

# Lessons from the Neurodiversity Movement

What CAPTAIN Cadre Can Do to Better Support Autistic Students

**Patrick Dwyer**  
PhD Candidate



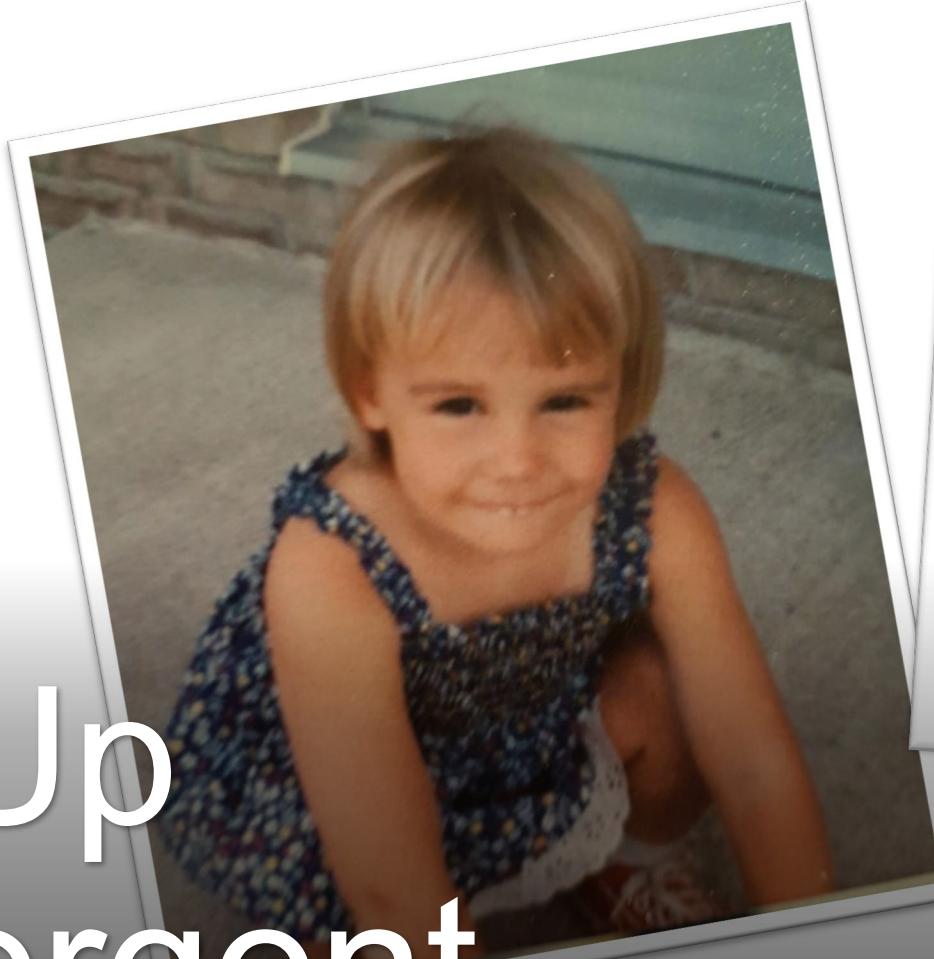
**Heather M. Brown, PhD**  
Associate Professor



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

# Growing Up Neurodivergent

Medical Model vs. the Neurodiversity Paradigm



A close-up photograph of a woman's face, showing her right eye, nose, and mouth. She has dark hair and is wearing red lipstick. The background is dark. A thick, vertical white line runs from the top to the bottom of the frame, separating the image from the text on the right.

Autistics are 7-9x  
more likely to engage  
in suicidal behaviours



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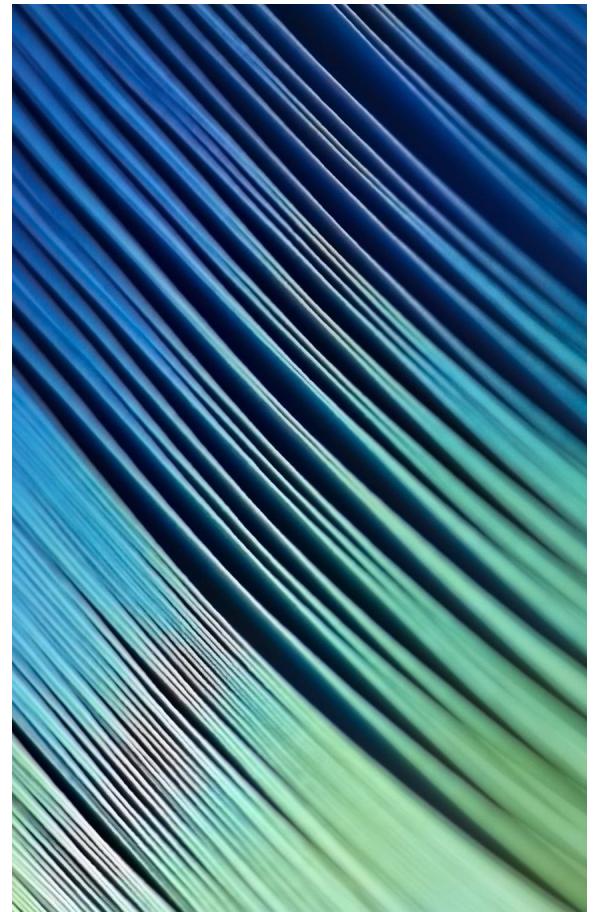
From a very young age, I internalized that:

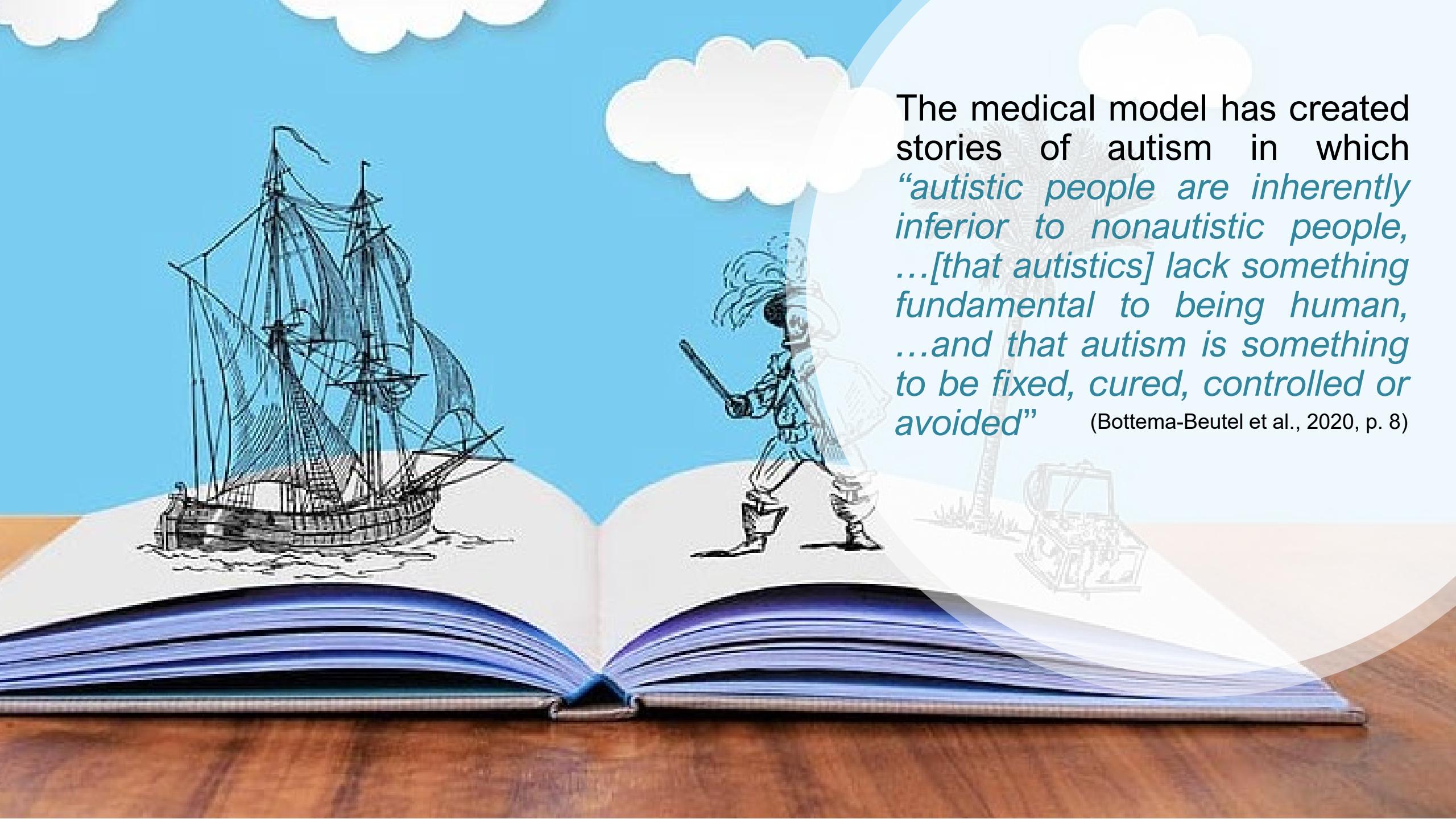
- I was BAD
  - I was overly sensitive and overly emotional
  - My needs were unreasonable
  - I was unlikeable
  - I wasn't normal
  - I HAD TO CHANGE
-

# Medical Model Definition of Autism

Rest on two fundamental assumptions

- 1 {
  - There is one “right”, “normal” or “healthy” way for human brains to function
- 2 {
  - If your neurological configuration and functioning differs substantially from the dominant standard of “normal”, then there is “Something Wrong With You”



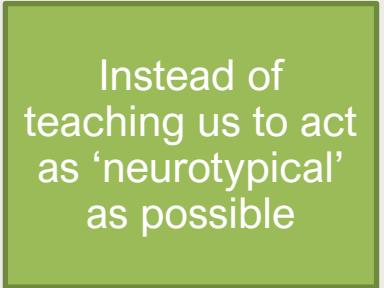


The medical model has created stories of autism in which *“autistic people are inherently inferior to nonautistic people, ...[that autistics] lack something fundamental to being human, ...and that autism is something to be fixed, cured, controlled or avoided”*

(Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020, p. 8)



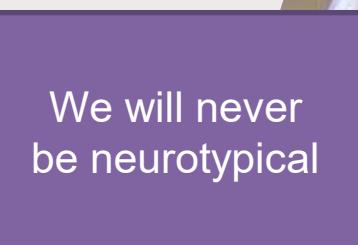
We need to refocus our interventions on supporting, developing and celebrating the child's strengths



Instead of teaching us to act as 'neurotypical' as possible



If that is the treatment goal, we will always fail



We will never be neurotypical





Using operant  
conditioning, you could  
teach your cat to swim.  
But a cat who can swim  
is still a cat.  
It will never be a dog.

# Neurodiversity Paradigm

What is an alternative story?

Neurodiversity  
refers to the  
simple fact  
that all brains  
are different



# Neurodiversity Paradigm

Three fundamental assumptions:

1. Diversity of brains is valuable
2. The idea of a “normal” brain is socially constructed
3. The power inequalities and stigma experienced by neurodiverse peoples mirror social dynamics toward other minority identities (e.g., First Nations, LGBTQ+)



“Just as biodiversity is essential to ecosystem stability,  
so neurodiversity may be essential for cultural stability”

(Singer, 2017, loc. 1979)

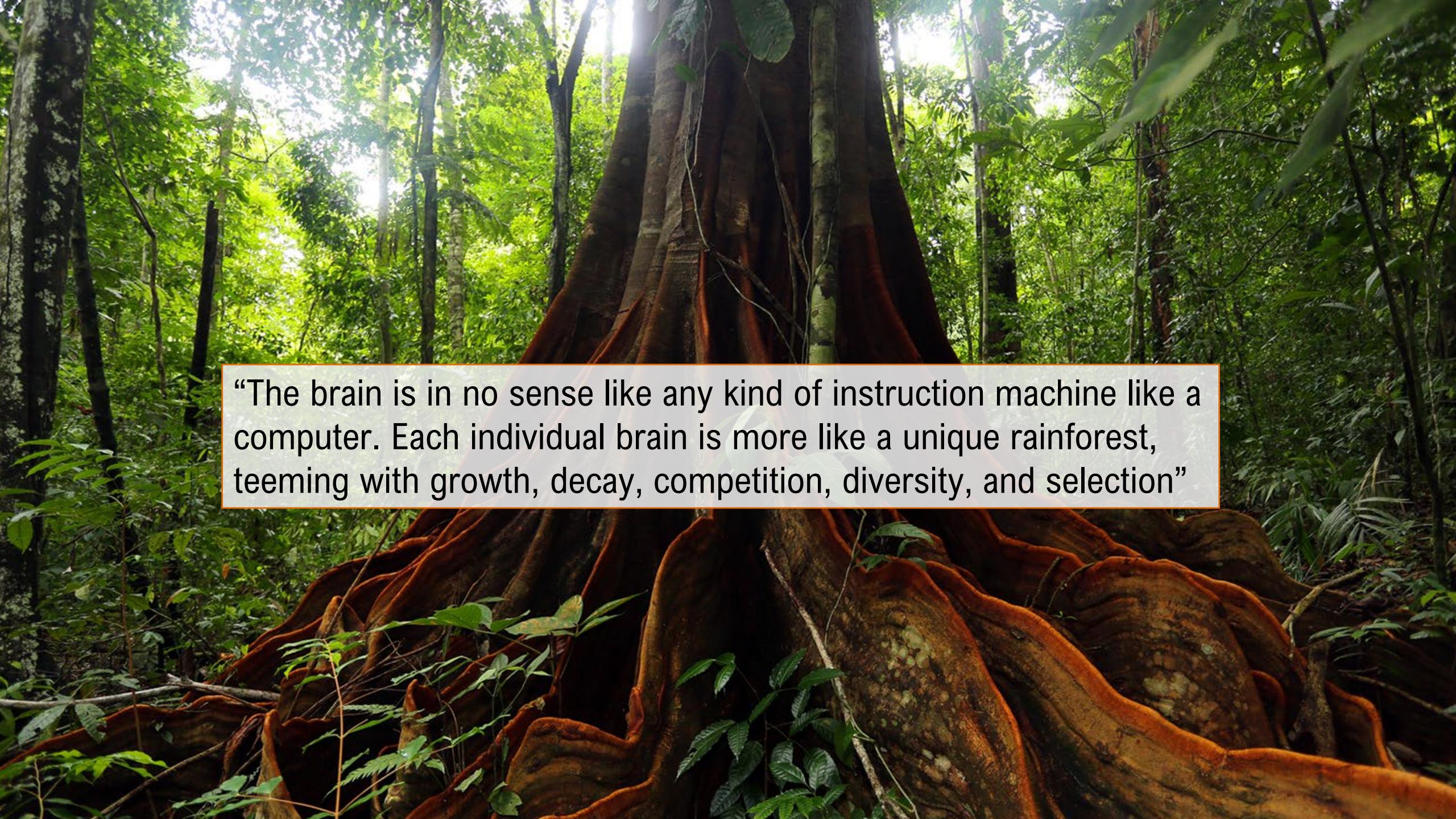


(Armstrong, 2010; Singer, 2017; Walker, 2012)



“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will be best at any given moment?”



A photograph of a dense tropical rainforest. In the foreground, several large trees with thick trunks and vibrant orange-red bark are visible. Sunlight filters down through the dense canopy of green leaves above, creating bright highlights and deep shadows. The overall atmosphere is lush and vibrant.

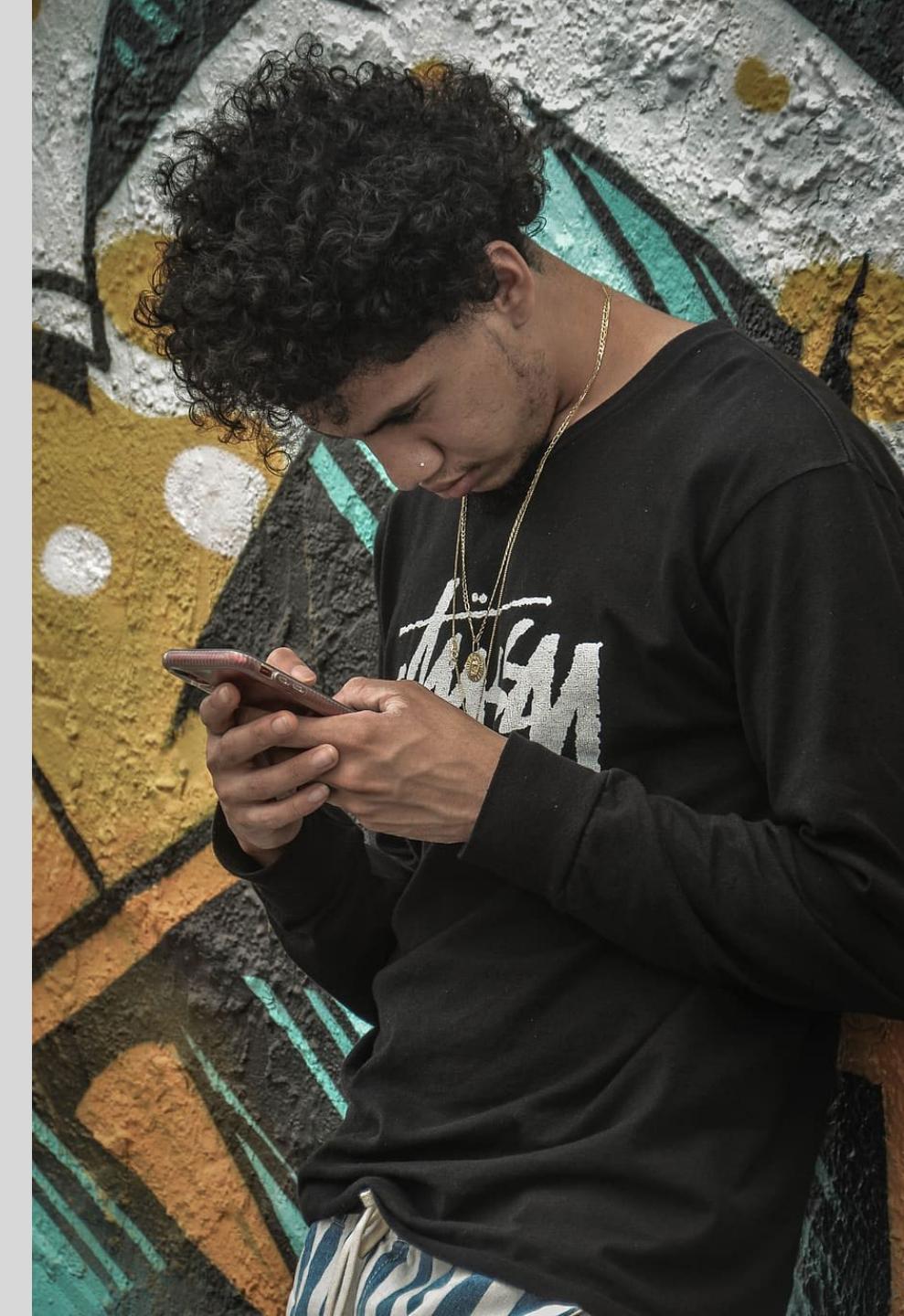
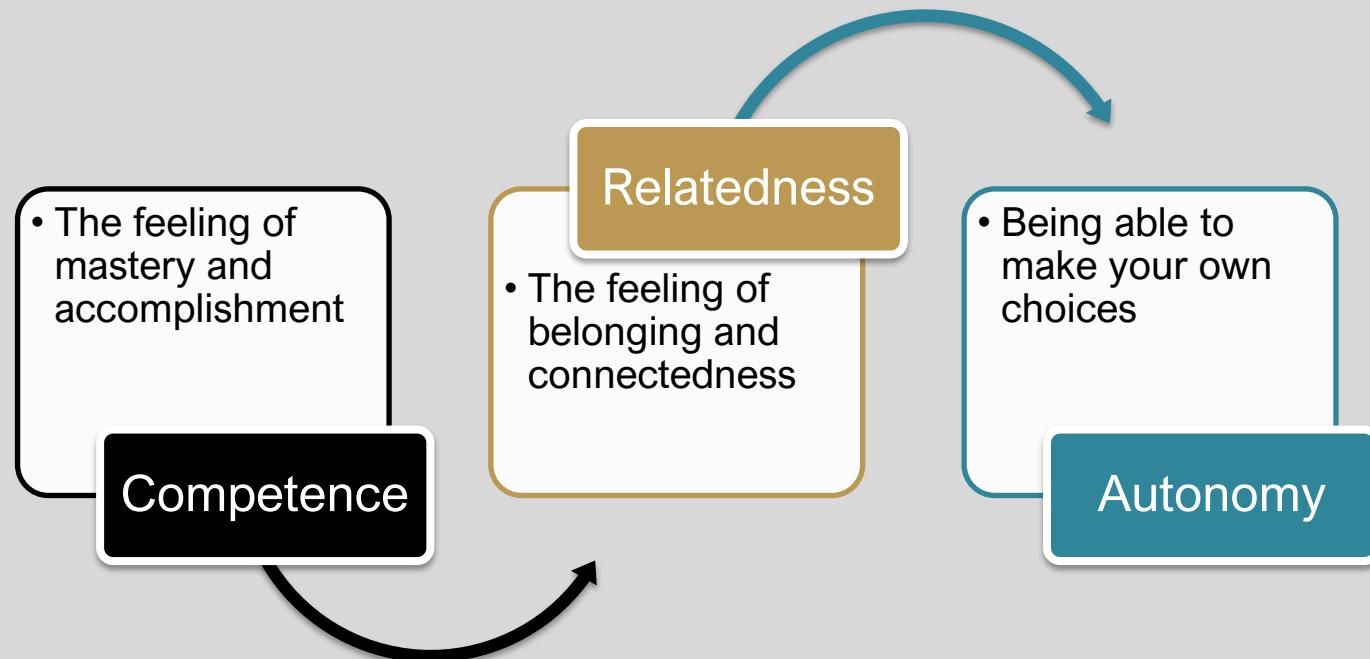
“The brain is in no sense like any kind of instruction machine like a computer. Each individual brain is more like a unique rainforest, teeming with growth, decay, competition, diversity, and selection”

# What does it mean to thrive?

And... is it any different for autistics?

# Self-Determination Theory

All humans have three core psychological needs



A photograph showing the backs of two people walking away from the viewer through a dense, green forest. One person is wearing a blue shirt and the other is wearing a grey shirt with a red backpack. The scene is filled with tall trees and lush foliage.

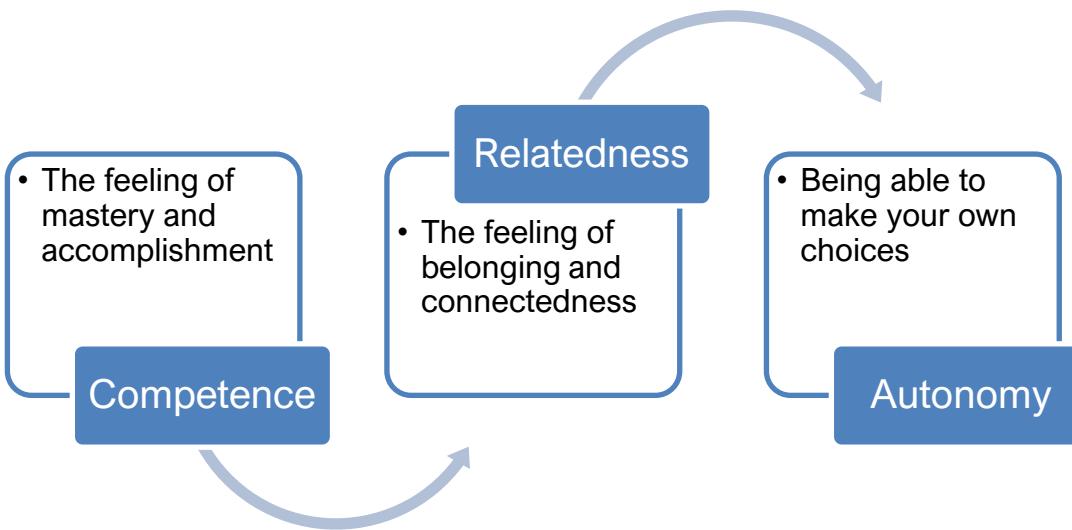
# Relatedness: Is it any different for autistics?

"A strong sense of connection with others in the community"  
Seligman, 2011

May be operationalized differently among people on the spectrum

**Examples:** prioritizing the development of a few close friendships or highly valuing their relationships with animals

# Self-Determination Theory



SDT proposes that the degree to which **any** of these three psychological needs is unsupported or thwarted within a social context will have a robust detrimental impact on **wellness** in that setting

Focuses on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people's sense of volition and initiative, their overall well-being, and (as is especially relevant to educators) the quality of their performance.

# Teaching Social Skills

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To what extent do our practices for teaching social skills to autistic students align with the tenants of the neurodiversity paradigm and self-determination theory?



# The Double Empathy Problem

And Autistic Communication Styles

Many key assumptions of social skills training are problematic at their core





We've historically assumed that  
autistic people lack empathy and  
neurotypical people have it

Research suggests it's  
not that simple...

1. Double Empathy  
Problem

2. Autistic Peer-to-Peer  
Communication

3. Masking and  
Camouflaging



# What is the “Double Empathy Problem”?



Communication  
breakdowns are a  
two-way issue

*“If it takes this much effort to assist someone with ASD in interacting with neurotypicals then where does the assumption that a neurotypical can understand and interact with someone with ASD so easily come from?”*

Quote from an autistic participant in a social skills training intervention (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020, p.202)

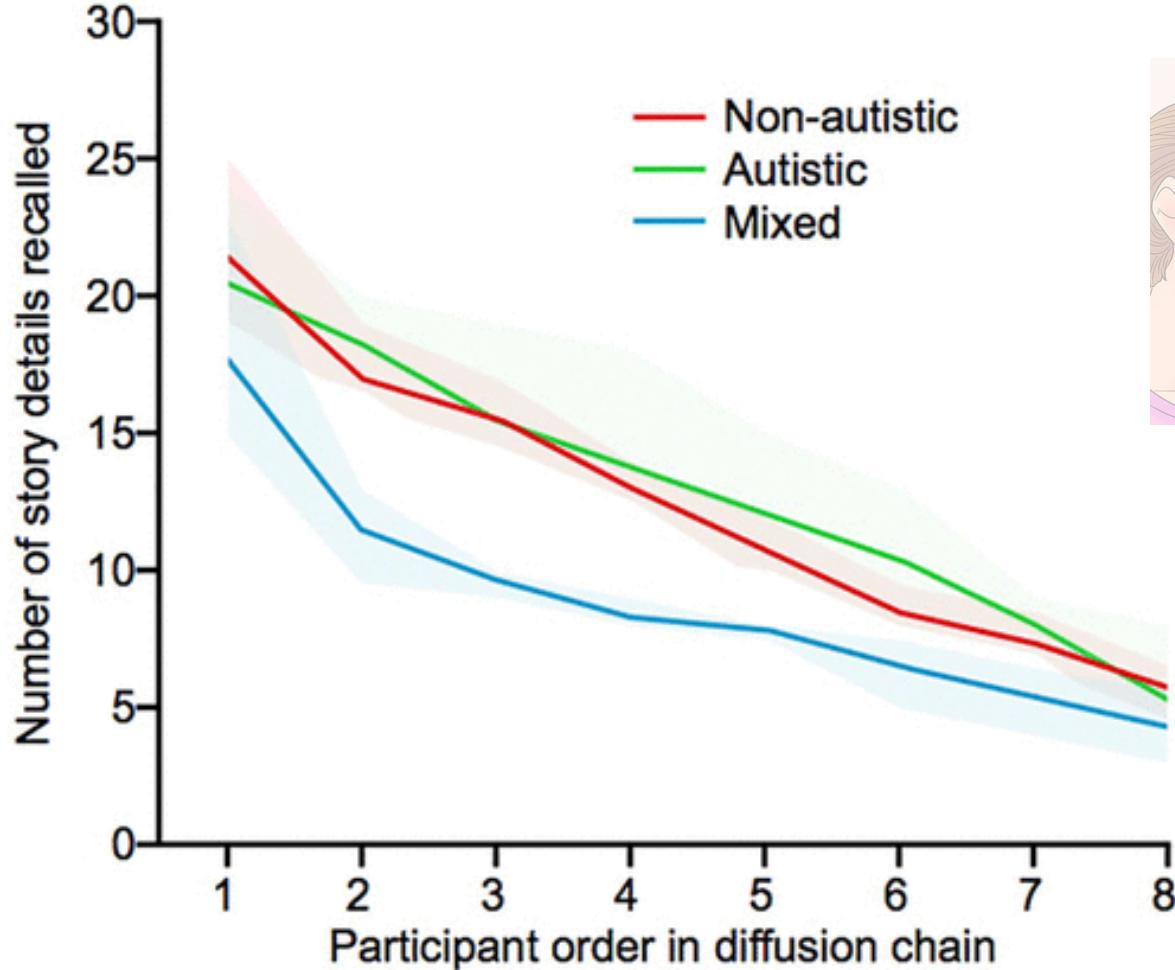


# Autistic Peer-to-Peer Communication



The Case of the Telephone Game

# The Case of the Telephone Game



“Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective”



## **Neurotypical Peers are Less Willing to Interact with Those with Autism based on Thin Slice Judgments**

Noah J. Sasson<sup>1,\*</sup>, Daniel J. Faso<sup>1</sup>, Jack Nugent<sup>2</sup>, Sarah Lovell<sup>3</sup>, Daniel P. Kennedy<sup>2,\*</sup> & Ruth B. Grossman<sup>3,\*</sup>

“...biases disappear when impressions are based on conversational content lacking audio-visual cues, suggesting that style, not substance, drives negative impressions of ASD”



## Socials Skills Training Leads to Camouflaging

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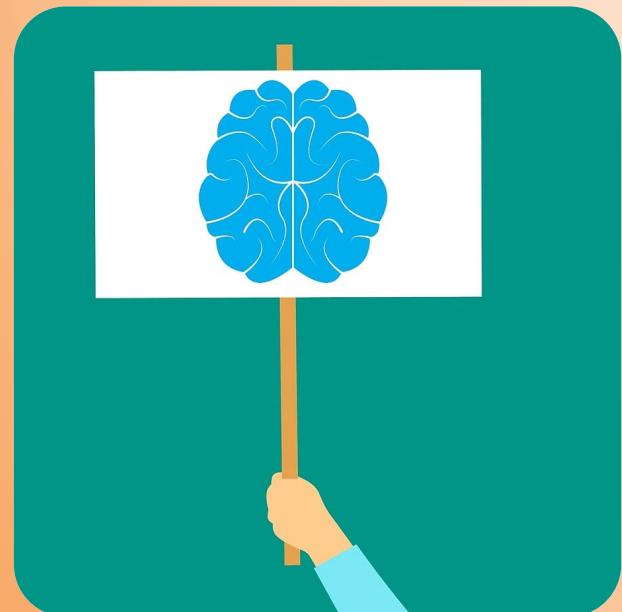
Camouflaging and masking strategies are often used by individuals with and without autism to blend into one's social surroundings by presenting a 'socially acceptable' or 'best' version of oneself, and, in the case of people with autism, by hiding our more obvious autistic traits and behaviours



Autistic participant in Hull et al., 2017:  
**“It’s mentally exhausting constantly having to be something else, literally never being able to be myself, and kind of sad too I guess?”**

Autistic participant in Livingston et al., 2019:  
**“Constant overthinking of possibilities of what to say, how it will come across, what others are and are not saying, the connotations of every word, sentence structure, emphasis, body language, as well as all of the above combined in a giant matrix of thought!”**

# Five-Minute Brain Break



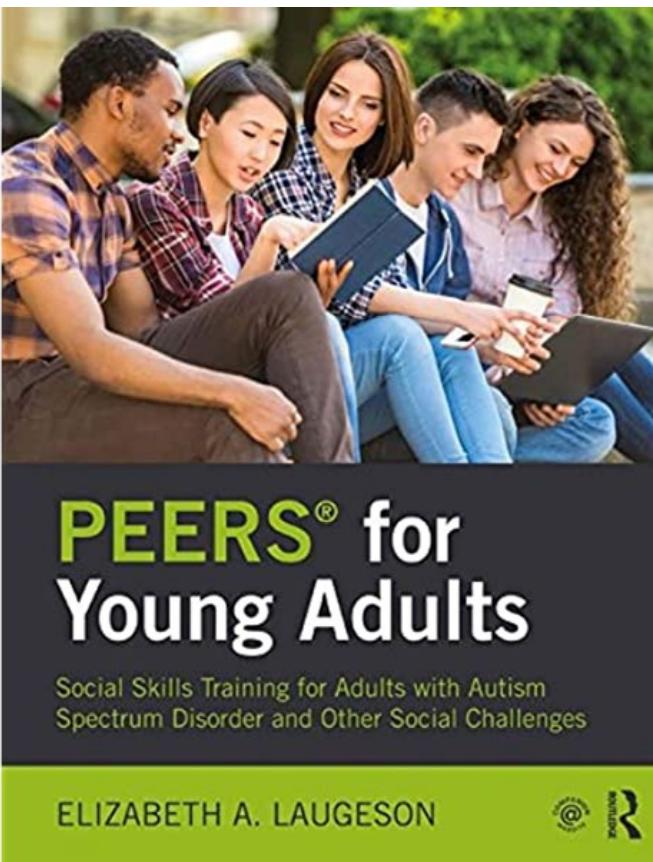
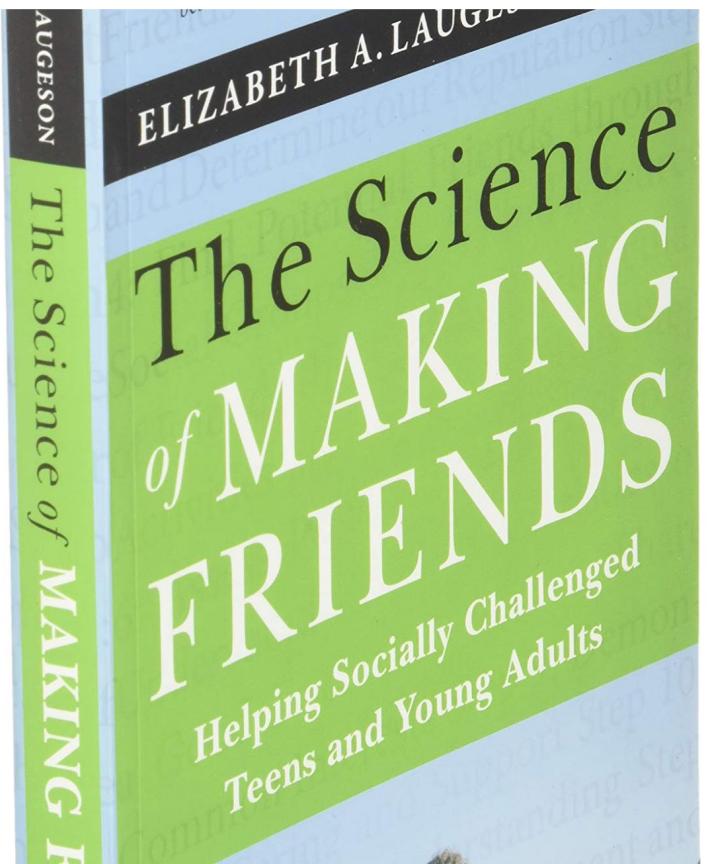
Please leave us comments in the chat to answer any or all of the following questions:

1. What most struck me about this talk so far is...
2. The question I would most like to ask is...
3. The idea I most take issue with is...

# How are Social Skills Taught? An Example

Questioning Current Practices

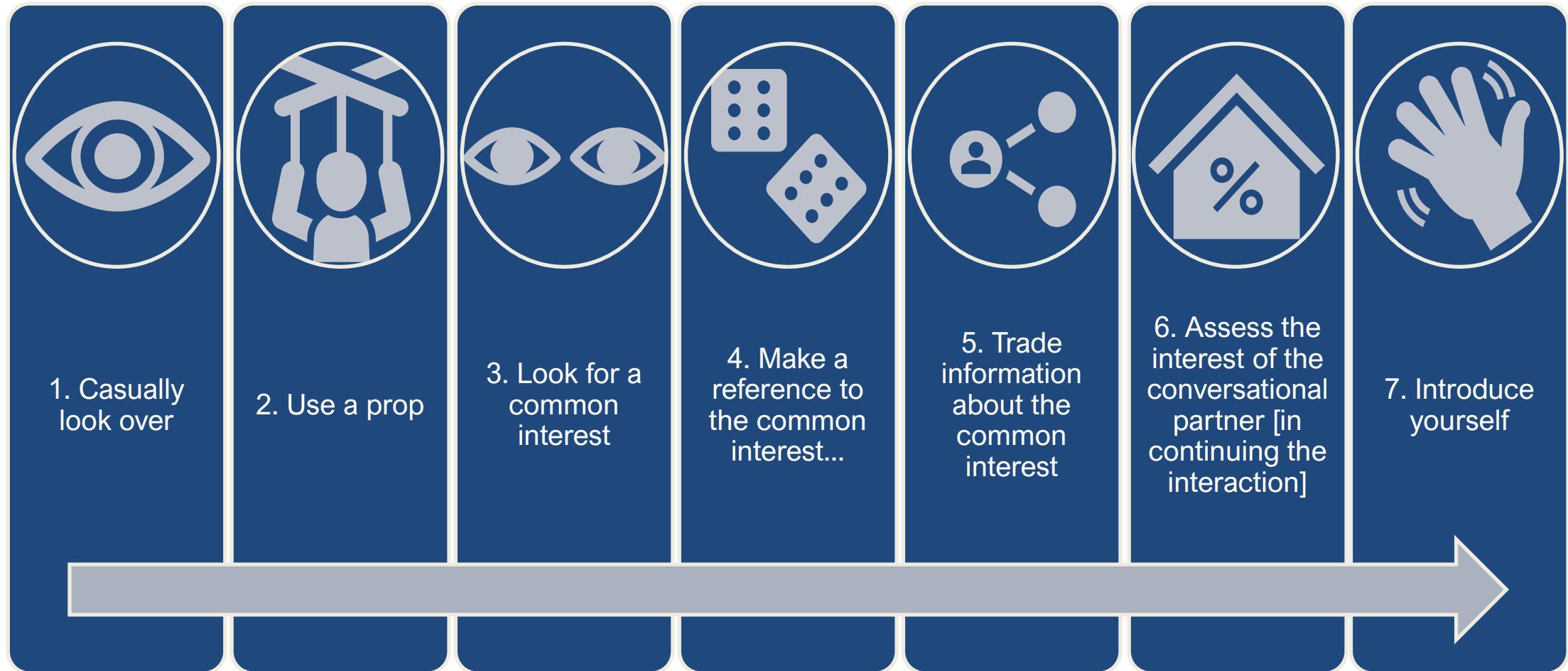
# An example of how PEERS® teaches social skills



"The following steps should be used when your teen or young adult is trying to start an individual conversation with someone he or she either doesn't know or knows only slightly... These steps should be followed in the order presented without skipping any steps"

(Laugeson, 2013)

# How to initiate a conversation with a stranger





[When people are not acquainted], a ‘ticket’ is required to begin a conversation... Tickets are not necessarily comprised of topic proffers on subjects in which the interaction partner is known to have an interest... Instead, they are generally fitted to the immediate context, and situate the two potential interaction partners as being involved together in the present social encounter. For example, when two people encounter each other at a bus stop one might say, “You waiting for the bus?”

- ...research has shown that, given the action-oriented nature of talk, it is often difficult to even pin down a particular topic when examining naturally-occurring conversations



Are we supposed to be following a long, confusing, stressful (and perhaps not entirely accurate) mental checklist of social rules all the time? In social interactions that unfold rapidly with no option to take a time-out to process?

Wouldn't this be exhausting and ineffective?

Do we learn social skills through explicit teaching, or through procedural learning, through learning by doing?



# How are Social Skills Taught?

Will the proposed intervention would be viewed favorably by the individuals for whom it is intended to benefit?

# Perspectives of Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder on Social-focused Intervention Practices

33 autistic participants in total

- 11 females (33% female)

67% white

58% in high school

Mean Age: 17.8 years

Age range: 14y-24y

Bottema-Beutel, K., Mullins, T. S., Harvey, M. N., Gustafson, J. R., & Carter, E. W.. (2016). Avoiding the “brick wall of awkward”: Perspectives of youth with autism spectrum disorder on social-focused intervention practices. *Autism, 20*(2), 196–206.

# Identifying social goals for students

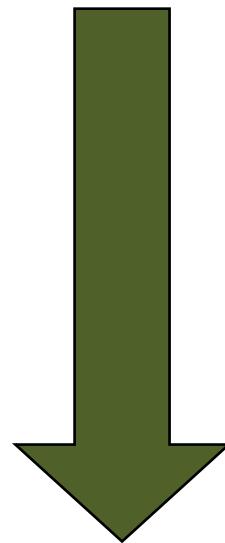
Positives	Negatives
 <pre>graph TD; A[making new friends] --- B[participating in social activities]; B --- C[community engagement]; C --- D[learning to manage stress during social interactions]; D --- A</pre>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• They personally did not need social-related goals</li><li>• Their current social situation was adequate and would not be improved by setting goals</li><li>• Setting social goals doesn't work<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hasn't worked in the past</li><li>• Goals too difficult</li></ul></li><li>• Stigma attached</li></ul>

# Identifying social goals for students



Social goals can be “good because they are measurable for someone who may not have the best sense of what normal social ability is”

22-year-old male



“It has the potential to be a very obvious and plain attempt at exactly what it is. It will draw bad attention to the selected students and cause bickering and unrest among the other students. Most students will deem something of the sort ‘childish’ and complain the entire time.” 16-year-old male

Autistic Voices



*...in their words*

# **How are Social Skills Taught?**

Involving teachers or other adults



# Adult supports

Teacher may “grease the wheels” to get a social interaction going

Adults supports  
can be helpful

To initiate  
conversations

To keep  
conversation  
going

Planning times  
to meet

Arranging  
transportation

# Presence of teacher(s) or other adult supports is often experienced as intrusive

- Want privacy and liberty to discuss topics considered off-limits by adults
- Makes things awkward

Intrusive into students' private lives

Makes the social interactions harder

- Stifles authentic communication
- Cannot be honest with each other

- Creates greater dependency on adults
- Adults are clueless about adolescent interactions

Unhelpful

# How are Social Skills Taught?

Involving non-autistic students in the intervention

Recruiting  
non-autistic  
peers

Orientation  
Events

Regular  
meetings

# Recruiting peers to be involved in the intervention

## Positives



Might widen their social circle or increase their ability to socialize



Please invite peers with common interests!



Component most likely to lead to successful social interactions

## Negatives

No one in my class is a suitable match

Social groups can only be successful if they are voluntary

“Wrong” peers picked -> personality clashes

Hard to gain entry to existing peer groups



# Hold an orientation meeting to explain the intervention to peers



"This would cause more trouble than it's worth."

"Think about it. You're putting a child with social issues who has trouble with his peers in a **spotlight** in front of his peers telling them how he/she is special."

"First off, this will **embarrass** that student heavily. It makes me uneasy in meetings when I have to discuss while everyone stares holes into my skull."

"Second off the kids couldn't care less what the teacher has to say about autism. They don't care."

"Most importantly it will draw extreme aggression towards the subjected child. The peers will not react kindly to having to go to a lecture because of the one student. They will feel that the child said something against them. And here come the mentally retarded jokes."

Autistic Voices



*...in their words*

"Uh-uh. This might work with adults, but I repeat.  
DO. NOT. USE. THIS. WITH. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

# Hold an orientation meeting to explain the intervention to peers

Positives

- Educating others about autism
- Increased opportunity for positive social interactions, social success and social acceptance

Autistic Voices



*...in their words*

- *“I like the idea of being understood by my peers”*
- *“It’s a great way to educate the other peers ‘til they learn more about what the people with autism feel”*

# Meet regularly with peers

Increases number  
of social  
interactions

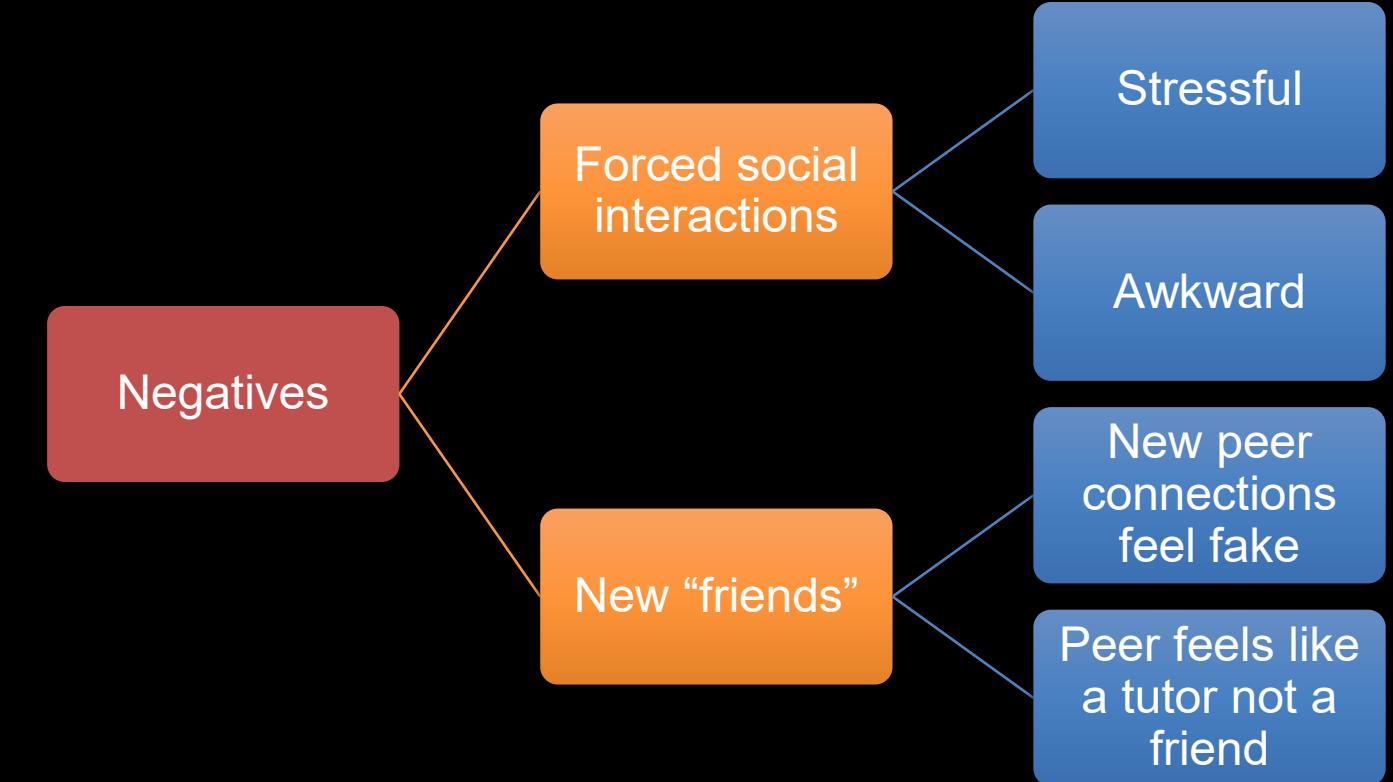
Through  
improved social  
skills

By increasing size  
of social circle

Enjoy the  
predictability of  
regularly  
scheduled social  
interactions

Positives

# 4. Meet regularly with peers



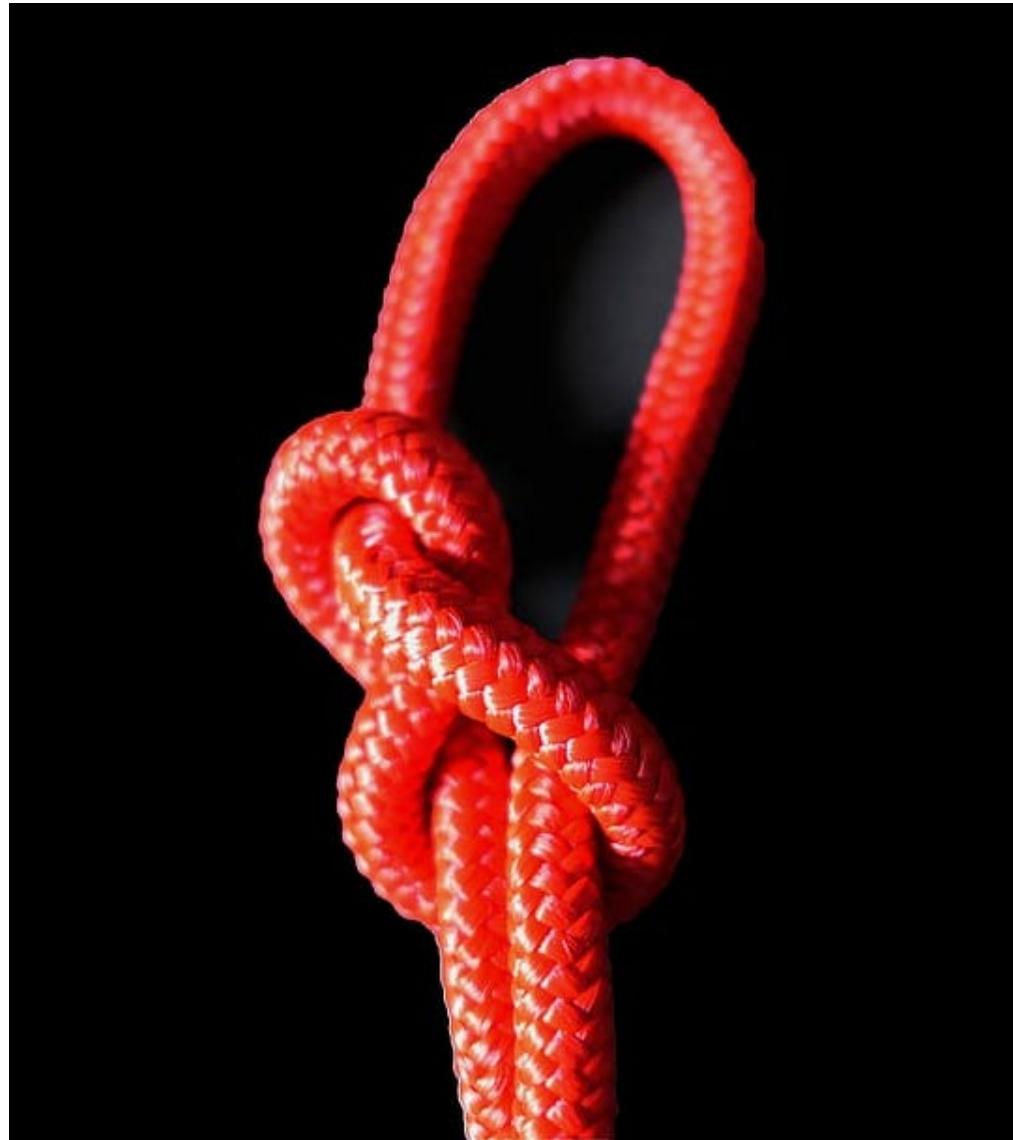


Recruiting peers  
to be involved in  
the intervention

Autistic Voices  
  
*...in their words*

“I have used this idea successfully once, but only under special circumstances (i.e., I was already friends with one member of the group). **More often, it's just been a brick wall of awkward”**

But can we truly  
dispense with social  
skills training?



- Autistics should not have to work so hard to ‘pass’ as neurotypical in order to achieve success at home, work or school
  - Yet, autistic youth and adults are often judged unfairly because our ‘odd behaviors’
- 

## An Unfair Double Bind

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- We look down on ourselves for acting ‘too autistic’ according to neurotypical standards
- At the same time, we feel ashamed for not acting ‘autistic enough’; and failing to act as our true authentic selves



# Unintentional rudeness and social feedback: An Example

Adam is very interested in trains and wants to share all his interesting train-related facts with other people. Adam's classmate Sarah is planning to travel on a train. Adam helpfully provides lots of information about schedules, routes, how to validate train tickets, and other useful information.

Sarah is an experienced train traveler, so Sarah finds Adam's well-intended advice exhausting and condescending.

# Possible Outcomes

Sarah uses subtle cues to convey to Adam that she is not interested. She uses body language to suggest boredom and disengages from the conversation at the first possible opportunity. But Adam doesn't notice these subtle cues.

Sarah tells Adam that he is being rude and "mansplaining." But Adam is bewildered and feels defensive; he was only trying to help!

Sarah tries to help Adam by suggesting that it would be helpful for him to be less "patronizing" in his interactions with others. But Adam doesn't really understand this feedback because it assumes a shared language - it assumes that he understands what Sarah means by "patronizing" - and he doesn't.

Sarah does nothing to stop Adam from continuing, making him look awkward in front of others. Sarah subtly encourages other people to laugh at Adam



None of these  
possibilities lead  
to social learning!

# So, Should/How Should Social Skills Be Taught?

Some suggestions and recommendations



# Learning social skills while doing an activity



## Easier

Helps to have a focus



## More enjoyable

Provides something to talk about



## More authentic

Intrinsically motivated to engage in the activity

Everyone is learning together

# Strategies when someone is unintentionally rude...

Be clear

Make sure the person understands the message you are trying to convey.

- Try to be as explicit as possible (without compromising dignity).
- Use terms and concepts you think the person will understand.

Protect dignity

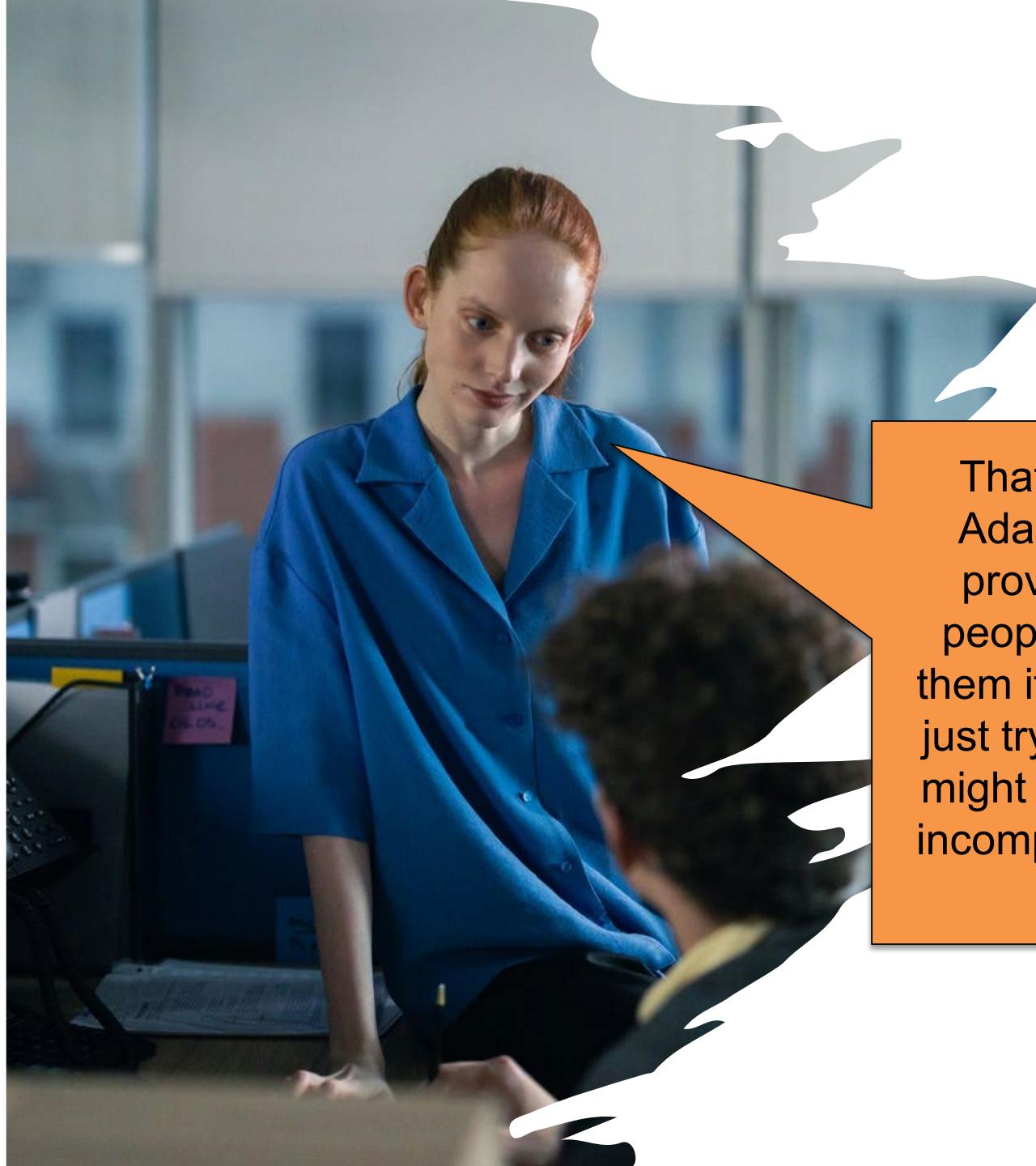
Be gentle, and don't shame the person when providing feedback!

- Don't chide or "make a production" of it!
- Be non-judgmental
- Use humour, if possible.

Don't be arbitrary

Don't simply invoke conventions and say this is the right or proper way. Many of us will question the rationality of social conventions!

- Try to refer to people's reactions and how they feel / interpret things.
- Don't try to argue that the "faux pas" itself is inappropriate or wrong.



# Unintentional rudeness and social feedback: An Example

That's a lot of great information Adam! But I hope you wouldn't provide so much detail to other people, especially without asking them if they need it. I know you are just trying to help, but some people might be worried you think they are incompetent or that they don't know what they are doing...

so Sarah finds Adam's well-intended advice exhausting and condescending.

d in trains and interesting train-people. Adam's going to travel on provides lots of schedules, routes, tickets, and other useful information.

train traveller, well-intended

# Strengths-based education



Begins with educators discovering what their students do best



Then educators help students use their strengths while learning new or difficult things



So that their students “can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence”

Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 2



# How to Use Strengths to Guide Learning



- 1 What have I observed that works well for the student?
- 2 What tools, activities or learning sequences bring out the best in the student?
- 3 What has been or can be done to support the student's learning and development where there is a concern/ challenge?

# Breakout Discussion 2

“Social skills training” can both enhance and restrict the social emotional growth of autistic students

Consider autistic students you have worked with in the past.

Share examples of when social skills training enhanced their social emotional growth and when such training restricted their development.

# Final Thoughts

# Double Empathy and Power



**Fig. 1.** Responses to the task of drawing an *E* on one's forehead: self-oriented *E* (left), indicating no perspective taking, and other-oriented *E* (right), indicating perspective taking.

Participants are assigned to write about a situation where they had power over others, or where others had power over them

Participants draw the letter “E” on their foreheads

Do they remember to take the perspective of the viewer into account?

It is not the neurodivergent  
child's responsibility to learn to  
live like a neurotypical



A group of diverse preschool children are sitting together, smiling and laughing. There are five children visible: a boy with blonde hair in a white t-shirt, a girl wearing a pink headscarf and a green patterned top, a boy with dark skin in a blue polka-dot shirt, a girl with light brown hair in a blue denim jacket, and a boy with brown hair in a blue and white striped shirt. They appear to be in a classroom setting.

Education begins the moment we see children as innately wise and capable beings. Only then can we play along in their world (V. Gowmon)