

AUTISM

Building an autism-friendly  
environment

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616.8982

KYDC 10

# BUILDING AN AUTISM FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

Now with  
50% more  
autism  
under-  
standing!

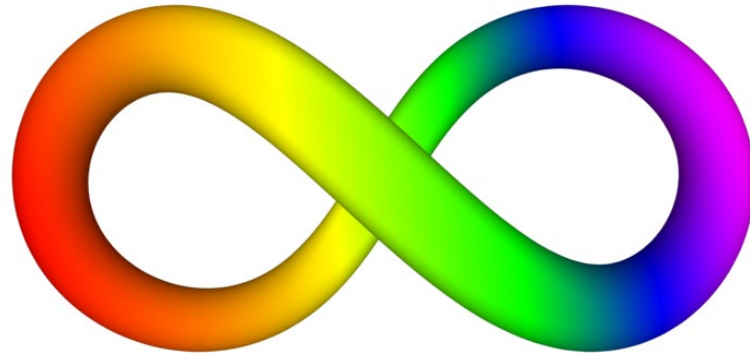
Innovative Supports for Autistic Workers  
UK Human Development Institute

# **BUILDING AN AUTISM FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT**

Bev Harp  
University of Kentucky  
Human Development Institute  
Lexington, KY

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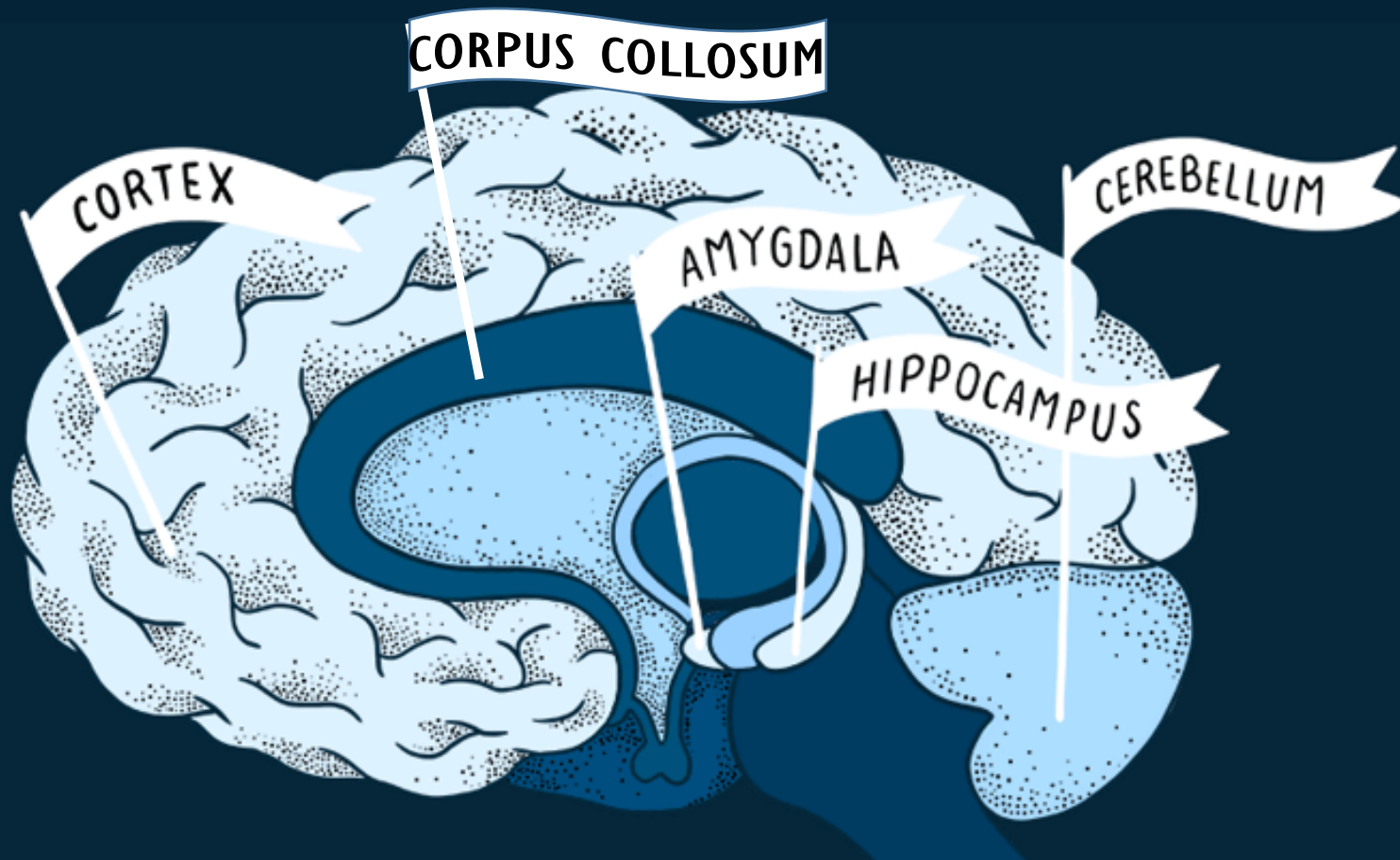
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# Autism basics

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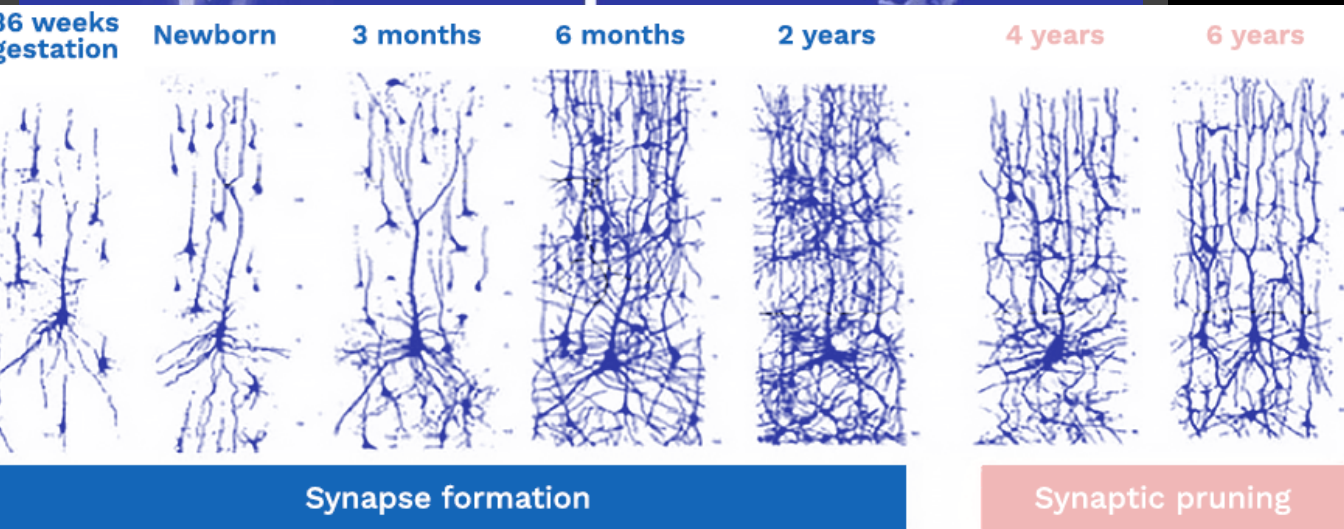
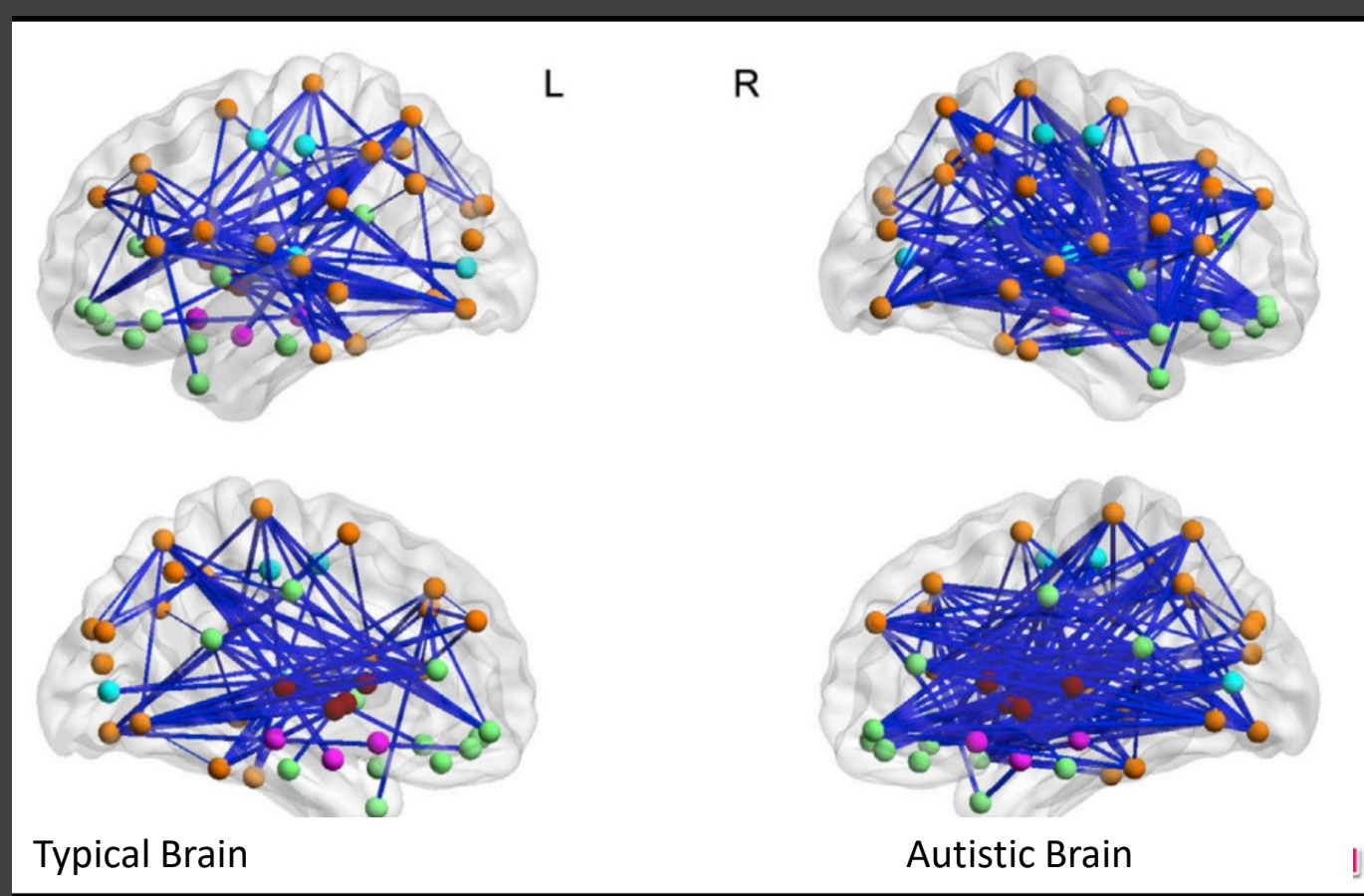
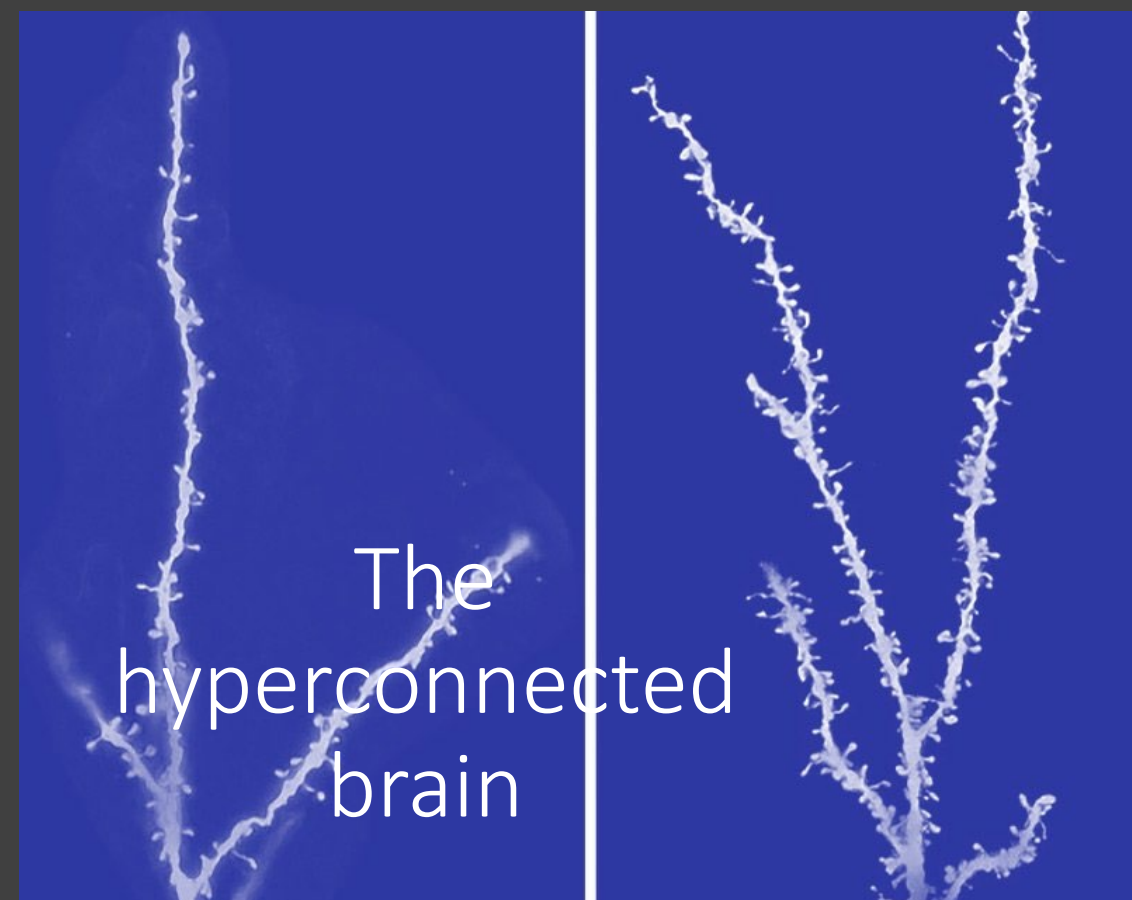
If only we could get people to understand this stuff...



# Autistic brains are different

Askham, A.V. (2020). Brain structure changes in autism explained. Spectrum. Retrieved from <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/brain-structure-changes-in-autism-explained/>





Rafiee, F., Rezvani Habibabadi, R., Motaghi, M., Yousem, D.M. and Yousem, I.J. (2022), Brain MRI in Autism Spectrum Disorder: Narrative Review and Recent Advances. J Magn Reson Imaging, 55: 1613-1624. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmri.27949>

# Therefore...

WE PERCEIVE  
DIFFERENTLY

WE THINK  
DIFFERENTLY

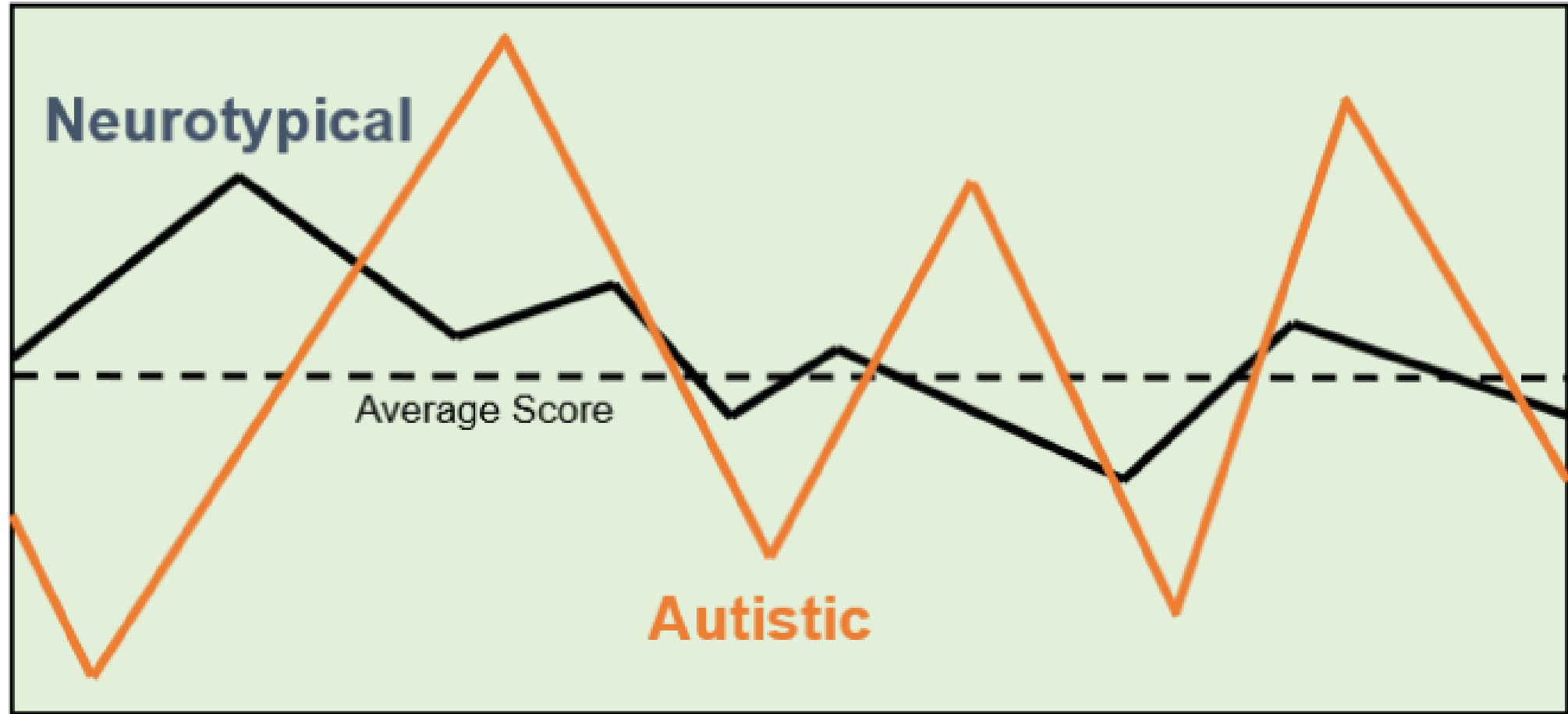
WE COMMUNICATE  
DIFFERENTLY





**Fight, flight, or freeze**

# The “spiky” cognitive profile

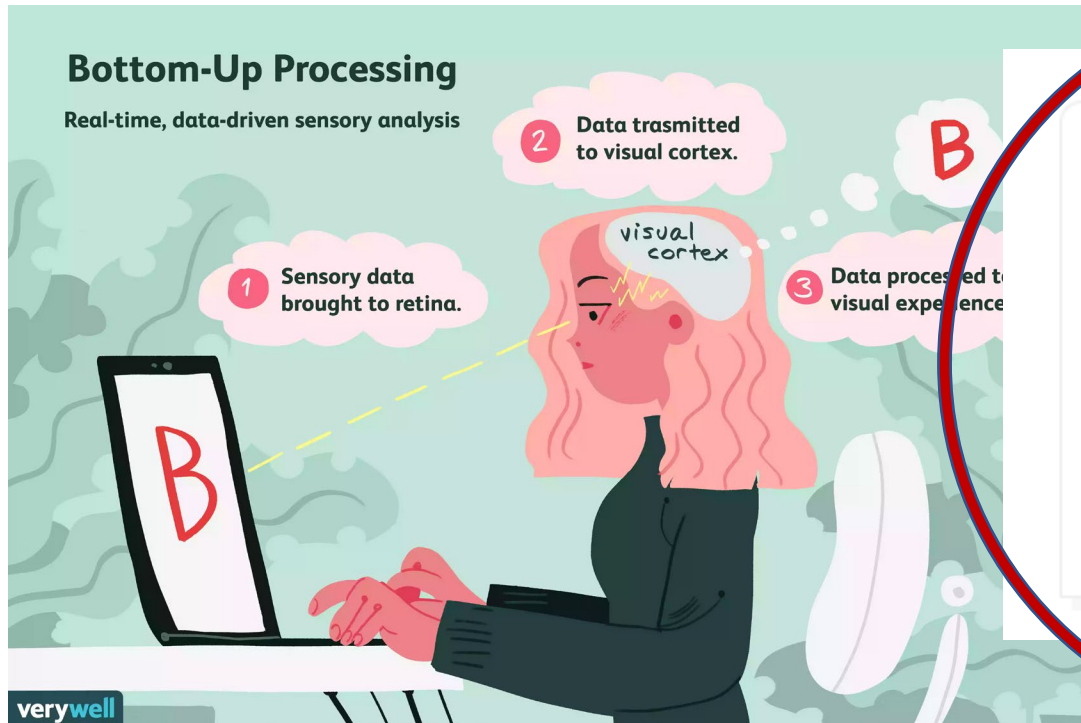


Nartin, M., & Milton, D. (2016). Supporting the inclusion of autistic children. In Knowles, G., Supporting Inclusive Practice and Ensuring Opportunity is Equal for All. London, Routledge.



# Bottom-up processing

Cherry, K. (2020). How bottom-up processing works. *Very Well Mind*. <https://www.verywellmind.com/bottom-up-processing-and-perception-4584296>



## Bottom-Up

- Data driven
- Focuses on incoming sensory data
- Takes place in real time

## Top-Down

- Info is interpreted using contextual clues
- Uses previous experience and expectations



# Monotropism

- Autistic people tend to do better when we can focus on one thing at a time.
- Things not in our area of focus are considered distractions.
- It isn't obstinance; it's how our brains are built.

Murray, D. (2018). Monotropism—an interest based account of autism. Encyclopedia of autism spectrum disorders, 10, 971-978.

# **“Behaviors”: 3 Dangerous assumptions**

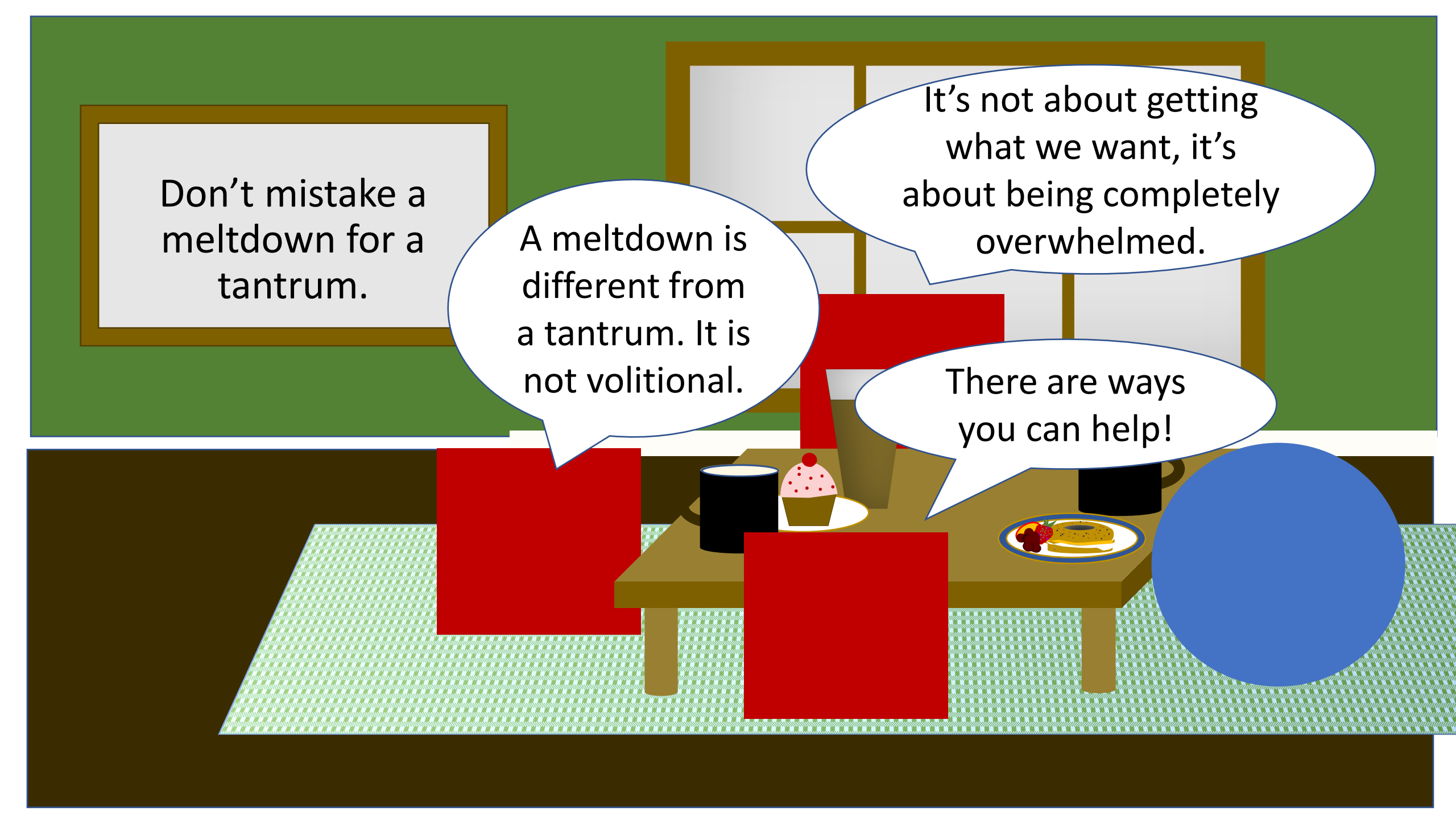
- They are doing this on purpose/for attention.
- They have the ability to do/not do what I am asking.
- The behavior is the problem.

Behavior: Saying “I hate you!”  
Response: “No, don’t say that!”  
Behavior: Stops saying that.  
Problem solved?

Behavior: Screaming in library  
Response: Bribe with candy  
Behavior: Stops screaming  
Problem solved?







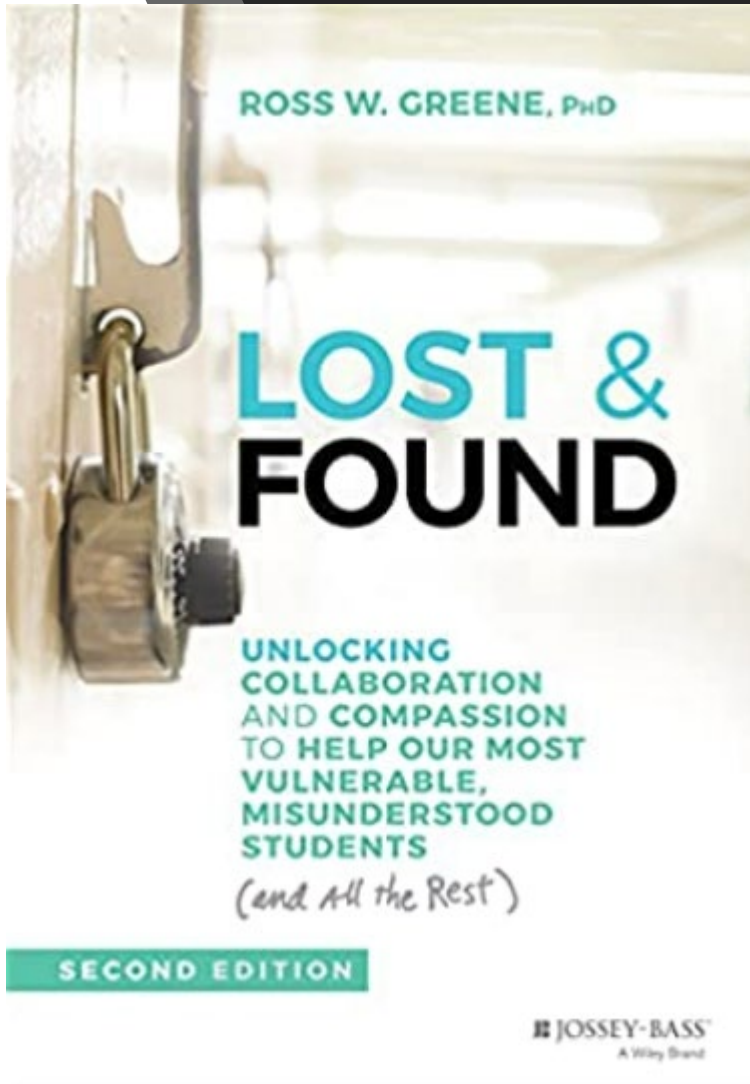
Don't mistake a  
meltdown for a  
tantrum.

A meltdown is  
different from  
a tantrum. It is  
not volitional.

It's not about getting  
what we want, it's  
about being completely  
overwhelmed.

There are ways  
you can help!

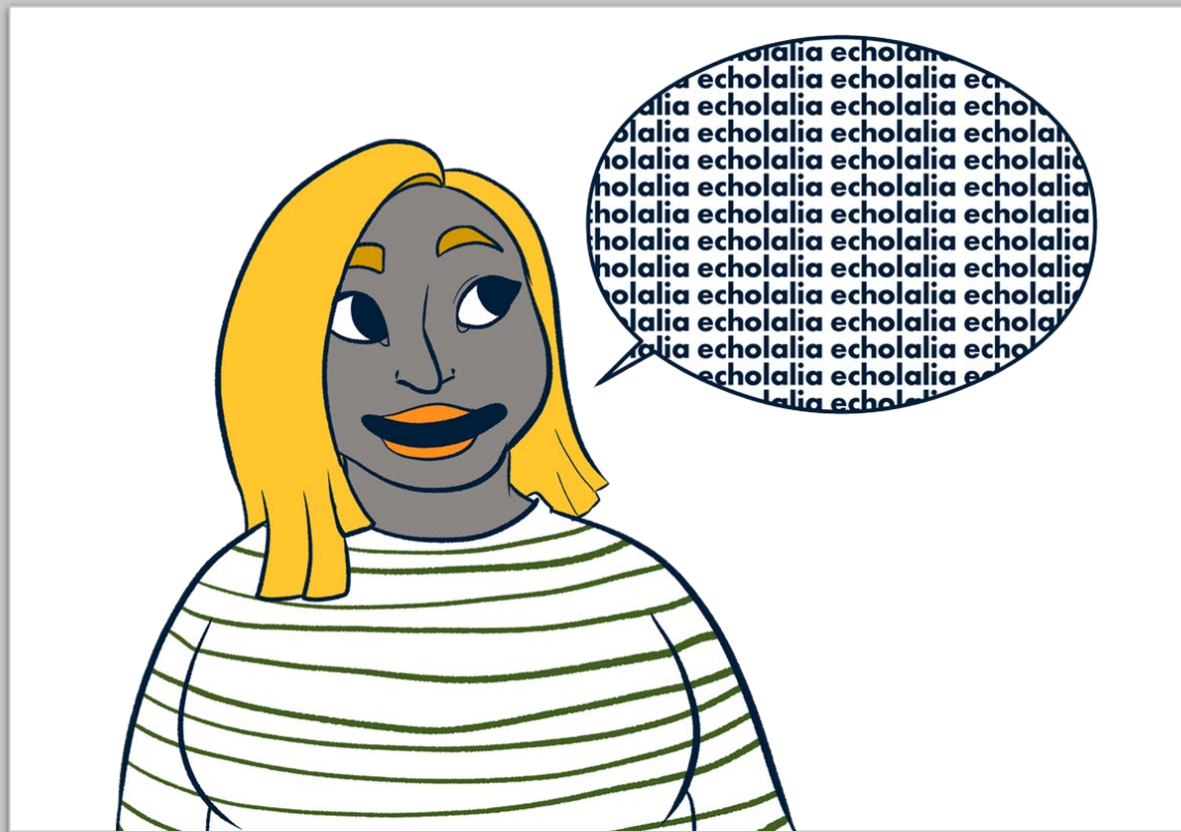




- Least dangerous assumption: The child wants to do well and will do as well as they are able at the time.
- Behavior oriented question: How can I get this person to stop yelling/biting/running/hitting/being disruptive?
- Person centered question: How can I support this person to have enjoyable and productive time in this setting?

Greene, R. (2021) Lost and Found. Jossey-Bass. Hoboken, NJ.

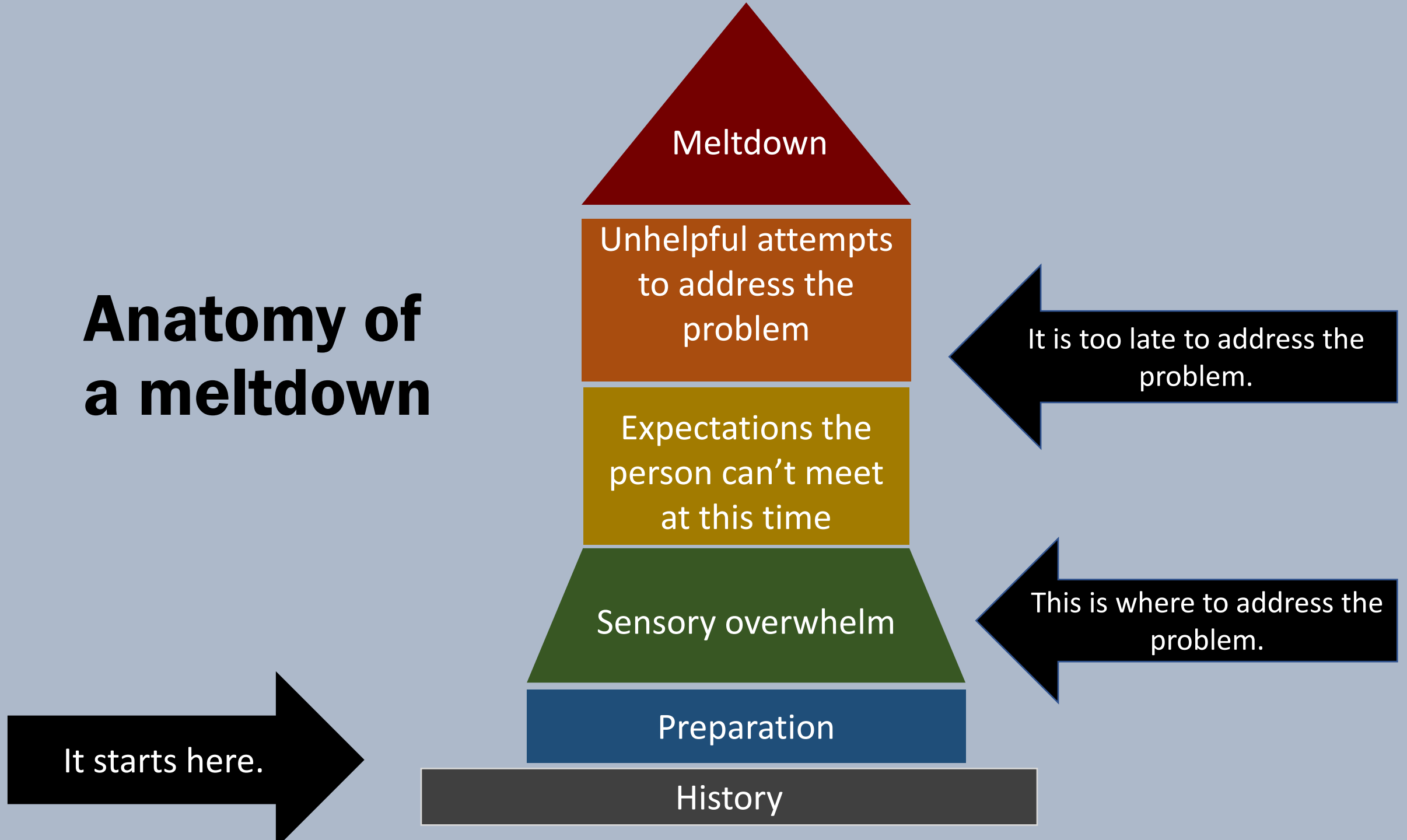
“Kids do well if they can.” Ross Greene



## Manage your expectations

Be aware that abilities can fluctuate dramatically from day to day. This might include talking, thinking, physical activities, the ability to tolerate specific foods or textures...pretty much every area of life!

# Anatomy of a meltdown



# During a meltdown

- You may be tempted to address the behavior rather than the person. This sends a message that you do not care about the person's distress.
- Instead, offer a quiet and comforting presence. Let the person guide you as how close you should come. Be available but not intrusive.
- Provide water, blankets, favorite objects or toys, and communication aids (pencils, paper, AAC if used, phone or device for texting.)
- Do not ask questions or make demands. Let the meltdown run its course.
- When the crisis has passed and the person is calm, ask them to make a plan with you.

# Meltdown plan: Sample script

- Last week at the library, you were very upset. I'm wondering if you can tell me why. (It is okay if they don't know.)
- You didn't do anything wrong. I'm not mad at you. I want to figure out how I can help you more the next time you are upset.
- When you are very upset, do you want someone to talk to you or not? If so, who? Do you want them to ask questions or not? Do you want to be touched or not? If so, by whom?
- These are some things that help me when I am upset (list your own strategies). Are any of these things that help you too? Do these give you other ideas about what might help?



# **It starts with the senses**

- Fluorescent lights, bright lights, busy patterns
- Noise, chatter, more than one person talking, and noises you might not be aware of like electricity.
- Scent of certain foods, perfumes, shampoos, etc.
- Some textures may be distracting or even painful
- Need for movement not understood or accepted
- Fine and gross motor skills may be very different from what you expect for a person of their age.



## **Designing a sensory-friendly environment**

- Have an area (preferably multiple areas) without fluorescent lighting.
- Use lamps with soft lighting.
- Ceiling lights can be covered; this will help some but not all issues.



Reduce noise as  
much as possible

But who am I telling?

# Variety of sitting and standing options

Neurodivergent children and adults may need non-standard seating options in order to focus.





# Movement options

- Include physical activities in the learning process
- Allow quiet movement around the room
- Allow extra breaks for movement
- Provide fidget items



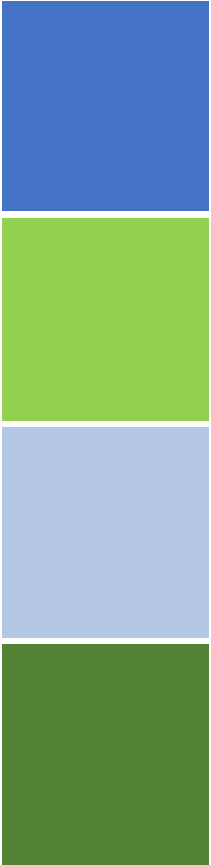




# Access conflict

When people have opposite needs in the same space

# Communicating with autistic people

- 
- **Calm:** Try co-regulation, showing the person how you calm your own body, holding space for them to do the same.
  - **Clear:** Be direct, no hints or sarcasm.
  - **Consistent:** Autistic people need to know what's coming up. If there's going to be a change, let them know as soon as you can.
  - **Respectful:** Autistic children and adults may not recognize or subscribe to social hierarchies. Never say, "because I said so," but give the reason in terms you know they will understand.

# Kindness: Acknowledging and accepting communication differences

- Politeness and kindness are understood differently by autistic vs allistic (non-autistic) people.
- Most autistic people have spent their lives trying very hard to speak the language of allistic people.
- When we try to claim space to speak our own language, we are often told we are breaking a rule or being difficult. We are rude or blunt and obnoxious or we are too quiet and don't contribute anything.
- All of this is neurologically-based.

# Priorities in communication

**Non-autistic**

**Connection**

Acknowledgment of the  
person as important  
independent of the content

**Information**

Needs reassurance of caring  
and respect first.

**Autistic**

**Information**

Clarity  
Transparency  
Logic and reason

**Connection**

Needs reassurance that  
content is understood.



Need

Non-  
autistic

Autistic

Our needs are not “special.”  
They are the same as yours.

Adequate nutrition and hydration	Yes	More likely to struggle with food and drinks; eating disorders more common
Sleep	Yes	Sleep disorders very common
Pain/distress absent or managed	Yes	Communication differences and interoception differences make this less likely
Social support system	Yes	Rejection and isolation are typical experiences, may have fewer friends.
Respect	Yes	Can be hard to find in many settings; even autistic professionals struggle with being taken seriously.
Tolerable sensory environment	Yes	Noise, lights, visual chaos, smells all experienced more intensely
How prepared are you to do the task?	1-10	1-10 Scale



A more  
affirming way  
than social  
skills “training”

Education  
and  
choice

In this situation, you  
could respond  
naturally by saying  
exactly what you are  
thinking.

If you do, circles  
might become angry,  
and you will be  
blamed for any  
conflict.

To circles, blunt  
speech is hate  
speech.

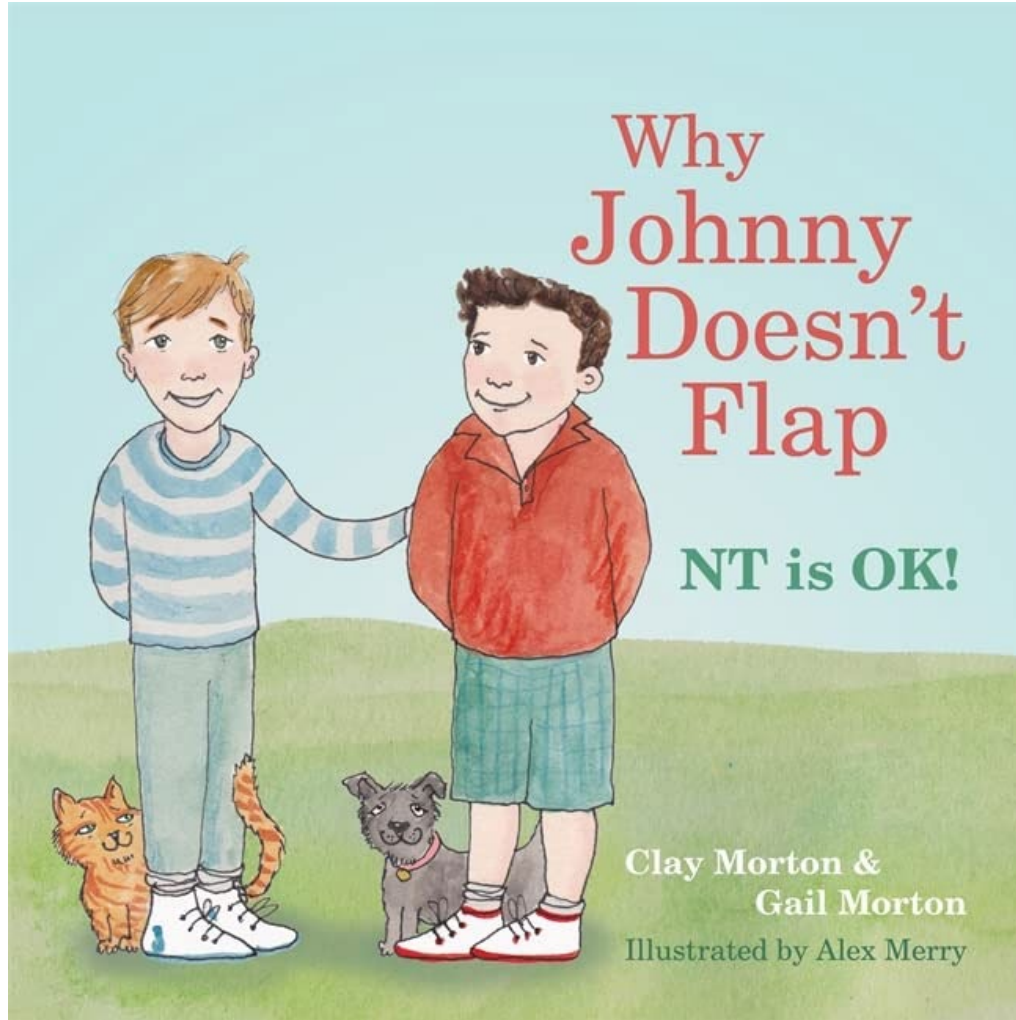
What they expect  
you to do is say  
that you like the  
gift even if you  
hate it.

If you meet this  
expectation, they  
will like you  
better, but they  
will probably get  
you the same  
thing next year.

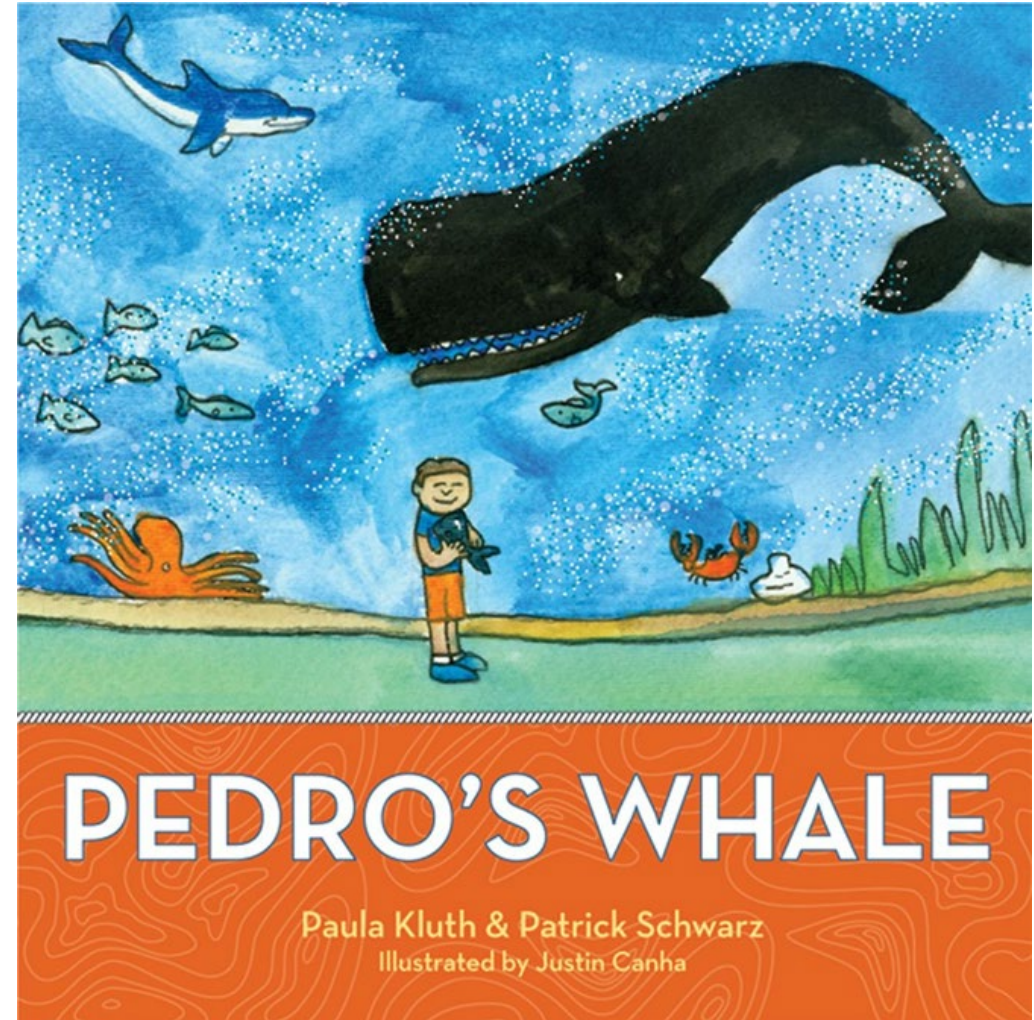
# Respectful communication

- Use a normal tone of voice. No baby talk!
- Address the autistic person directly, not the parent or support person.
- If asking them to do something, explain why.
- Answer questions truthfully.
- Understand that questioning is how they learn; it's not “backtalk” or rudeness.
- Allow extra time for responses. Wait patiently and do not try to finish their sentences.

# Autism-positive books for younger kids



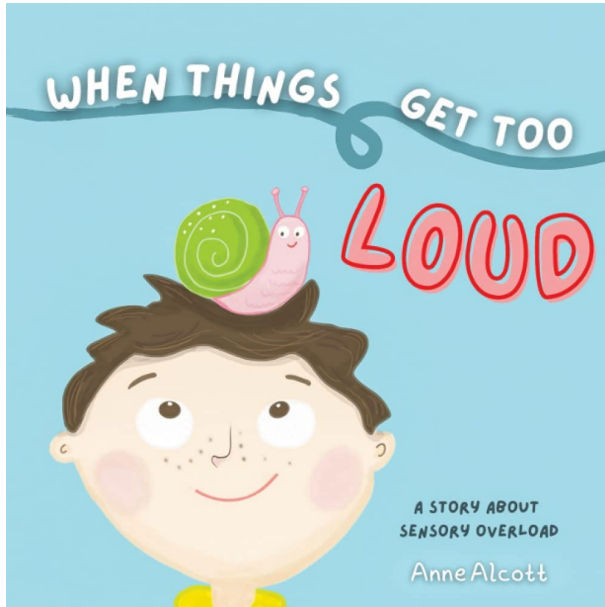
Why Johnny Doesn't Flap: NT is OK (C. Morton & G. Morton)



Pedro's Whale (P. Kluth)

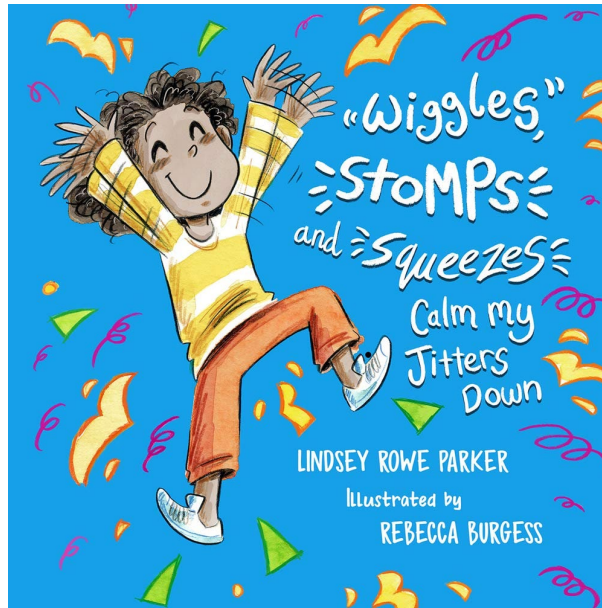


# Picture books: Sensory differences



When things get too loud: A story about sensory overload  
Paperback – July 8, 2021

by Anne Alcott



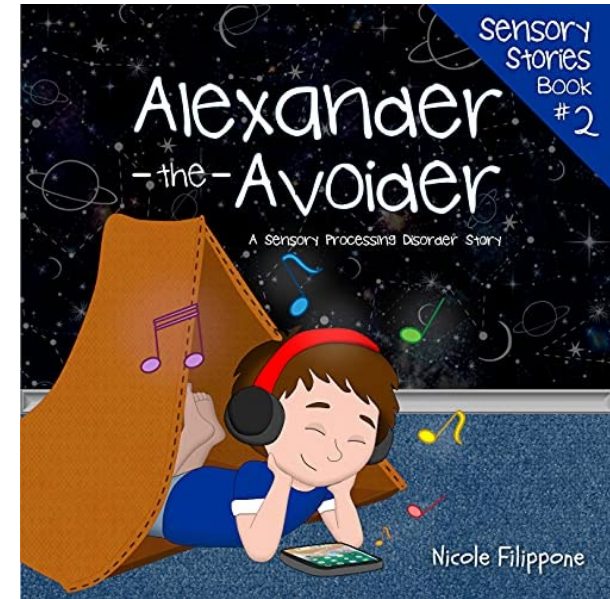
Wiggles, Stomps, and Squeezes Calm My Jitters Down  
Hardcover – April 1, 2021

by Lindsey Rowe Parker



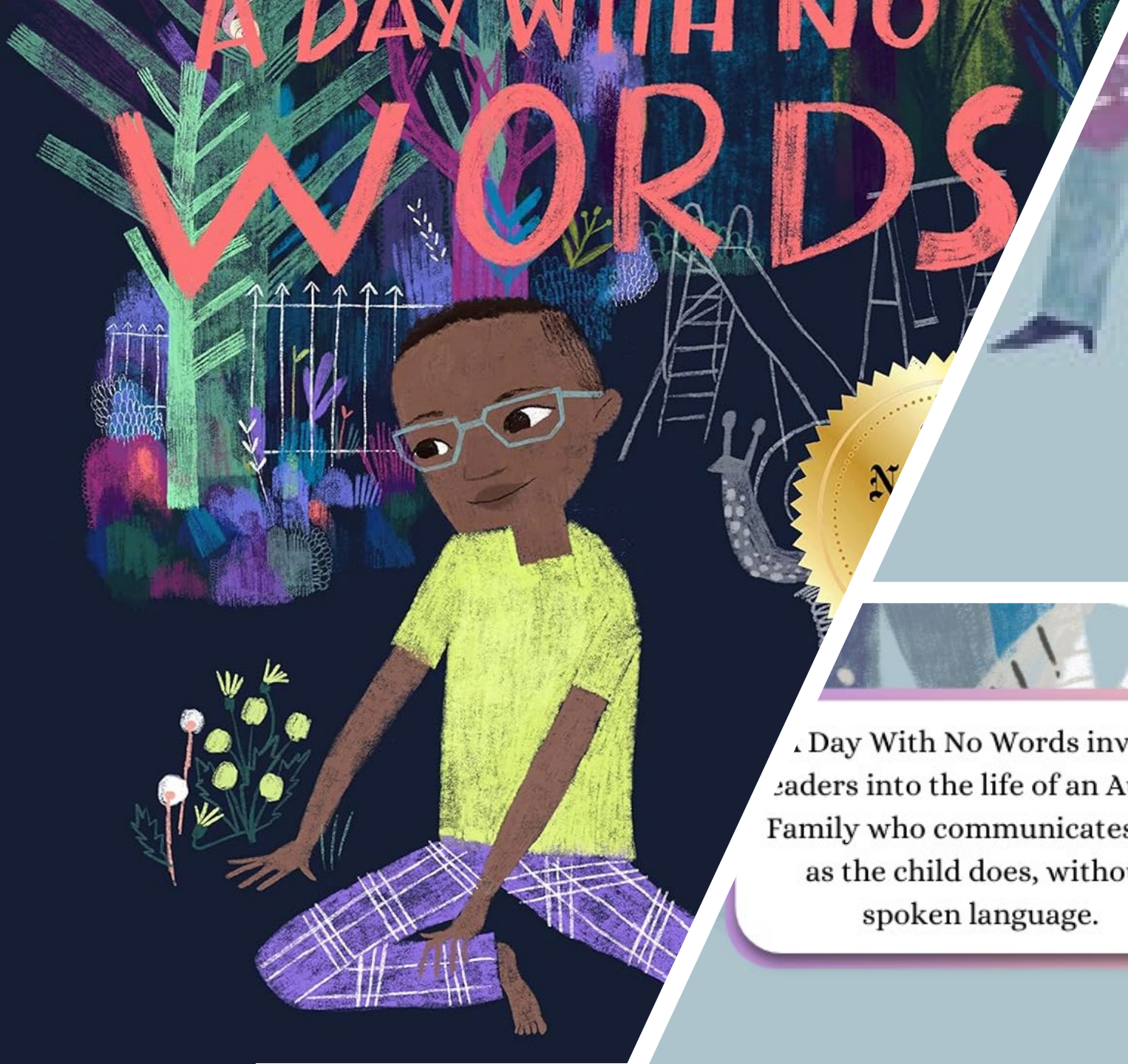
Sensory Seeking Sebastian  
Paperback – January 28, 2021

by Christia DeShields



Alexander the Avoider: A Sensory Processing Disorder Story  
(April 18, 2021)

by Nicole Filippone



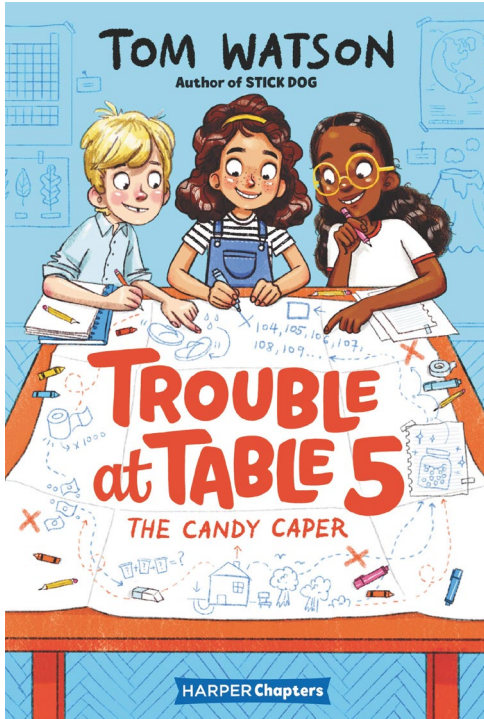
A Day With No Words invites readers into the life of an Autism Family who communicates just as the child does, without spoken language.



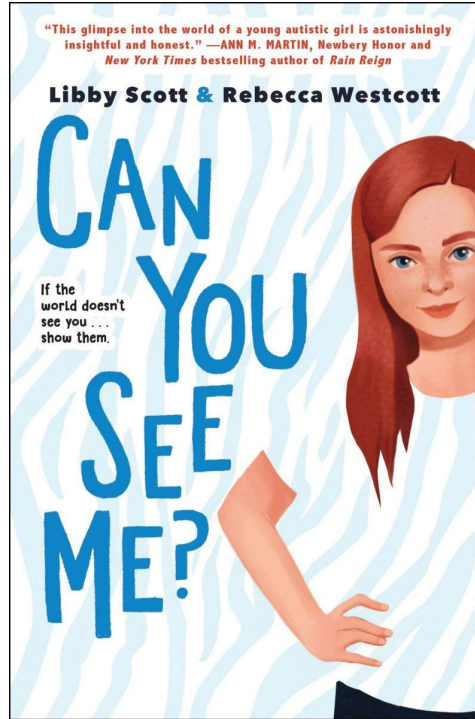
A day with no  
Words (2023)  
Tiffany  
Hammond



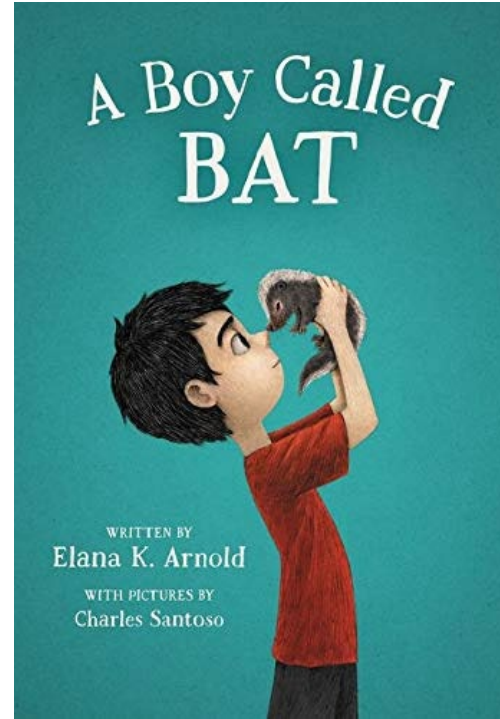
# Pre-teen picks



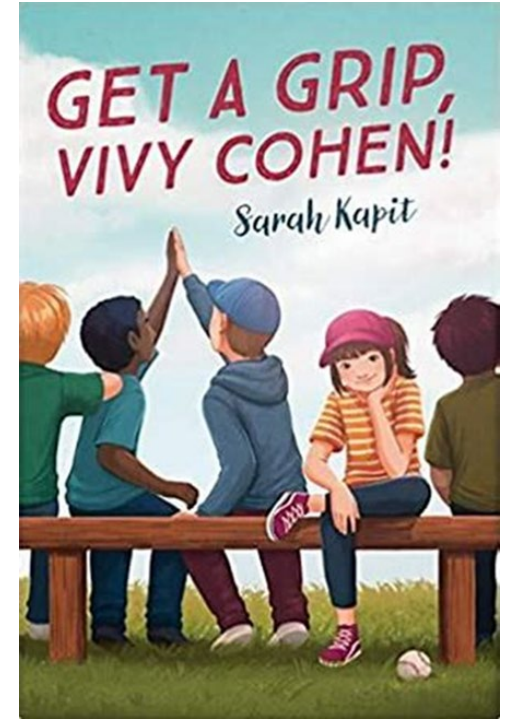
Trouble at Table 5 #1:  
The Candy Caper  
February 25, 2020  
by Tom Watson



Can You See Me?  
March 3, 2020  
by Libby Scott

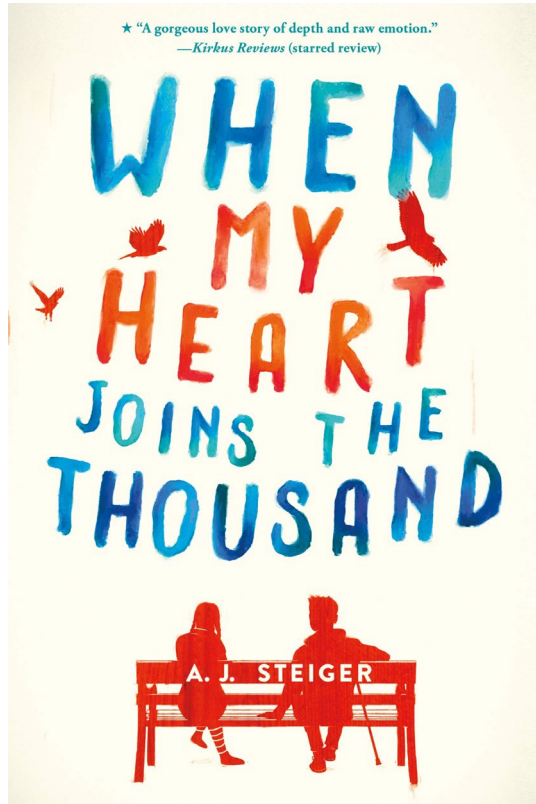


A Boy Called Bat (The  
Bat Series, 1)  
March 14, 2017  
by Elana K. Arnold

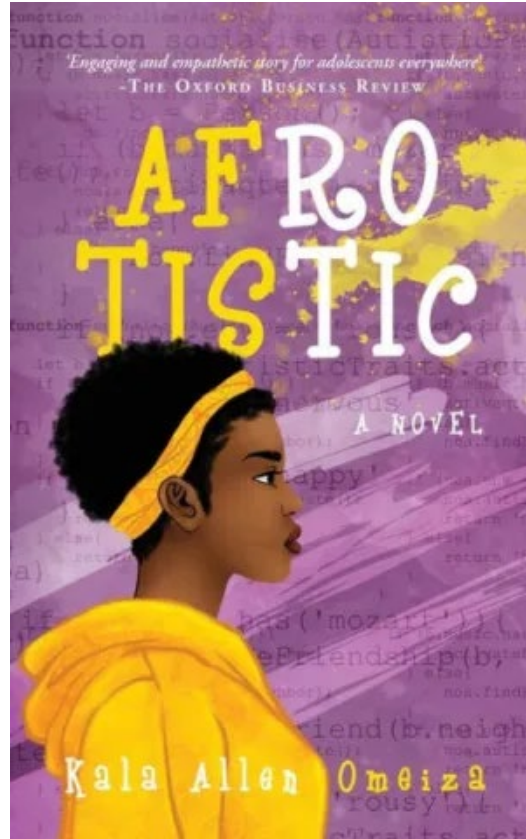


Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!  
February 25, 2020  
by Sarah Kapit

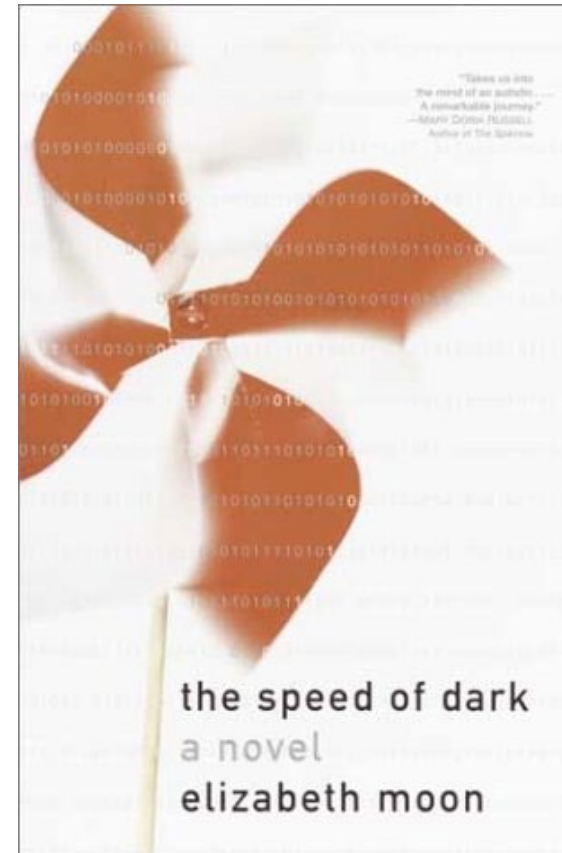
# Young Adult fiction



When My Heart Joins  
the Thousand  
A. J. Steiger (2018)



Afrotistic  
Kala Allen Omeiza  
(2022)



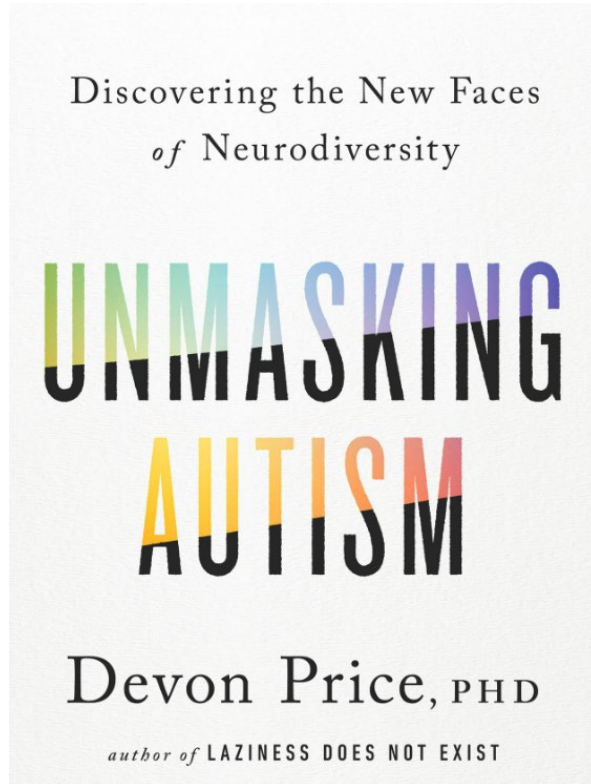
The Speed of Dark  
Elizabeth Moon (2003)



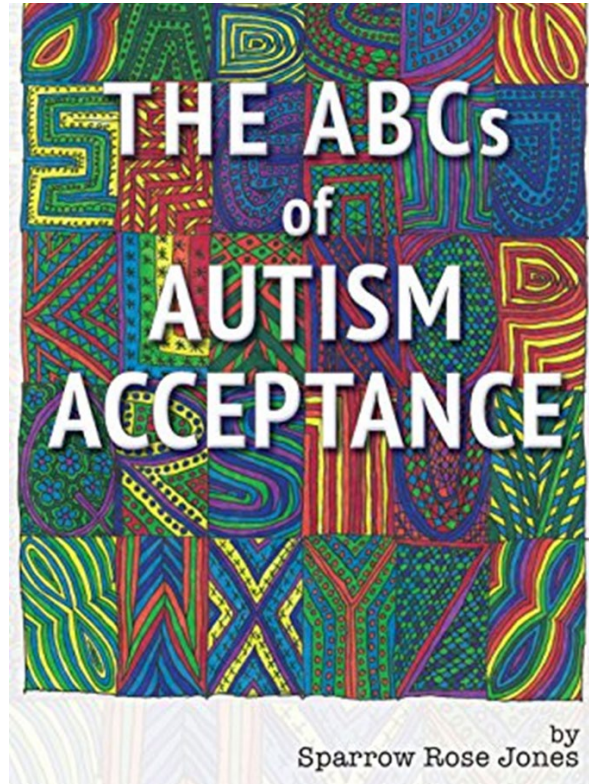
On the Edge of Gone  
Corinne Duyvis (2016)



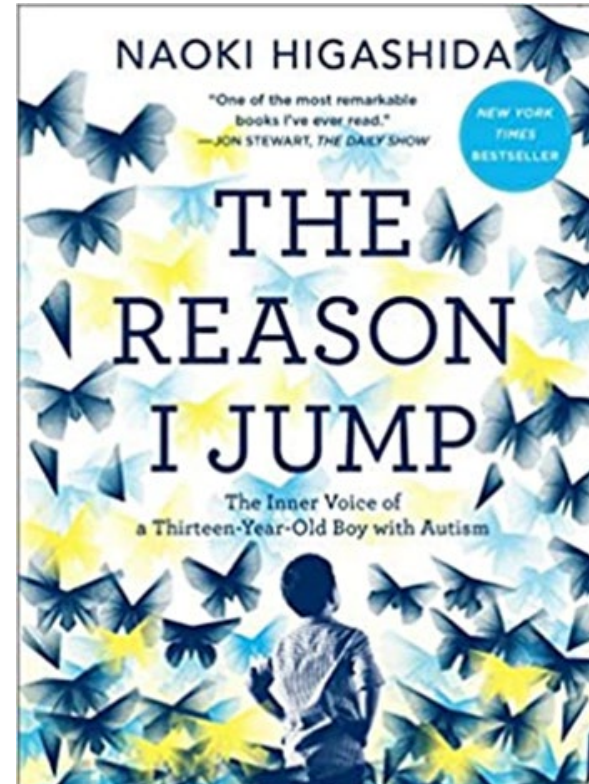
# Non-fiction recommendations



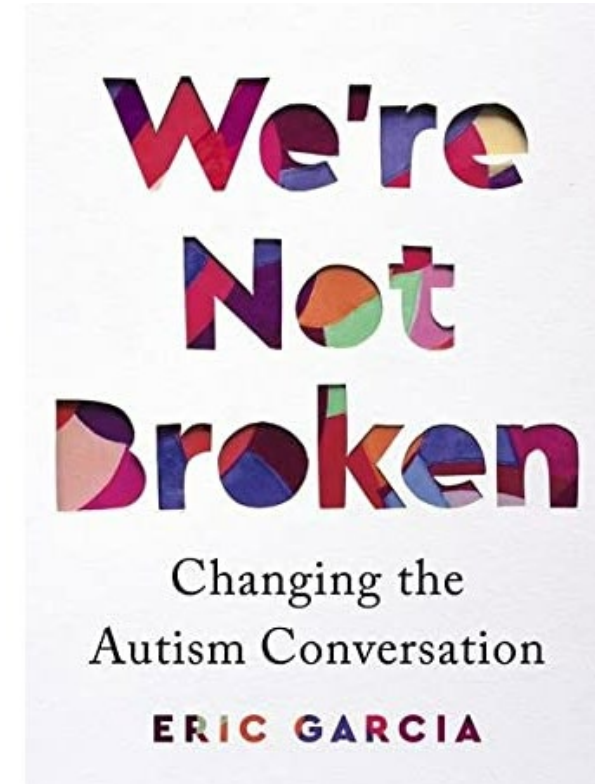
Unmasking Autism  
Devon Price (2022)



The ABCs of Autism  
Acceptance S.R. Jones  
(2016)



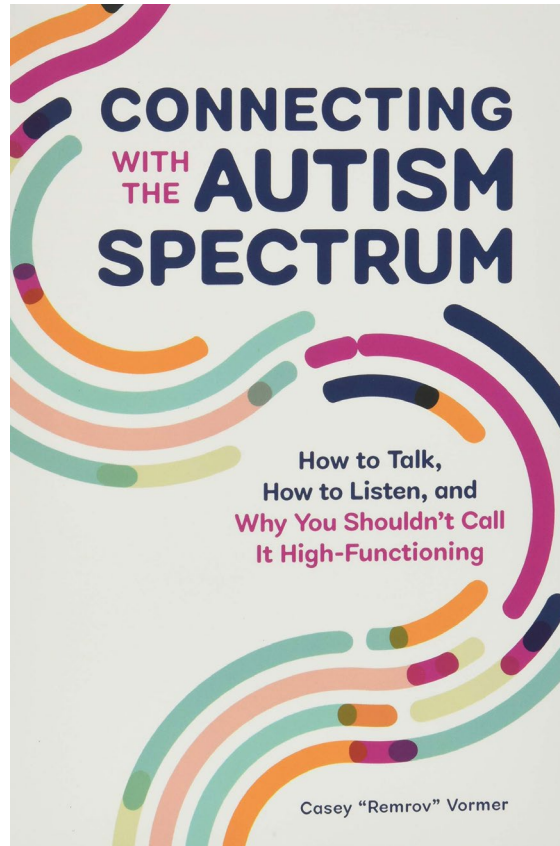
The Reason I Jump  
Naoki Higashida (2016 )



We're Not Broken  
Eric Garcia (2021)



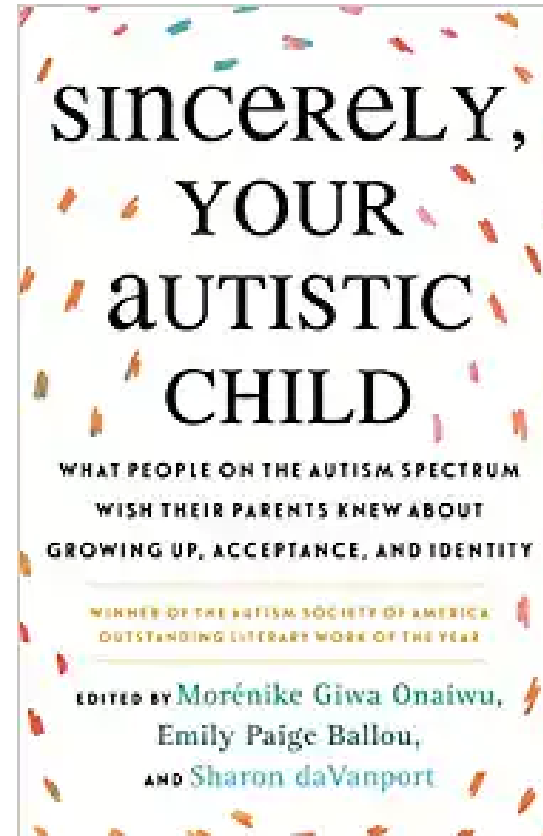
# For parents



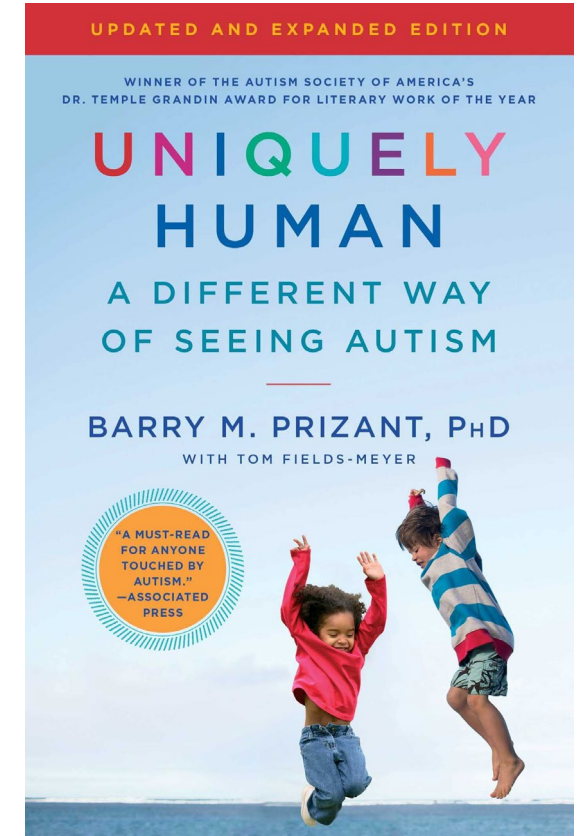
Connecting with the  
Autism Spectrum  
Casey Vormer (2020)



The Real Experts: Readings  
for Parents of Autistic  
Children  
M. Sutton, ed. (2011)



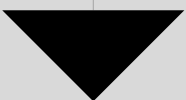
Sincerely, Your Autistic Child  
Onaiwu, Ballou, &  
daVanport, eds. (2021)



Uniquely Human  
(B. Prizant) (2020)

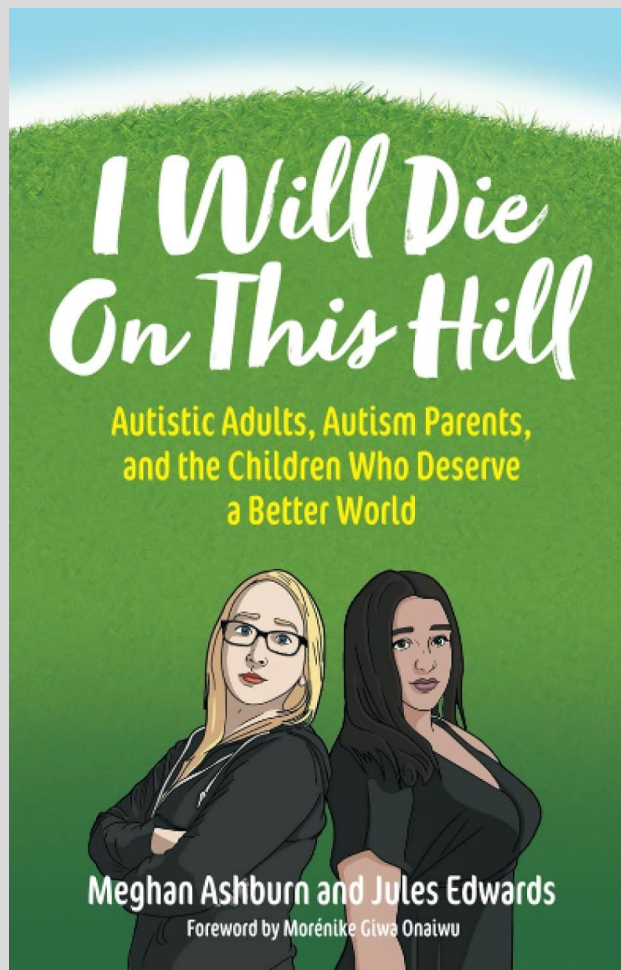
IF

THEN

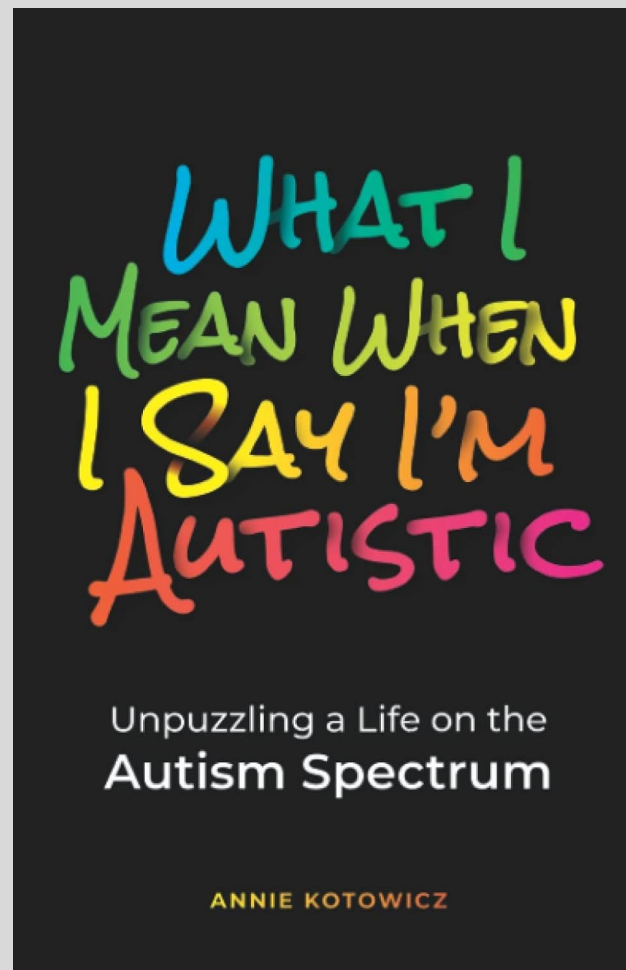


READ THIS

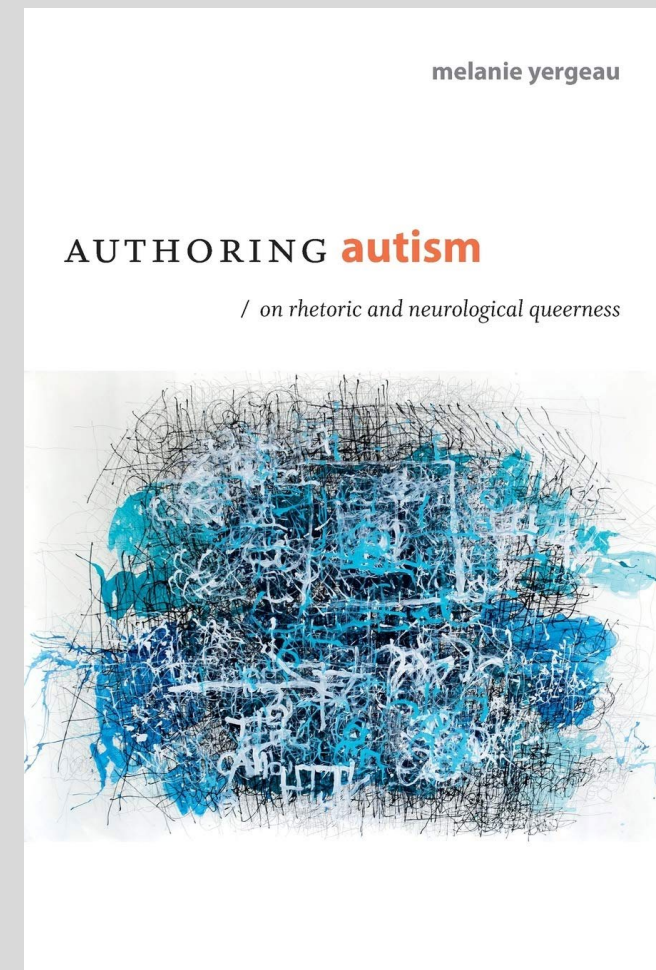
You wonder why autistic self-advocates and autism parents struggle to get along (and what we can do about it):



You don't understand why this person says they are autistic when they don't seem anything like your nephew:



You love words and ideas and want to think deeply about autism rhetoric and its consequences:





# Choosing books about autism

Author is  
autistic  
**+ 3**

Recommended  
by autistic-led  
groups  
**+2**

Words in title:  
Overcome,  
defeat, survive  
**-5**

Puzzle piece  
symbol on  
cover  
**-3**

Cover or intro  
explains how  
autistic  
knowledge is  
incorporated  
**+ 1**

Words in title:  
Neurodivergent,  
neurodiversity,  
**=**

Focus on  
external  
behaviors  
**-3**

# References

Greene, R. (2021) *Lost and Found*. Jossey-Bass. Hoboken, NJ.

Haghighat, H., Mirzarezaee, M., Araabi, B. N., & Khadem, A. (2021). Functional networks abnormalities in autism spectrum disorder: age-related hypo and hyper connectivity. *Brain Topography*, 34(3), 306-322.

King, J. B., Prigge, M. B., King, C. K., Morgan, J., Dean, D. C., Freeman, A., ... & Anderson, J. S. (2018). Evaluation of differences in temporal synchrony between brain regions in individuals with autism and typical development. *JAMA Network Open*, 1(7), e184777-e184777.

Leary, M.R., & Donnellan, A.M. (2012). *Autism: Sensory-movement differences and diversity*. Cambridge.

Murray, D. (2018). Monotropism—An interest-based account of autism. *Encyclopedia of autism spectrum disorders*, 10, 971-978.

Nartin, M. & Milton, D. (2016). Supporting the inclusion of autistic children. In Knowles, G., *Supporting Inclusive Practice and Ensuring Opportunity is Equal for All*. London, Routledge.

# Thank you



Author photo  
By Katie Sweet

## *The End*

For more information or discussion,  
please contact Bev at

[baharp2@uky.edu](mailto:baharp2@uky.edu)