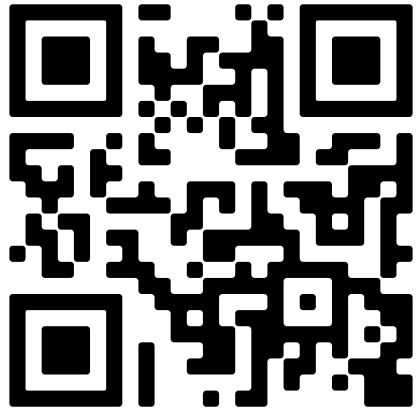


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From Stuck to Thriving: A Guide to Understanding, Connecting and Empowering Neurodivergent Children

By Shelby Czarnick

LICSW, ADHD-CCSP, Rooted in Relationship Coach, Founder of Essential Life Tools



Essential Life Tools LLC

Genoa, NE



Website: essentiallifetools.org



Email: info@essentiallifetools.org



Phone: 402-285-2629



Getting Present

Together Brief Meditation

Sound bowl seance

Today's Promise:

You will leave with practical tools for connection, regulation and real life follow-through when your stuck

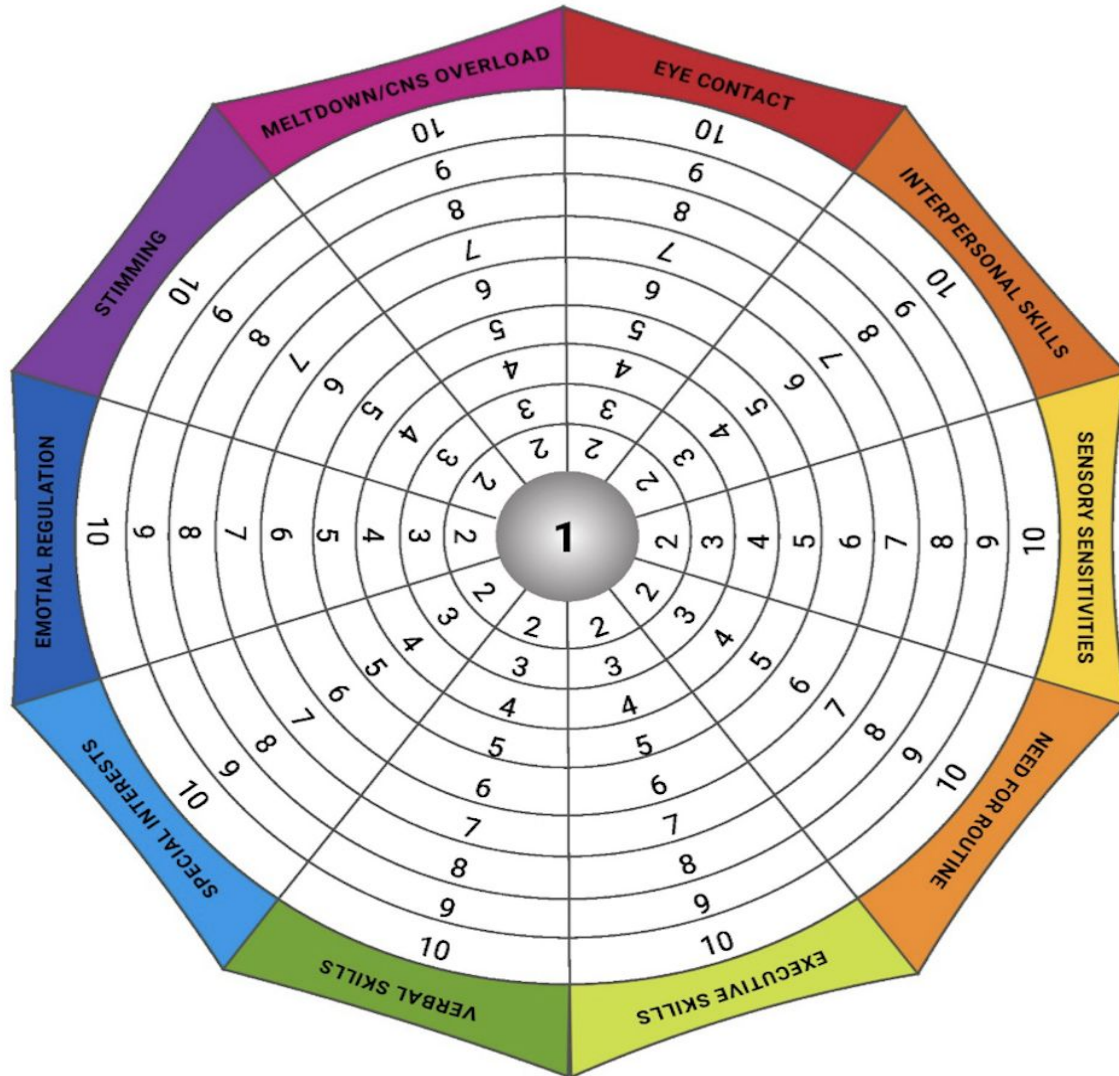


Neurodivergent Defined

Refers to people whose brains function differently from what's considered typical — including differences in attention, learning, mood, perception, and social processing (e.g., ADHD, autism, dyslexia, etc.). It highlights *natural brain diversity*, not disorder.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

Neurodivergent Defined



ND Brains Are Common Here

Neurodivergence in Early Childhood



- ADHD ≈ 8–10% of preschool population
- Autism ≈ 1 in 36 (Maenner et al., 2023)
- 20–30% of childcare learners show sensory / EF support needs

“It’s not a niche — it’s in our work.”

Why It Matters

Why is this important?

Why is what you do important?

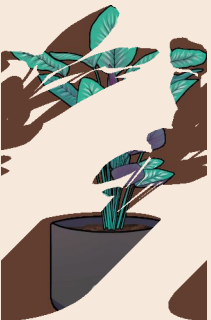


You are working with kids! You influence the next generation!

You have the opportunity to break icky family cycles!

You can help a struggling child & family become a thriving adult and a thriving family system!

And sometimes the work is really hard.



Why It Matters

Three Core Disconnects We Need to Rethink

Behavior ≠ Biology

Attention = Access

Regulation & Connect First

What's not working ...

Behavior ≠ Biology

ADHD delay = 2–3 years (Sibley et al., 2020; Barkley, 2015)

Executive Skill	When Typically Emerging	ND Variation
Waiting	~3–4 years	may need scaffolds through early school years
Impulse control	~3–5 years	may be delayed past K
Emotional regulation	2–7 years	takes longer + needs explicit teaching
Transition tolerance	toddler–preschool	still fragile in school-age



Attention = Access

Problem:

- ADHD can't regulate attention to learn by observing
- Autism misses tone shifts, body language, micro-cues

Needs:

- Children with ADHD brains need multi-sensory repeated exposure (Cortese et al., 2018)
- Children with Autism need explicit instruction (Hudry et al., 2021)

“If the brain can't receive the lesson, it can't learn the skill.”

Regulation & Connect First

Connection is not fluff.

Connection is ACCESS.

Without enough safety, we may only see:

Protection

Masking

Avoidance

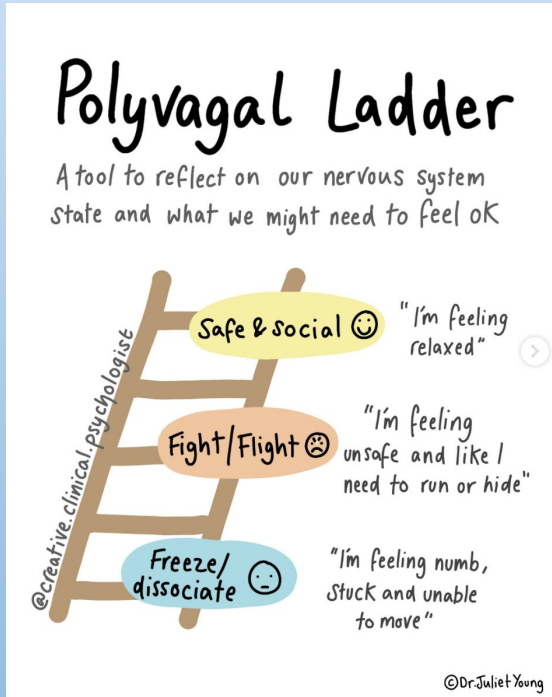
Shame

Testing

Survival Behavior

Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Flückiger et al., 2018; SAMHSA, 2014; Morris et al., 2007; Cook et al., 2021

Regulation & Connect First



Dysregulated brain = survival brain

Sensory input ↑ participation
(Dunn & Brown, 2018)

Emotional regulation is co-created, not independent (Porges, 2011)

“Regulation & Connection first — everything else second.”

What Do We Do ?!

Needs Based on Stuck Point

Ask what kind of support the nervous system may need before adding more correction.

When the behavior stuck point seems...	The child may need...	Not more...
ADHD / EF overload	Movement, shorter steps, repetition, scaffolding, lower shame	Lectures
Autism / predictability + social access	Visuals, clear expectations, explicit teaching, sensory support	Social guessing
Trauma / threat response	Safety, control, consistency, trust, no surprise shame	Pressure
Sensory overload	Body-based regulation, reduced input, rhythm, pressure, movement	Words

Before we respond to the behavior and MAYBE even before we find this ...
We need to be connect & regulated with a different question to find it

Which Tool When For Connection & Emotional Control

Which Tool Fits Which Brain?

Age/Stage	How the Brain Learns Best	Tool
Infants	Co-regulation & modeling	Warm routines, sensory rhythm, caregiver attunement
Toddlers	Repetition + body first	Visuals, calm corner, songs, first/then, simple 2 choices
Preschool	Rehearsal + play	Social stories, emotion cards, scripted practice, play-based problem-solving
School-age	Rehearsal + reflection	Coping plans, CBT/SEL skills, role-play, self-monitoring, repair scripts
Adolescence	Abstract + identity	Social mapping, values work, DBT/CBT tools, perspective-taking, real-life planning

◆ *Teach it when they're calm – not when they're caught.*

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Neurodivergent Specific Tweaks

Assess Through Connection

 **Ask “How exactly is this happening?”**

Let's be Curious!

 **Identify Hidden Strengths**

Every curse is a strength.

You need to help flip it!

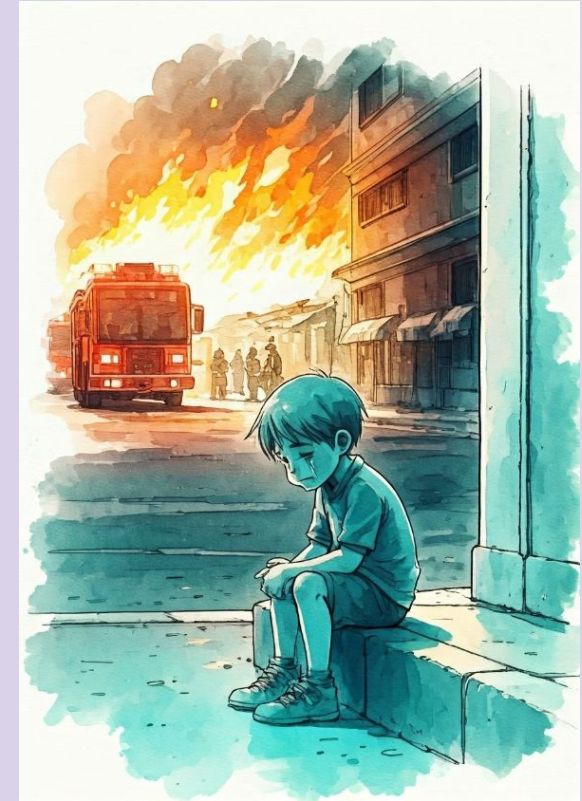
 **Develop Missing Skills**

Focus on teaching specific abilities rather than fixing problems.

Assess Through Regulation & Connection Antecedent!



How exactly



Assess Through Regulation & Connection

Reframe

Every “curse” may be a strength without a skill yet.

Argumentative	→ Inconsistency detector
Silly / disruptive	→ Energy shifter
Won't answer	→ Processing or protection
Bossy	→ Leadership without flexibility
Intense/Challenge	→ Deeply invested or passionate
Avoidant	→ Overwhelmed and needing a smaller doorway
Lazy	→ forgetful

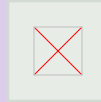
Reframing does not excuse harm. It helps us find the usable strength or the missing skill so we know what to teach.

Develop Missing Skills

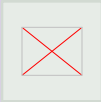
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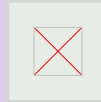
Take Turns



Ask for Help



Enter Conversation



Wait



Notice in Others “They’re Not Interested”

and take turns with fun facts

How to Get Attention

- 1 Tap shoulder
- 2 Walk in and listen for topic
- 3 Raise hand

When we name the missing skill, behavior becomes something we can **teach**.

**How to Connect When They
or Their Bodies Don't Want to**

When They Can't Connect Yet

To build safety before you ask for honesty.

Five small moves that lower the threat level

1

Regulate yourself first

Before correcting, breathe, soften your face, lower your speed, and get curious.
Use: "I notice..." or silently notice the pattern without chasing every comment.

2

Start beside them, not at them

Use parallel connection: movement, play, drawing, dancing, organizing the room, or doing something nearby while they settle. Ask interests ahead of time.

3

Track the pattern, not the decoy

Do not chase every comment, refusal, or power struggle.
Notice what the nervous system is protecting.

4

Give control without losing structure

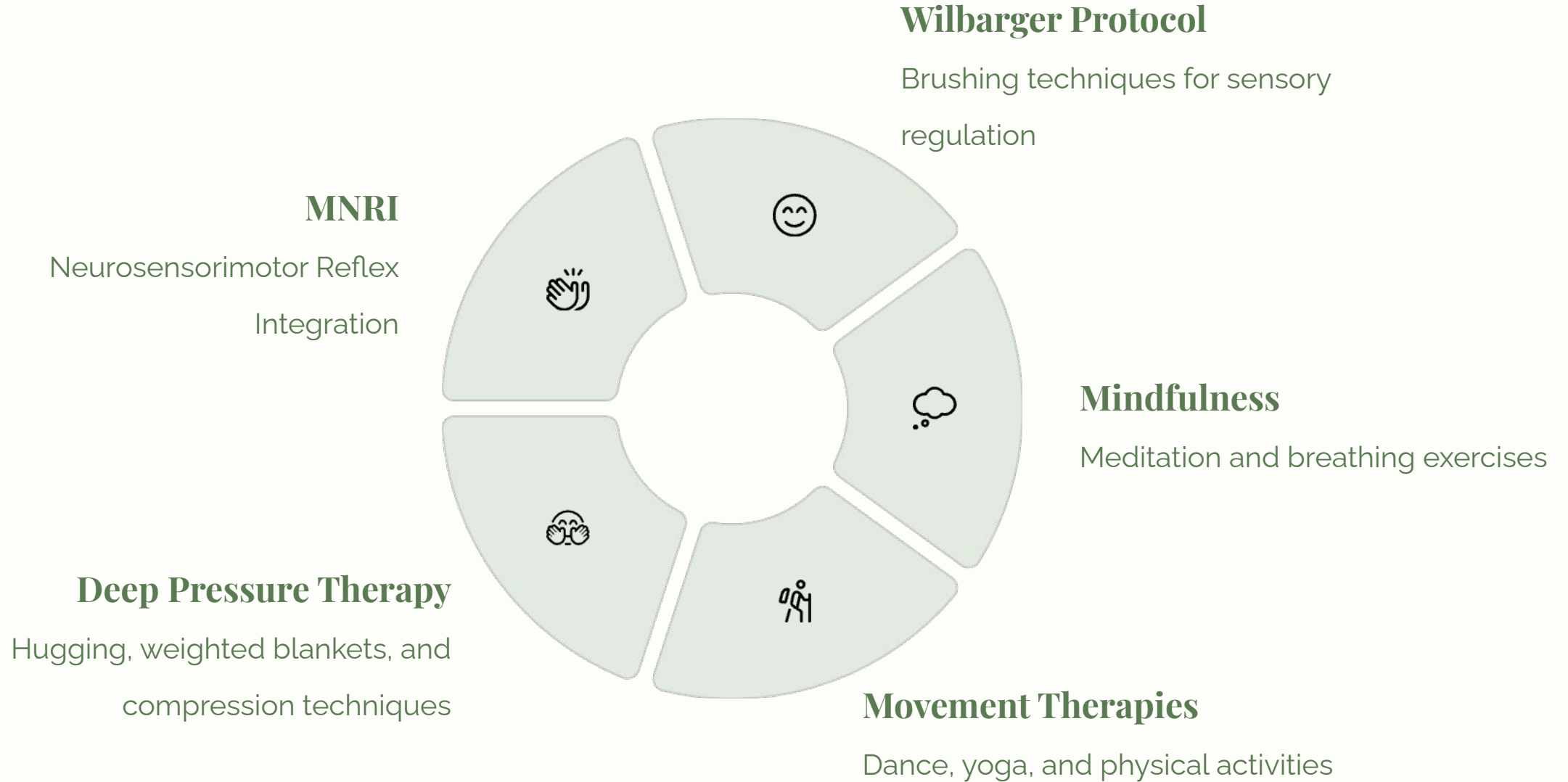
Use a visual agenda. Ask, "Anything you want to add?" Use a parking lot for next time.
"You do not have to tell me everything today. What would make this 5% safer?"

5

Body tools. Play.

Set up the room for wiggle chair, movement, pushing. breathing. sound bowls, laugh/humor, lower lighting.
Sometimes routining it in.

Break the Stuckness and Break the Tantrums



The Do-Over Drill

When “name it” makes it worse → rehearse the next move

When to Use

Use when the child is stuck

✘ Brain stuck in a loop

✘ Logic is offline

✘ Naming the feeling brings denial

Goal:
cognitive flexibility,
not winning the argument



Five-Step Regulation Rehearsal

- 1** Name it softly
“I wonder if this feels frustrating.”
- 2** Expect denial
They resist. Do not argue. Say: **“Okay.”**
- 3** Toward move
Rehearse the choice that moves toward the shared goal + positive outcome.
- 4** Away move
Briefly rehearse the choice away from the goal + natural outcome.
- 5** Return + space
“You’re right. I’d rather practice the toward move.” Then get quiet.

Ana & Taekwondo Example

TOWARD MOVE

“You can go with Grandma, use a calm body, and get McDonald’s after.”

AWAY MOVE

“Or you can stay home with me and sister. No McDonald’s tonight.”

RETURN

“You’re right. I’d much rather practice the taekwondo plan again.”

Validate → pause → rehearse → re-choose → **give space**

**Before Framework, We Need a
Moment for Parent Help**

Engaging Neurodivergent Caregivers

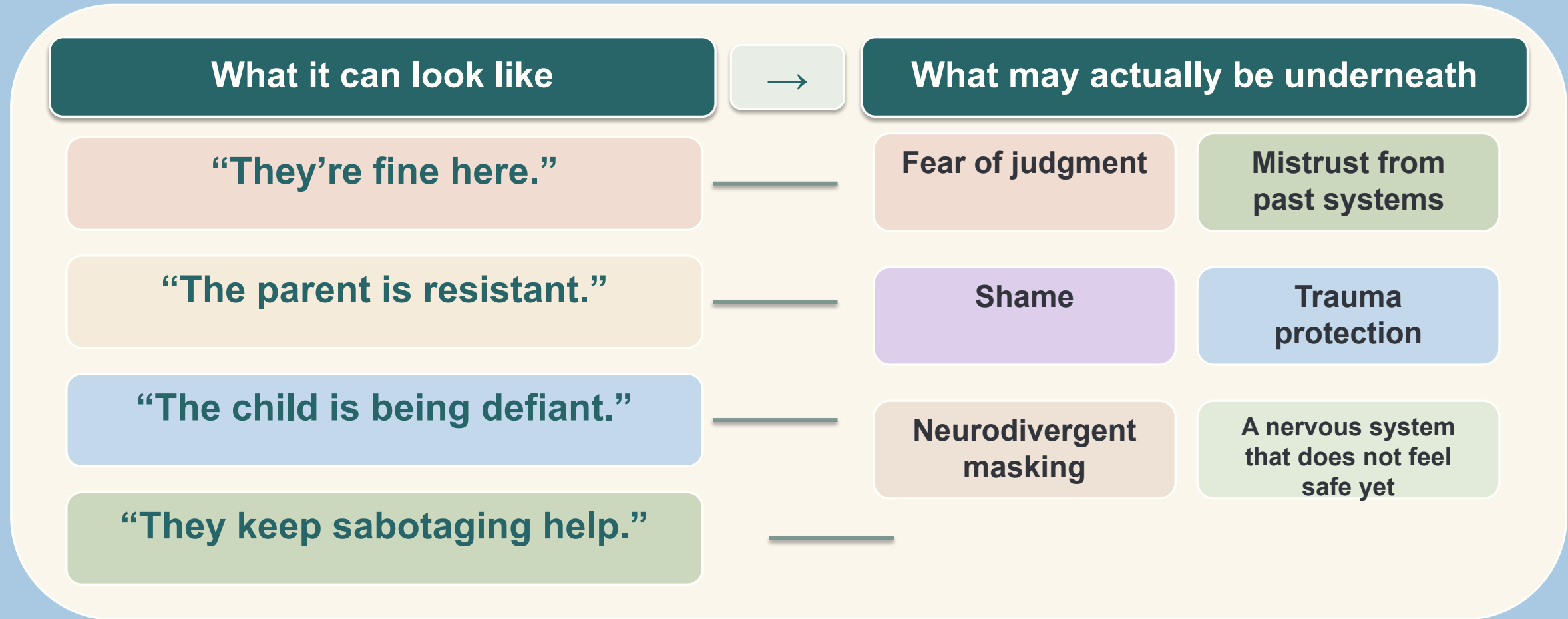
Executive Functioning ... Unorganized ... Task Initiation ... Time Management!



2:42min

What Looks Like Resistance May Be Protection

Pause before the label. Look for what the nervous system or family system may be protecting.



Connection, Connection, Connection!

You have to connect with your clients and you have to help parents connect with their children.

"In a world that rejects you. Sometimes all you have to do is respond accepting their different thought processes and all of them in order for change to begin."

-Anonymously from individual client to therapist

Take time to connect rebuilding trust and ability to be open.

Progress is made simply by responding differently.



Building Support Systems

Creating effective support systems requires specific tools. Help families implement these strategies to build meaningful connections.

1

Support Assessment

Identify existing positive relationships where they've felt understood, even briefly.

2

I-Message Format

"I feel ___ when ___ because ___" creates safe communication pathways.

3

Intuition References

Validate their perceptions with "I sense/notice that..." statements.

4

Learn Skill: Kindly Say No

1 Thank you... 2 Right now I need to (boundary) ... 3 One thing to do (alternative options)

5

Connection Inventory

Document who helps them feel seen, heard, and valued.

6

Basic Needs Check

When they feel "off" or anxious without knowing why, assess if basic needs (hunger, sleep, sensory) are met.

Remember: Support systems require maintenance and intentional nurturing.

Do Things In Real Time

"I will never try it out unless we start it in therapy"

"I'll be honest. I go straight to work. So if you don't send me an email afterwards I won't remember what to do."

Stuck -to- Thriving Framework

Connect + Regulate

Assess + Flip + Reframe

Teach Skills with Access

Practice + Support

Temple Grandin once said,

"The focus should be on teaching people with autism to adapt to the social world around them while still retaining the essence of who they are, including their autism."

Behind every struggle is a strength to uncover or a skill to build. Our job is to find it.

Take this from today and make it happen tomorrow!

1 Challenge!

Ask for handout and use it!

From Stuck to Thriving: The Tomorrow Tool

A one-page, next-day reminder for using today's learning with one child, one family, or one stuck moment.

Behind every struggle is a strength to uncover or a skill to build. Our job is to find it.

The 4-Part Stuck-to-Thriving Check

Step	Ask yourself	Try tomorrow
1. Connect + Regulate	What does this child's body need before access is possible?	Lower speed, soften voice/face, reduce sensory load, add movement, or start beside them.
2. Assess + Flip + Reframe	What might this behavior be protecting, communicating, or showing me?	Look for the hidden strength or missing skill before choosing the response.
3. Teach Skills with Access	If the child could not learn this by watching, what needs direct teaching?	Teach one specific ability: wait, ask for help, enter conversation, get attention, or take turns.
4. Practice + Support	How will we rehearse this in real life and support the adults?	Practice when calm, use visuals/scripts, email the plan, and choose one realistic follow-through step.

Quick Doorway Reminders

ADHD / executive-function overload

May need: movement, shorter steps, repetition, scaffolding. Not more: lectures.

Autism / predictability + social access

May need: visuals, clear expectations, explicit teaching, sensory support. Not more: social guessing.

Trauma / threat response

May need: safety, control, consistency, trust. Not more: pressure.

Sensory overload

May need: body-based regulation, reduced input, rhythm, pressure, or movement. Not more: words.

2

Help Me Build What You Actually Need



Tool to tell me how to help!
<https://forms.gle/LK85D2EETVq929F96>

Scan to open the form



From Stuck to Thriving: The Tomorrow Tool

Choose anonymous access or share your email

Essential Life Tools LLC



Genoa, NE



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Phone: 402-285-2629

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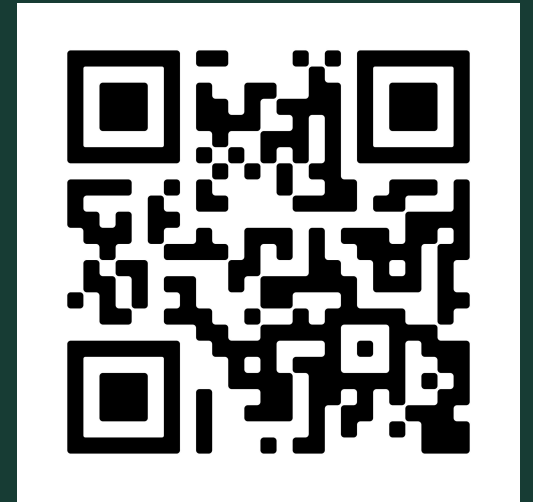
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