

Lessons from the Neurodiversity Movement

What CAPTAIN Cadre Can Do to Better Support Autistic Students

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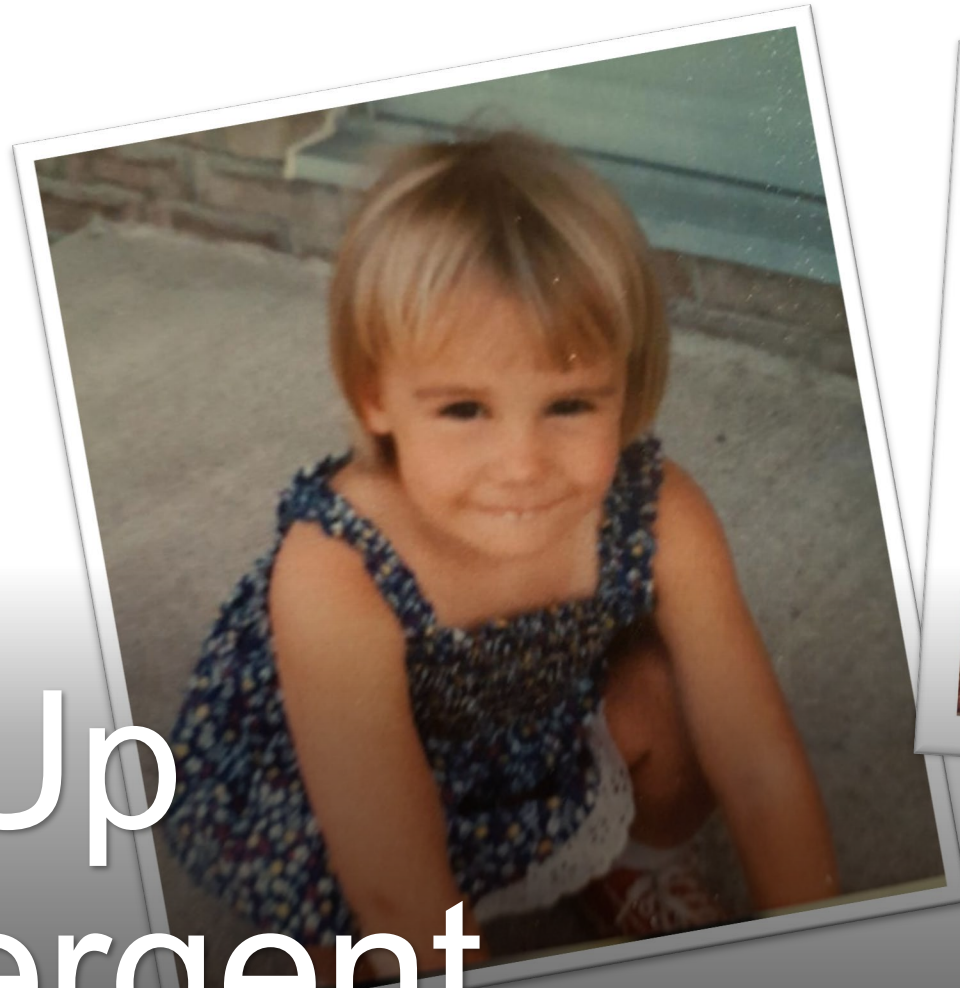
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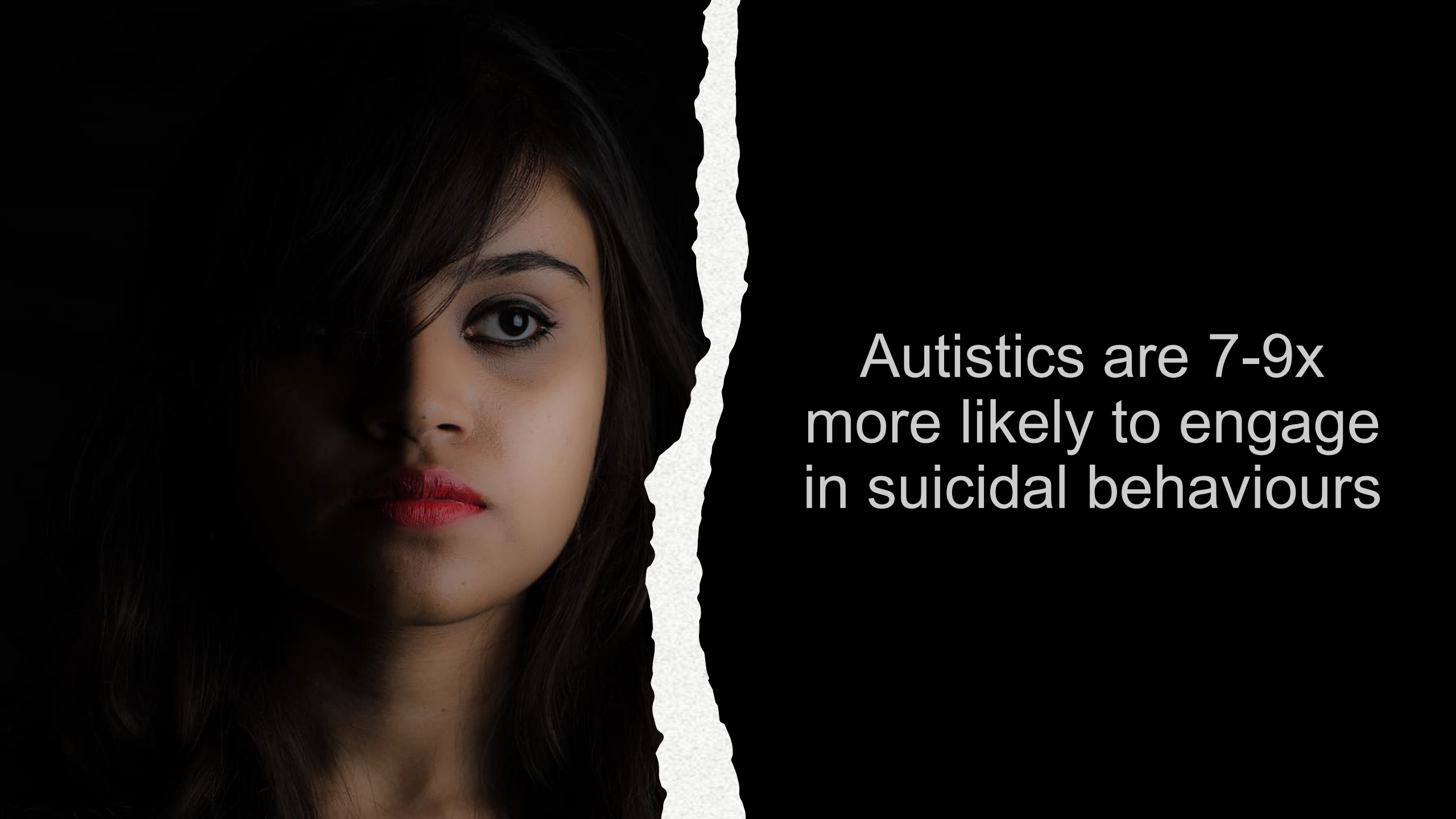


UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Growing Up Neurodivergent



Medical Model vs. the Neurodiversity Paradigm



Autistics are 7-9x
more likely to engage
in suicidal behaviours



From a very young age, I
internalized that:

- I was BAD
 - I was overly sensitive and overly emotional
 - My needs were unreasonable
 - I was unlikeable
 - I wasn't normal
 - I HAD TO CHANGE
-

Medical Model Definition of Autism

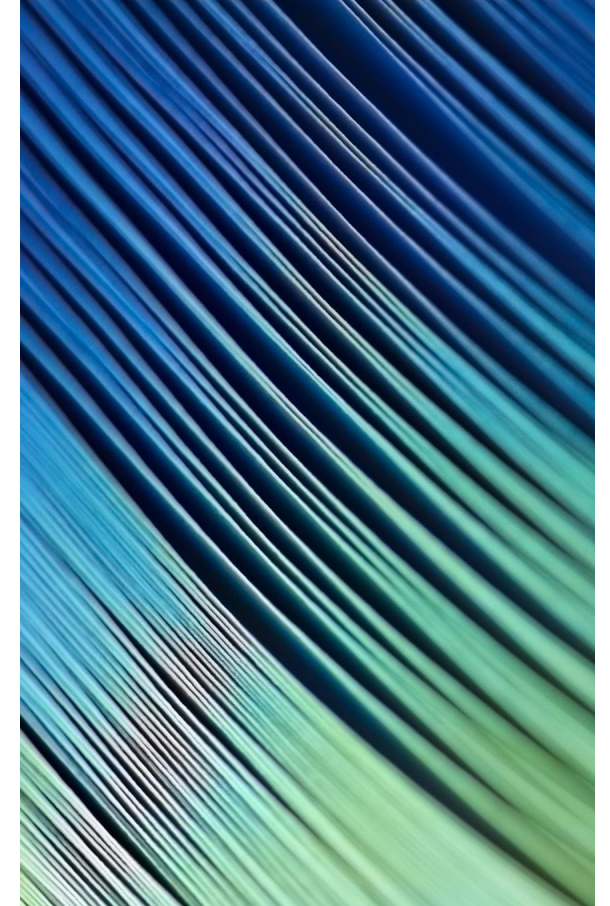
Rest on two fundamental assumptions

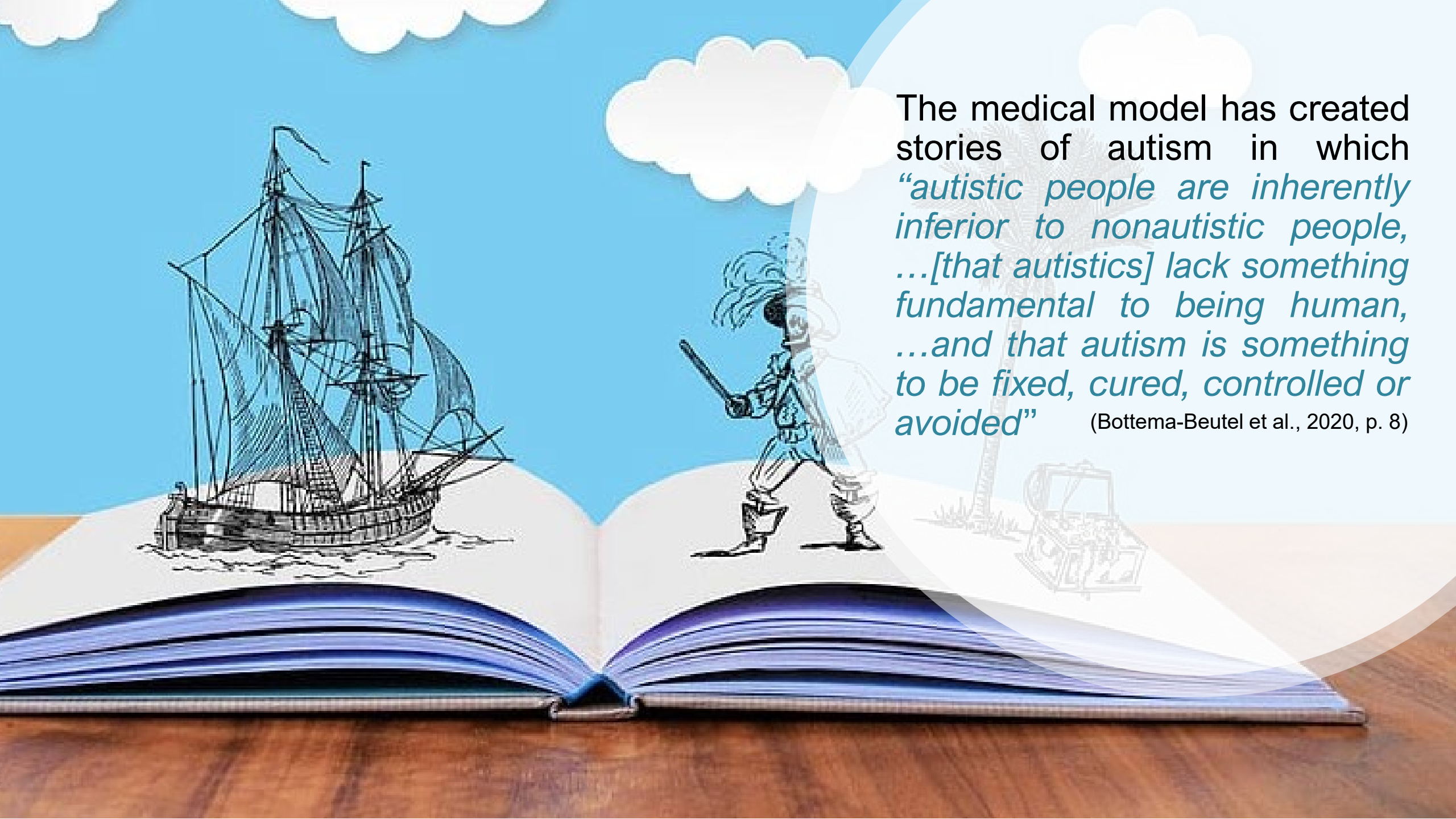
1

- There is one “right”, “normal” or “healthy” way for human brains to function

2

- If your neurological configuration and functioning differs substantially from the dominant standard of “normal”, then there is “Something Wrong With You”





The medical model has created stories of autism in which *“autistic people are inherently inferior to nonautistic people, ...[that autistics] lack something fundamental to being human, ...and that autism is something to be fixed, cured, controlled or avoided”* (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020, p. 8)

We need to refocus our interventions on supporting, developing and celebrating the child's strengths



Instead of teaching us to act as 'neurotypical' as possible



If that is the treatment goal, we will always fail



We will never be neurotypical





Using operant conditioning, you could teach your cat to swim. But a cat who can swim is still a cat. It will never be a dog.

Neurodiversity Paradigm

What is an alternative story?


Neurodiversity
refers to the
simple fact
that all brains
are different



Neurodiversity Paradigm

Three fundamental assumptions:

1. Diversity of brains is valuable
2. The idea of a “normal” brain is socially constructed
3. The power inequalities and stigma experienced by neurodiverse peoples mirror social dynamics toward other minority identities (e.g., First Nations, LGBTQ+)

A large, ancient tree with thick, gnarled branches and dense green foliage dominates the foreground. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a bright, starburst effect in the upper left. The background shows a forest of thinner trees, with light rays streaming through the leaves. The overall scene is lush and vibrant, with a strong sense of natural beauty and tranquility.

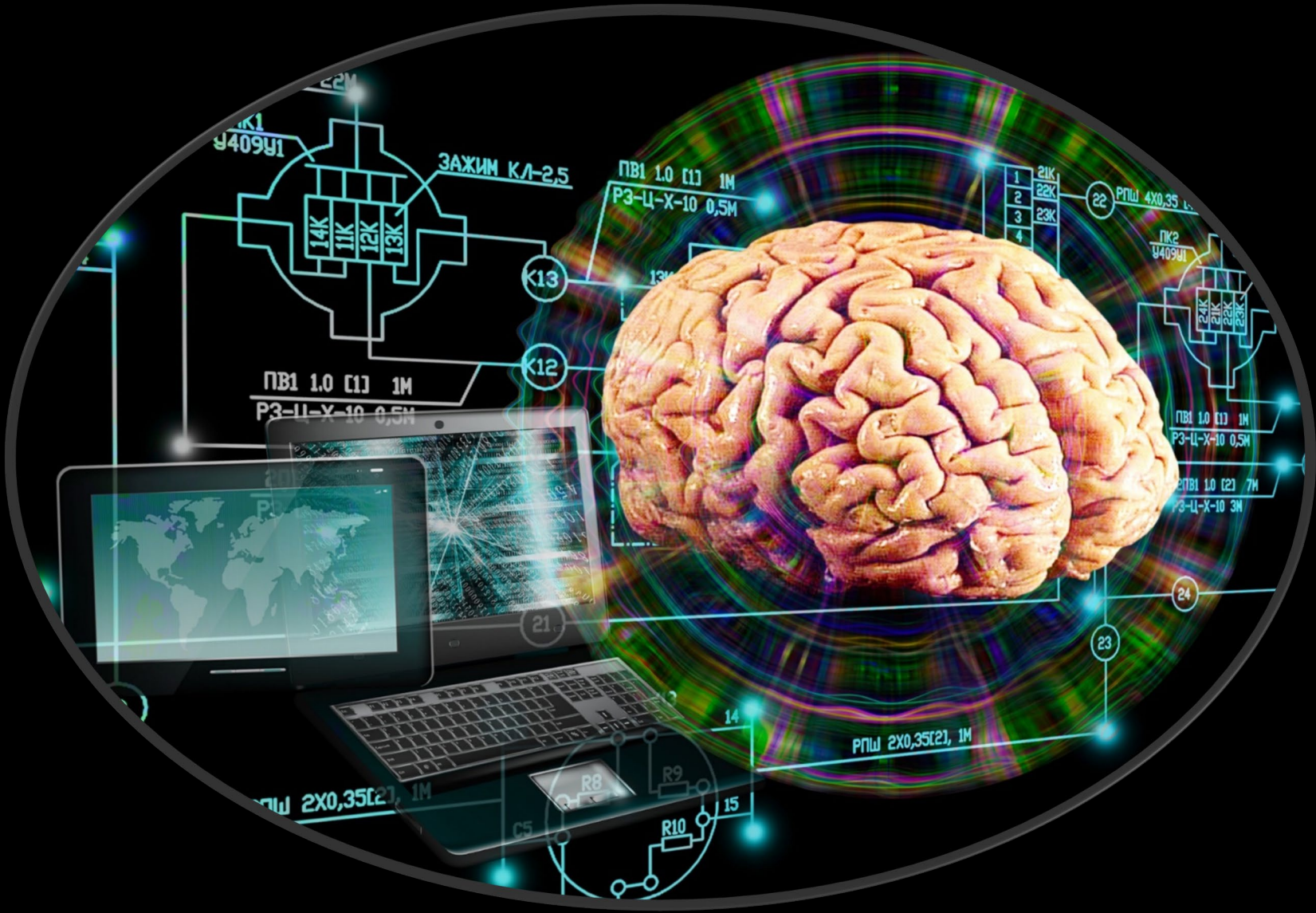
**“Just as biodiversity is essential to ecosystem stability,
so neurodiversity may be essential for cultural stability”**

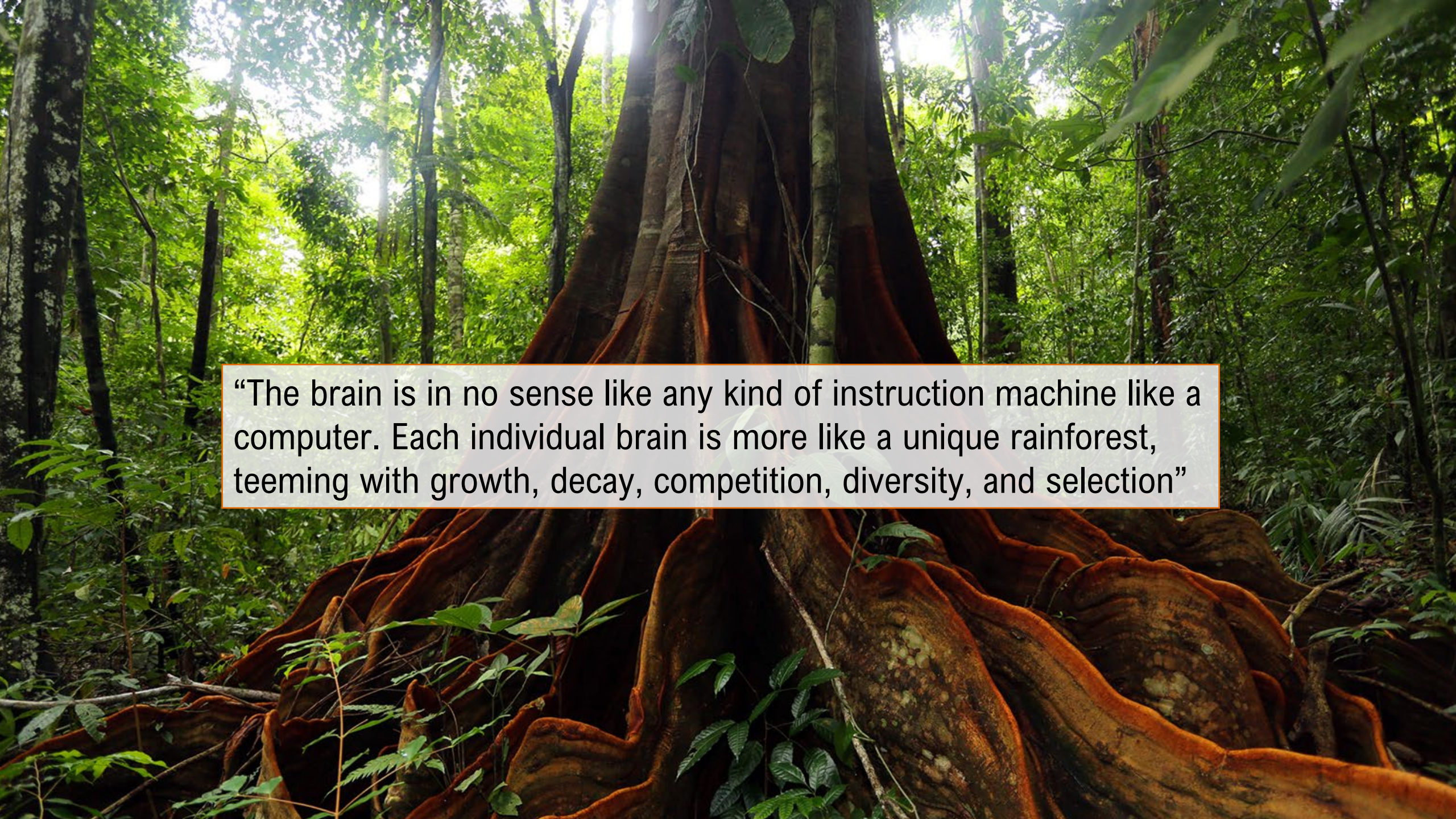
(Singer, 2017, loc. 1979)

(Armstrong, 2010; Singer, 2017; Walker, 2012)



“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will be best at any given moment?”



A photograph of a large tree in a rainforest, showing its thick trunk and prominent, reddish-brown buttresses. The tree is surrounded by lush green foliage and other trees in the background. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a bright, dappled light effect. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box with an orange border.

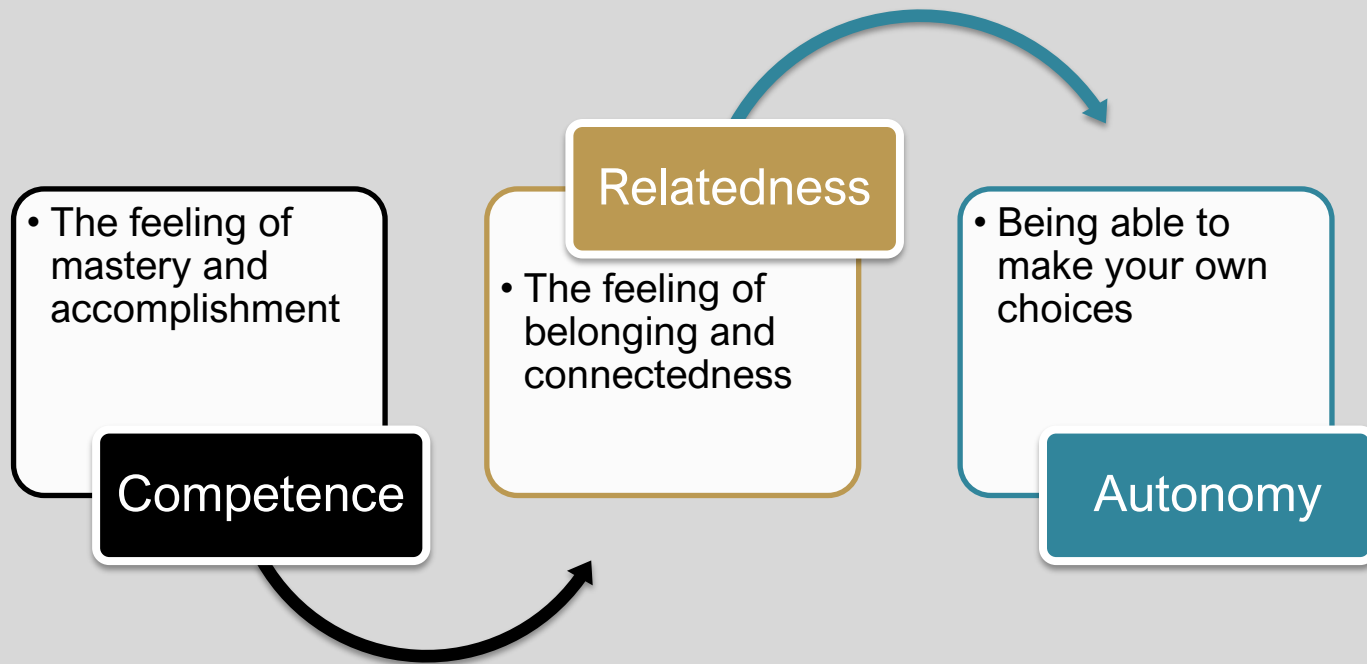
“The brain is in no sense like any kind of instruction machine like a computer. Each individual brain is more like a unique rainforest, teeming with growth, decay, competition, diversity, and selection”


What does it mean to thrive?

And... is it any different for autistics?

Self-Determination Theory

All humans have three core psychological needs



A photograph of two people hiking through a dense forest. The person on the left is wearing a blue shirt, and the person on the right is wearing a light blue shirt and a red backpack. They are both looking towards the right side of the frame. The background is filled with green foliage and tree trunks.

Relatedness: Is it any different for autistics?

“A strong sense of connection with others in the community”
Seligman, 2011

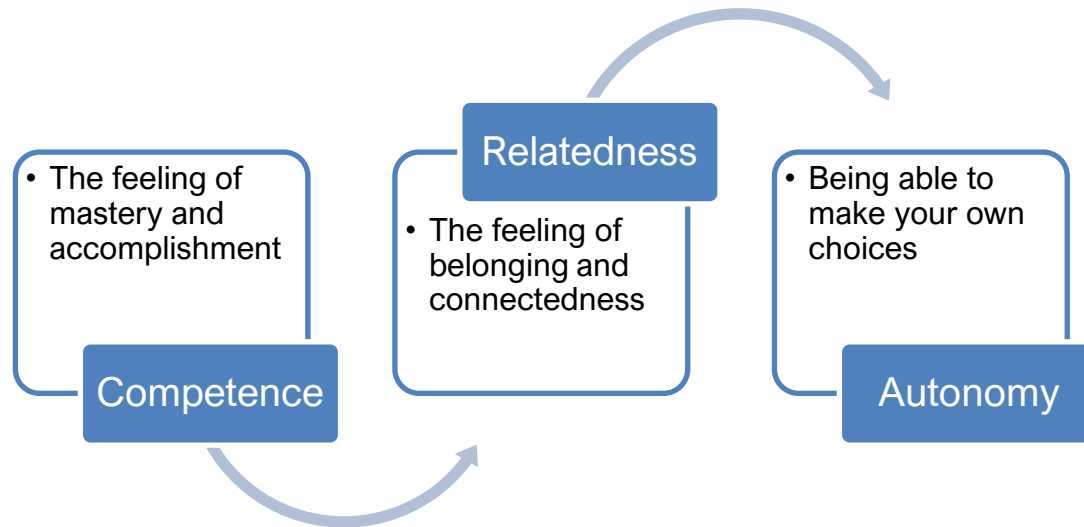


May be operationalized differently among people on the spectrum



Examples: prioritizing the development of a few close friendships or highly valuing their relationships with animals

Self-Determination Theory



SDT proposes that the degree to which **any** of these three psychological needs is unsupported or thwarted within a social context will have a robust detrimental impact on **wellness** in that setting

Focuses on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people's sense of volition and initiative, their overall well-being, and (as is especially relevant to educators) the quality of their performance.

Teaching Social Skills

To what extent do our practices for teaching social skills to autistic students align with the tenants of the neurodiversity paradigm and self-determination theory?



The Double Empathy Problem

And Autistic Communication Styles

Many key assumptions of social skills training are problematic at their core





We've historically assumed that autistic people lack empathy and neurotypical people have it

Research suggests it's not that simple...

1. Double Empathy Problem

2. Autistic Peer-to-Peer Communication

3. Masking and Camouflaging



What is the “Double Empathy Problem”?



Communication
breakdowns are a
two-way issue

“If it takes this much effort to assist someone with ASD in interacting with neurotypicals then where does the assumption that a neurotypical can understand and interact with someone with ASD so easily come from?”

Quote from an autistic participant in a social skills training intervention (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020, p.202)

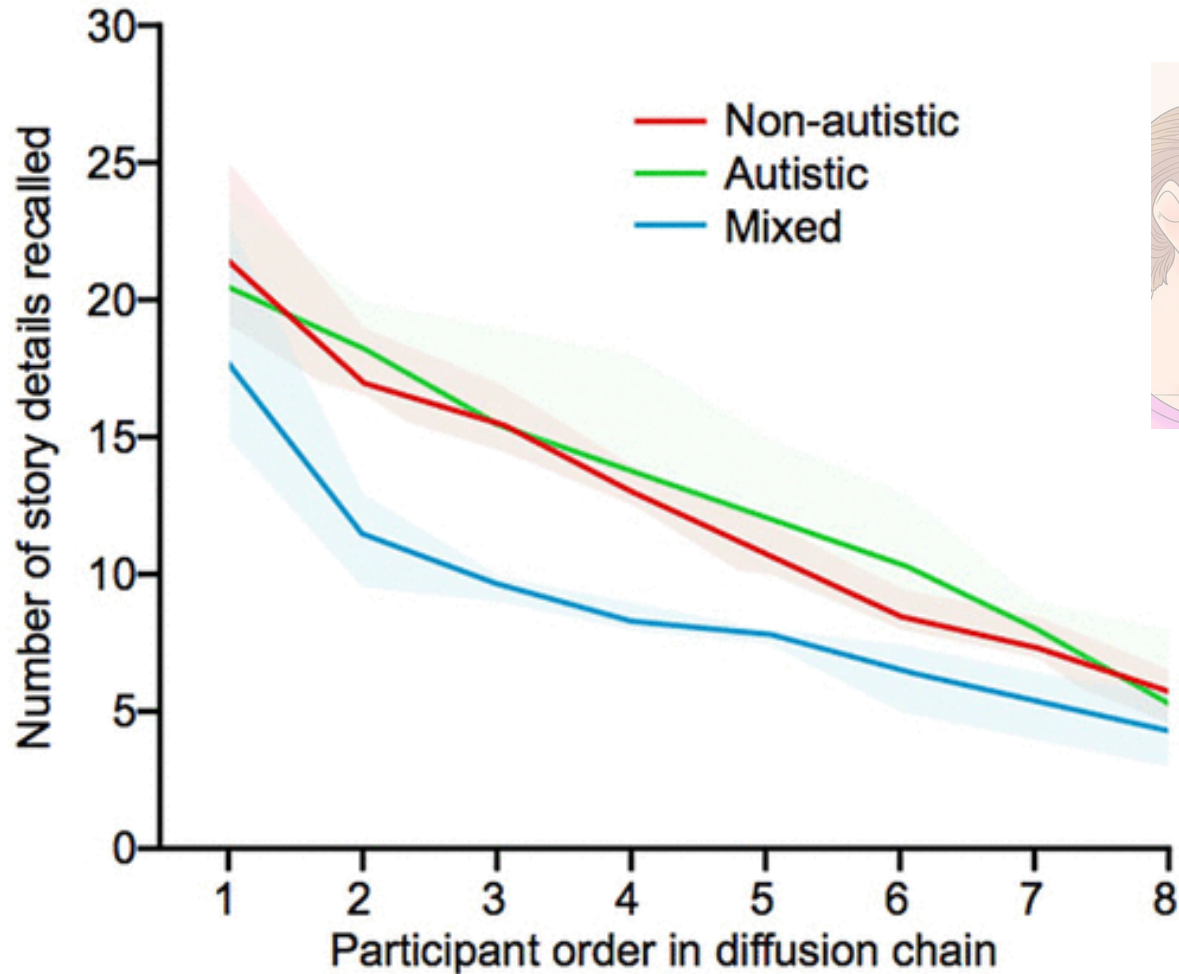


Autistic Peer-to-Peer Communication



The Case of the Telephone Game

The Case of the Telephone Game



“Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective”



Neurotypical Peers are Less Willing to Interact with Those with Autism based on Thin Slice Judgments

Noah J. Sasson^{1,*}, Daniel J. Faso¹, Jack Nugent², Sarah Lovell³, Daniel P. Kennedy^{2,*} & Ruth B. Grossman^{3,*}

“...biases disappear when impressions are based on conversational content lacking audio-visual cues, suggesting that style, not substance, drives negative impressions of ASD”



Social Skills Training Leads to Camouflaging

Camouflaging and masking strategies are often used by individuals with and without autism to blend into one's social surroundings by presenting a 'socially acceptable' or 'best' version of oneself, and, in the case of people with autism, by hiding our more obvious autistic traits and behaviours



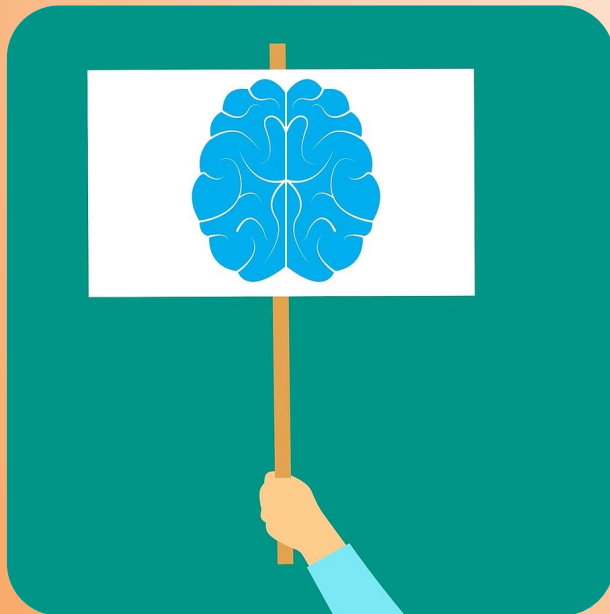
Autistic participant in Hull et al., 2017:

“It’s mentally exhausting constantly having to be something else, literally never being able to be myself, and kind of sad too I guess?”

Autistic participant in Livingston et al., 2019:

“Constant overthinking of possibilities of what to say, how it will come across, what others are and are not saying, the connotations of every word, sentence structure, emphasis, body language, as well as all of the above combined in a giant matrix of thought!”

Five-Minute Brain Break



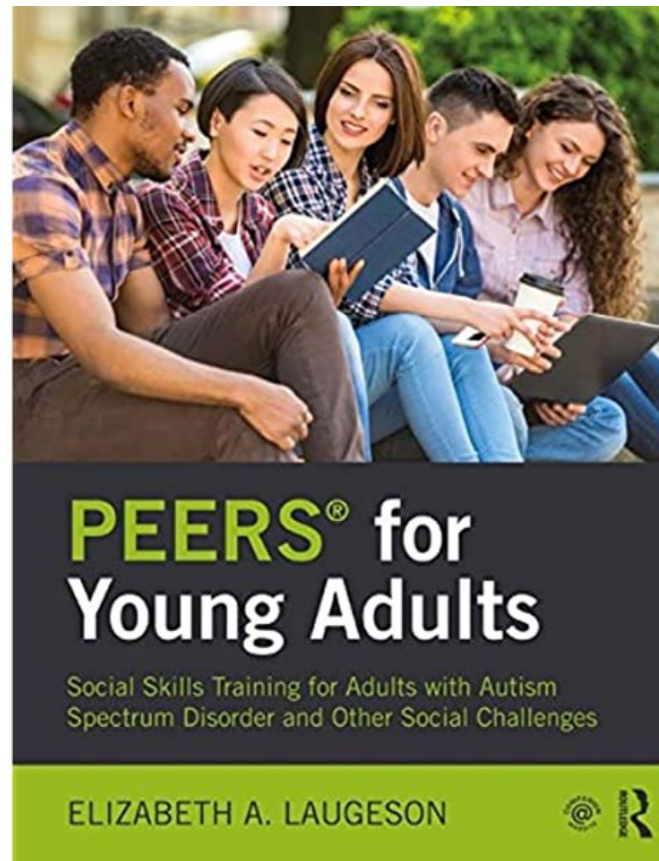
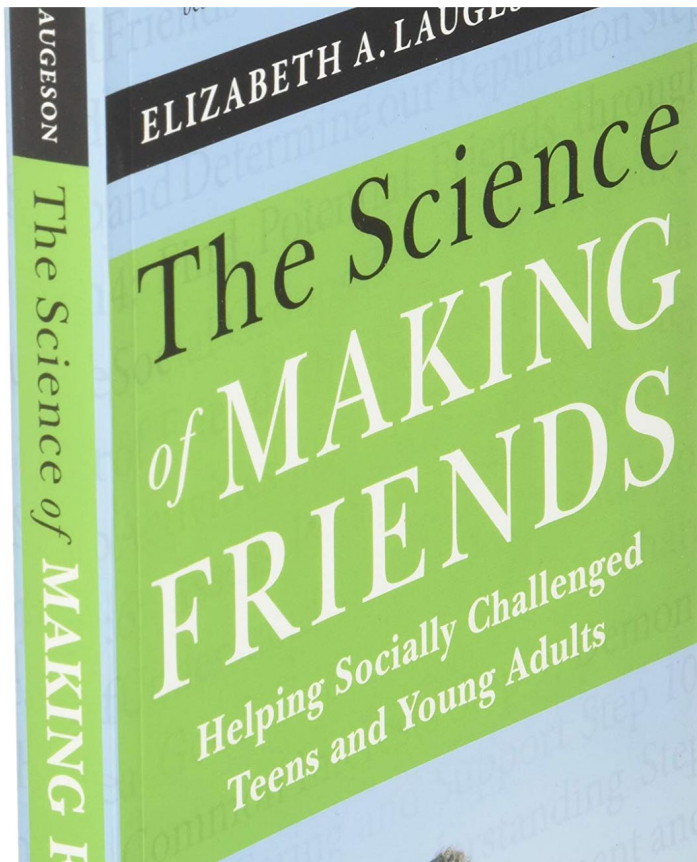
Please leave us comments in the chat to answer any or all of the following questions:

1. What most struck me about this talk so far is...
2. The question I would most like to ask is...
3. The idea I most take issue with is...

How are Social Skills Taught? An Example

Questioning Current Practices

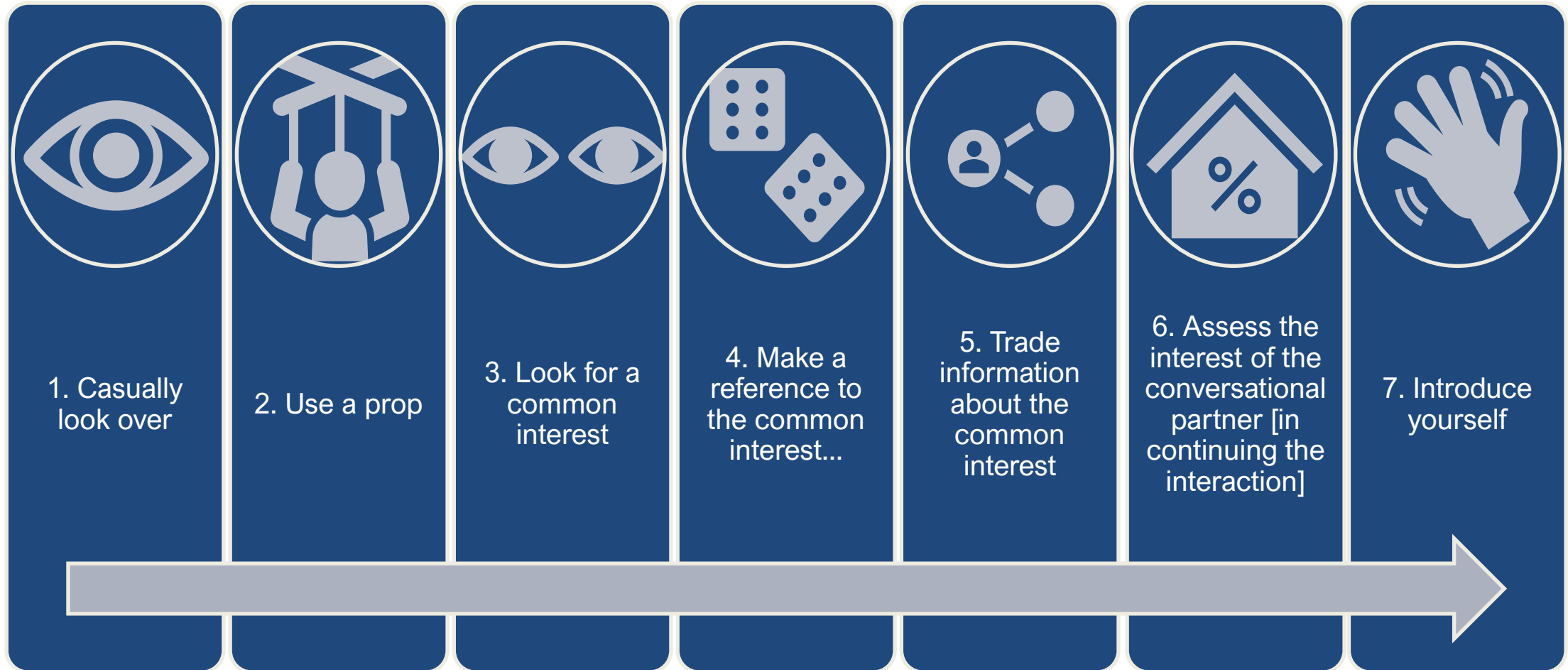
An example of how PEERS® teaches social skills



“The following steps should be used when your teen or young adult is trying to start an individual conversation with someone he or she either doesn’t know or knows only slightly... These steps should be followed in the order presented without skipping any steps”

(Laugeson, 2013)

How to initiate a conversation with a stranger





[When people are not acquainted], a 'ticket' is required to begin a conversation... Tickets are not necessarily comprised of topic proffers on subjects in which the interaction partner is known to have an interest... Instead, they are generally fitted to the immediate context, and situate the two potential interaction partners as being involved together in the present social encounter. For example, when two people encounter each other at a bus stop one might say, "You waiting for the bus?"

- ...research has shown that, given the action-oriented nature of talk, it is often difficult to even pin down a particular topic when examining naturally-occurring conversations



Are we supposed to be following a long, confusing, stressful (and perhaps not entirely accurate) mental checklist of social rules all the time? In social interactions that unfold rapidly with no option to take a time-out to process?

Wouldn't this be exhausting and ineffective?

Do we learn social skills through explicit teaching, or through procedural learning, through learning by doing?



How are Social Skills Taught?

Will the proposed intervention would be viewed favorably by the individuals for whom it is intended to benefit?

Perspectives of Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder on Social-focused Intervention Practices

33 autistic participants in total

- 11 females (33% female)

67% white

58% in high school

Mean Age: 17.8 years

Age range: 14y-24y

Identifying social goals for students

Positives



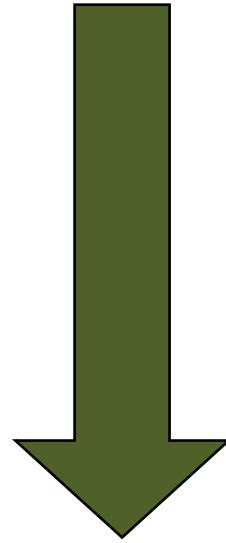
Negatives

- They personally did not need social-related goals
- Their current social situation was adequate and would not be improved by setting goals
- Setting social goals doesn't work
 - Hasn't worked in the past
 - Goals too difficult
- Stigma attached

Identifying social goals for students



Social goals can be
“good because they are
measurable for someone
who may not have the
best sense of what
normal social ability is”
22-year-old male



“It has the potential to be a very
obvious and plain attempt at
exactly what it is. It will draw bad
attention to the selected students
and cause bickering and unrest
among the other students. Most
students will deem something of
the sort ‘childish’ and complain
the entire time.” 16-year-old male

Autistic Voices



...in their words

How are Social Skills Taught?

Involving teachers or other adults



Adult supports

Teacher may “grease the wheels” to get a social interaction going

Adults supports
can be helpful

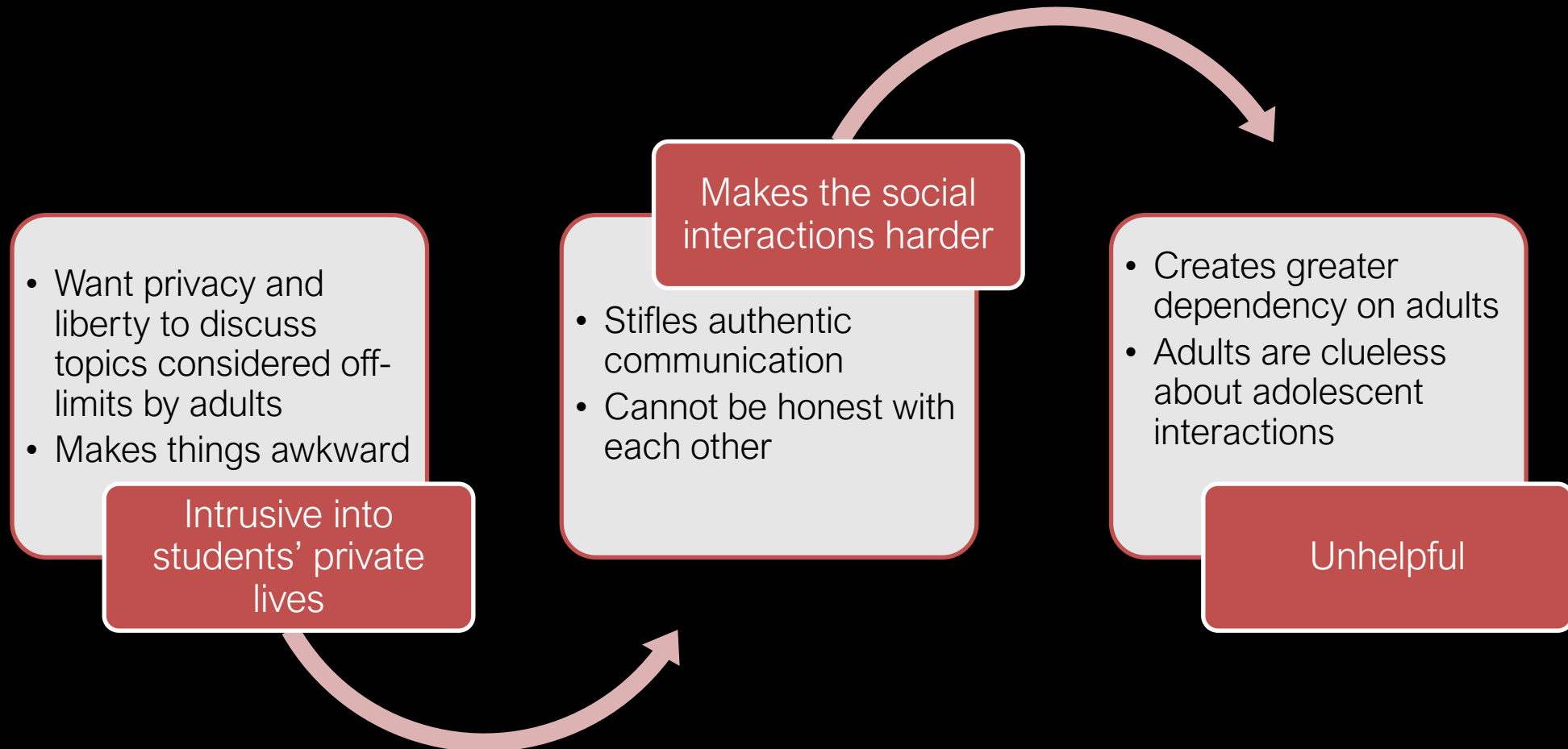
To initiate
conversations

To keep
conversation
going

Planning times
to meet

Arranging
transportation

Presence of teacher(s) or other adult supports is often experienced as intrusive



How are Social Skills Taught?

Involving non-autistic students in the intervention

Recruiting
non-autistic
peers

Orientation
Events

Regular
meetings

Recruiting peers to be involved in the intervention

Positives



Might widen their social circle or increase their ability to socialize

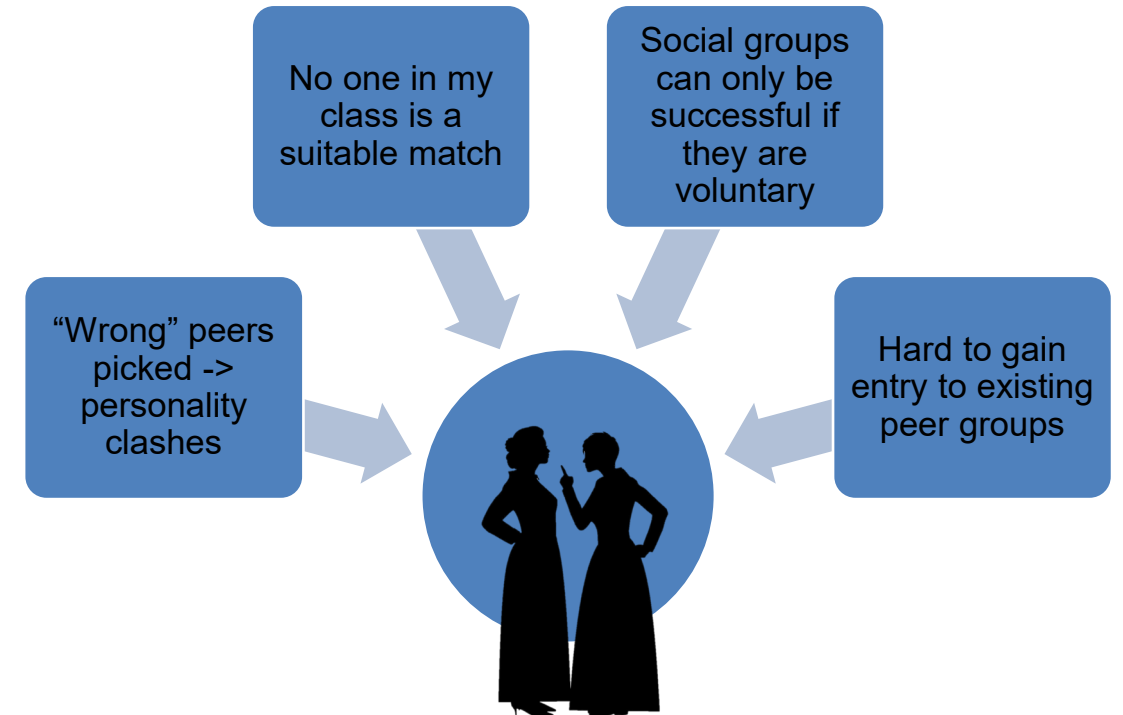


Please invite peers with common interests!



Component most likely to lead to successful social interactions

Negatives



Hold an orientation meeting to explain the intervention to peers



“This would cause more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Think about it. You’re putting a child with social issues who has trouble with his peers in a **spotlight** in front of his peers telling them how he/she is special.”

“First off, this will **embarrass** that student heavily. It makes me uneasy in meetings when I have to discuss while everyone stares holes into my skull.”

“Second off the kids couldn’t care less what the teacher has to say about autism. They don’t care.”

“Most importantly it will draw extreme aggression towards the subjected child. The peers will not react kindly to having to go to a lecture because of the one student. They will feel that the child said something against them. And here come the mentally retarded jokes.”

Autistic Voices



...in their words

“Uh-uh. This might work with adults, but I repeat.
DO. NOT. USE. THIS. WITH. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Hold an orientation meeting to explain the intervention to peers

Positives

- Educating others about autism
- Increased opportunity for positive social interactions, social success and social acceptance

Autistic Voices



...in their words

- *“I like the idea of being understood by my peers”*
- *“It’s a great way to educate the other peers ‘til they learn more about what the people with autism feel”*

Meet regularly with peers

Increases number
of social
interactions

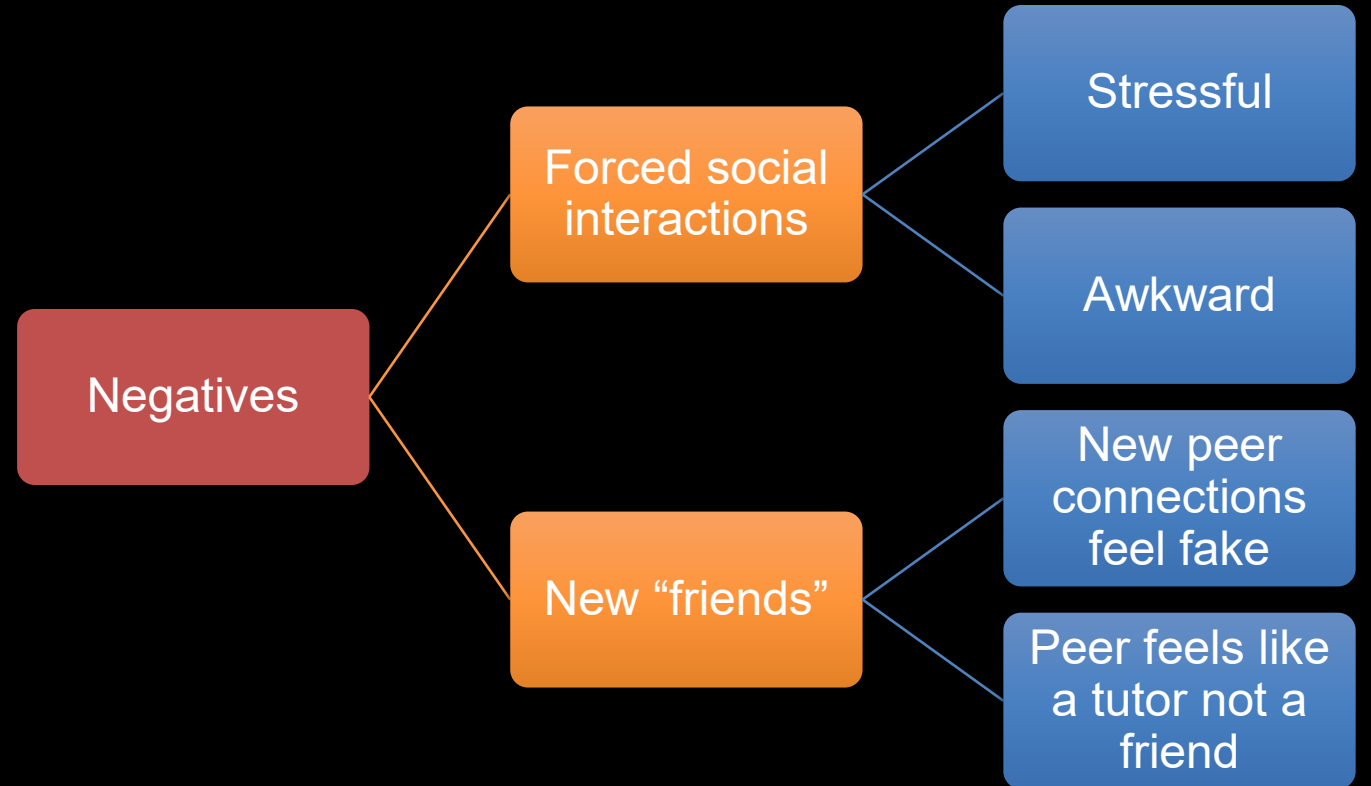
Through
improved social
skills

By increasing size
of social circle

Enjoy the
predictability of
regularly
scheduled social
interactions

Positives

4. Meet regularly with peers



Recruiting peers
to be involved in
the intervention



Autistic Voices



...in their words

“I have used this idea successfully once, but only under special circumstances (i.e., I was already friends with one member of the group). **More often, it’s just been a brick wall of awkward”**

But can we truly
dispense with social
skills training?



- Autistics should not have to work so hard to 'pass' as neurotypical in order to achieve success at home, work or school
 - Yet, autistic youth and adults are often judged unfairly because our 'odd behaviors'
-

An Unfair Double Bind

- We look down on ourselves for acting 'too autistic' according to neurotypical standards
- At the same time, we feel ashamed for not acting 'autistic enough'; and failing to act as our true authentic selves



Unintentional rudeness and social feedback: **An Example**

Adam is very interested in trains and wants to share all his interesting train-related facts with other people. Adam's classmate Sarah is planning to travel on a train. Adam helpfully provides lots of information about schedules, routes, how to validate train tickets, and other useful information.

Sarah is an experienced train traveler, so Sarah finds Adam's well-intended advice exhausting and condescending.

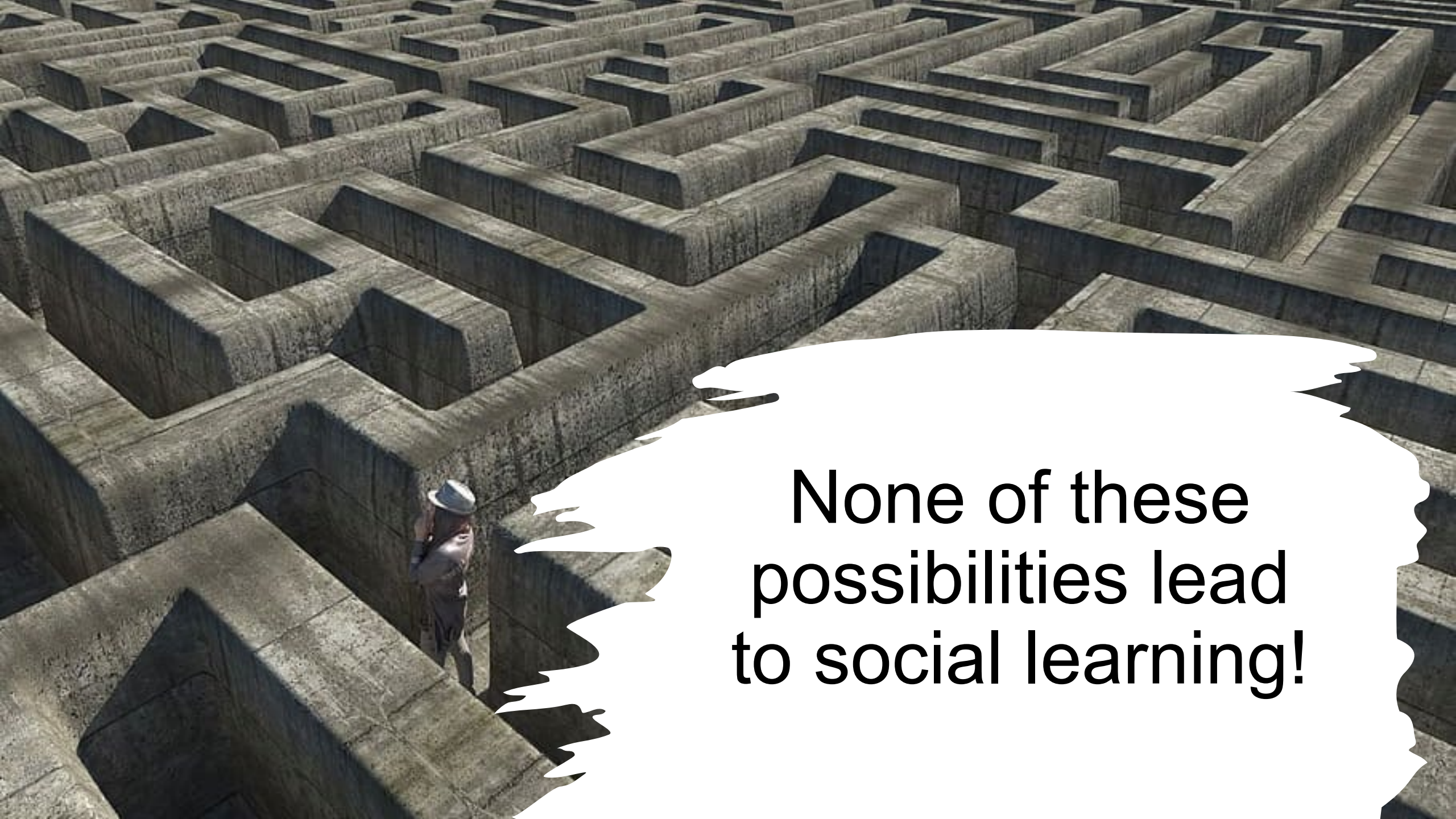
Possible Outcomes

Sarah uses subtle cues to convey to Adam that she is not interested. She uses body language to suggest boredom and disengages from the conversation at the first possible opportunity. But Adam doesn't notice these subtle cues.

Sarah tells Adam that he is being rude and "mansplaining." But Adam is bewildered and feels defensive; he was only trying to help!

Sarah tries to help Adam by suggesting that it would be helpful for him to be less "patronizing" in his interactions with others. But Adam doesn't really understand this feedback because it assumes a shared language - it assumes that he understands what Sarah means by "patronizing" - and he doesn't.

Sarah does nothing to stop Adam from continuing, making him look awkward in front of others. Sarah subtly encourages other people to laugh at Adam



None of these possibilities lead to social learning!

So, Should/How Should Social Skills Be Taught?

Some suggestions and recommendations

Learning social skills while doing an activity



Easier

Helps to have a focus



More authentic

Intrinsically motivated to engage in the activity

Everyone is learning together



More enjoyable

Provides something to talk about

Strategies when someone is unintentionally rude...

Be clear

Make sure the person understands the message you are trying to convey.

- Try to be as explicit as possible (without compromising dignity).
- Use terms and concepts you think the person will understand.

Protect dignity

Be gentle, and don't shame the person when providing feedback!

- Don't chide or "make a production" of it!
- Be non-judgmental
- Use humour, if possible.

Don't be arbitrary

Don't simply invoke conventions and say this is the right or proper way. Many of us will question the rationality of social conventions!

- Try to refer to people's reactions and how they feel / interpret things.
- Don't try to argue that the "faux pas" itself is inappropriate or wrong.



Unintentional rudeness and social feedback: An Example

That's a lot of great information Adam! But I hope you wouldn't provide so much detail to other people, especially without asking them if they need it. I know you are just trying to help, but some people might be worried you think they are incompetent or that they don't know what they are doing...

ed in trains and interesting train-people. Adam's ng to travel on provides lots of edules, routes, tets, and other ul information.

train traveller, so Saran finds Adam's well-intended advice exhausting and condescending.

Strengths-based education



Begins with educators discovering what their students do best



Then educators help students use their strengths while learning new or difficult things



So that their students “can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence”

Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 2



How to Use Strengths to Guide Learning



1

What have I observed that works well for the student?

2

What tools, activities or learning sequences bring out the best in the student?

3

What has been or can be done to support the student's learning and development where there is a concern/ challenge?

Breakout Discussion 2

“Social skills training” can both enhance and restrict the social emotional growth of autistic students

Consider autistic students you have worked with in the past.

Share examples of when social skills training enhanced their social emotional growth and when such training restricted their development.

Final Thoughts

Double Empathy and Power



Fig. 1. Responses to the task of drawing an *E* on one's forehead: self-oriented *E* (left), indicating no perspective taking, and other-oriented *E* (right), indicating perspective taking.

Participants are assigned to write about a situation where they had power over others, or where others had power over them

Participants draw the letter “E” on their foreheads

Do they remember to take the perspective of the viewer into account?

It is not the neurodivergent
child's responsibility to learn to
live like a neurotypical





Education begins the moment we see children as innately wise and capable beings. Only then can we play along in their world (V. Gowmon)