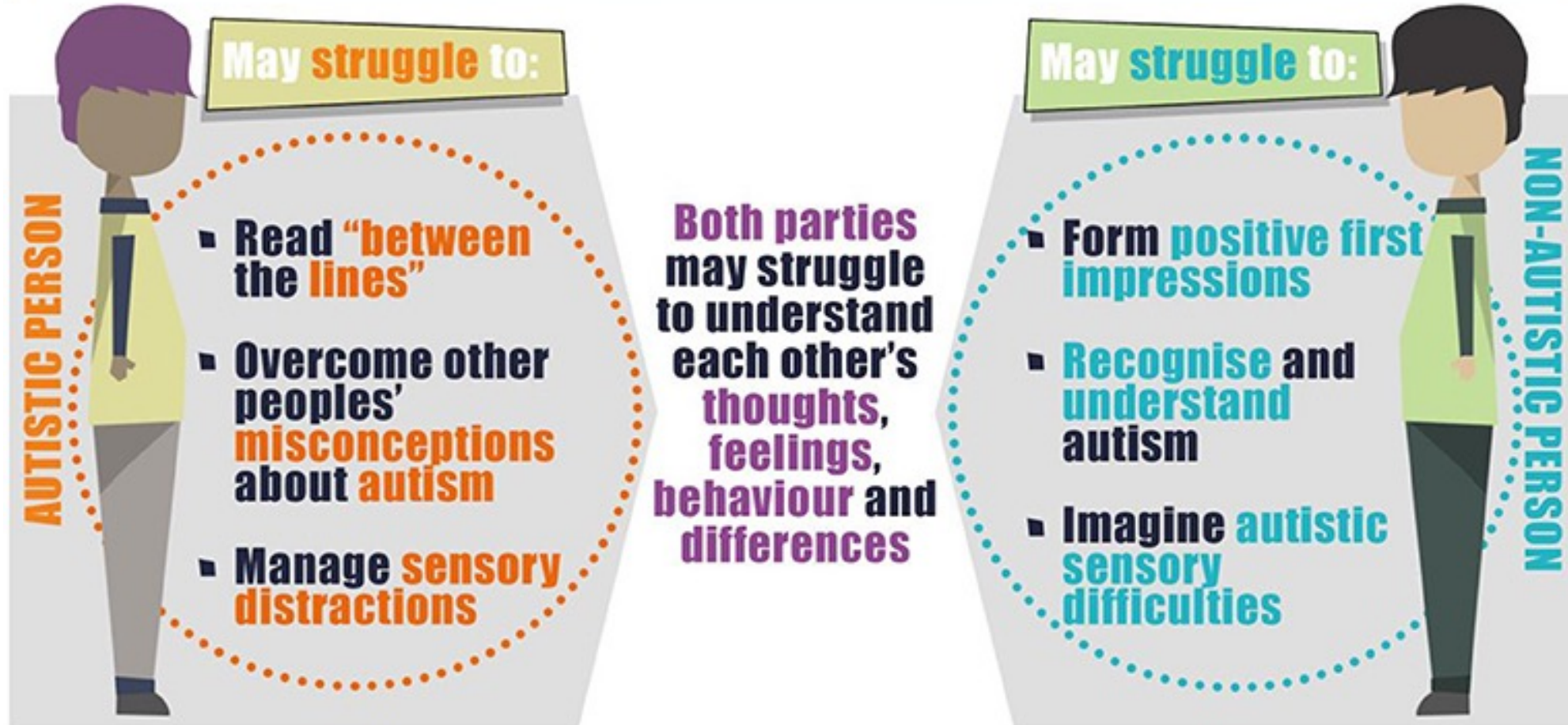


# Example: Cultural Differences



<https://x.com/killersundymann/status/1446131283969589250?s=20>

# THE DOUBLE EMPATHY PROBLEM

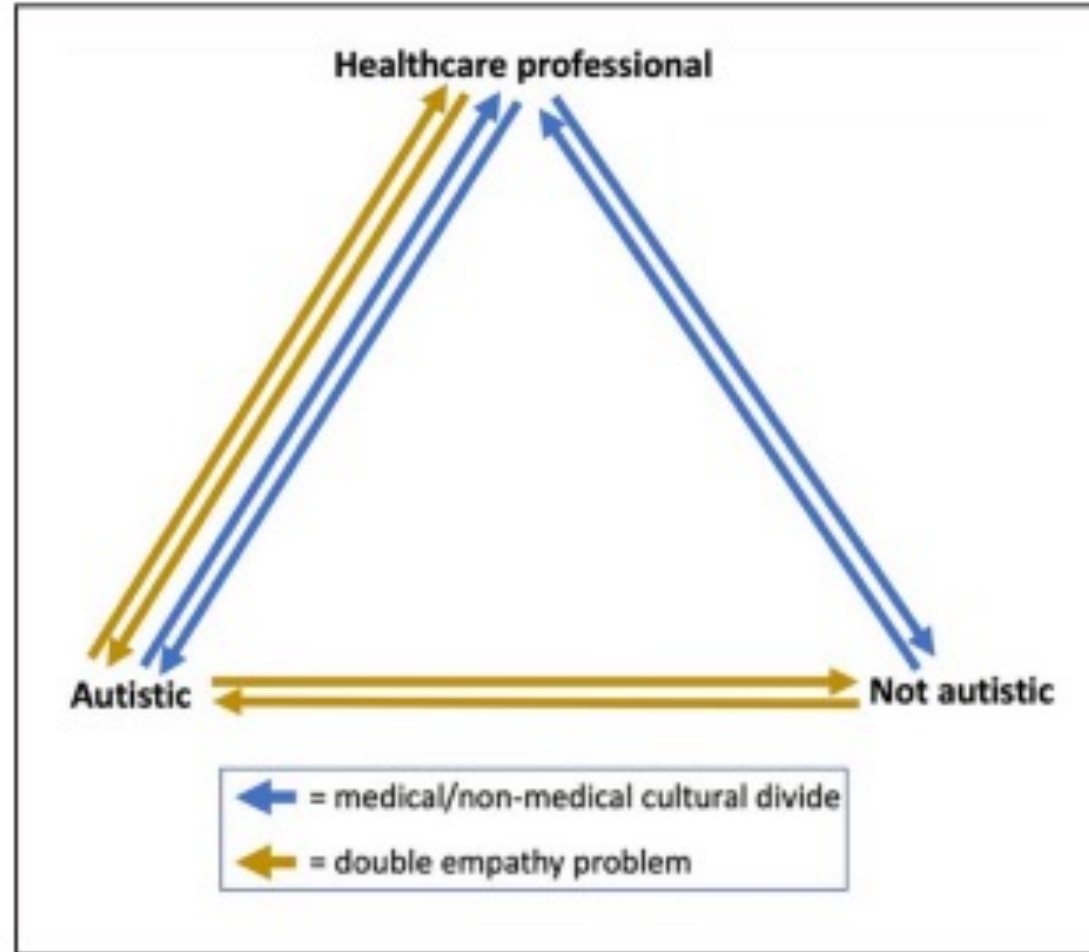


<https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2021.554875>





# Triple Empathy Problem



Shaw, S. C., Carravallah, L., Johnson, M., O'Sullivan, J., Chown, N., Neilson, S., & Doherty, M. (2023). Barriers to healthcare and a 'triple empathy problem' may lead to adverse outcomes for autistic adults: A qualitative study. *Autism*, 13623613231205629.



What should we do if a child plays like this?



# Autistic play: Medical Model Versus Reality

- “Non-functional” autistic ways of playing at preschool age are associated with higher nonverbal IQ at school-age for autistic children



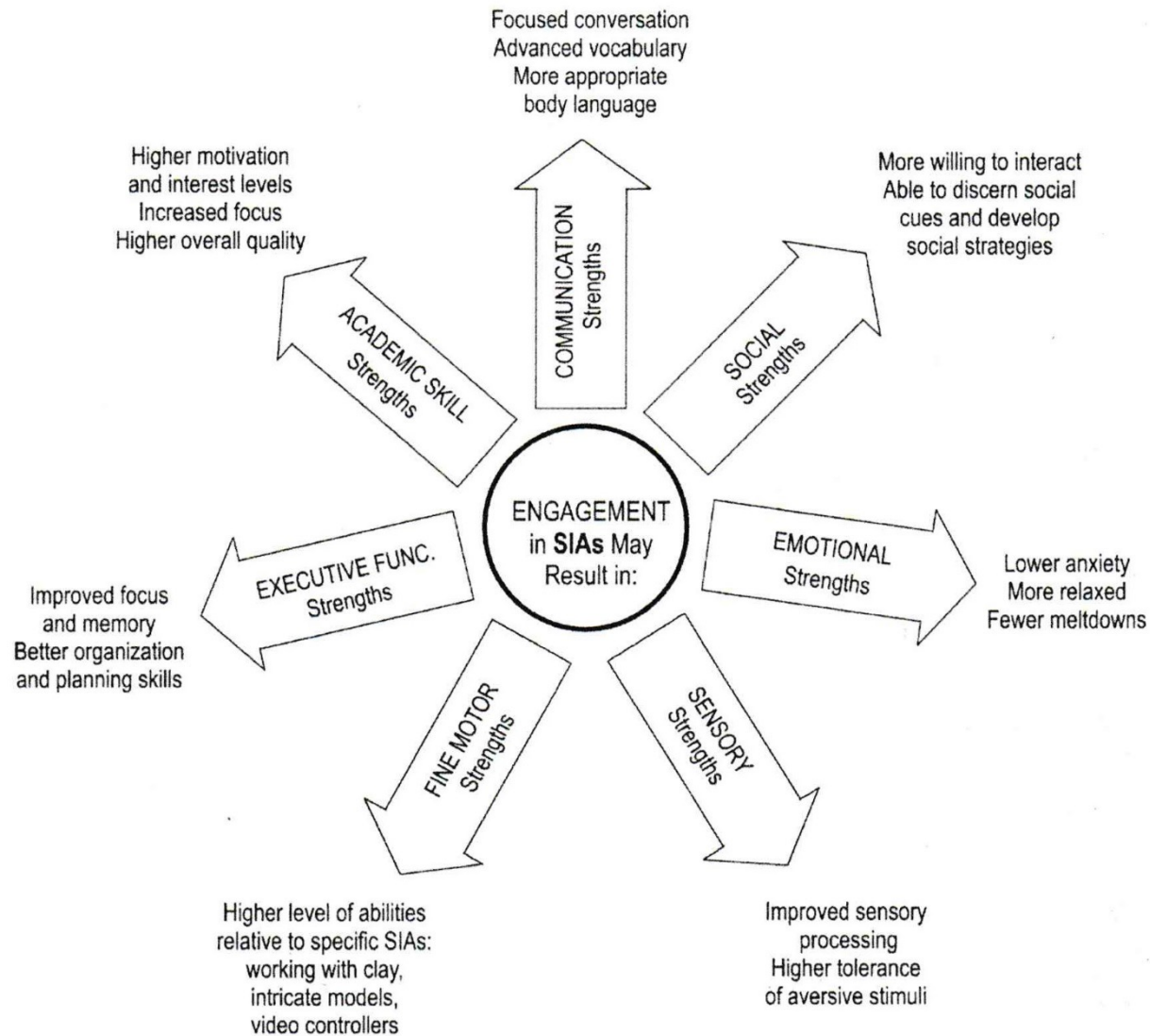
Girard, D., Courchesne, V., Cimon-Paquet, C., Jacques, C., & Soulières, I. (2023). Visual abilities and exploration behaviors as predictors of intelligence in autistic children from preschool to school age. *Autism*, 13623613231166189.



# Focused/Special/Restricted Interests

- Useful in careers
- Useful in connecting with others
- Life satisfaction
- Coping skills





Winter-Messiers, M. A., Herr, C. M., Wood, C. E., Brooks, A. P., Gates, M. A. M., Houston, T. L., & Tingstad, K. I. (2007). How far can Brian ride the Daylight 4449 Express? A strength-based model of Asperger syndrome based on special interest areas. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 22(2), 67-79.



Can you think of any ways you can use autistic children's special interests in your office to facilitate visits or communication?





# Sensory Strengths: Examples



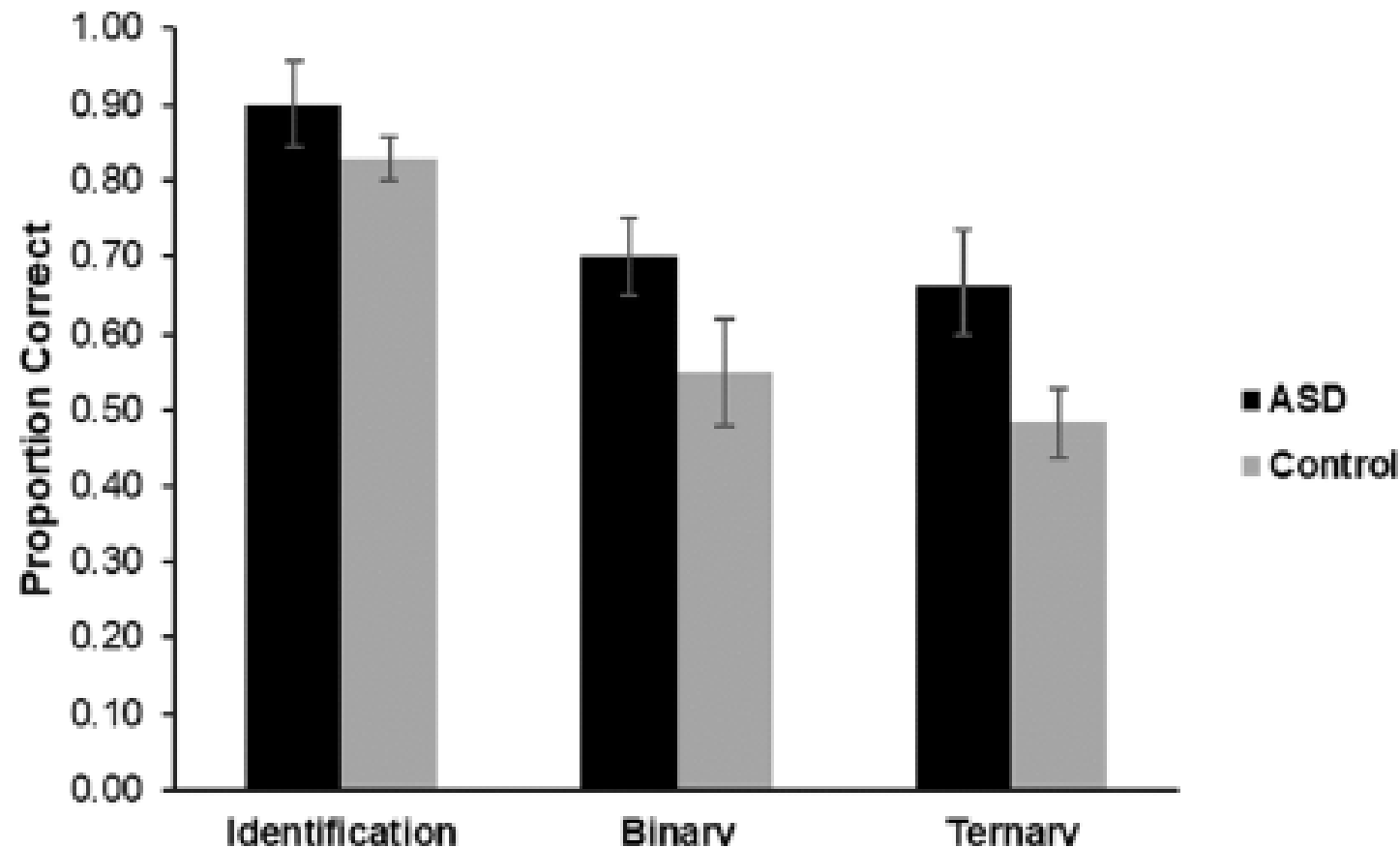
# Exploring Capacity for Detecting Smells



There was cake in the jar. What other smell was hidden in the jar?

Walker, S. C., Williams, K., & Moore, D. J. (2020). Superior identification of component odors in a mixture is linked to autistic traits in children and adults. *Chemical Senses*, 45(5), 391-399.

# Autistic children outperformed nonautistic children



Walker, S. C., Williams, K., & Moore, D. J. (2020). Superior identification of component odors in a mixture is linked to autistic traits in children and adults. *Chemical Senses*, 45(5), 391-399.

# Cognitive Strengths





# Traditional IQ Tests May Underestimate Autistic Children

- 30 autistic children (ages 6-12)
- Considered
  - at highest level of impairment
  - “untestable”



(Courchesne et al, 2015; in Montreal)

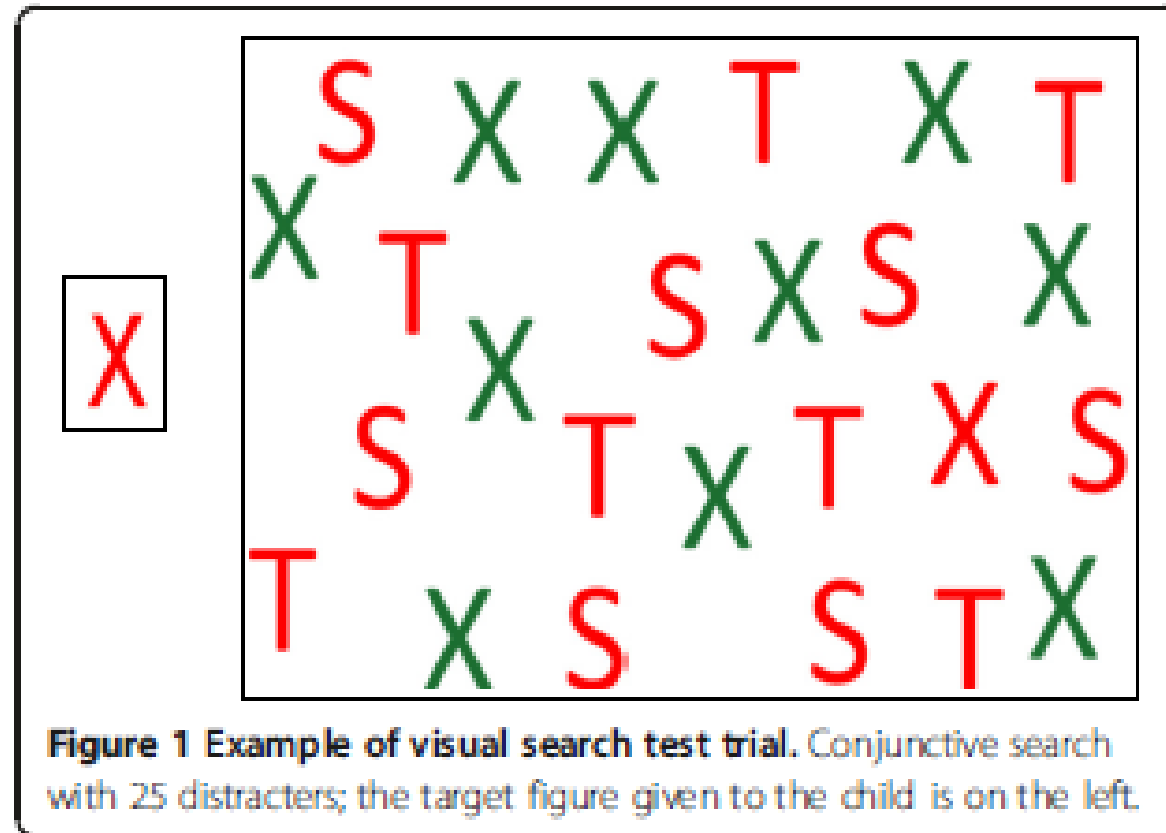


- 90% completed at least 2/3 tests
- Raven's Color Progressive Matrices –
  - 10% had a score above 90<sup>th</sup> percentile
- Children's Embedded Figures Test
- Autistic children faster than NT children (matched on RCPM and age)



Courchesne, V., Meilleur, A. A. S., Poulin-Lord, M. P., Dawson, M., & Soulières, I. (2015). Autistic children at risk of being underestimated: school-based pilot study of a strength-informed assessment. *Molecular autism*, 6, 1-10.

# Visual Search Tasks



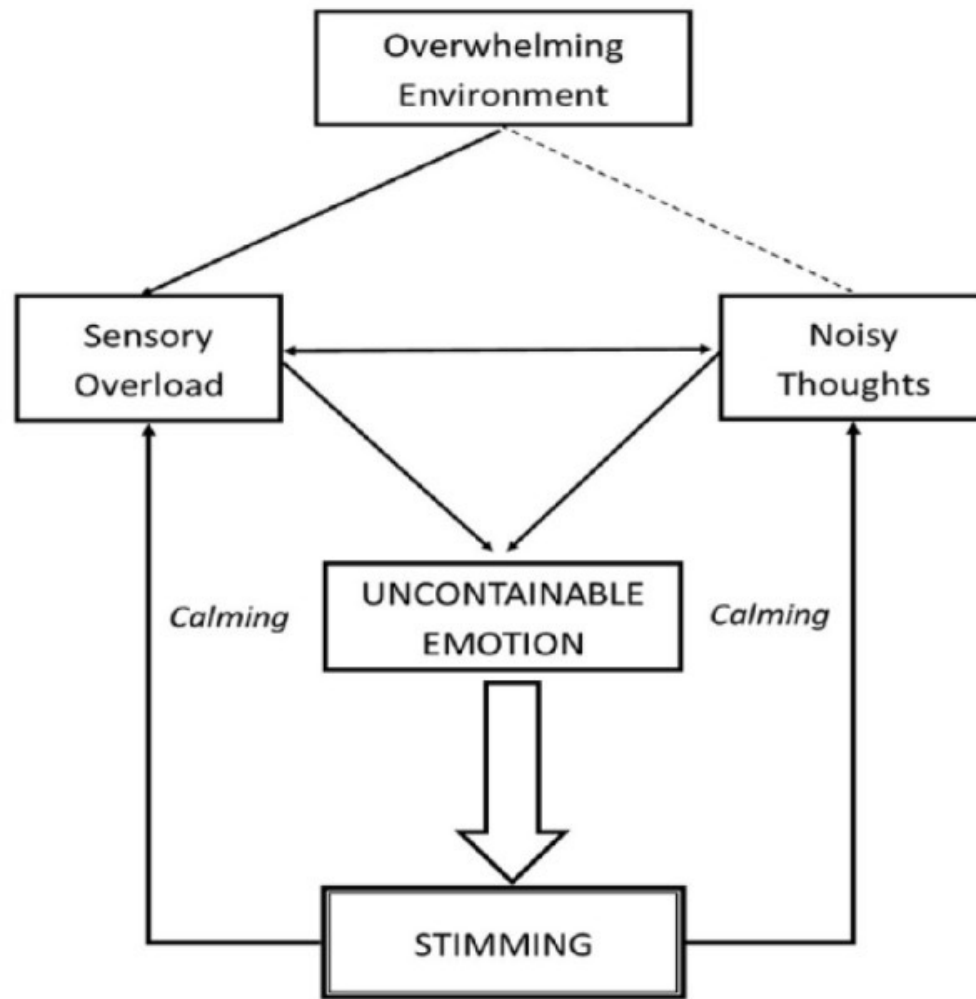
Courchesne, V., Meilleur, A. A. S., Poulin-Lord, M. P., Dawson, M., & Soulières, I. (2015). Autistic children at risk of being underestimated: school-based pilot study of a strength-informed assessment. *Molecular autism*, 6, 1-10.

# Stimming



@catnippacket





Kapp, S. K., Steward, R., Crane, L., Elliott, D., Elphick, C., Pellicano, E., & Russell, G. (2019). 'People should be allowed to do what they like': Autistic adults' views and experiences of stimming. *Autism*, 23(7), 1782-1792.



# How to Talk to Parents and Kids About Autism

## DO

- ✓ OFFER HOPE
- ✓ BE DIRECT/HONEST
- ✓ ND-AFFIRMING RESOURCES
- ✓ KEEP BIASES IN MIND

## DON'T

- ✗ TALK ABOUT IT LIKE A TRAGEDY
- ✗ BEAT AROUND THE BUSH
- ✗ PUT IT OFF UNTIL LATER
- ✗ INVOKE FEAR





# Dr. Lamar Hardwick, Autism Pastor



# Resources

- Autistic Self-Advocacy Network: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>
- Thinking Person's Guide to Autism: <https://thinkingautismguide.com/>
- Chatting and Infodumping Story: <https://neuroclastic.com/free-pdf-download-of-neuroinclusive-social-story-on-chatting-and-infodumping/>
- Art of Autism: <https://the-art-of-autism.com/>
- Reframing Autism: <https://reframingautism.org.au/about-autism/>
- Arc of King County: <https://arcofkingcounty.org/>



# Resources for Autistic Clinicians

- Washington: Autistic Social Caring Network:  
[www.meetup.com/autscn](http://www.meetup.com/autscn)
- Autistic Doctors International:  
<https://autisticdoctorsinternational.com/>



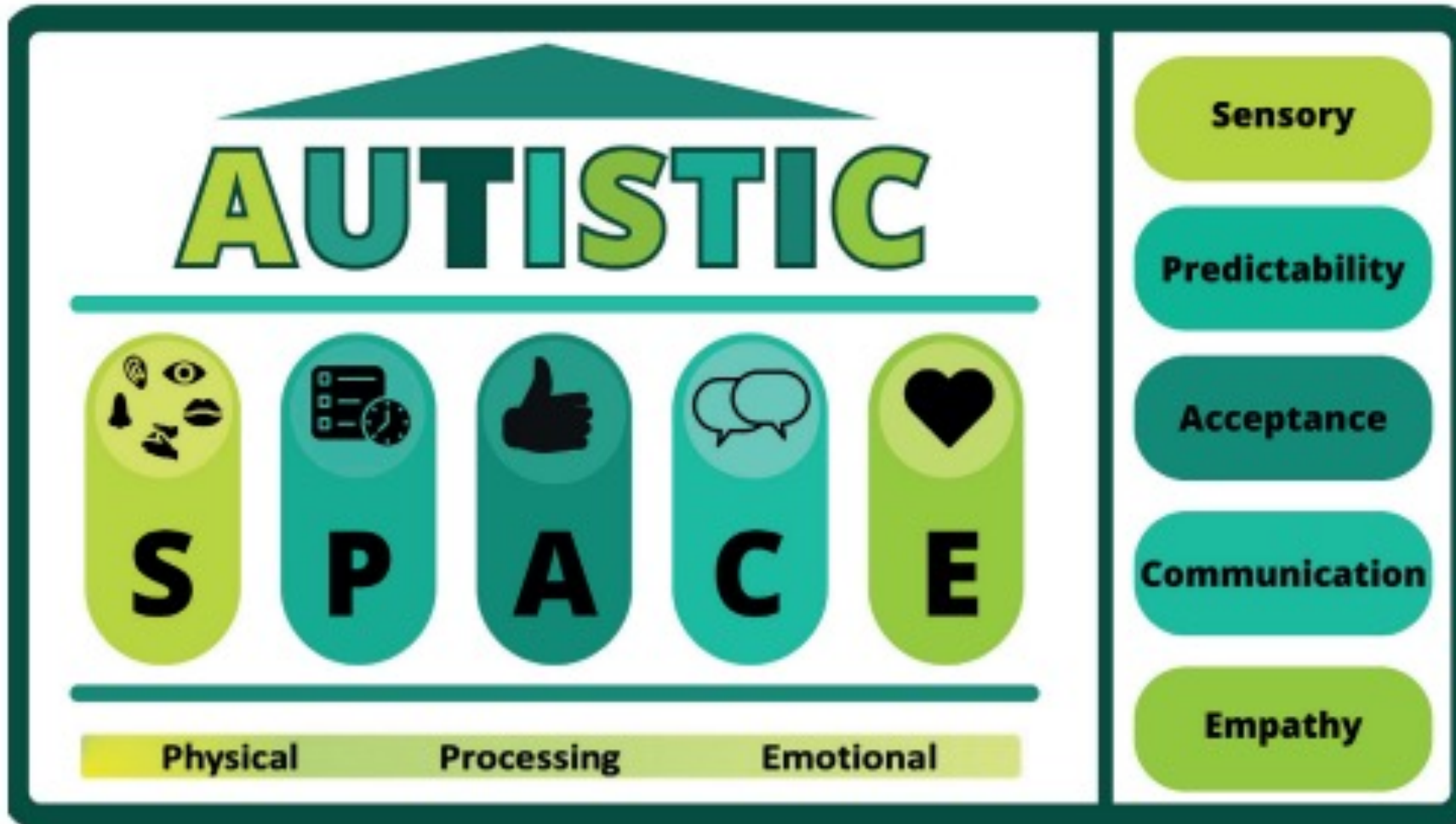


Figure 1. The Autistic SPACE framework.

Doherty, M., McCowan, S., & Shaw, S. C. (2023). Autistic SPACE: a novel framework for meeting the needs of autistic people in healthcare settings. *British Journal of Hospital Medicine*, 84(4), 1-9.



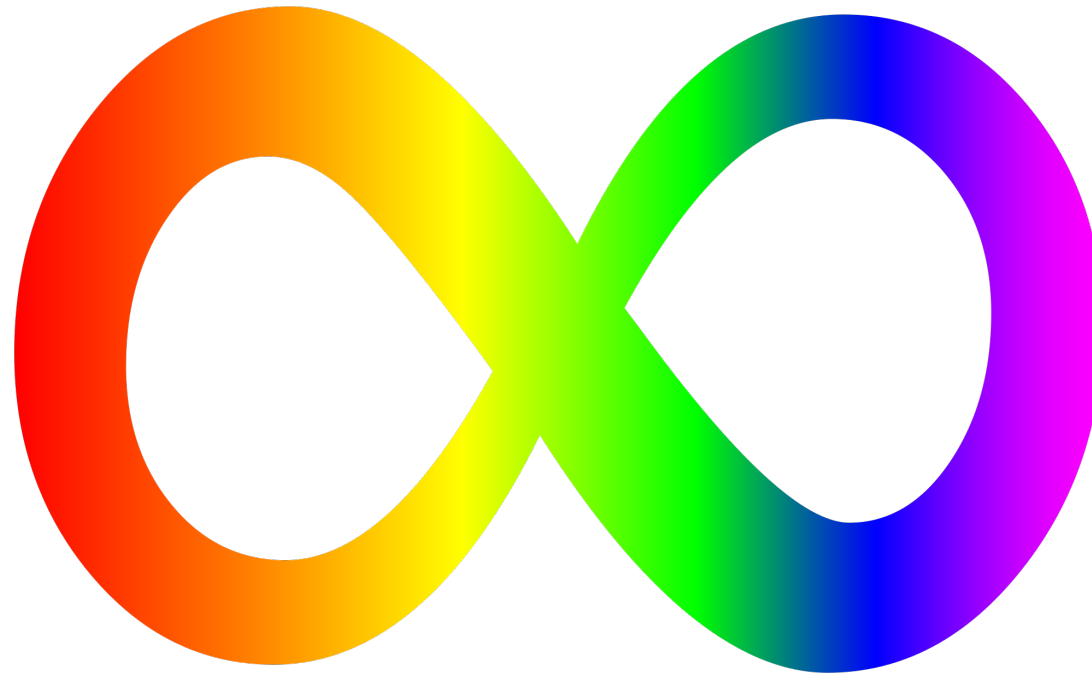
# Article for Parents



- <https://www.parentmap.com/article/13-tips-talking-your-child-about-their-autism>

# Outschool

- What is autism?
- <https://outschool.com/classes/what-is-autism-ages-8-12-Cftkp548>



# Neurodiversity-Affirming Books

- <https://booksforlittles.com/unpolished-booklist/disability/validating-autistic-experiences/>



# My Friend with Autism

Enhanced Edition



Written by Beverly Bishop

Illustrated by Craig Bishop



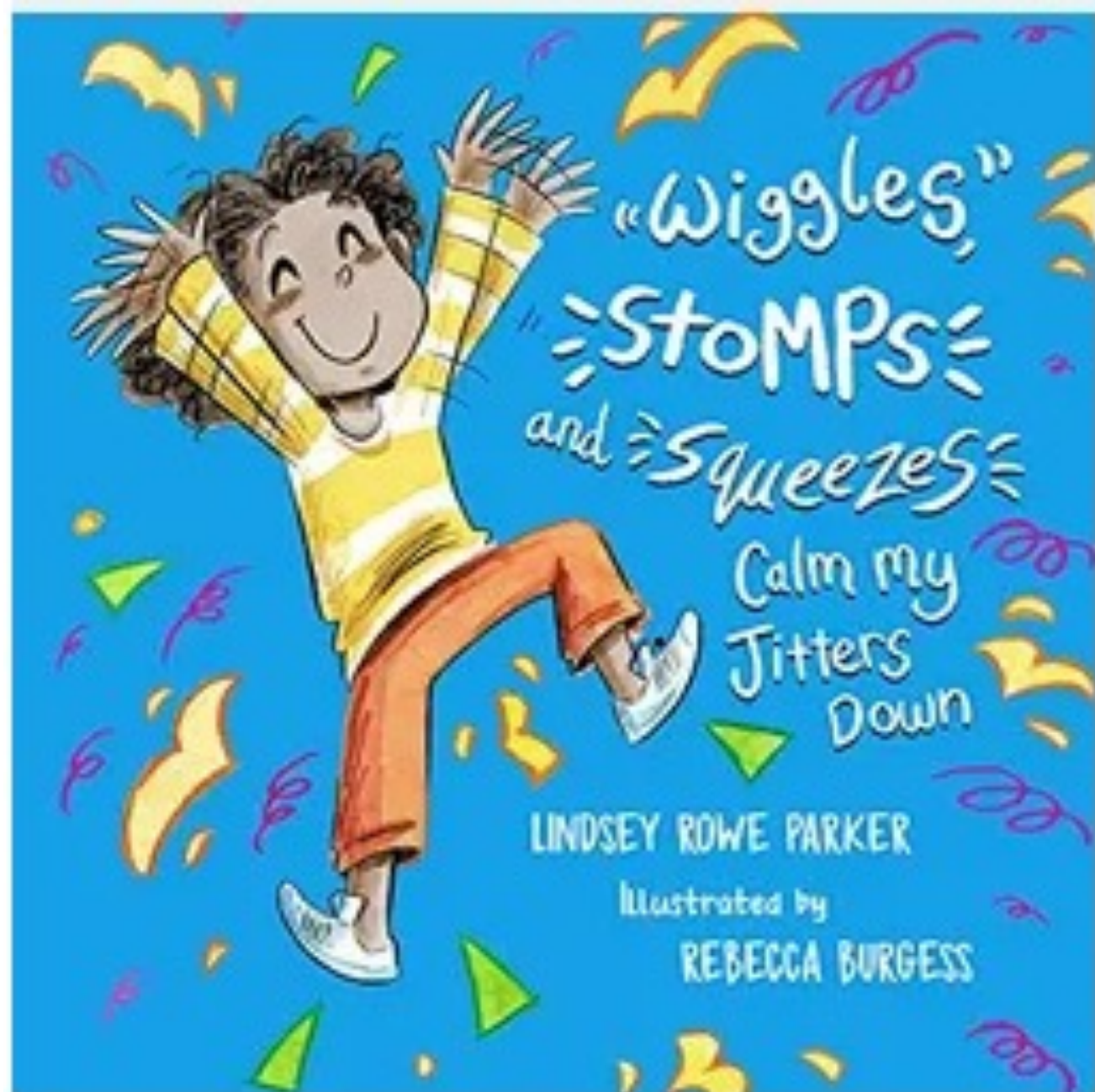


# MELIA AND JO

BILLY ARONSON  
&  
JENNIFER OXLEY







**Questions?**

**Thank you for attending!**



# Contact Information

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