Supporting Neurodivergent Learners in Suzuki Spaces: Strategies and Ideas for Teachers and Parents

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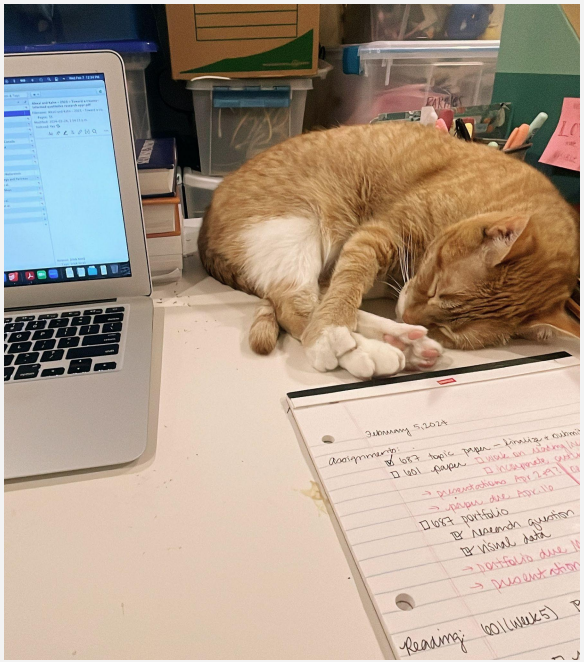
Land Acknowledgment

Who am I?

- Musician
- Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP)
  - Music and movement groups for kids with language differences and disabilities
- PhD student and child language researcher
- Mum to three; Suzuki parent for 10 years, 4 instruments, 3 teachers
- Mixed-neurotype household



How do I see the world?

- Neurodiversity-affirming
- Anti-racism and decolonization; cultural humility
- Relative social privilege; neurodivergent-adjacent
- Access/equity/justice, play, community and belonging
- Music as a way of fostering connection, community, and meaning-making

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Guiding Principles

- Strengths-based; assume competence
- Neurodiversity includes lots of types of brains; within each diagnosis there exists so much variation
  - Parents as partners
  - Children as experts on their own experience
  - Trial and error is OK
  - YMMV (your mileage may vary!)
- Outward behaviour ≠ inner experience

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Building Trust

- Allowing time to build rapport
  - Play-based, no/low pressure activities, opportunities for early success
- Allowing time and space for learners' interests
  - Listening, incorporating special interests
  - This is not just about motivation; this is how we build a relationship of trust

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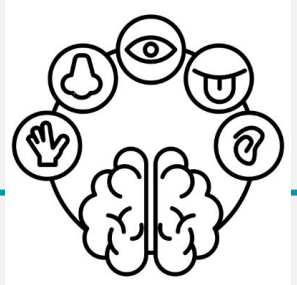
Language and Communication Considerations

- Support needed for understanding language/auditory processing
  - Visuals, short phrases, processing time
  - Show/model in addition to or instead of using verbal instructions?
- Support needed for using spoken language
  - Multimodal communication: visuals, gestures, AAC, etc.
  - Be prepared: ability to use spoken language may vary
- Direct communication—say what you mean
  - “Have a seat” → “Please sit down”
  - “I need a hand” → “Can you help me with this?”
- Repetition and wait time
- Slow down

Language and Communication Considerations

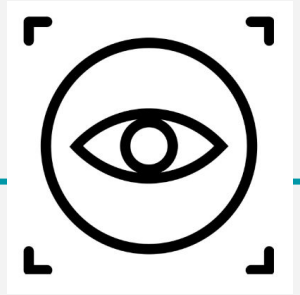
- Visual schedules, predictable routines; prep for transitions and changes in advance
- Honour echolalic communication (i.e., copying words and phrases, in the moment or from other sources)
- Make space for “off topic” comments
  - Can this be an opportunity for connection?
  - Can you make a plan together about when to talk about it?
- For some kids, declarative language may be a useful tool
  - “Show me your rest position” → “It’s time for rest position now”
- Social stories

Sensory/Movement Considerations



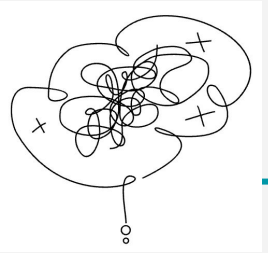
- Consider the sensory environment
  - Lighting
  - Background noise
  - Smells, etc.
- Build in movement and sensory supports
  - Learners may need **more** access to some sensory inputs (e.g., heavy work, vestibular, tactile feedback, etc.)
  - Learners may need **less** of some sensory inputs (e.g., volume, pitch, touch/tactile cues, competing sounds, etc.)
  - **Note**: it is especially important to ensure consent before using tactile cues when working with neurodivergent learners

Attention Considerations



- Modeling, playing together
- Schedules (photos, pictures and/or words), visual timers
- Focus and intrinsic motivation may be aided by:
  - Novelty
  - A bit of positive stress (e.g., a deadline)
- Lesson time/day as a possible factor in attention and regulation
  - Consider timing of meds, fatigue, other demands, etc.
- Sensory regulation is a prerequisite for focus

Perfectionism, Anxiety, Stress, and Shame



- Model making mistakes and talking about feelings
- May be helpful to follow a consistent, predictable schedule, OR to allow for increased autonomy
    - What does autonomy look like in this context?
- Regular opportunities for success
- Work with parents, siblings

“Managing Behaviour”

- Avoid behaviourist approaches
  - First-then, rewards charts, etc. should be used with EXTREME caution if at all
  - Can be harmful, especially to neurodivergent learners
- **Masking** (i.e., behaving the way others expect/want you to behave even when it feels bad or goes against the way your brain works best)
  - Associated with poor mental health outcomes
  - Exhaustion and burnout

“Managing Behaviour”

So how can we approach this?

- Understand behaviour as communication:
  - What is a behaviour communicating?
  - What is the underlying need that is not being met?
- Reframe refusal and “non-compliance” as self-advocacy
- Try to foster emotional- and self-regulation and build connection based in shared enjoyment
- Forget about “typical” timelines; accept that it’s OK for the process to look different than what you might expect

Neurodivergence and Trauma

- Autistic trauma is VERY COMMON
  - Estimates that 50–89% of Autistic individuals will experience interpersonal violence
- Neurodivergent folks are harmed by ableism, compliance-based interventions, masking, bullying, and systemic discrimination; the risk is greater for those who are marginalized based on race and/or gender

What can we do?

- Understand that “kids do well if they can” (Dr. Ross Greene)
- Adopt neurodiversity-affirming approaches that foster belonging
- Learn about trauma-informed approaches

(Coles-White et al., 2025; Cooke et al., 2025; Di Marco et al., 2025; Pearson et al., 2023)

Belonging

- Kids (and teens and adults) feel welcome, safe, and included when their differences are not just accommodated, but **celebrated**
  - Real inclusion means all individuals are accepted *as they are*
  - This has important implications for mental health—the toll of needing to hide who you are/behave in certain ways in order to be accepted is high
- The goal is not just tolerance, but belonging

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Thank-you!

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Resources and references:
www.unisonSLP.com

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