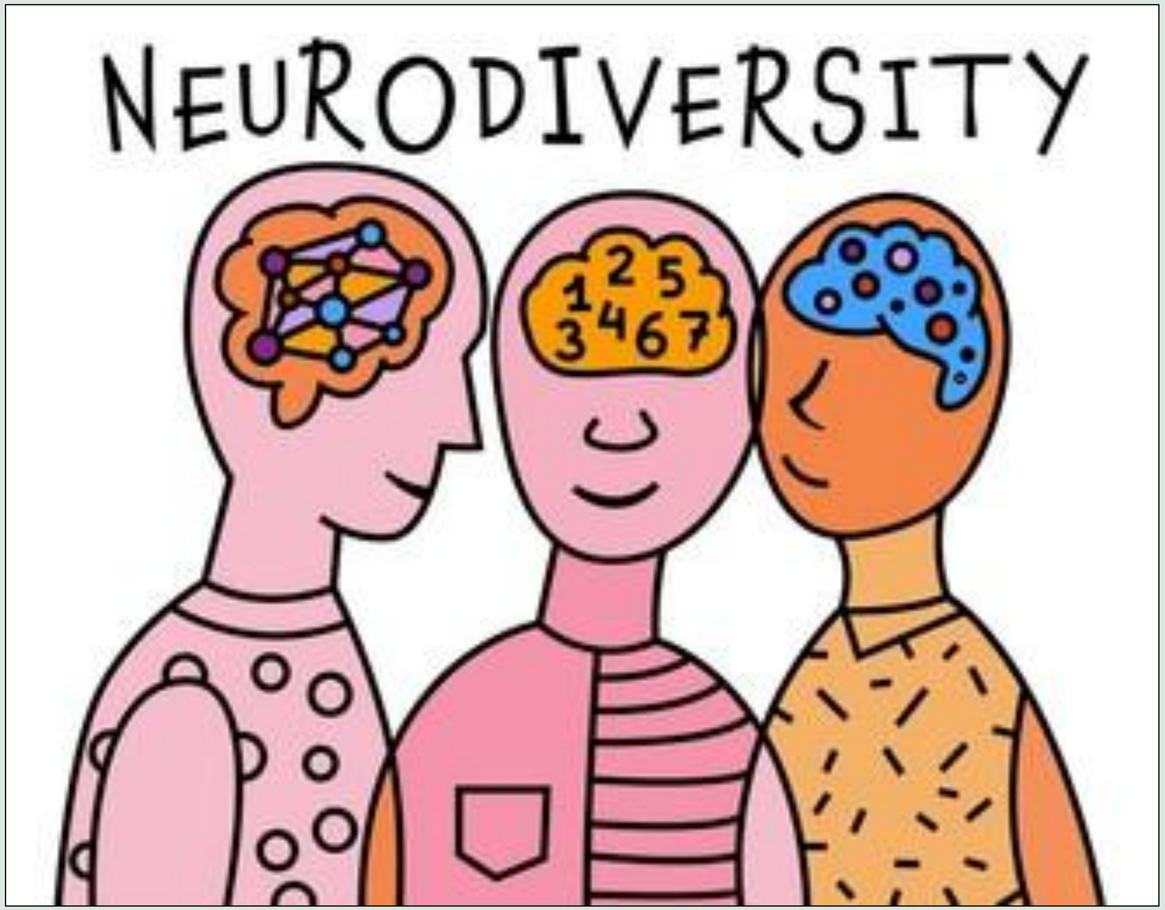
Supporting Neurodivergent Children in Early Childhood Education



Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we gather today.

As educators we recognise that Aboriginal communities have been nurturing and teaching children on these lands for over 65,000 years.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present and acknowledge that Aboriginal sovereignty has not been ceded.

Uniting



Getting to know each other



Melindie Lane

Uniting PSFO - SE Team

B. App. Science, Grad. Dip. (E.C.),
Grad. Dip Counselling,
M. Education (E.C.)



Jemimah Simpkin

Former Uniting PSFO

Director/Ed. Leader –
Prom Coast Centre for Children
B. Tch. (E.C.), B. Ed. Studies,
Grad. Cert. Autism Studies,
M. Autism Studies (*current study*)



Cara McKie

Former Uniting PSFO

E.C. Social Work Practice Coach –
ECMS
B. Behavioual Science (Psych.),
Grad. Dip. (E.C.), Grad. Dip.
Counselling, M. Social Work

Presentation Outline



- The Preschool Field Officer Program – inclusion support
- Identifying a need in our early learning communities
- AGECS – Warrawong Grant
- What is Neurodiversity?
- Neuro-Affirming Terminology – what it is and why we use it
- Yellow Ladybugs resource - ‘Supporting Autistic girls in early childhood’
- ADHD Australia resource – ‘Recognising children who may need more support’
- Practical strategies to support neurodivergent children
- Questions



Preschool Field Officer Program

The PSFO program supports the **inclusion** of all children attending **funded kindergarten programs**, with a particular focus on children with additional needs and those experiencing vulnerabilities.

PSFOs use a capacity building approach to support educators to increase their knowledge and skills, and to develop confidence in responding to a parent’s concerns about their child’s development.

To access inclusion support, contact your local PSFO Program

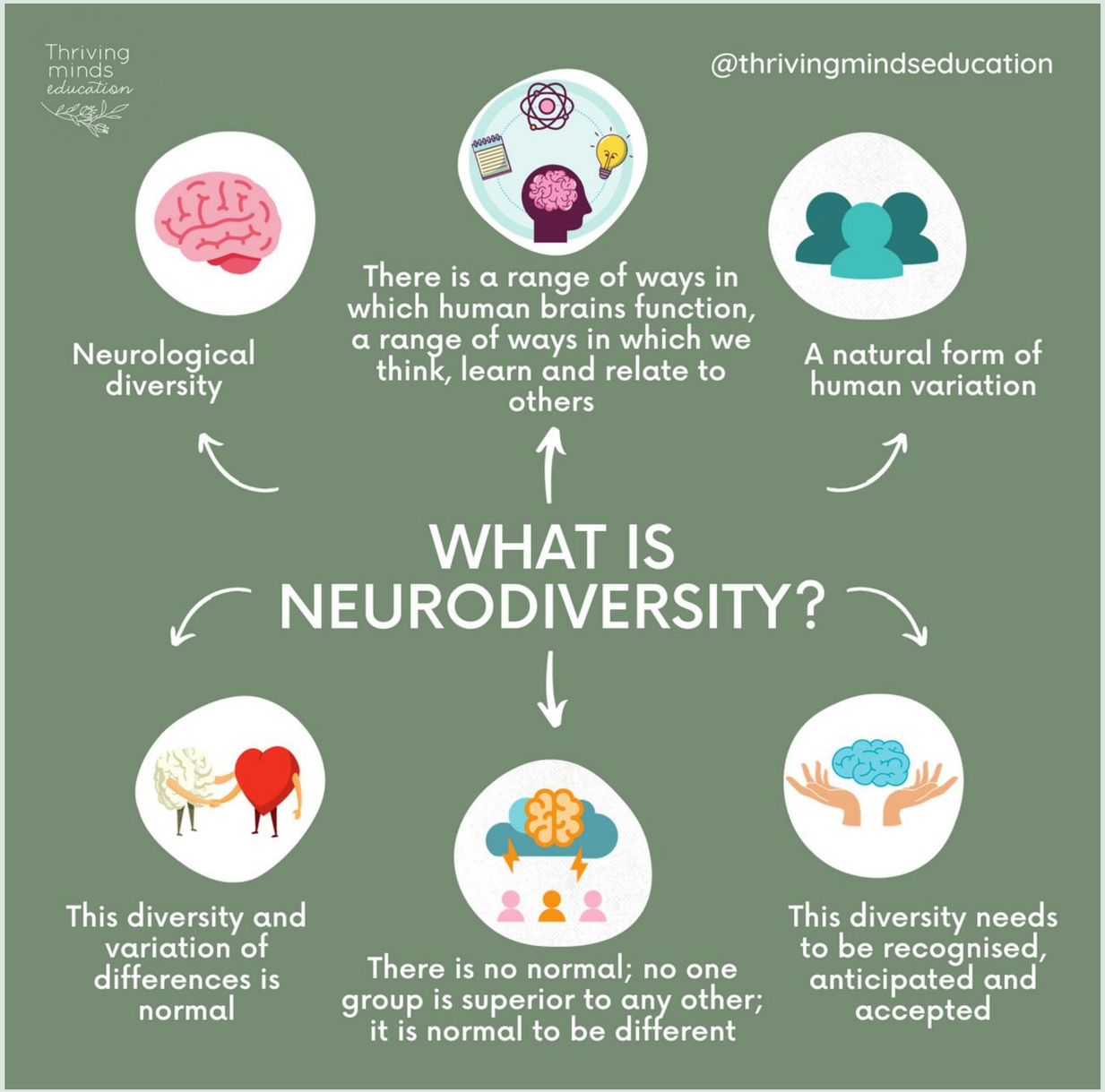
- If you provider is Uniting, the Referral Form can be found on the Uniting Early Learning webpage: https://earlylearning.unitingvictas.org.au/services/psfo/

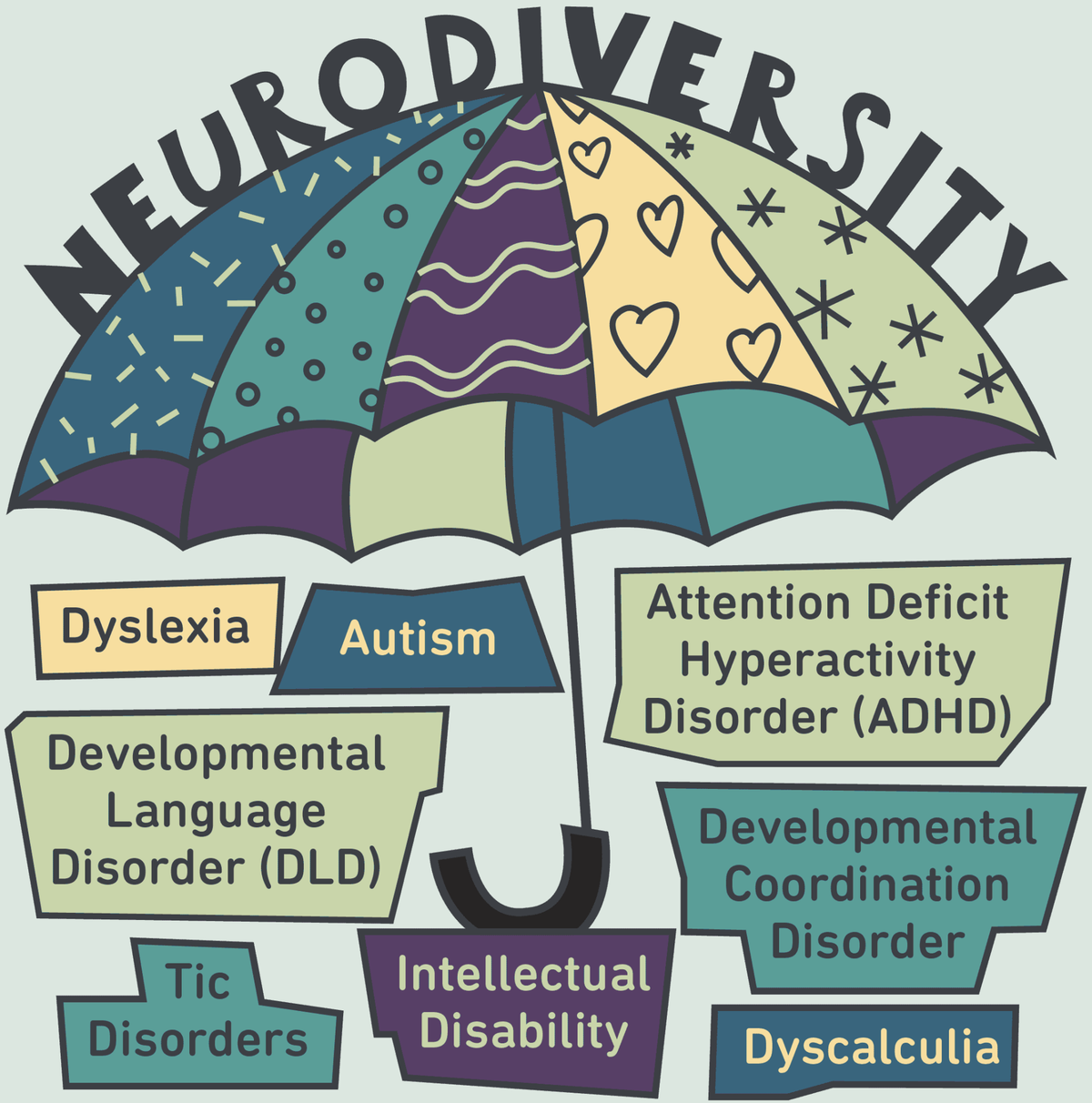
- To find out who your allocated PSFO Program is, you can check the Department of Education website: https://www.vic.gov.au/preschool-field-officer-program

- If your E.C. program is not funded by the Department if Education, you can access inclusion support with the Victorian Inclusion Agency: https://www.viac.com.au/

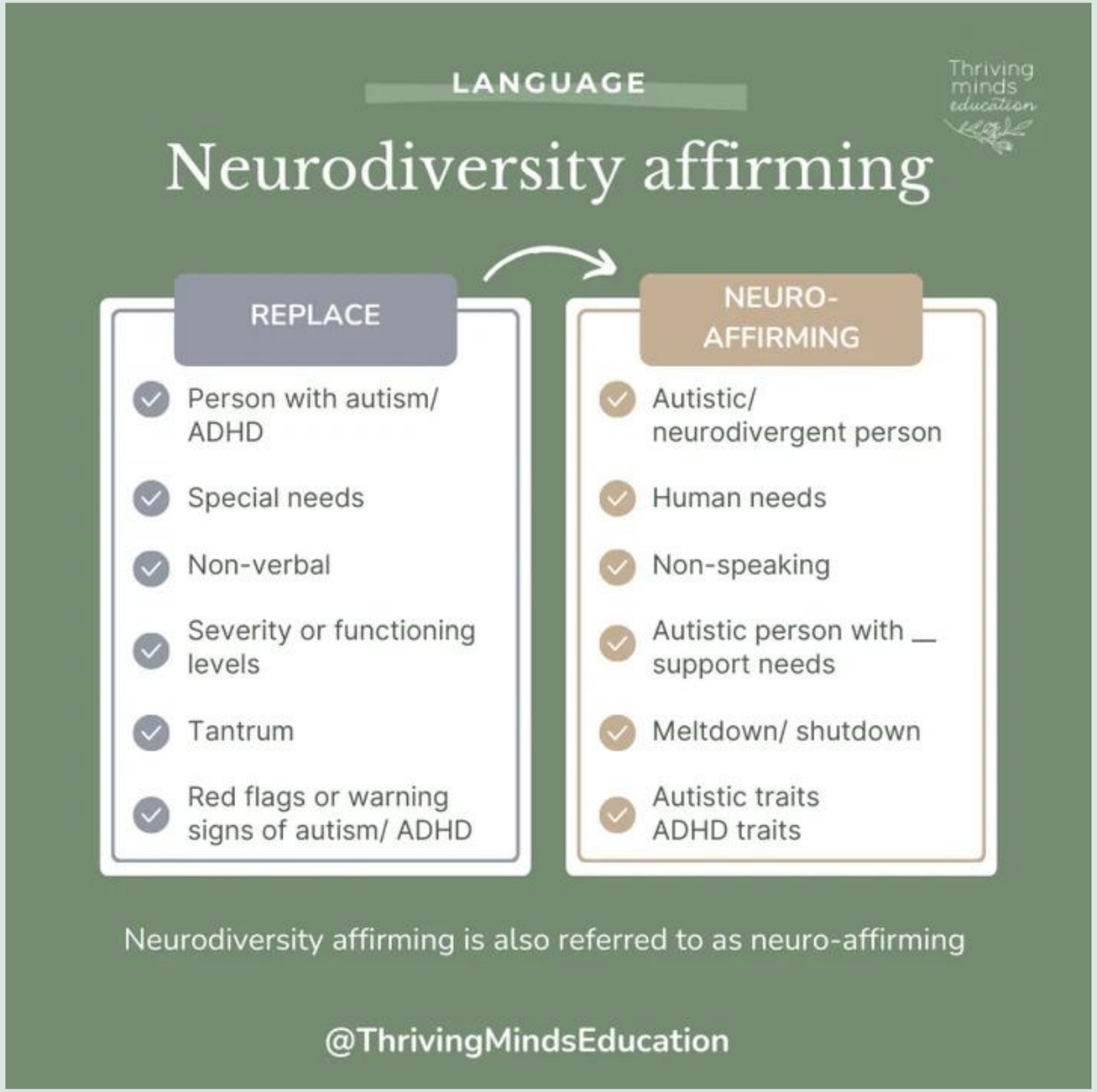


What is Neurodiversity?





.... and more!



Neuro-Affirming Terminology

Identity-first language is generally preferred by the Autistic community – **'Autistic'** rather than **'person with autism'**

Identity-first language is increasingly preferred by the ADHD community, too – **'ADHDer'**, though some people still prefer **'person with ADHD'**

It is okay to ask a child's parents or carers which terminology they prefer



https://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/Resources

Neuro-Affirming Terminology

Neurodiversity-affirming preference	Deficit-based language to avoid	Rationale for preference
General		
Person with ADHD / ADHDer (based on individual preference)	Suffers from ADHD / Afflicted by ADHD / defined in opposition to 'healthy controls', implying ADHD is unhealthy	Neutral, non-pathologising language that doesn't define the person by perceived deficits; avoids victimisation language; recognises individual choice between person-first and identity-first preferences.
Neurodivergent / Neurocognitive difference / Neurodevelopmental difference / ADHD neurotype	Neurodevelopmental disorder / Abnormal brain	Positions ADHD as an expected part of variation rather than a medical pathology.

Traits and characteristics		
ADHD traits / ADHD characteristics	ADHD symptoms / ADHD behavioural problems	Reframes experiences as inherent traits rather than medical symptoms that need to be 'cured'.
Attention differences / Attention regulation differences / Interest-based attention regulation	Attention deficit / Inattention	Acknowledges differences in attention allocation and sustained attention rather than suggesting cognitive failure.
Emotional sensitivity / Emotion regulation differences	Emotional dysregulation / Deficient emotional self-regulation / Emotion regulation deficits / Emotion regulation problems / Emotional regulation impairment	Reflects neurocognitive differences in emotion regulation.
Executive functioning differences	Executive dysfunction / Executive function deficits / Executive function problems / Executive function impairments	Neutral description of cognitive differences without implying malfunction.

Toward Neurodiversity-Affirming Language for ADHD – Friedel et al., 2025 https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/gucym_v2

Developing resources to support neurodivergent children in EC programs



yellow LADYBUGS

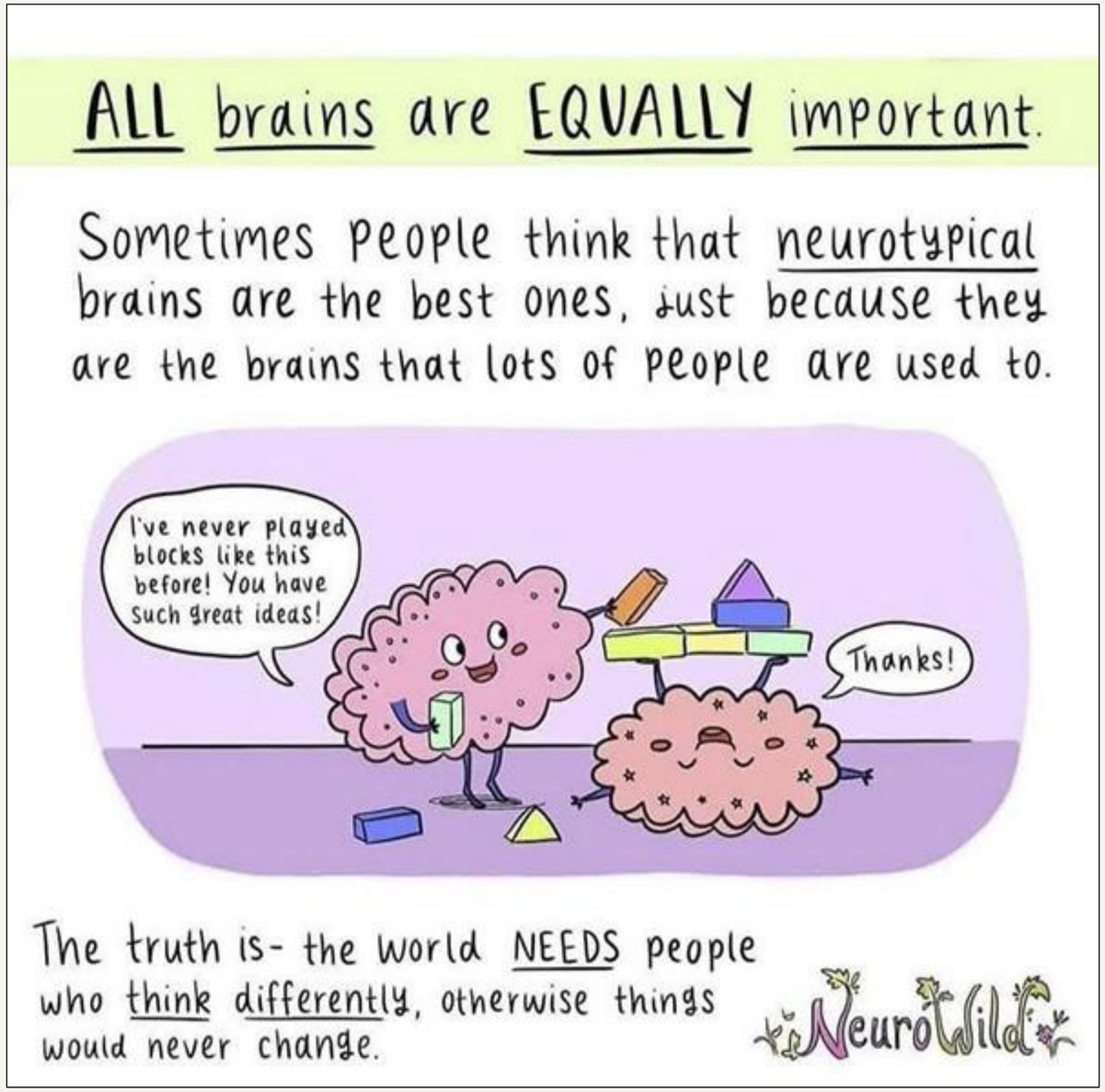
Yellow Ladybugs is a non-government organisation dedicated to the happiness, success and celebration of Autistic girls, women and gender diverse individuals.

https://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/

What is autism?

- A natural variation in human brain development
- Autistic people experience the world differently to neurotypical people.
  This can include differences in:
    - Communication
    - Social interactions
    - Emotional regulation
    - Sensory experiences
    - Behavioural differences

No two Autistic people are the same.



Recognising a Need in the Early Childhood Community



Autistic girls are often missed because:

- The DSM-5 diagnostic criteria is based on the ‘male’ presentation of autism
- Females often mask, copying observed behaviour, recognising what is socially accepted and internalising their Autistic traits
- Girls can display behaviours that aren’t considered ‘disruptive’ and therefore not inconvenient

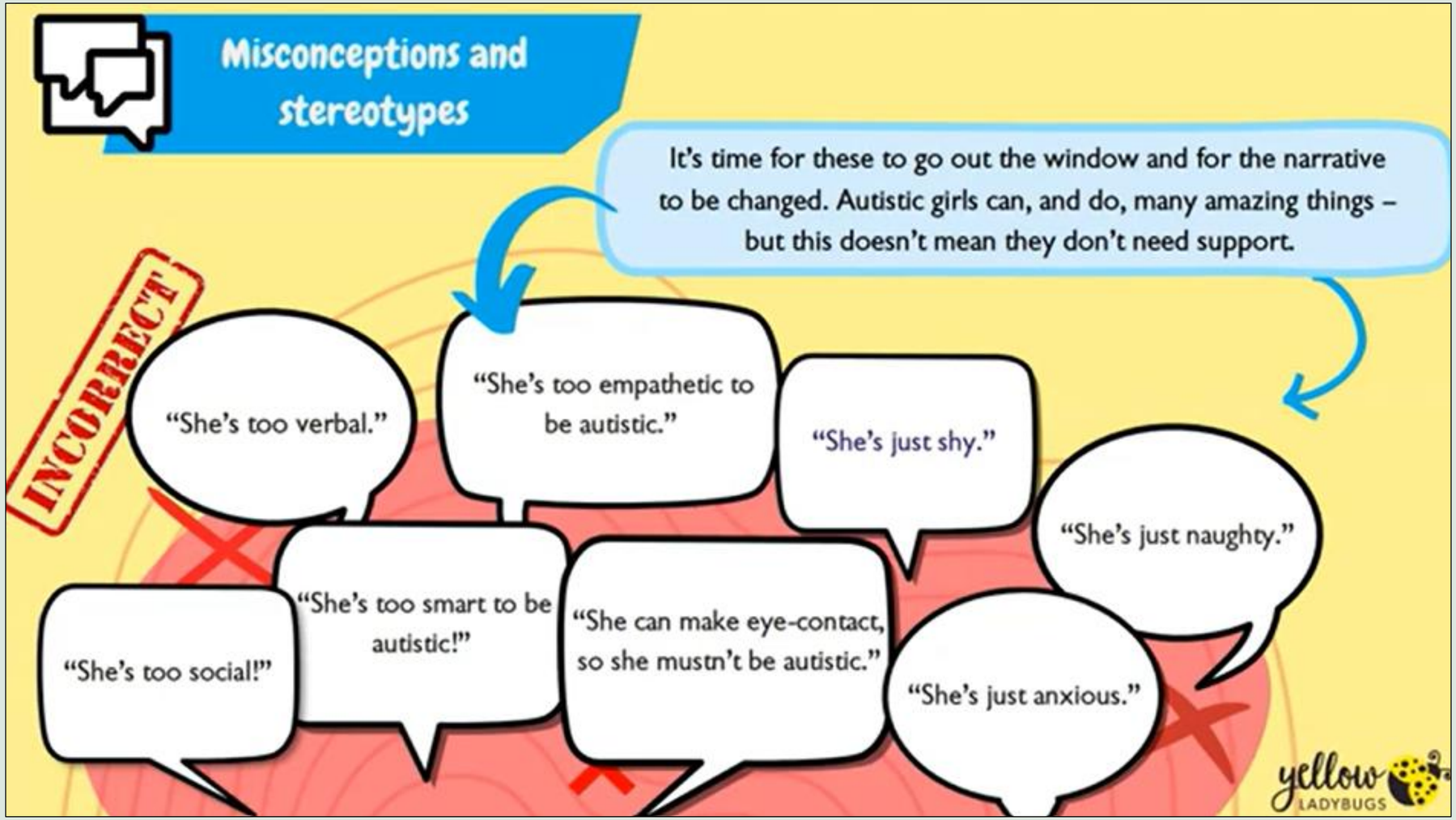


AUTISM: SAME TRAIT, DIFFERENT REACTION



Boy	Trait	Girl
Consider Autism	Late Talker	Quiet/shy
Autism	Obsessed with animals	Passionate/ "normal"
Autism/ behavior	Dysregulation/ outbursts	Dramatic
Autism	Rigid behaviors	Perfectionist
Autism	Plays by self or parallel	Quiet/shy
ADHD/Autism	Excessive talking/ interrupting	Talks too much/too social
Autism	Sensory Differences	Moody/ Dramatic
Odd/Autism	Unusual voice/ intonation	Cute/sweet

Mrs. SPEECHIE

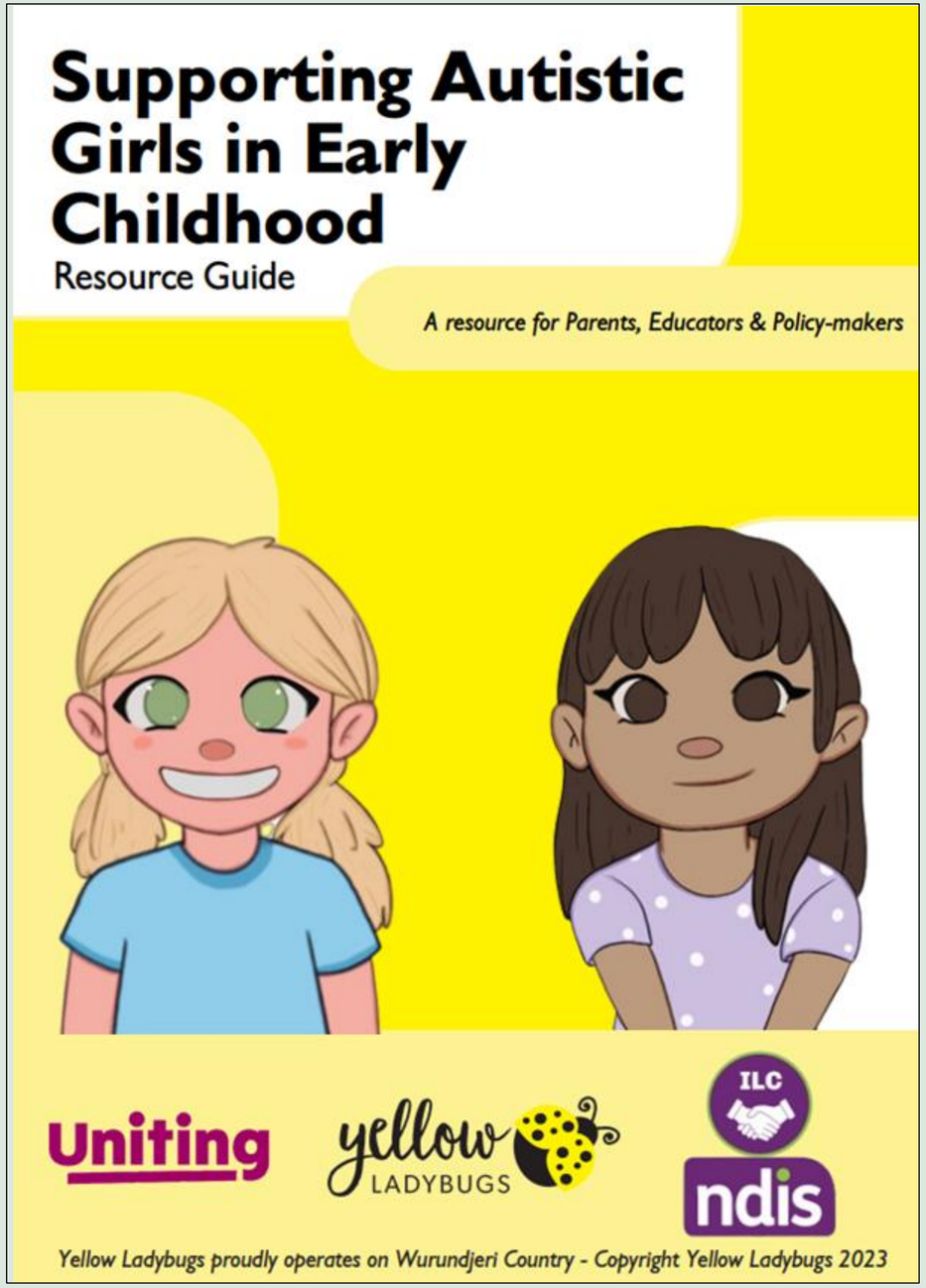

Misconceptions and stereotypes
It's time for these to go out the window and for the narrative to be changed. Autistic girls can, and do, many amazing things – but this doesn't mean they don't need support.
INCORRECT
"She's too verbal."
"She's too empathetic to be autistic."
"She's just shy."
"She's just naughty."
"She's too social!"
"She's too smart to be autistic!"
"She can make eye-contact, so she mustn't be autistic."
"She's just anxious."
yellow LADYBUGS

This free resource is a five-part video series exploring:

- Autism and Girls in Early Childhood
- Autistic Girls in the Early Childhood Environment
- ‘Behaviour’ and Autistic Girls in Early Childhood
- Neuro-affirming ways Early Childhood Educators can support Autistic Girls
- Transitioning into an Early Learning Setting and/or School for Autistic Girls
-

Supporting Autistic Girls in Early Childhood Resources





Autistic Girls in Early Childhood Resources

- Each video runs for 8 – 15 minutes

- They are designed for Early Childhood teachers and educators, to support understanding and inclusion for Autistic girls

- Videos may be suitable to share with parents, too

- This Resource Guide compliments the information provided in the 5 videos, including research used to develop the video content

TOP 5 TRAITS

noticed in autistic Girls under 6 years old

We surveyed parents & carers of autistic girls. These were the 5 most noticed traits:



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AUTISTIC TRAITS

can look different for different girls...

easily distracted

bubbly & energetic

often enters classroom happy

loves to play with friends, but can be controlling

loves to climb and run

notices things in the classroom that others might miss

sometimes runs away when confused

amazing attention to detail



both autistic



always fidgeting

bright & compliant

appears shy & quiet

often anxious

struggles to make connections with other children

finds drop-off time hard

loves to tell her teachers about horses

can't handle the texture of her art smock

loves to draw and paint

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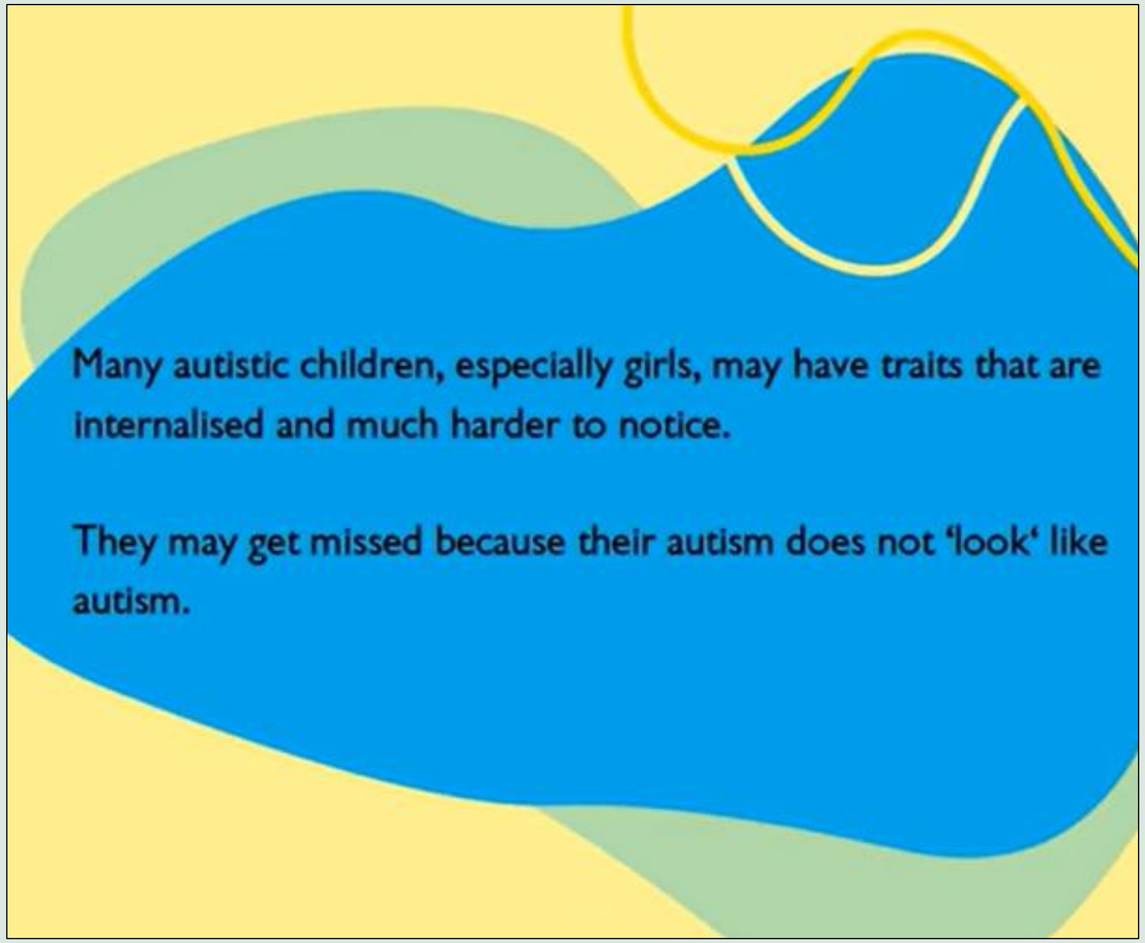
Uniting

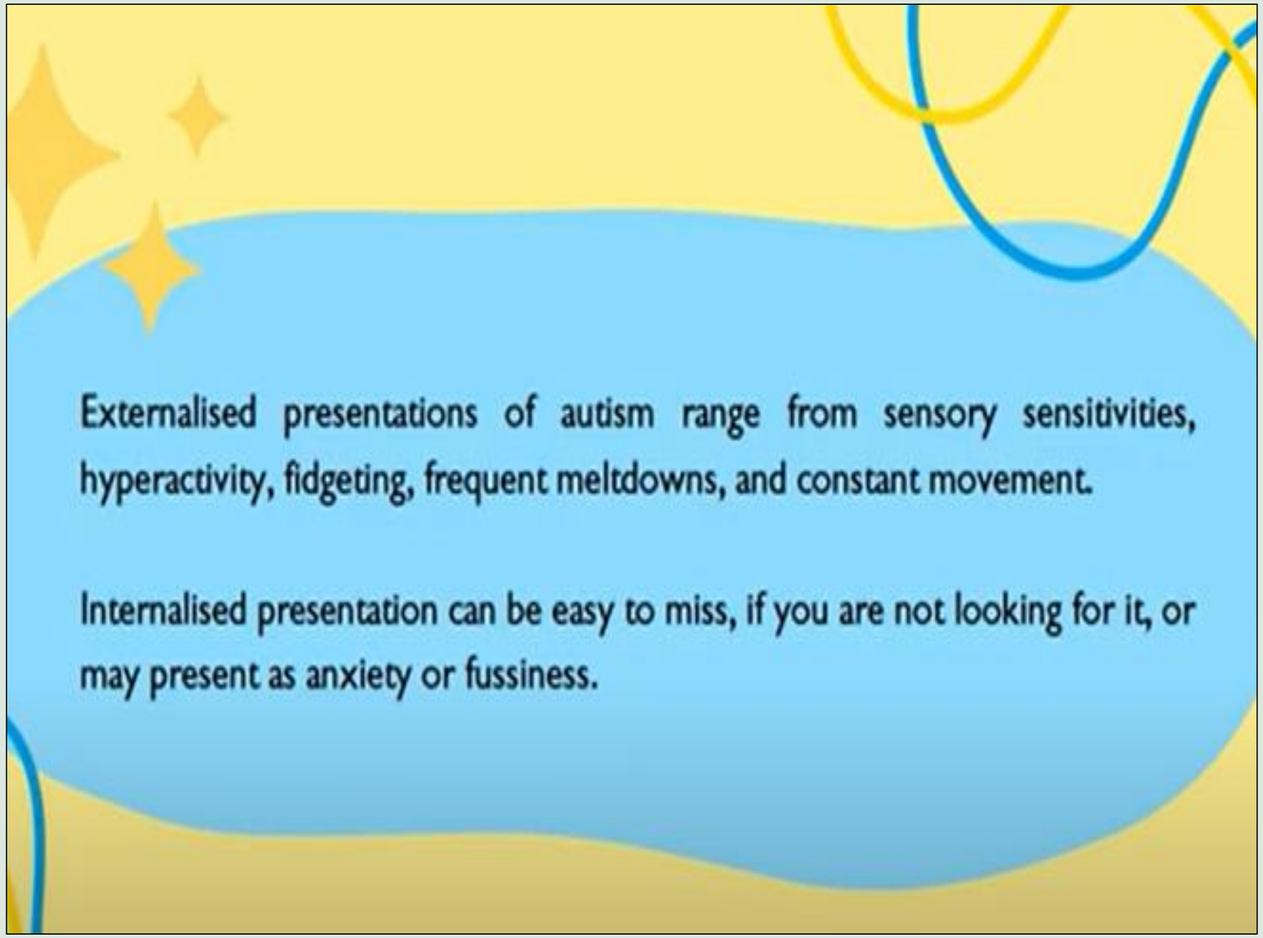
Supporting Autistic Girls in EC Resources

Autism is a difference that affects how a person thinks, feels, and experiences the world. It is a lens through which an individual sees and processes the world differently to others around them and can result in differences in language, communication, cognition, sensory processing, motor control and social behaviours.

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External and Internal Presentations





External and Internal Presentations

- Intense focus on certain subjects go unnoticed if they are ‘socially expected‘ for girls - liking animals or drawing
- Stims are less obvious - stims that are not rocking or flapping are not picked up
- Sensory sensitivities go unnoticed - responses to certain clothing or food textures may be seen as fussiness
- Increased effort required to handle certain situations - on the surface they appear to be doing well

Examples of Internalised Behaviours

Externalised presentations of autism range from sensory sensitivities, hyperactivity, fidgeting, frequent meltdowns, and constant movement.

Internalised presentation can be easy to miss, if you are not looking for it, or may present as anxiety or fussiness.

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Masking

Masking

Autistic girls are often overlooked due to their ability to mask and internalise their difficulties.

Masking is exhausting. Often, children that are quiet and compliant during the day will experience meltdowns once they are home and no longer feel the need to mask.

"She masked at kindy and childcare, but would completely meltdown at home."

"She is extremely compliant, never draws attention to herself but then has meltdowns at home."

"She had huge meltdowns at home after a full day of kindy."



yellow LADYBUGS

Autistic Girls are Awesome!



The Yellow Ladybugs Videos

The 5 videos about supporting Autistic girls at kindergarten can be found on the **Yellow Ladybugs Resources Hub** or the **Uniting PSFO home page** on the Uniting Vic Tas website



Autistic Girls in Early Childhood - Video 1



Autistic Girls in Early Childhood - Video 2



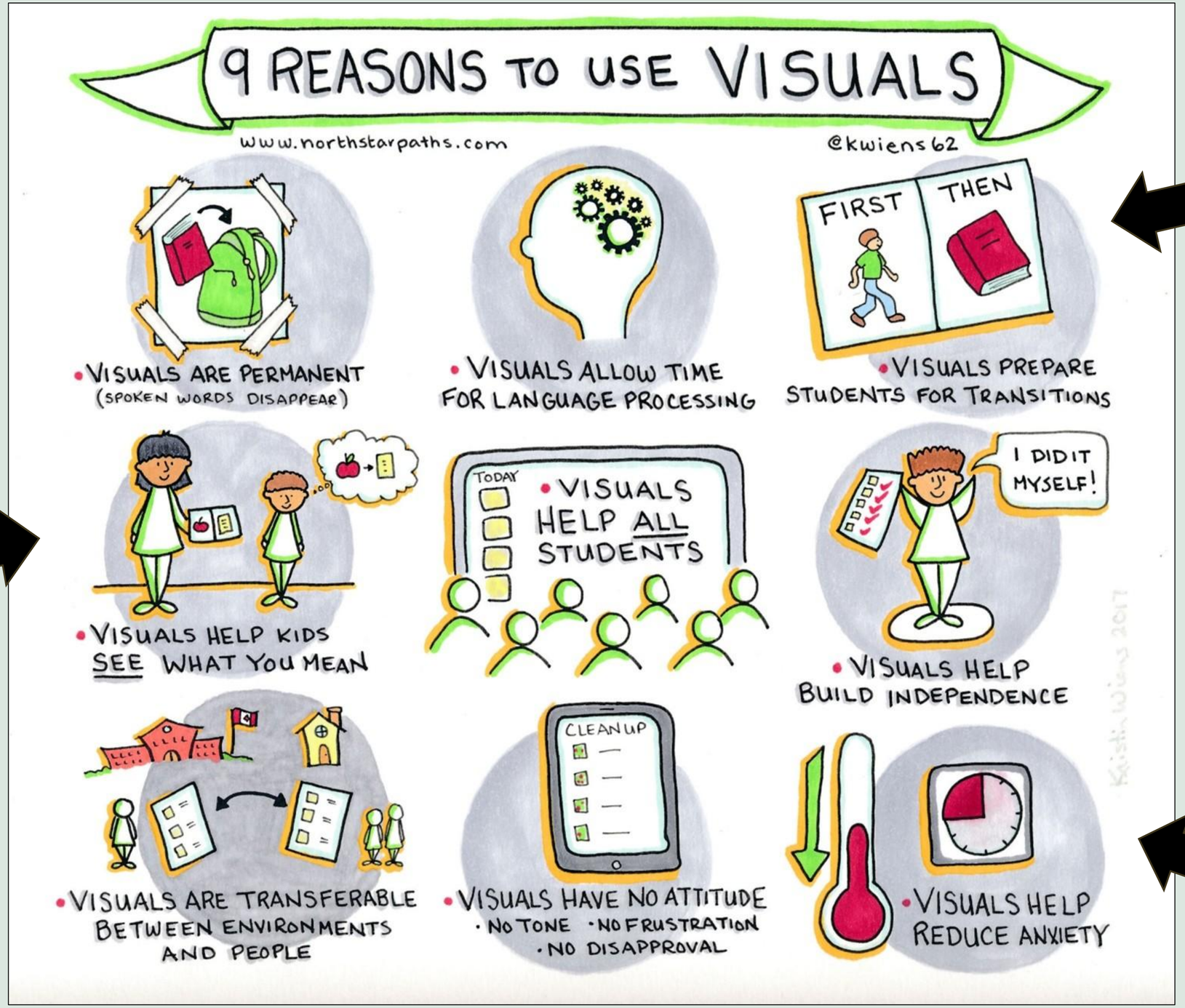
Autistic Girls in Early Childhood - Video 3



Autistic Girls in Early Childhood - Video 4



Autistic Girls in Early Childhood - Video 5


9 REASONS TO USE VISUALS
www.northstarpaths.com
@kwiens62
• VISUALS ARE PERMANENT (SPOKEN WORDS DISAPPEAR)
• VISUALS ALLOW TIME FOR LANGUAGE PROCESSING
FIRST
THEN
• VISUALS PREPARE STUDENTS FOR TRANSITIONS
• VISUALS HELP KIDS SEE WHAT YOU MEAN
TODAY
• VISUALS HELP ALL STUDENTS
I DID IT MYSELF!
• VISUALS HELP BUILD INDEPENDENCE
• VISUALS ARE TRANSFERABLE BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTS AND PEOPLE
CLEAN UP
• VISUALS HAVE NO ATTITUDE
· NO TONE · NO FRUSTRATION
· NO DISAPPROVAL
• VISUALS HELP REDUCE ANXIETY
Kristin Wiens 2017

Practical visual strategies to support Autistic children



Concrete object



Visuals keyring

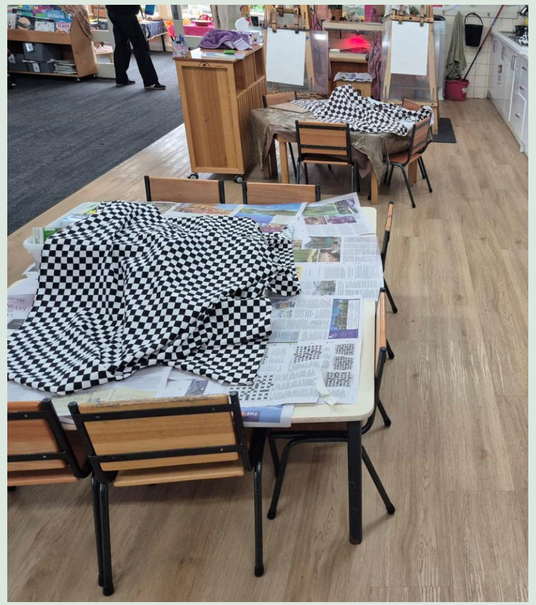


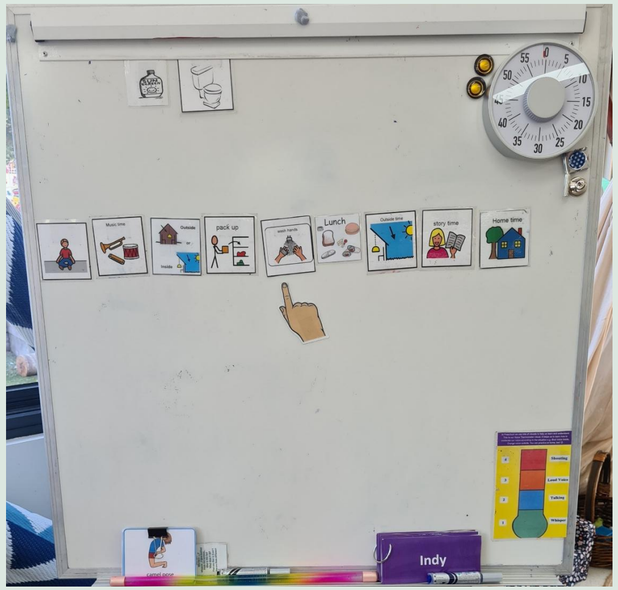
Key Word Sign

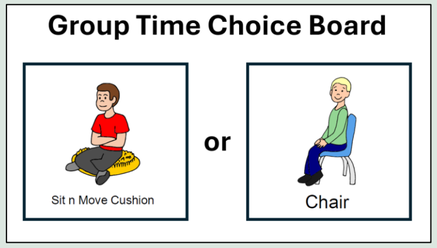


Facial Expression/ Gesture









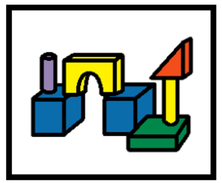




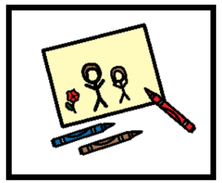




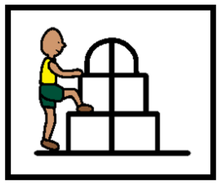




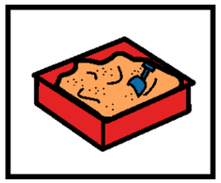
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2



3



4

ADHD Australia Project

[redacted]

Preschoolers aren't meant to be easy

But they shouldn't feel impossible



Recognising children who may need more support

Uniting

ADHD AUSTRALIA



All children have their moments

Every preschooler forgets, fidgets, gets upset or struggles to listen sometimes.

This is typical preschool behaviour and what makes the preschool classroom so challenging.

Some do it more than others. Most grow out of it.

Some don't.

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Some more so than others

Some children stand out as:

- more active
- more impulsive
- more emotional
- more reactive

The question is not whether these behaviours happen.

It's whether they happen more often, more intensely and make preschool harder for the child.

Recognising children who may need more support Uniting ADHD AUSTRALIA



Support comes before diagnosis

Diagnosis of ADHD in preschoolers is only considered:

- when support strategies have not met the child's needs
- the child's challenging behaviour impacts participation
- attention difficulties are affecting learning and skill development

Your approach should not be to identify ADHD, but to recognise children who may benefit from extra support.

Recognising children who may need more support Uniting ADHD AUSTRALIA

Recognising Children Who May Need More Support



Internalised ADHD Traits

- Daydreaming, zoning or spacing out
- Disorganisation, forgetfulness, difficulty starting and finishing tasks
- Losing items, mental fatigue
- Anxiety, rumination, rejection sensitivity, emotional dysregulation
- Perfectionistic traits
- Less outward physical restlessness
- Masking
- Meltdowns once arriving home or after kinder

Looking for Patterns







More Active Than Peers

Hyperactivity



- Constant movement
- Difficulty remaining seated
- High intensity physical play
- Appears physically uncomfortable when still

Support Strategies

Hyperactivity



- Build movement into the day rather than expecting long periods of sitting
- Support regulation with planned physical activity and sensory play
- Provide an environment that supports safety

Support ideas for movement seekers and busy bodies



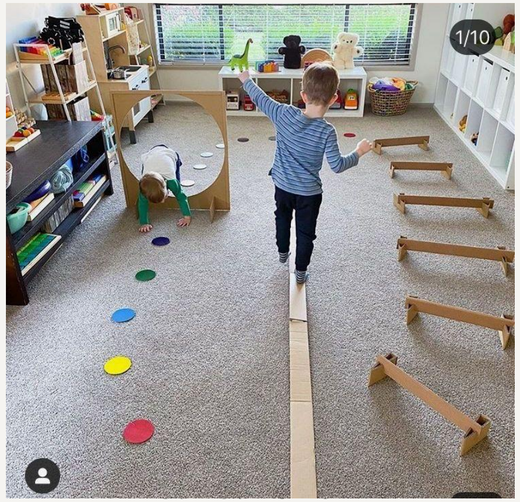

















Acts First, Thinks Later
Impulsivity
• Unpredictable
• Grabs or interrupts
• Impatient
• Blurting out
• Acts impulsively
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Support Strategies
Impulsivity
• Provide closer supervision during higher-risk play
• Intervene early by creating conditions that support safe behaviour
• Collaborate with families to ensure consistent strategies
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Hears The Words, Misses The Message

Difficulty absorbing instructions



- Looks attentive but does something different
- Needs instructions repeated
- Appears surprised by correction
- Struggles with multi-step directions

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Support Strategies

Difficulty absorbing instructions



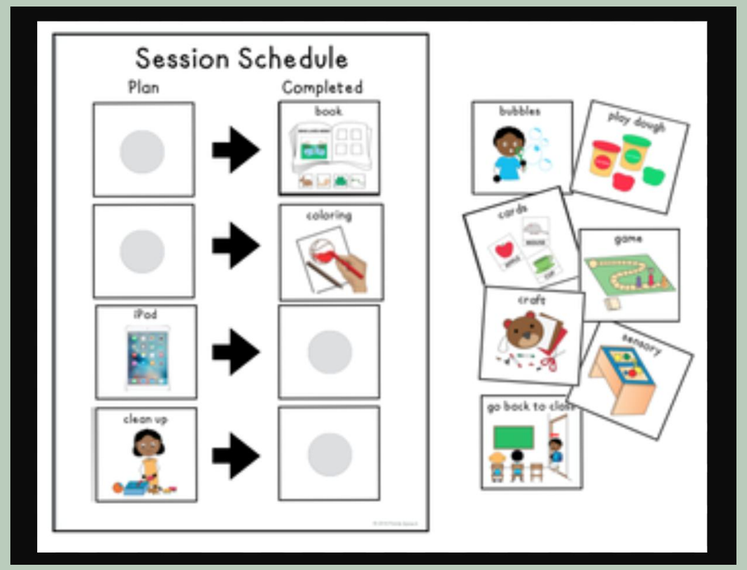
- Check that the child can hear
- Check that they can understand
- Give one simple step at a time
- Scaffold understanding using visual supports

Recognising children who may need more support

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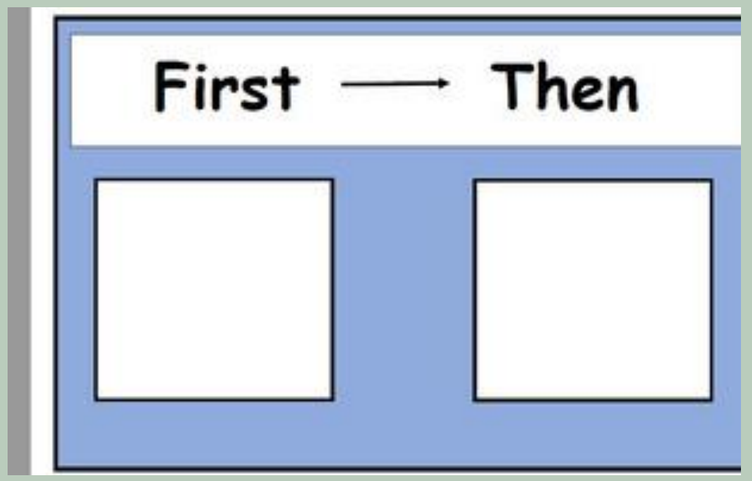
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Supporting Understanding and Processing



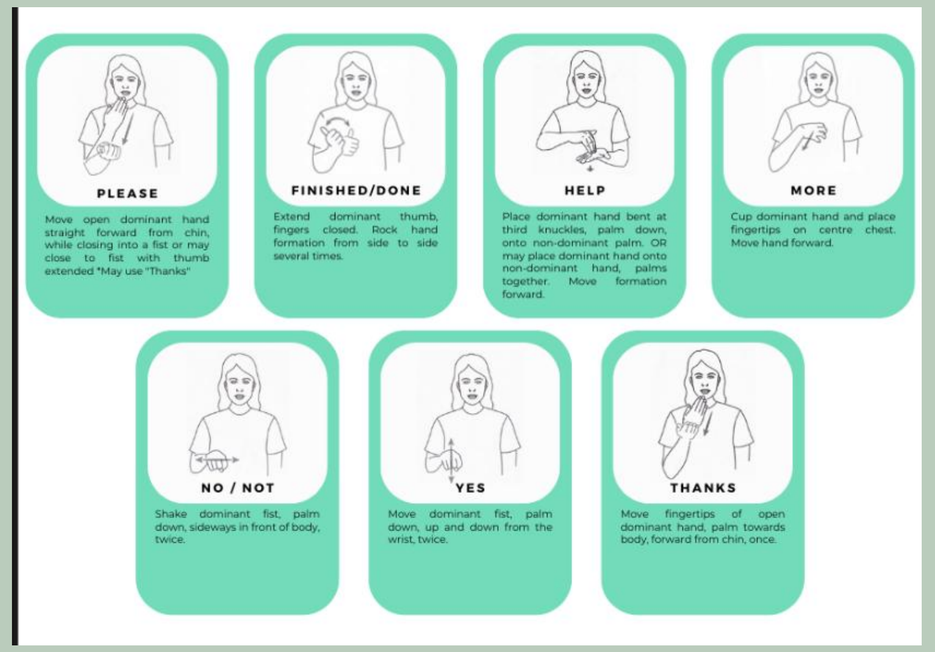













A child's behavior is not always what it seems
• behavior is communication •
What we see: Behavior
What we don't see:
What's under the surface
SOCIAL SKILLS
NEED TO BELONG
PHYSICAL SAFETY
BASIC NEEDS
SECURITY
THOUGHTS
EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING
ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSORS
ATTACHMENT
HUNGER
NEED FOR CONNECTION
POWER
ATTENTION
SLEEP
EMOTIONS
PHYSICAL HEALTH
ANGER
SENSORY NEEDS
DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL
SADNESS
SELF-ESTEEM
FEAR
PARENTS withconfidence


Big Feelings Come Fast
Emotional dysregulation
• Easily frustrated
• Anger escalates quickly
• Reactions seem bigger than peers
• Mood shifts rapidly
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Support Strategies
Emotional dysregulation
• Learn the child's triggers and intervene early
• Redirect the child with a calming activity
• Create a safe space for the child to calm down
• Supervise closely if the behaviour becomes unsafe
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Unpredictable From Moment To Moment

Variability



- Calm one moment, reactive the next
- Behaviour shifts across the day
- Hard to anticipate responses

Recognising children who may need more support

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Support Strategies

Variability

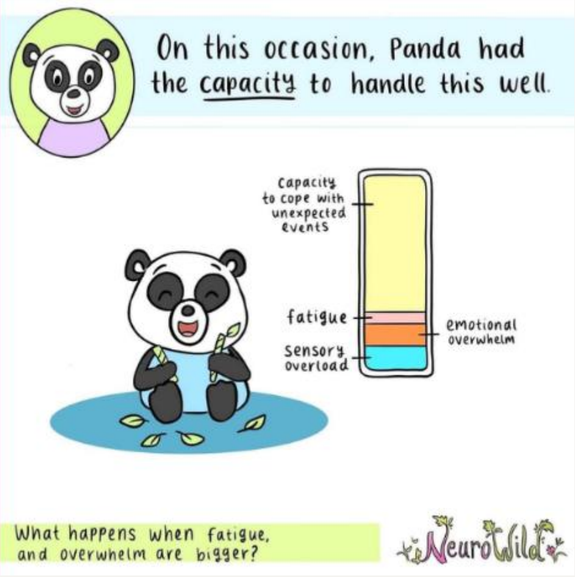


- Look for patterns rather than isolated incidents
- Support friendships and positive peer interactions
- Support regulation first, then learning
- Supervise closely if the behaviour becomes unsafe

Recognising children who may need more support

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Supporting Emotional Regulation Ideas:

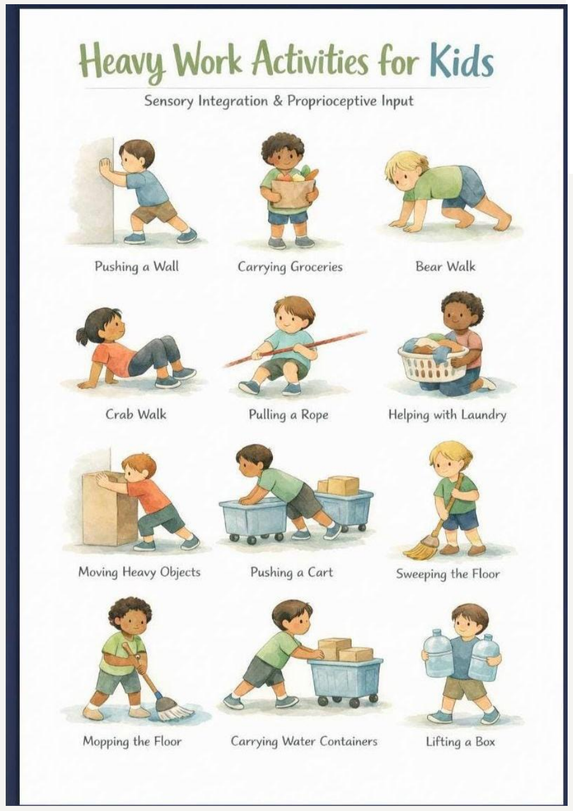
















Attention That Quietly Slips Away

Inattention



- Shorter attention span
- Gets distracted mid-task
- Leaves work unfinished
- Day-dreams frequently

Recognising children who may need more support

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Support Strategies

Inattention



- Provide extra support to stay engaged with activities
- Support perseverance by pairing with a peer
- Provide individual support when needed

Recognising children who may need more support

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Struggles with Structure
Low tolerance for structured tasks
• Avoids table-based work
• Finds it hard to sit quietly in a group
• Prefers movement-based activities
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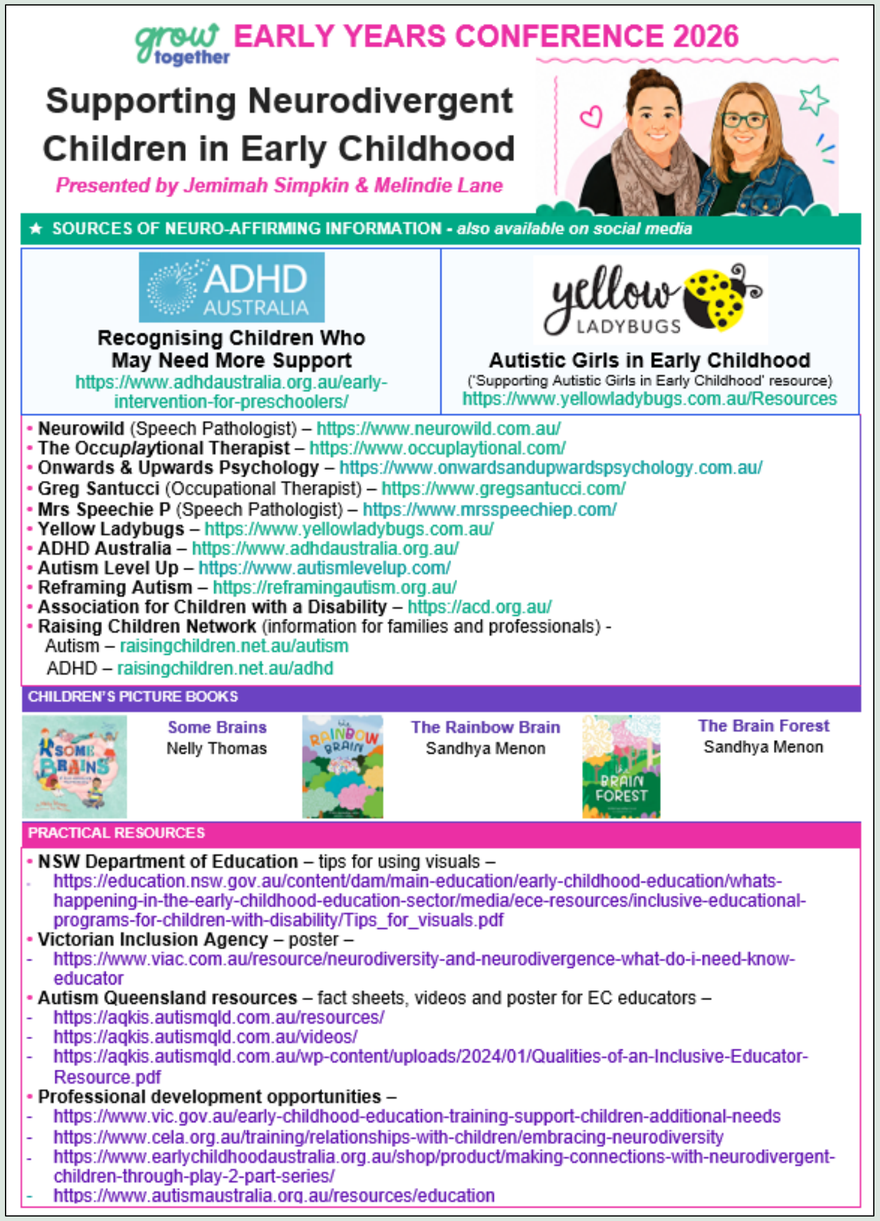

Support Strategies
Low tolerance for structured tasks
• Provide extra support with the daily routines
• Break structured activities into smaller steps
• Focus on engagement and perseverance over outcome
Recognising children who may need more support
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ADHD AUSTRALIA


When To Seek Extra Support
The usual strategies don't work
• Participation, relationships and learning are impacted
• Similar patterns reported at home
• Support needs require input beyond the expertise of the education team
Recognising children who may need more support
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When to seek extra support
The usual strategies don't work
Raise your concerns with the child's family if:
• progress does not occur over time with support
• behaviour is difficult to manage despite appropriate strategies
• it affects learning, participation or relationships
The child's family may seek further support from their Child Health Nurse, GP, paediatrician or psychologist.
Recognising children who may need more support
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Useful Resources

- Yellow Ladybugs
- ADHD Australia & ADHD Assist
- Neurowild
- Mrs Speechie P
- The Occu*play*tional Therapist
- Raising Children Network



grow together EARLY YEARS CONFERENCE 2026

Supporting Neurodivergent Children in Early Childhood

Presented by Jemimah Simpkin & Melindie Lane

★ **SOURCES OF NEURO-AFFIRMING INFORMATION** - *also available on social media*

ADHD AUSTRALIA

Recognising Children Who May Need More Support
https://www.adhdaustralia.org.au/early-intervention-for-preschoolers/

yellow LADYBUGS

Autistic Girls in Early Childhood
('Supporting Autistic Girls in Early Childhood' resource)
https://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/Resources

- **Neurowild** (Speech Pathologist) – https://www.neurowild.com.au/
- **The Occu*play*tional Therapist** – https://www.occuplaytional.com/
- **Onwards & Upwards Psychology** – https://www.onwardsandupwardspsychology.com.au/
- **Greg Santucci** (Occupational Therapist) – https://www.gregsantucci.com/
- **Mrs Speechie P** (Speech Pathologist) – https://www.mrsspeechiep.com/
- **Yellow Ladybugs** – https://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/
- **ADHD Australia** – https://www.adhdaustralia.org.au/
- **Autism Level Up** – https://www.autismlevelup.com/
- **Reframing Autism** – https://reframingautism.org.au/
- **Association for Children with a Disability** – https://acd.org.au/
- **Raising Children Network** (information for families and professionals) -
  Autism – raisingchildren.net.au/autism
  ADHD – raisingchildren.net.au/adhd

CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

Some Brains
Nelly Thomas

The Rainbow Brain
Sandhya Menon

The Brain Forest
Sandhya Menon

PRACTICAL RESOURCES

- **NSW Department of Education** – tips for using visuals –
  - https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/early-childhood-education/whats-happening-in-the-early-childhood-education-sector/media/ece-resources/inclusive-educational-programs-for-children-with-disability/Tips_for_visuals.pdf
- **Victorian Inclusion Agency** – poster –
  - https://www.viac.com.au/resource/neurodiversity-and-neurodivergence-what-do-i-need-know-educator
- **Autism Queensland resources** – fact sheets, videos and poster for EC educators –
  - https://aqkis.autismqld.com.au/resources/
  - https://aqkis.autismqld.com.au/videos/
  - https://aqkis.autismqld.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Qualities-of-an-Inclusive-Educator-Resource.pdf
- **Professional development opportunities** –
  - https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-education-training-support-children-additional-needs
  - https://www.cela.org.au/training/relationships-with-children/embracing-neurodiversity
  - https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/shop/product/making-connections-with-neurodivergent-children-through-play-2-part-series/
  - https://www.autismaustralia.org.au/resources/education

To apply for a Warrawong Grant:

https://www.foresthillecf.org.au/Main.asp?_=Grants



