

Neurodivergent and Thriving!

Weaving Lived Experience and Acceptance into Practice

Maddy Dever

Building Brighter Futures Conference

Edmonton, AB

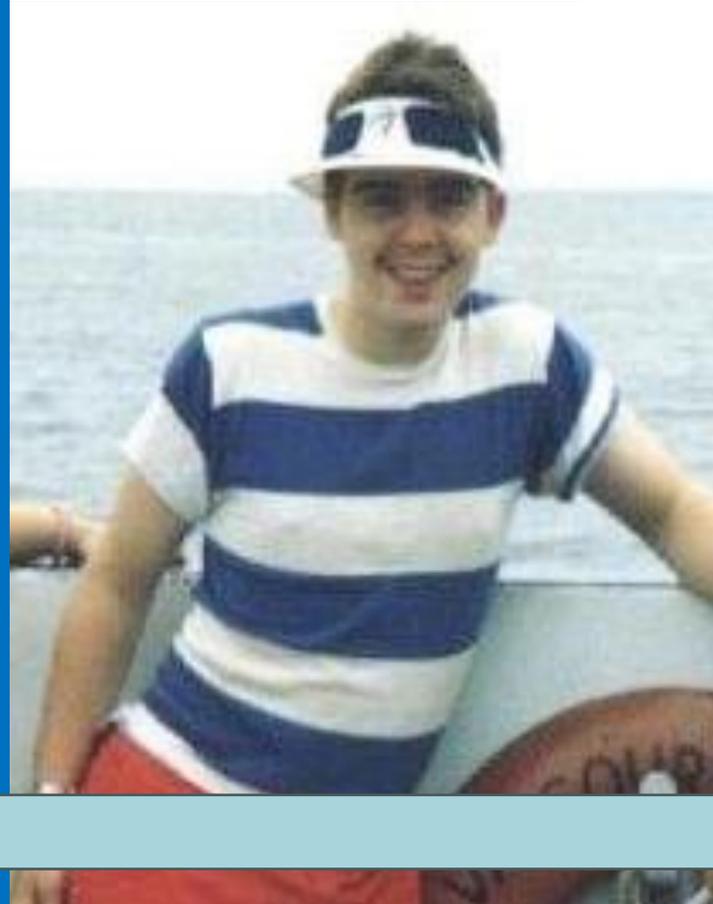
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**HOW DO WE WEAVE ACCEPTANCE
AND LIVED EXPERIENCE INTO OUR
PRACTICE SO NEURODIVERGENT
PEOPLE THRIVE?**

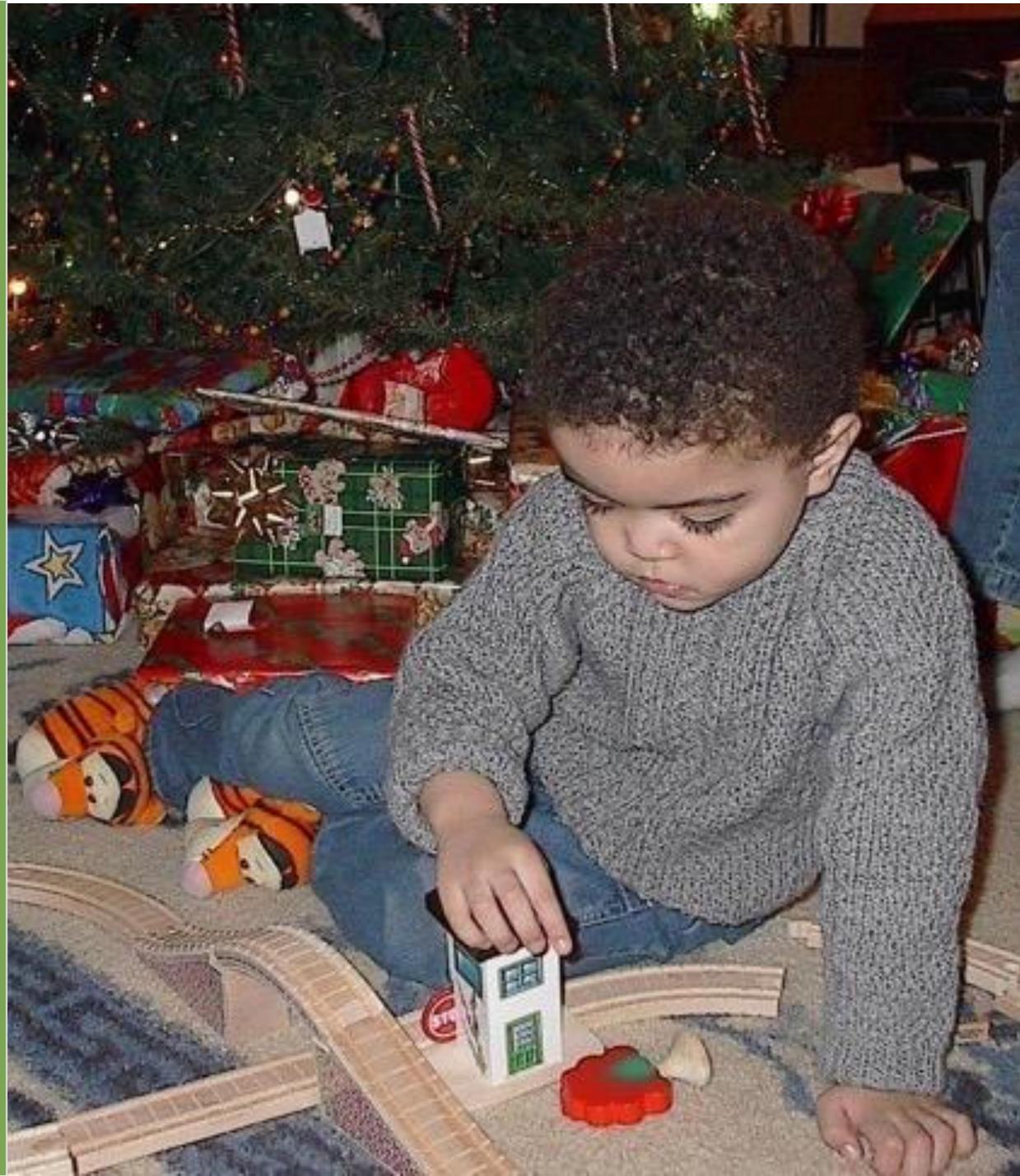


TELEPHONE LENS TO SPEECH
A TELEPHONE LENS TO SPEECH
LANGUAGE PATHOLOGICAL PRACTICE



My journey as an advocate

Aha Moments of Parenting





**More Aha
Moments...**



**When Should We Tell Kids They
Are Autistic?**

YESTERDAY!



**THE STRUGGLE WITH BEING AN
AUTISTIC YOUTH**

What is Autism Acceptance?

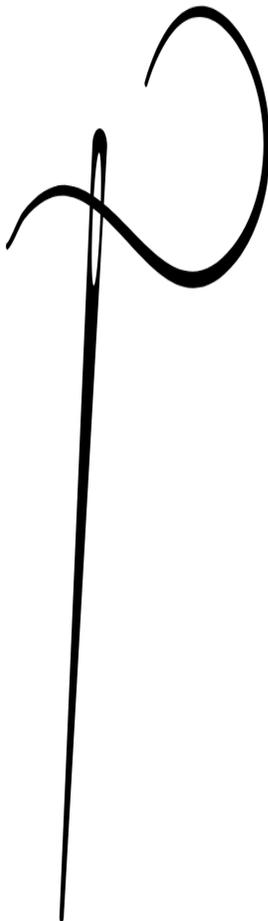
joint echolalia unashamed
best practices Universal Design following my IEP
knowing my rights real jobs for real pay stimming together natural
self acceptance still a cause that needs attention a basic human right communication
listening to behavior working with my headphones on talking to me and not my aide integrated classrooms
getting the help I need listening to me when I am hard to understand not telling people to look at you
helping my child use his AAC device for everybody paying my autistic employees a real wage
respecting my rights welcoming the world love inclusion
knowing joy autism acceptance is allowing my child to stim
providing sensory-free rooms proud loud hands unconditional presuming competence
allowing people to stim treating autistic people as people
the radical notion that autistics are people listening understanding what will allow my child to flourish
respect unapologetic diversity where normal is self-defined
working on the floor scripting respecting all forms of communication
a community affair stimming in public without shame
open mindedness

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Autism Acceptance – Changing Language

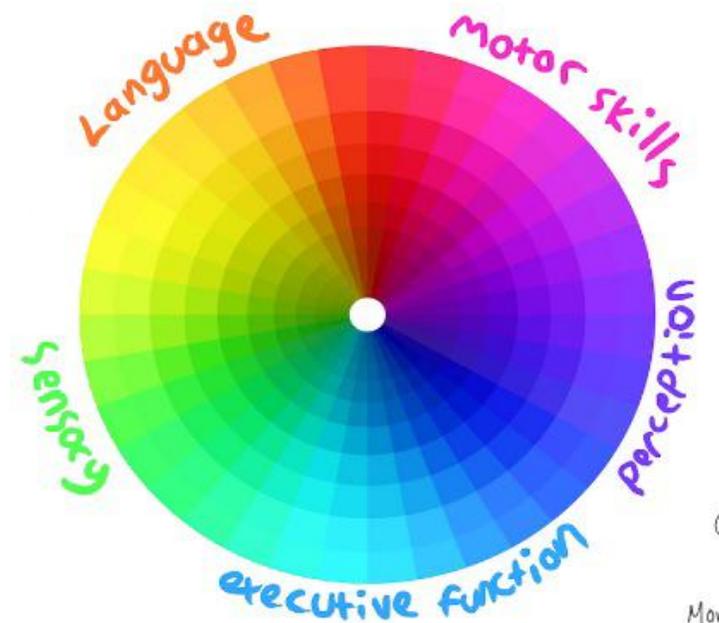


Instead of...	Try...
Red Flags	Possible/Early Signs of Autism
Symptom	Characteristics or Traits
Deficit	Challenge
Interventions	Supports
Impairment	Barrier
Severe	Extensive
Co-morbid	Co-occurring or Co-existing
Challenging Behaviours	Interfering Behaviours
Compliance	Co-operation/Co-operative
Suffering from/Affected by	Challenged/Impacted by <specific need>
Non-verbal	Non-speaking
Restricted Interests	Intense or Exclusionary Interests
Attention-seeking	Support-seeking/Connection-seeking
Special Needs	Needs or Accommodations

Levels of Functioning

- How an Autistic can “function” one day in one area may be very different the next day
- “Functioning” describes capabilities at a moment in time
- Strengths in one area **may mask** significant gaps or challenges in other areas
- Change can quickly make someone “Low Functioning” who has been deemed “High Functioning”
- Functioning labels **are ableist** – they **don’t help the child**, but continue **stigma** towards certain autistics, and faulty expectations towards others

What does the autism spectrum look like?



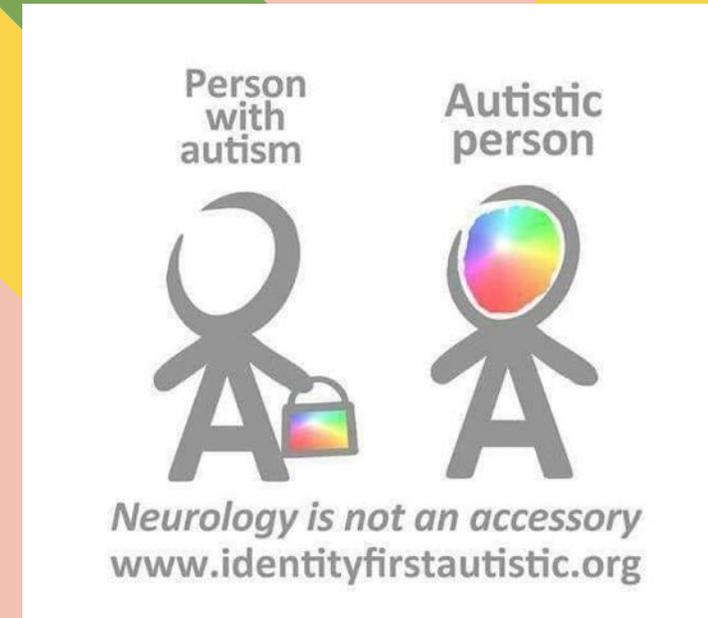
Circular spectrum by
Rebecca Burgess
Montage @sciencebase

SUPPORT THE "NEEDS"
NOT THE "LABELS"

MADDY DEVER - EVERY DAY

Autism Acceptance - Identity

Identity-first language	Person-first language
I am Canadian	I have Canadianness
I am a parent	I have offspring
I am non-binary	I have non-binariness
I am right-handed	I have right-handedness
I am white	I have whiteness
I am a Sens fan	I have a fan interest in Sens



When it comes to talking about a person, use identity language, or safer just talk about them. If you are talking about autism, use the diagnosis neutrally – “on the autism spectrum” or use Diagnosis-First Language “is **diagnosed** with autism.”

A group of people's hands are stacked together in a circle, symbolizing unity and community. The hands are of various skin tones and are positioned in a way that suggests a supportive and inclusive environment. The background is softly blurred, showing more people in a professional or social setting. The overall tone is warm and positive.

Autism as an Identity and Community

Neurodiversity, NeuroTypes and Neurodivergence, Oh my!

Neurodiversity refers to the diversity of human brains and the wide variety of individual differences in brain functioning.

Neurodiversity **paradigm** (a philosophy) Neurodiversity **Movement** (a social justice movement)

Neurotype – a particular way a brain functions, and can be associated with a person, or how those with a similar condition function.

Neurotypical - neurotypes fall within the majority of people in a culture

Neurodivergent is used to refer to an individual person whose brain functions in ways that are different than what's considered "normal". **Both neurodevelopmental and mental health conditions** are under the neurodivergent umbrella

Never say "neurodiverse individual" Arrrrgggh!

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Moving From NeuroType to NeuroTapestry

Autism Acceptance – Attitude and Agency

Language shapes attitudes – attitude is the biggest barrier

- When we shift from “**fix the student**” to “**how can we help?**”, barriers fall.
- My daughter thrived when educators focused on **accommodating her needs** rather than changing her.
- A culture of accommodation **saves lives**.
- **Agency** grows when Autistics are **listened to, included** in IEPs, and learn the language of accommodations.
- When Autistics understand their supports, they gain **confidence, independence, and identity**.

Things Kat Wants You To Know



- Every Autistic presents differently
- Some of the things I do have the opposite meaning. If it looks like I'm not paying attention like I had on chin and elbow on table it means I'm focussed not uninterested
- Sometimes if I put my head down I can still pay attention
- Just because I'm not doing something doesn't mean I don't want to do it
- Sometimes constant encouragement and pressure can slow me down
- I have very good social skills but isn't is sometimes hard to apply them into real situations
- Sometimes if I'm not speaking it's because I may have words to say but

**SCHOOL
IS A
SENSORY
HELLSCAPE**





**DON'T
TOUCH ME**

A photograph of two hands reaching towards each other, with the sun positioned between their fingers, creating a bright starburst effect. The background features a scenic mountain landscape with a lake, snow-capped peaks, and golden grass in the foreground. A semi-transparent blue box contains the text "Seeking Connection" in white, with a green horizontal line below it.

Seeking Connection

Stimming is an Energy



It's as natural to us as breathing

It can help us focus, self-regulate

Consider stimming to be an energy that regulates through us. If we are made to stop a particular stim, that energy still exists, and will go elsewhere.

Stopping stims can cause us to lose the self-regulation and/or our self-control and “behaviours” can come out that are harder to manage/stop

Unless a stim is causing harm to the Autistic or others, it probably shouldn't be stopped.

Parenting Challenges



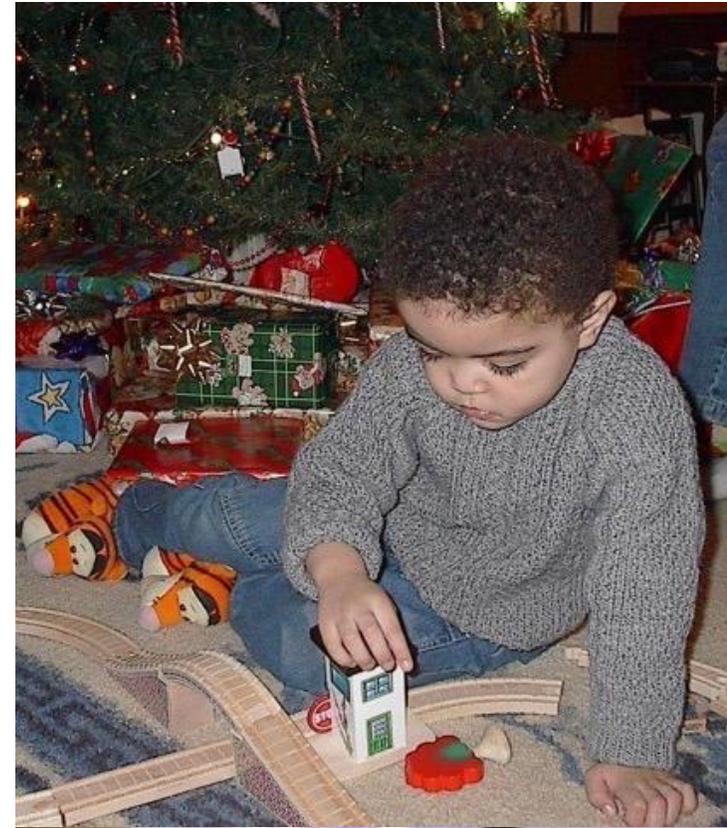
Grief

Grieve if you must, for your own lost dreams. But don't mourn for *us*. We are alive. We are real. And we're here waiting for you.

- Jim Sinclair (1993)

Children on the Spectrum Grow and Change

- An autistic child at 2, is not going to have the same challenges at 5, at 10, at 15 as 21. The challenges will ebb and flow, but they do all grow
- The growth may not be at the same rate as a neurotypical child, but there is still growth
- Autistic growth chart isn't linear. It has peaks and valleys, and times it will seem to regress but it does continue.



Self-Care Is Essential!



B R E A T H E



Parenting Tips Learned From Aha! Moments

A man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark jacket, is seated in a wheelchair on the edge of a high cliff. He is looking out over a vast, hazy landscape of rolling hills and valleys under a golden sunset sky. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the entire scene. In the distance, a winding river or path is visible through the valleys. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

My Personal Purpose & Vision

**WHAT DO WE NEED TO WEAVE INTO
OUR PRACTICE SO NEURODIVERGENT
PEOPLE THRIVE?**

YOU!

**CALL
TO**

A C T I O N

How to Contact Me



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Podcasts

- The Autistic Rambler Podcast
- The Riff Raff Podcast - launching in January 2026



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