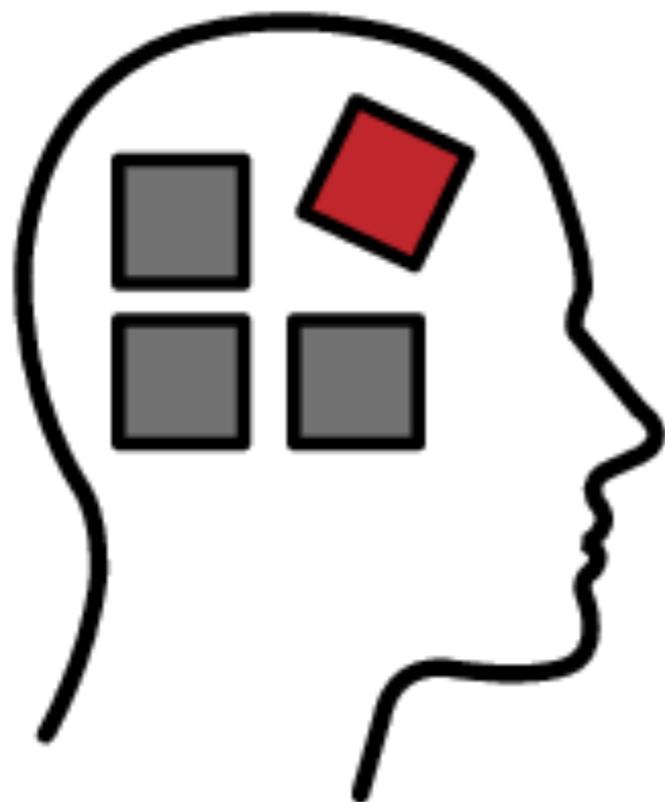


What Jewish Educators Should Know About Autism

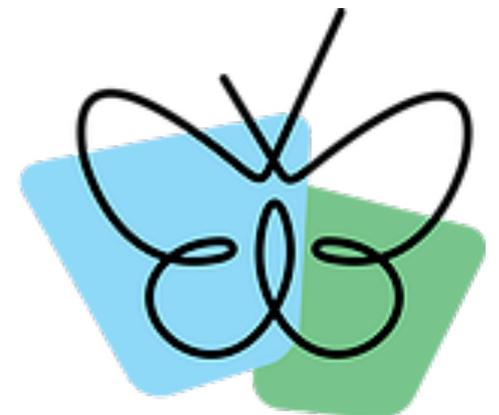
Rabbi Ruti Regan

Rabbinic Disability Scholar in Residence



www.matankids.org
@mataninc

matan





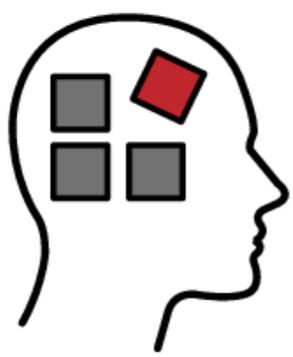
autistic

Language politics



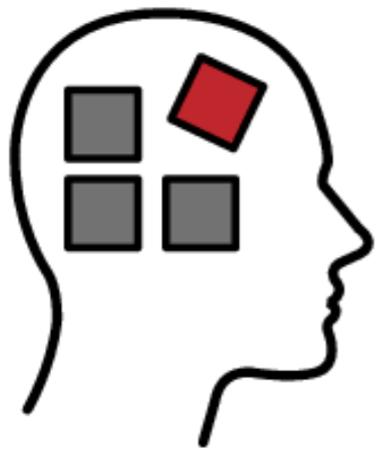
with
autism

- I say “autistic” because that’s the language the organized autistic community uses.
- Related: I’m a female rabbi. I don’t call myself “a “person with femaleness who happens to be ordained within the Hebrew faith”.
- I care more about what people are saying than whether they’re using a noun or an adjective to say it.

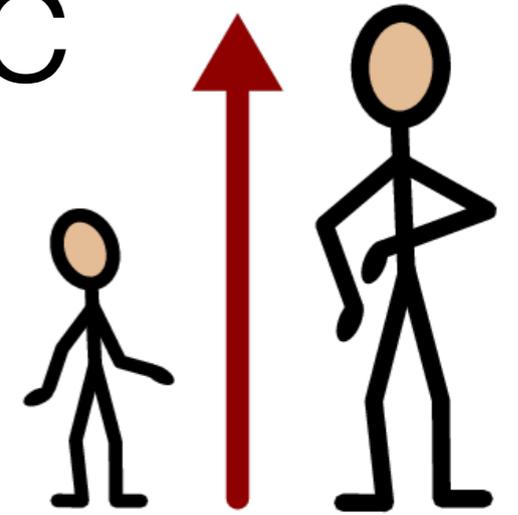


What is autism?

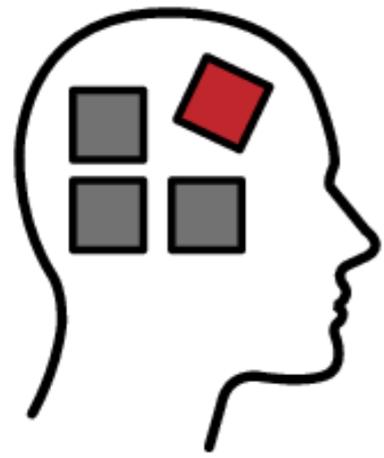
- Autism is a neurological developmental disability.
- Thought to be genetic; autistic people are affected by autism from early childhood onward.
- Autism is not always significantly disabling in early childhood.
- Autism-related impairments often become apparent later in life as school and other settings become more demanding.
- Autism is lifelong and incurable. People who are autistic stay autistic.



Remember: Autistic people grow up



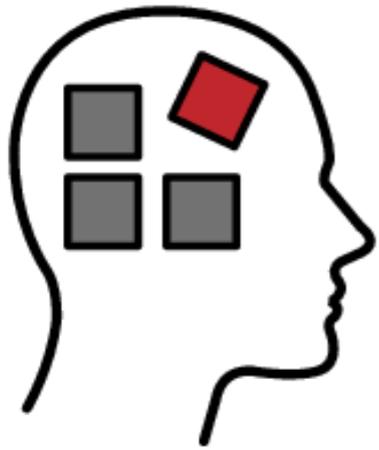
- Autistic children become autistic adults.
- Even if you teach very young children, thinking of them as future adults matters.
- (There's a reason that when we circumcise 8 day old boys, we express the hope that they will grow into marriage, Torah, and good deeds).
- Treat puberty and other development as significant.
- Respect age and life stage.



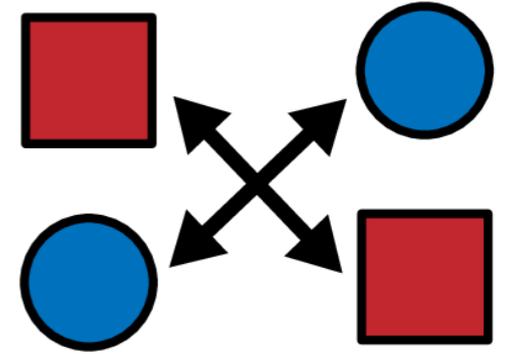
Autism is kind of a weird diagnosis



- Autism can be diagnosed based on impairments in a fairly broad range of areas.
- All attributes associated with autism are also associated with other conditions.
- No one impairment or attribute is shared among all autistic people.
- Autism is diagnosed when symptoms are not better-explained by another diagnosis (eg: fetal alcohol syndrome; Rett syndrome).

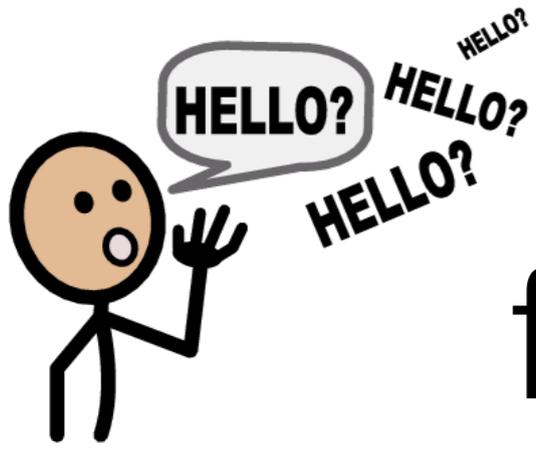


Autistic impairments aren't unique

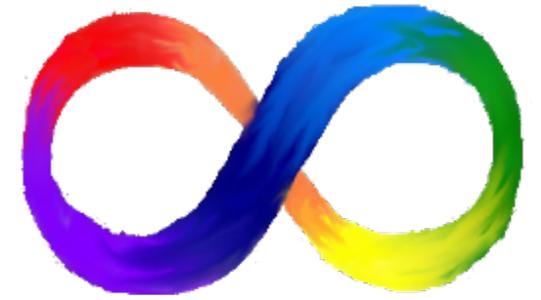


- All impairments associated with autism are also associated with other disabilities.
- It is possible to have both autism and another disability (eg: people with Down's syndrome or cerebral palsy are often also autistic)
- Learn from other conditions - and apply what you learn about autism to other situations!

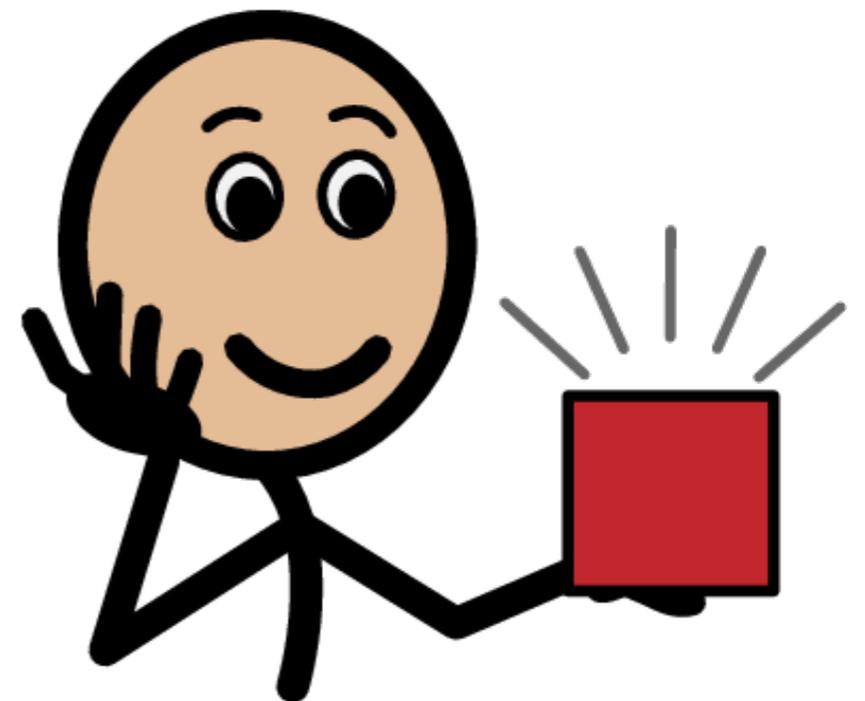
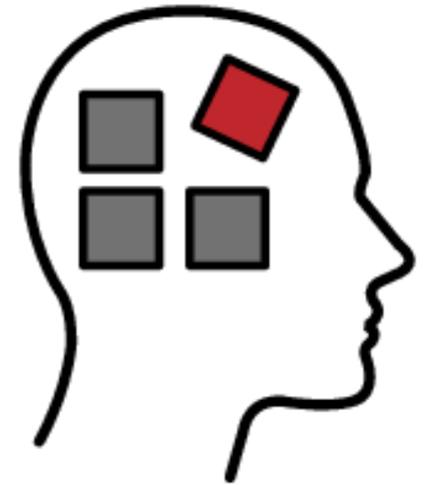




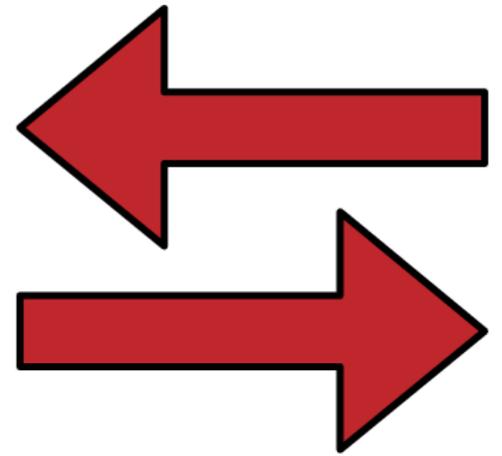
Some common features of autism



- Unusually intense special interests
- Sensory processing differences.
- Impairments in expressive and/or receptive communication.
- Executive dysfunction.
- Movement disorders.
- Motor skill impairments.

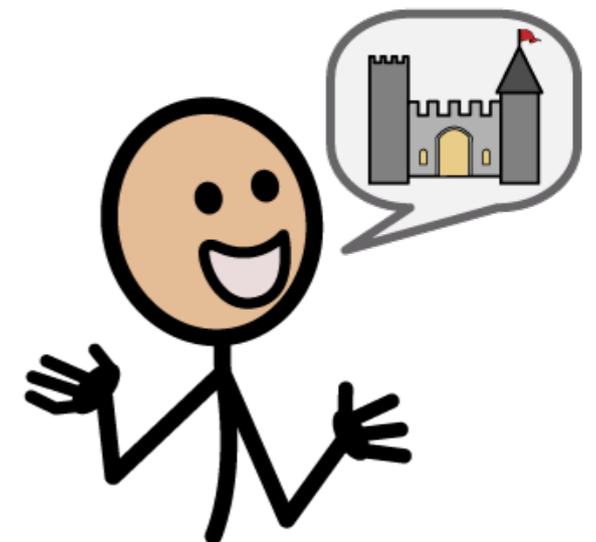
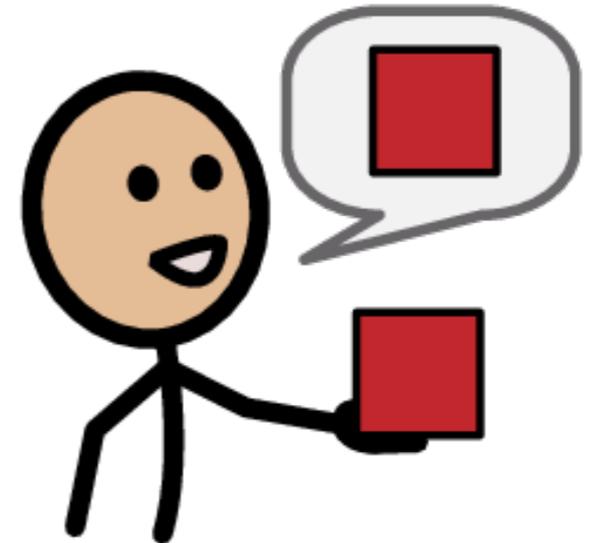


Autism-related differences can be in opposite directions!



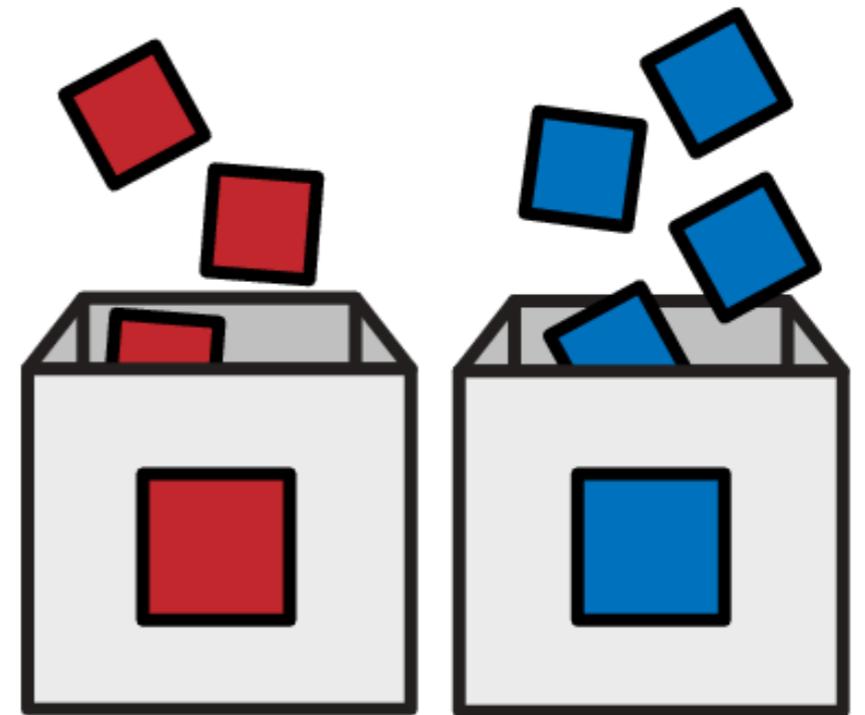
For instance:

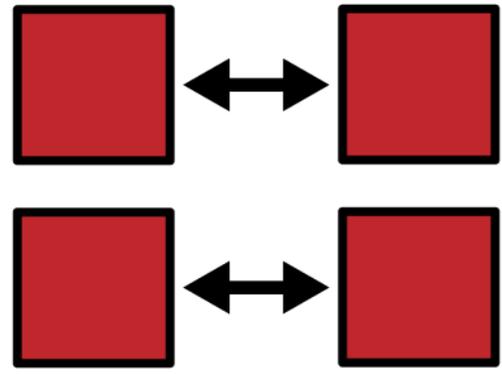
- Some autistic people use extremely literal language.
- Some autistic people communicate primarily in *non*-literal language such as quotes from TV shows.
- Both are common autistic language/communication impairments.



Nevertheless, attempts to sort autism into categories don't work well

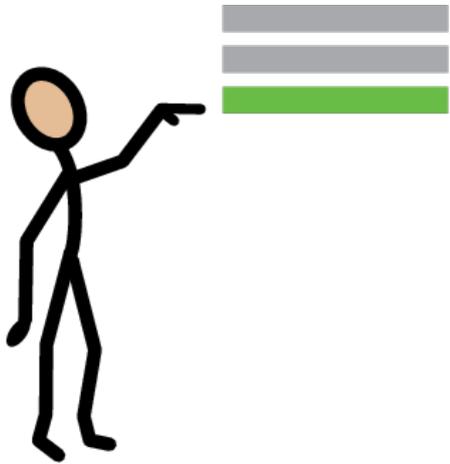
- Asperger's syndrome and autism are the same thing.
- “High functioning” and “low functioning” aren't meaningful terms.
- One autistic trait doesn't predict other autistic traits.



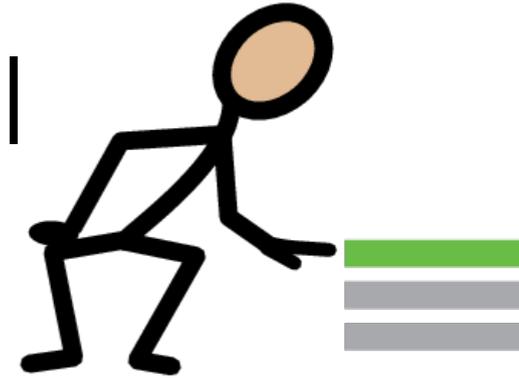


Autism and Asperger's
syndrome are the same thing

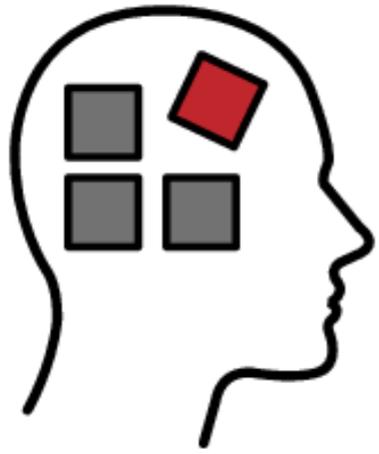
- DSM IV distinguished between autism and Asperger's syndrome; DSM V does not.
- The difference was whether or not someone had a speech delay prior to the age of three.
- It turns out that the age at which someone starts speaking doesn't make enough of a difference to justify two diagnostic categories.



“High functioning” and “low functioning” aren’t meaningful terms

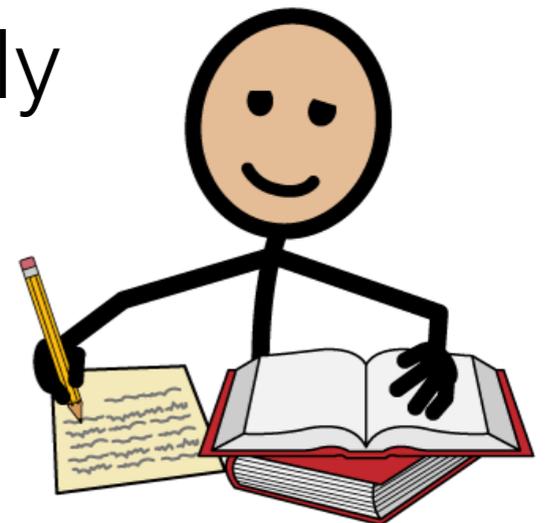
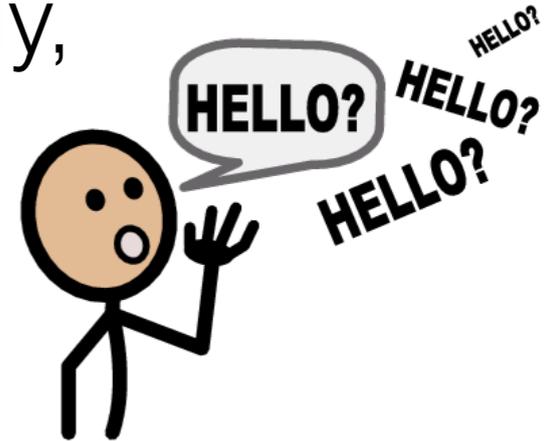


- There is no clinical definition of “high functioning” and “low functioning”.
- When you hear someone described as “high functioning” or “low functioning”, all it means is that someone has described them that way.
- Autism is qualitative, not quantitative. It’s best to be specific!



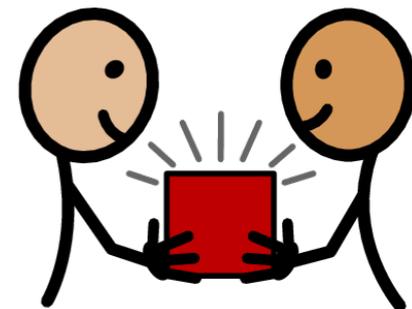
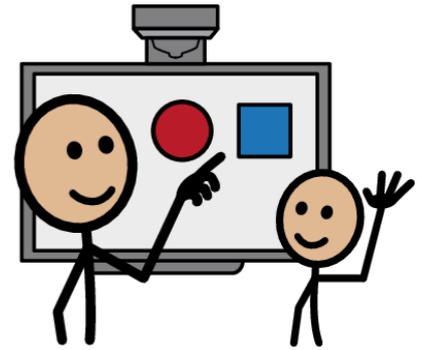
One kind of impairment doesn't predict another

- Eg: Some people with very strong language skills can't feed themselves, live independently, or switch tasks without assistance.
- Eg: Some people with severe movement impairments don't have sensory problems.
- Eg: Some people who can live independently can't talk.
- Avoid making assumptions!



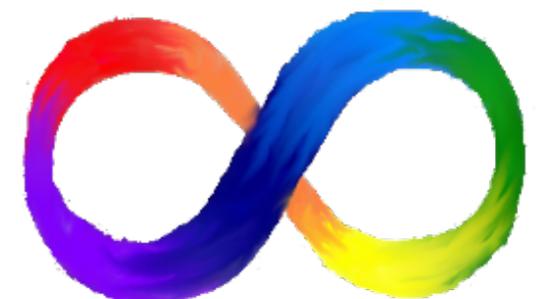
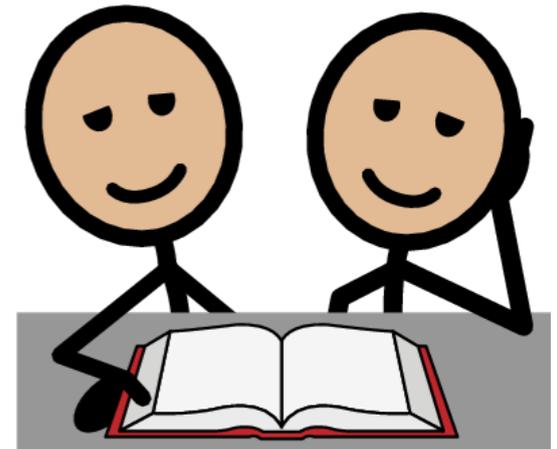
Remember: Teaching is not therapy!

- Teachers and therapists have different expertise and different jobs.
- Don't get intimidated by materials written by-and-for-therapists.
- It's ok that you don't know what therapists know about therapy — you are a different kind of expert, and your expertise is really important.
- Becoming a more inclusive teacher is about improving your inclusive *teaching* skills.



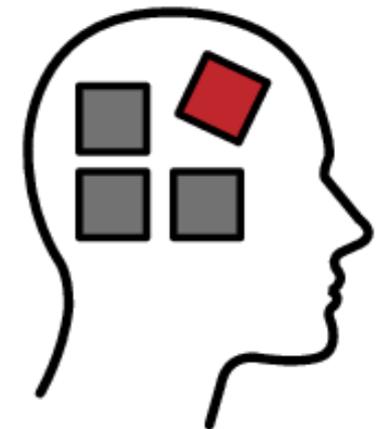
Including autistic learners in progressive education

- Educators build relationships and trust with learners.
- Activities are meaningful to learners.
- Learners gain understanding of the material.
- Learners develop worthwhile skills.
- Learners engage with ideas and contribute their own.
- Learners collaborate.
- Everyone is part of the conversation.

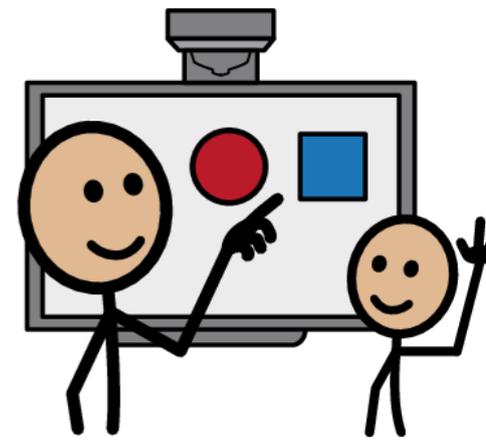


Inclusive progressive education

- Inclusive teaching makes room for the difference that disability makes.
- Teaching methods and activities acknowledge and account for the realities of impairments.
- Learners work with their brains and bodies rather than against them.
- Students with and without disabilities learn together in ways that work well for them.
- Learners with and without disabilities contribute to the shared work of learning together.

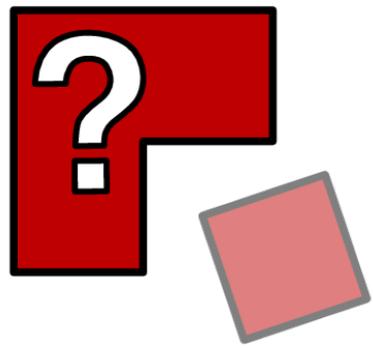


First and foremost: Use the skills you already have

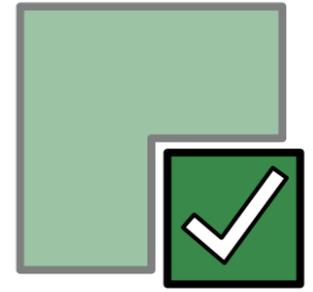


- Don't be afraid of the "autism" label. You know a lot about teaching, and most of it applies to autistic learners too.
- In most ways, autistic learners are just like any other learners.
- Autistic learners have the same need for meaning, understanding, relationship, and support as all other learners.
- Don't forget what you already know!



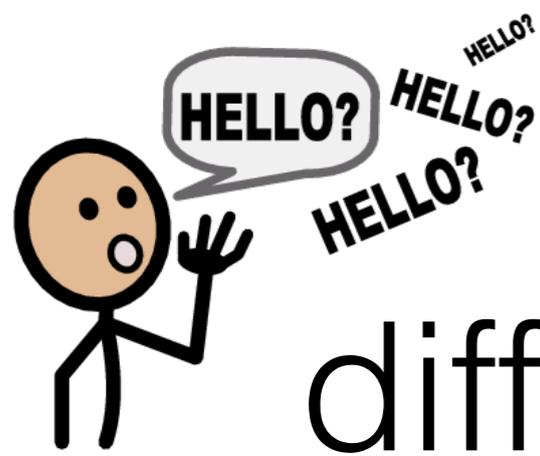


Problem-solving skills



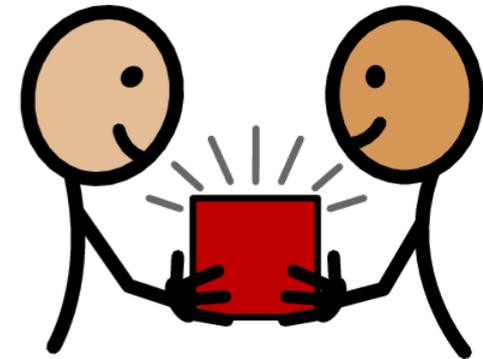
- How do you usually learn from your learners about what they need?
- How do you usually account for the range of learners when you plan lessons?
- How do you usually figure out whether or not a lesson is working?
- When a lesson doesn't work for some of your students, what do you normally do to figure out how to fix it?
- Have you tried those things?

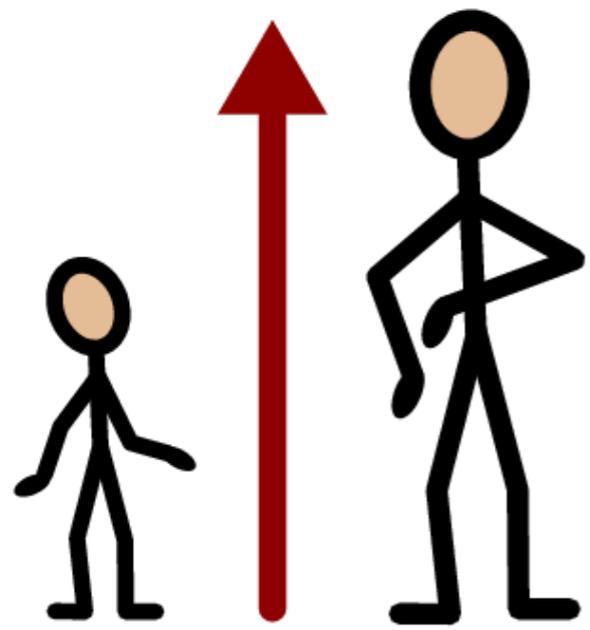




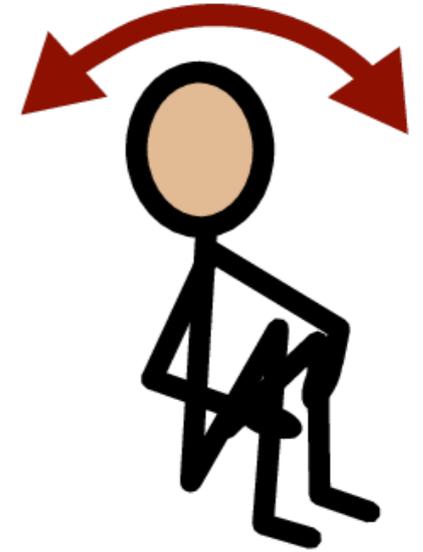
Understanding the difference that autism makes

- Some autistic learners may need you to develop skills that most teachers do not have.
- All autistic learners need you to understand that autism affects perspective and life experience.
- All autistic learners need to be respected.
- Be careful about stereotypes. Teach the learners you have, not the learners in the diagnostic manual.

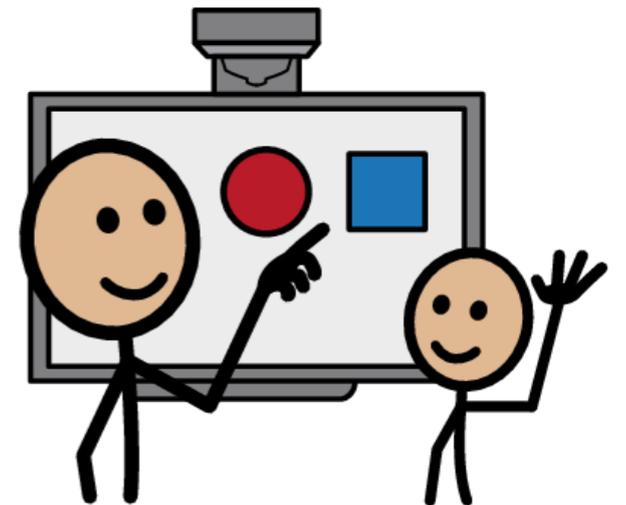




Disability is part of
developmentally
appropriate practice



- Developmentally appropriate practice takes into account age *and* disability.
- Do not take development personally.
- Do plan for difference.
- Work with where the learner is at, not against it.

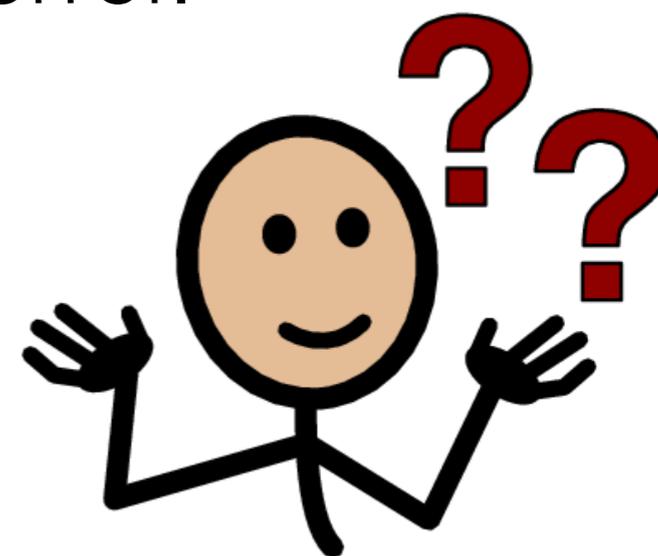
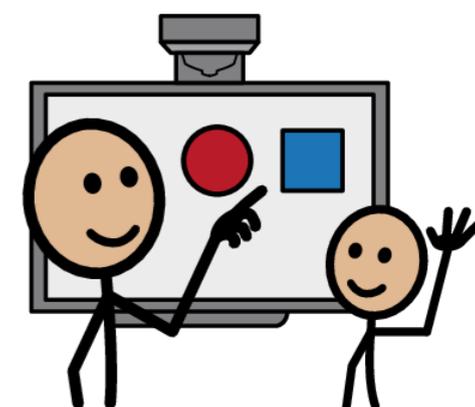


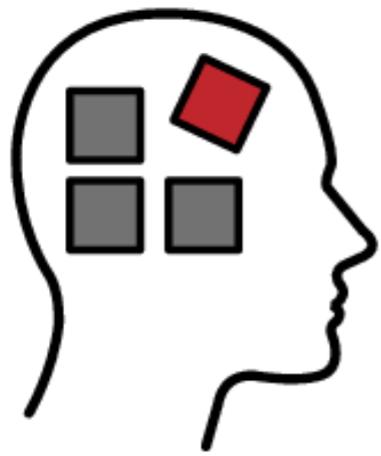


You're going to have to do a lot of guessing.



- Autism isn't very well-understood.
- We don't have great assessment tools.
- Figuring out things out requires a lot of trial and error. Don't get discouraged by the error.
- It's not just you. It's hard for everyone.
- As you learn more, your guesses can become better-informed.



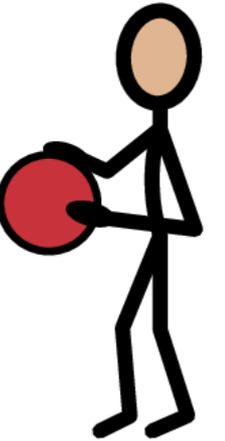
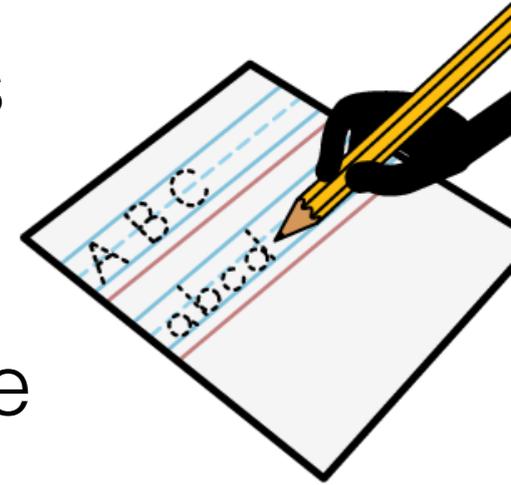


Remember: Autism is a disability!

- Your autistic learners will sometimes be unable to do things.
- Explaining why they should do something does not create the ability to do it
- You can't cure a neurological disorder by explaining appropriate behavior.
- If telling autistic people that we're weird could make us normal, there wouldn't be any autistic people left.
- Look for accommodations and supports.

Fine and gross motor skills

- Many autistic people have impaired fine and/or gross motor skills.
- When you plan activities, think about whether they are physically feasible for all of your learners.
- Eg: How will students who struggle with handwriting participate in a big paper activity?
- How will students who can't move quickly participate in games?
- For Hebrew teachers: Learn how to set up Hebrew typing on computers and mobile devices. For many learners, it's a critically important option.



Some autistic people have trouble with voluntary motion



- This is *different* than impaired fine/gross motor skills.
- Some autistic people have trouble getting their body to start moving or stop moving.
- Some autistic people try to do one thing and find that their body moves in an unintended ways.
- This can interfere with communication — and almost everything else someone might want to do.
- For some people, it helps to move continuously (eg: rocking, lining things up, ripping paper into tiny pieces, doodling).

Difficultly initiating and switching tasks

- Some autistic people have trouble starting, stopping, and switching.
- This is unrelated to motivation. Someone who desperately wants to do something may still spend hours struggling to start doing it.
- Sometimes people need help.
- Sometimes people need to be prompted or supported in order to start or stop.

Getting confused or derailed

- Some autistic people get stuck in ways that might not make sense to others.
- They may not always understand something that “everyone understands”.
- Eg: Instructions like “finish your worksheet and then find a partner to check your work with” might have implied steps that they don’t know how to do.

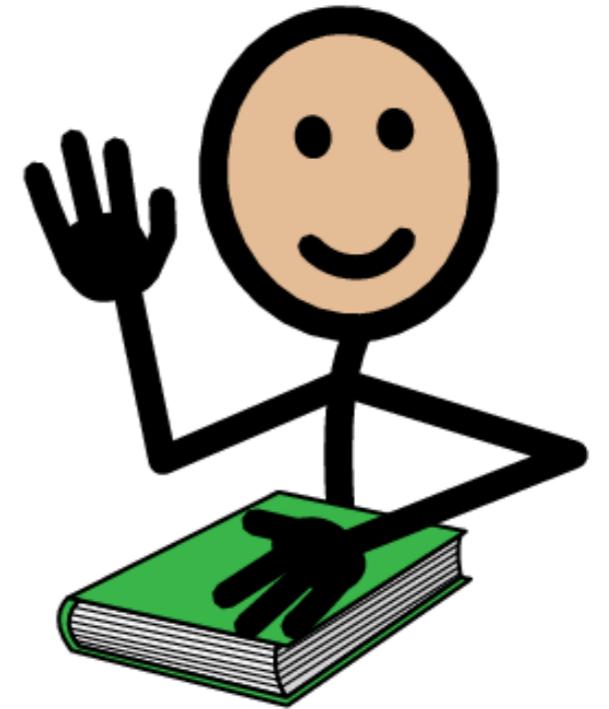


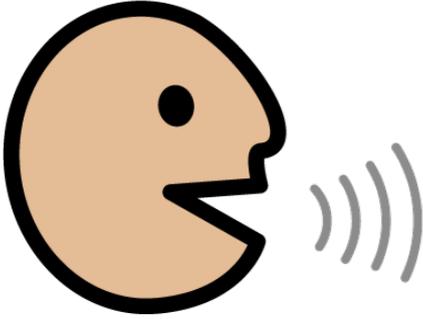
Make it possible to ask for help

- Telling learners “ask for help if you need it” isn’t enough. Learners need a clear *way* to ask for help.
- How can your students ask you for help? Do all of them know how to do that? How do you know?
- Does the method of asking for help work during all activities? (Eg: The classroom? Field trips? Art projects? Quiet reading time? Special events? Recess?)
- Offer help if students seem stuck. Students who have trouble with initiation may not always be able to come to you.

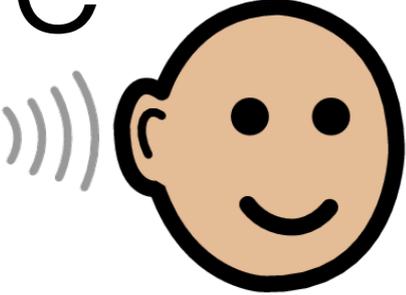
When people ask for help, believe them

- Autistic learners may struggle with things that seem obvious to you.
- They may seem so obvious that it's hard to imagine how anyone could possibly have trouble with them.
- Believe them, and work on your imagination.





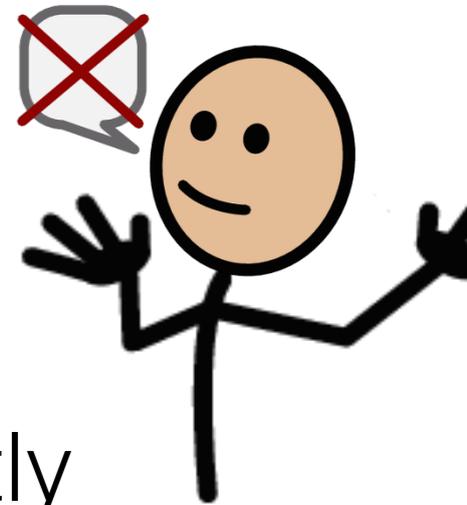
Expressive vs receptive communication



- Most autistic people have some sort of impairment in expressive communication, receptive communication, or both.
- Expressive communication = communicating in ways that others can understand.
- Receptive communication = understanding what other people are communicating.
- It's not always easy to tell which kind of impairment someone has.

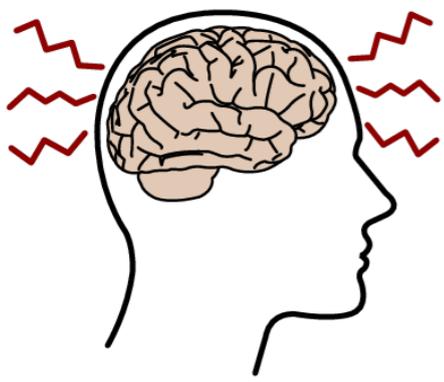
The problem with “nonverbal”

- Nonverbal is often used to mean both “people who don’t speak much or at all” and “people who don’t understand language”.
- Speech and language are different things.
- Some people who understand language perfectly well can’t talk.
- Some people who can’t talk have severe language impairments.
- Some people have various degrees of impairment in both speech and language.

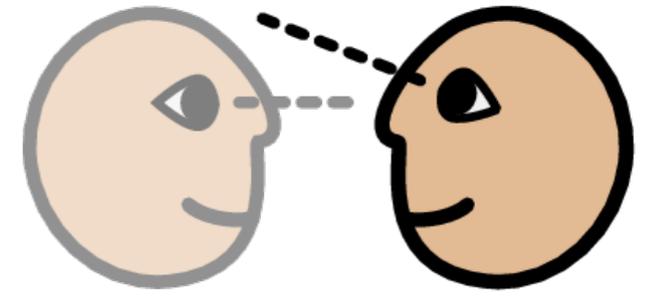


When you can't assess language

- If someone doesn't have reliable expressive communication, it's usually hard to tell what they do and don't understand.
- The most important thing is to keep attempting to communicate with them.
- Address them directly, and seek out ways to listen.
- If you can't tell what they understand, use simplified language *sometimes* but not always.



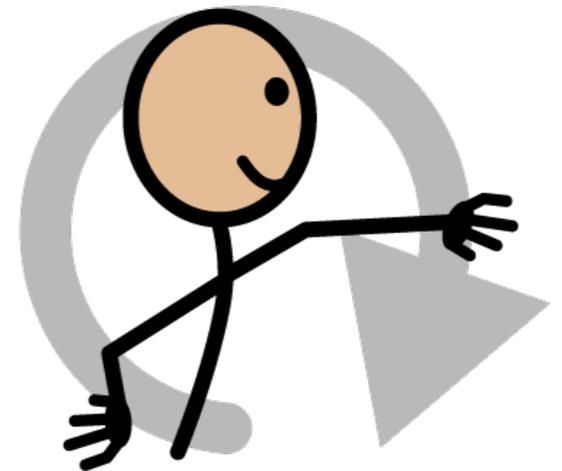
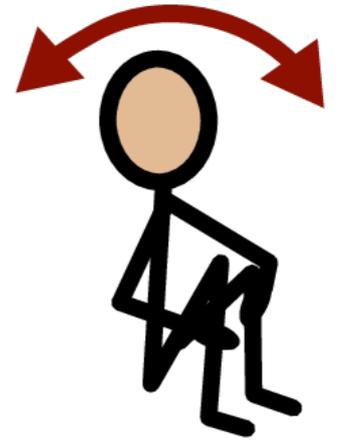
Eye contact



- Many (not all) autistic people avoid eye contact.
- Explaining that eye contact is socially expected does not create the ability to make eye contact.
- Many autistic people find eye contact physically painful.
- Some autistic people *need* to avoid eye contact in order to understand what someone is saying.
- Don't assume that people who look away aren't listening!
- Learn alternative ways to assess whether or not a student is paying respectful attention.

Stimming/Unusual movements

- Many autistic people move in unusual ways.
- Eg: Rocking, staring at their fingers, lining up objects, spinning things, making sounds.
- This can be involuntary.
- This can be necessary.
- Trying to make an autistic person hold still rarely ends well.

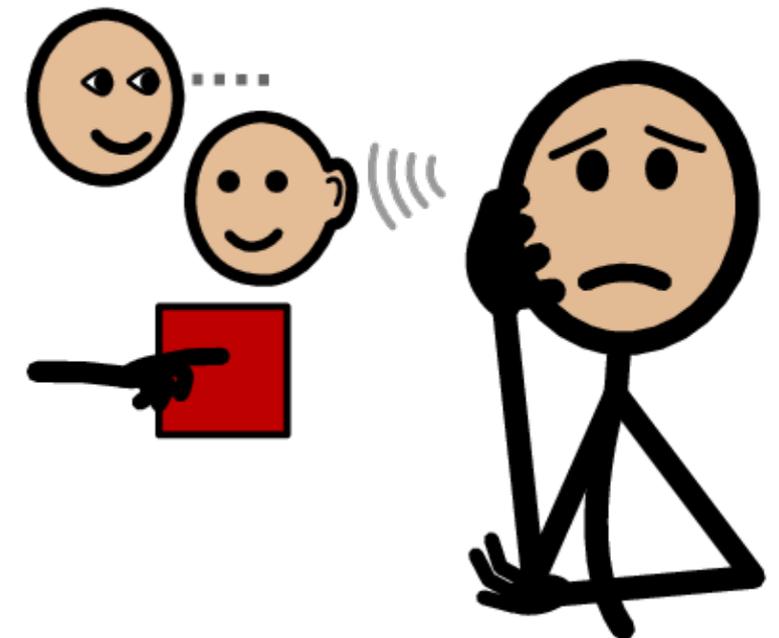
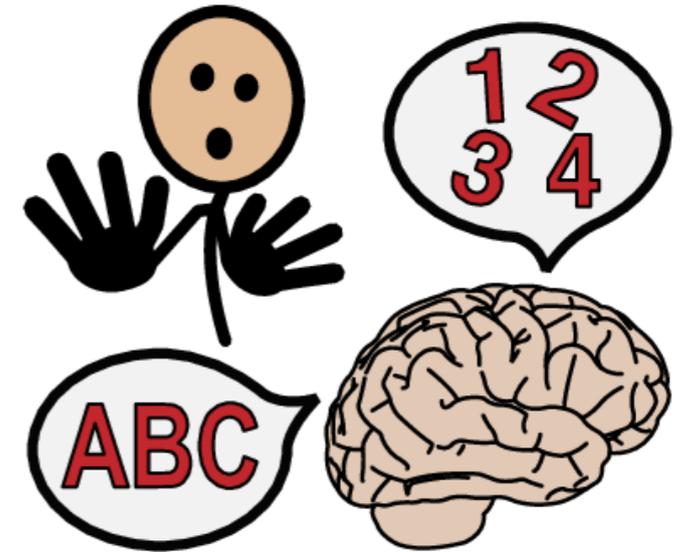


Looking odd doesn't mean someone should leave

- Taking breaks is not the solution to every problem.
- Moving oddly doesn't always mean someone should leave the room.
- Sometimes, moving oddly is what makes it possible to stay in the room.
- Sometimes moving oddly is just how someone's body works.
- Autistic people who look autistic need to be welcome.

Pain and overload

- Many autistic people experience painful cognitive and/or sensory overload.
- Too much difficult-to-process information can be overloading
- Sensory experiences (eg: flickering lights, ambient noises, bright colors, just about anything) which most people easily tolerate can be excruciating to some autistic people.
- Consider the possibility that your autistic learners are in pain.



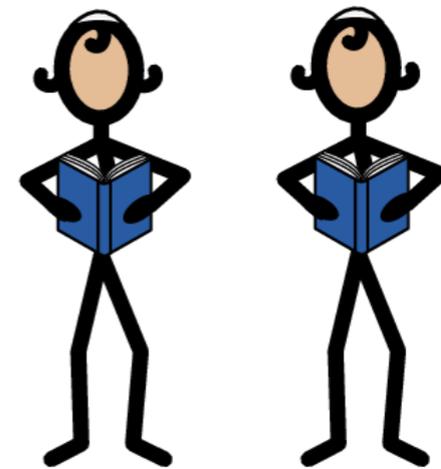
Some common sensory strategies for managing pain

- Taking breaks.
- Covering ears.
- Rocking back and forth.
- Staring at and/or manipulating an object (eg: a rock or a glitter jar).
- Explaining that these things aren't considered appropriate will not eliminate the need to do them.



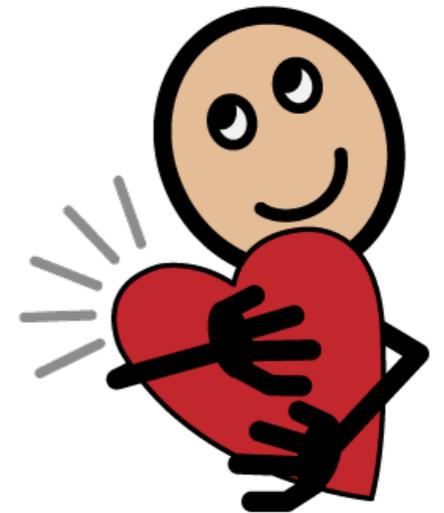
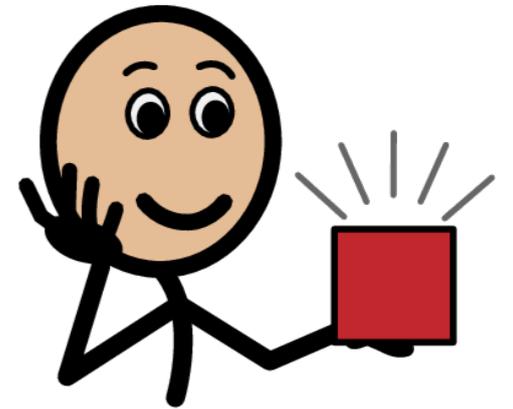
Sometimes unusual movements are body language

- Moving oddly isn't always a sensory strategy — sometimes it's communication!
- Happy flapping.
- Anxious flapping.
- Rocking as a greeting or way of acknowledging shared presence
- (eg: rocking together while reading side-by-side or reciting the Amidah)
- When you listen for meaningful body language, you often find it.

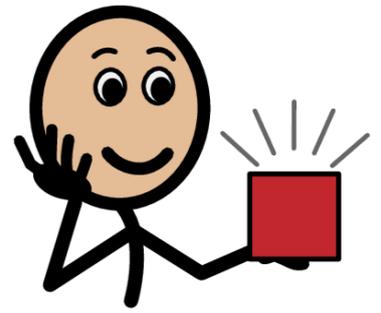


About those special interests.....

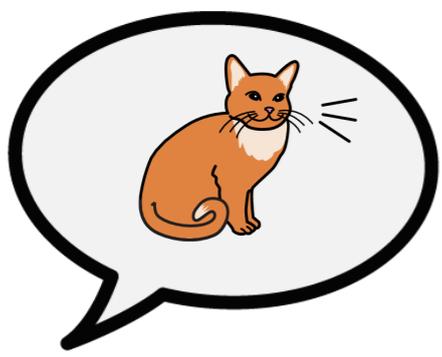
- Many autistic learners bring up their special interests whether or not it's contextually relevant.
- Remember: They're not doing this to annoy you. They're doing this because this is how they think. Don't take it personally!
- Don't punish students for attempting to participate, even if their participation is disruptive.
- Assume good faith, and look for ways to help them engage with what you are trying to teach.



A world filtered through unusual interests and knowledge

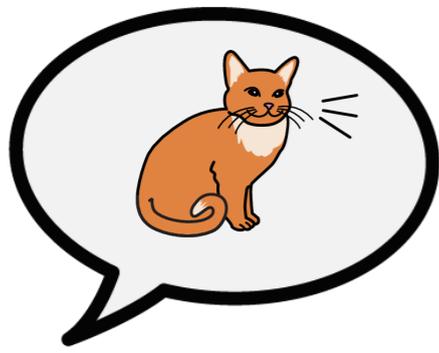


- Autistic people often have very unusual patterns of knowledge and focus.
- Autistic people may find most things outside of their special interests intensely confusing.
- Most people, autistic or not, learn new things by connecting them to something they already understand.
- Autistic learners *also* need to learn by connecting new things to what they already know.
- Telling people off for what they do and don't already understand will not help them to learn new things.



Some people who sound like (or are) articulate professors also have severe language impairments.

- Large subject-specific vocabularies can mask language disabilities.
- The fact that someone sounds “smart” does not mean that they can do everything considered “basic”.
- Some autistic people *only* have reliable language skills in their areas of special interest.
- Eg: Someone who knows highly technical vocabulary about cats might not have the language skills to reliably describe the playground, addition, or a novel fact about something else.



Attempts to use subject-specific vocabulary for other things



- Most people, autistic or not, learn to discuss new things by using their existing vocabulary.
- Autistic people often have *radically* different existing expressive vocabulary.
- Autistic people attempting to use their available vocabulary to communicate may be misinterpreted as changing the subject or being flippant.
- Eg: Someone with cat-focused vocabulary might refer to people as “meowing” rather than talking, or they might compare a president they’re learning about to a cat breed they’re familiar with.
- Again, it helps to assume good faith.

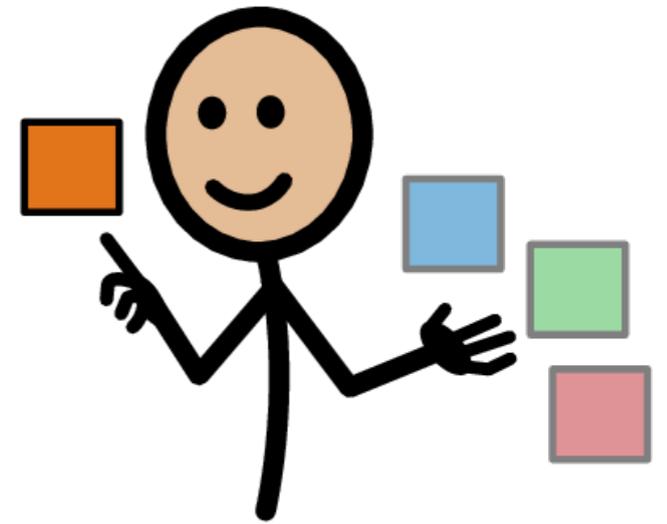
Using TV quotes to communicate



- Many autistic people do some of their communication by quoting lines from TV or movies.
- Often, their intended meaning is not the literal meaning.
- Eg: Someone who says “Got milk?” in reference to the old TV commercials *might* be asking you if you have milk — or they might not.
- They might be asking for milk — or saying something largely unrelated to milk.
- Eg: They might be saying “this textbook sounds like overwrought marketing disguised as a public health campaign”.

The “or something else?” method of figuring out what someone means

- Make a guess about what someone might be trying to say.
- Say “Are you saying [your guess], or something else?”
- (Sometimes two options works better, but don’t use too many at once.)
- Keep narrowing it down until you get it.
- Repeat as needed.

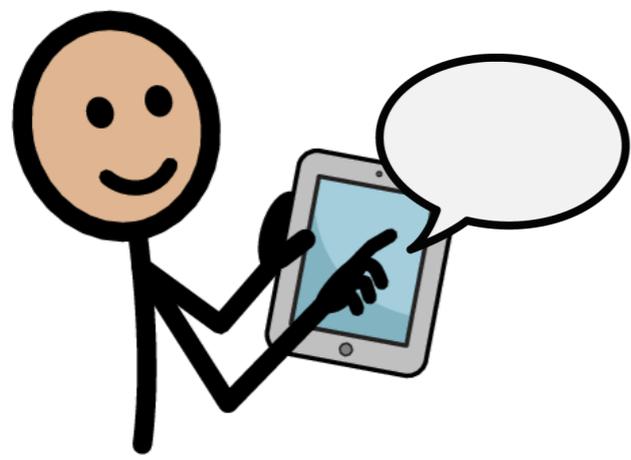


An example in Torah class

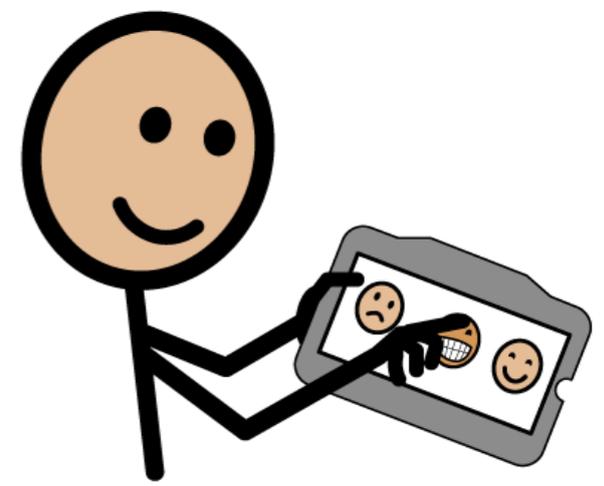
- Morah Sarah: Why did Joseph's brothers get mad at him?
- Shira: Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: Shira, are you talking about milk, the parsha, or something else?
- Shira: Parsha! Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: Do you think his brothers were angry about milk, or do you mean something else?
- Shira: Else!
- Morah Sarah: Are you talking about something Joseph had, or something else?
- Shira: Had coat! Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: I think you mean that they were angry because he had the coat of many colors and they didn't. Is that right, or did you mean something else?
- Shira: No! Joseph didn't share!
- Morah Sarah: Do you mean that they were mad that he didn't share his special coat, or something else?
- Shira: Because he didn't share!
- Morah Sarah: Thank you Shira. What does everyone else think about Shira's idea? Were Joseph's brothers mad because he didn't share?

How this could have gone

- Morah Sarah: Why did Joseph's brothers get mad at him?
- Shira: Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: Shira, stop being silly.
- Shira: Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: Shira, it's not time for snack. We will have milk later.
- Shira: No snack! GOT MILK?!
- Morah Sarah: Shira, we need to use our inside voices.
- Shira: Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: Look at the schedule. We drink milk at snack time in this classroom. It's not time for milk.
- Shira: Got milk?!!
- Morah Sarah: Shira, I think you need a time out. Come back when you can sit nicely and use your inside voice.

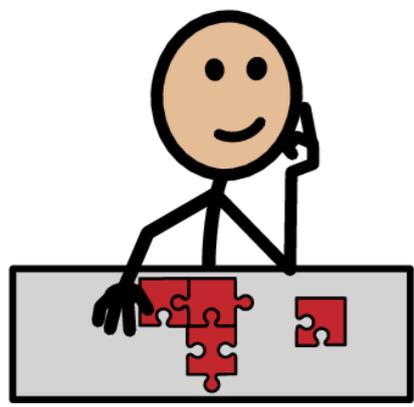


Some other communication suggestions

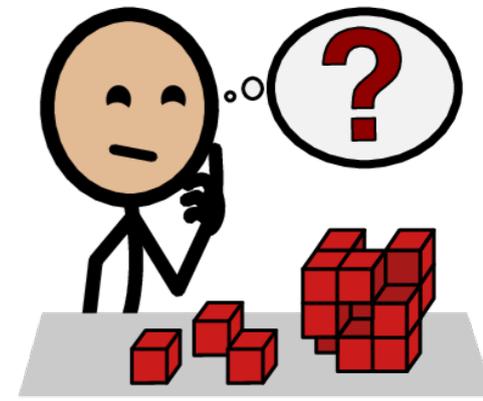


- Typing and/or writing make communication more possible for some people.
- Some people benefit from using picture symbols to support their communication. (SymbolStix has dramatically more Jewish vocabulary than any other symbol library).
- Some people use apps to communicate.
- Some people use different methods at different times.
- Make space for people to communicate in the way that works best for them.

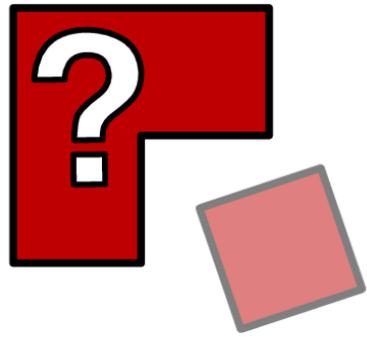




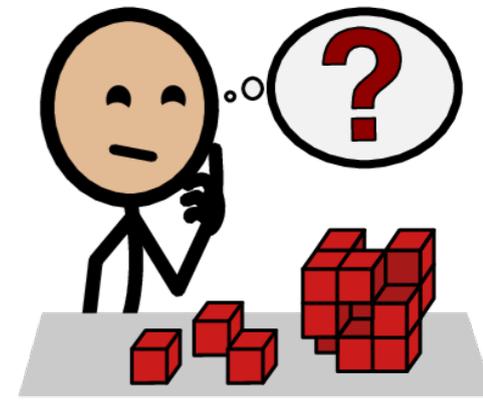
“Easy” and “Hard”



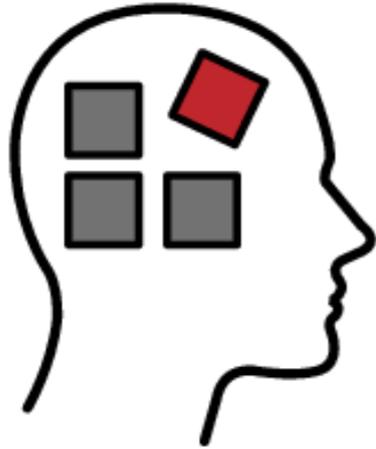
- Common sense definitions of “easy”/“hard” and “introductory”/“advanced” do not always apply to autistic people.
- Sometimes things called “easy” are impossible for an autistic person; sometimes things called “hard” are much more possible.
- Don’t be rigid about prerequisites and levels.
- If someone is required to master impossible-to-them “basics” before they’re allowed to do anything else, they may never get to learn.



If making it easier doesn't help, try making it harder



- When autistic learners struggle, our first instinct as educators may be to give them simpler/easier tasks.
- This *sometimes* helps, but it can also backfire.
- Eg: Autistic learners may be understandably reluctant to cooperate with being taught the aleph-bet for the 7th year in a row.
- If making something easier doesn't help, trying making it more challenging.
- If using simplified language doesn't help, try using more precise/technical language.



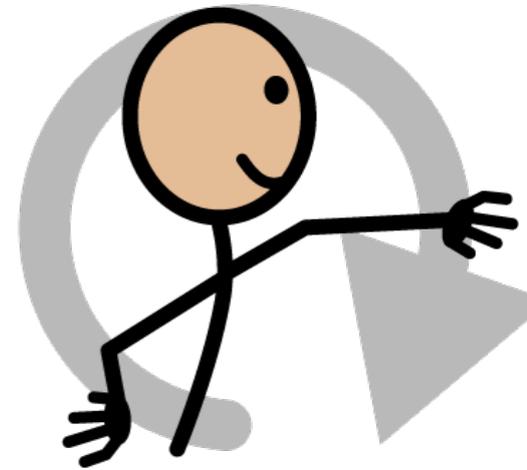
Chevruta

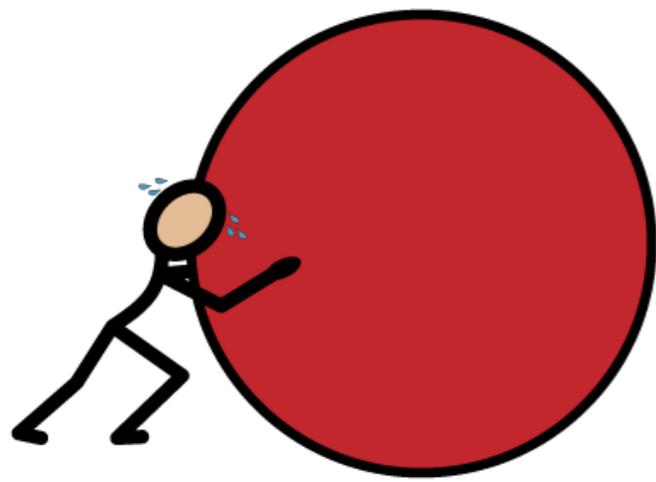


- Chevruta learning works *really* well for some autistic people.
- Values and emphasizes repetition and intense interest.
- Incorporates sensory strategies (rocking, singsong voice, sitting in the same place, etc).
- You don't have to be able to independently initiate things or independently focus your attention, because partners help each other with that.

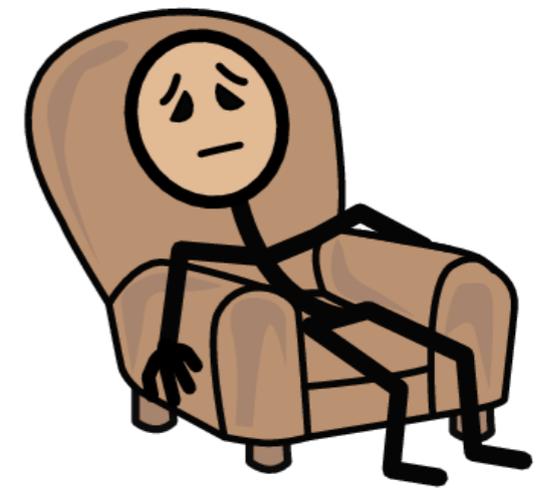
Fluctuating abilities

- Many autistic people have fluctuating patterns of ability and impairment.
- Eg: Some people lose speech at certain levels of exhaustion.
- Some people can only speak reliably when they're sick.
- Some people have more trouble controlling their body on some days than other days.
- When you see an autistic person do something, don't assume that they could *always* do it if they tried hard enough.





Exhaustion



- Autistic learners may have to work much harder to do things that others do easily.
- Autism doesn't come with superhuman energy or stamina.
- The time and energy spent working harder has to come from somewhere.
- Make sure you're not pushing your learners into unsustainable levels of exhaustion.

Spiritual and emotional exhaustion

- Our culture is not kind to autistic people (or to disabled people in general).

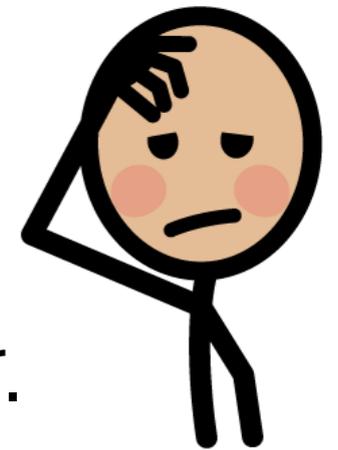


- “Autism Awareness” campaigns often send the message to autistic people that the world would be better off without us.

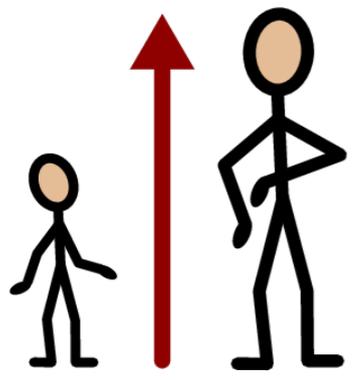


- Parents are encouraged to mourn for the non-autistic child they expected.

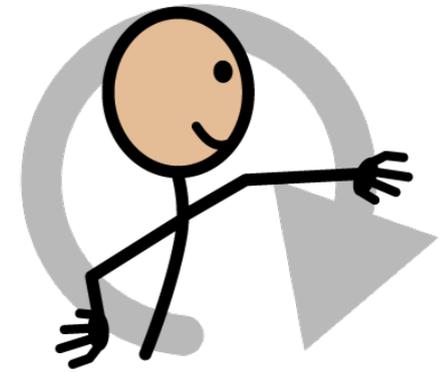
- Pundits and respected journalists speculate that murderers must have been autistic.



- The effects of this don't stop at the classroom door.



Learning access strategies takes time

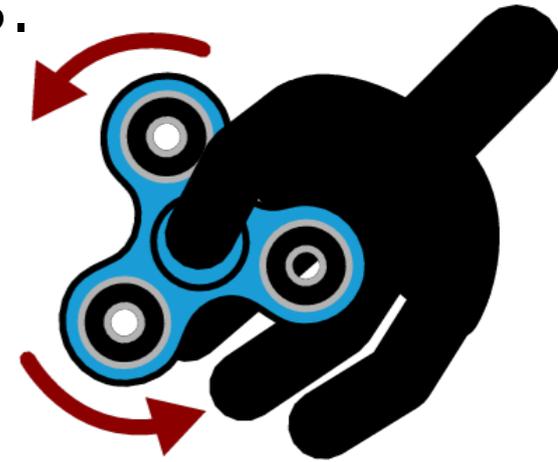


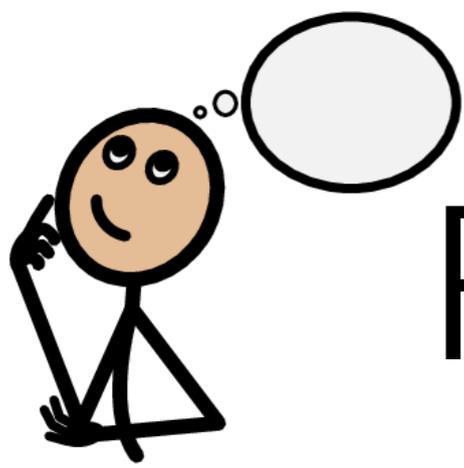
- People with disabilities aren't born knowing how to use adaptive strategies.
- Adaptive skills are learned through time, creativity, and experimentation.
- Your autistic learners need time to learn, and space to make mistakes.
- Don't make perfect use a precondition for access to adaptive tools.
- Accessibility is a right, not a reward for good behavior.



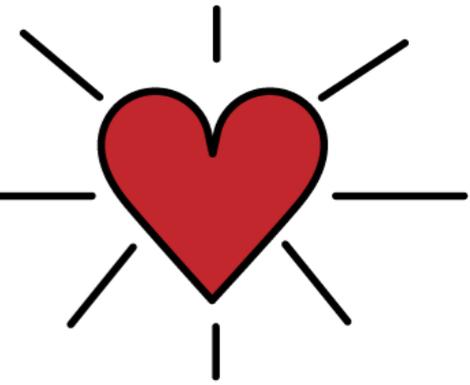
Disruptive and necessary aren't opposites

- Sometimes people need to do disruptive things.
- Sometimes people are disruptive for reasons beyond their control.
- Be careful about rules like “no flying fidgets”.
- The learner who needs fidget toys the most may also be someone who is unable to reliably avoid throwing them.
- (People who need to use fidgets to keep control over their body often involuntarily throw them from time to time.)





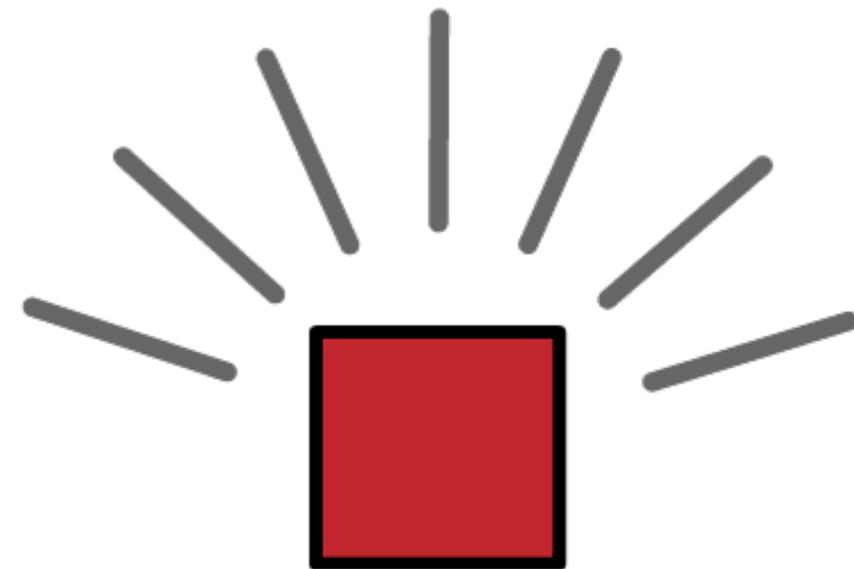
Practice empathy



- Work to understand how the world looks to your autistic students (or campers, or participants).
- Think about what they're experiencing.
- How do they feel? What do they think? How do you know?
- Remember: autistic students need emotional validation for the same reasons that everyone else does.

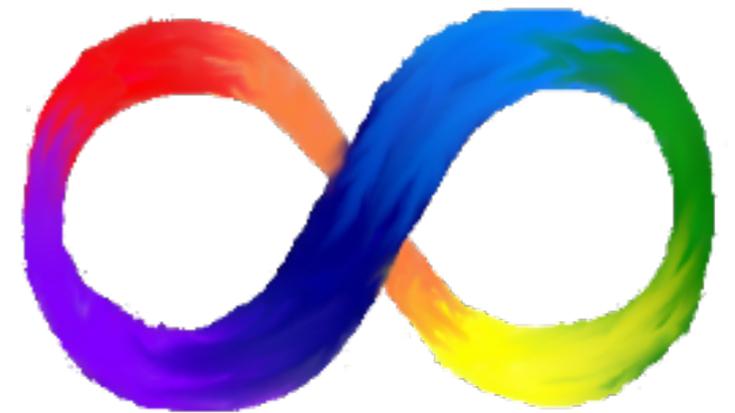
Assume the things that autistic learners value are valuable

- Autistic people, like other humans, have their reasons for caring about things.
- Assume that those reasons matter.
- Don't trivialize, mock, or condescend.
- When there's a conflict, assume good faith and look for solutions.



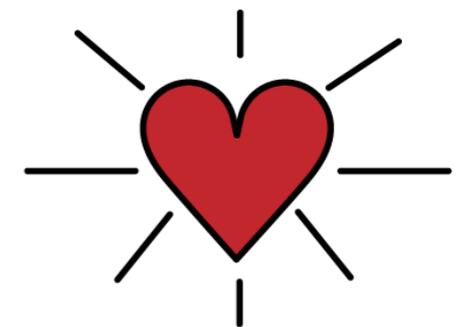
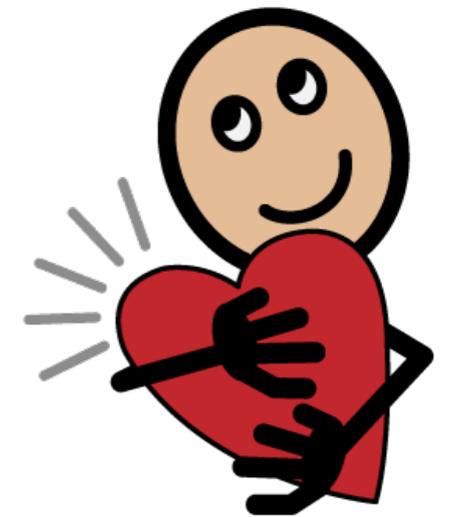
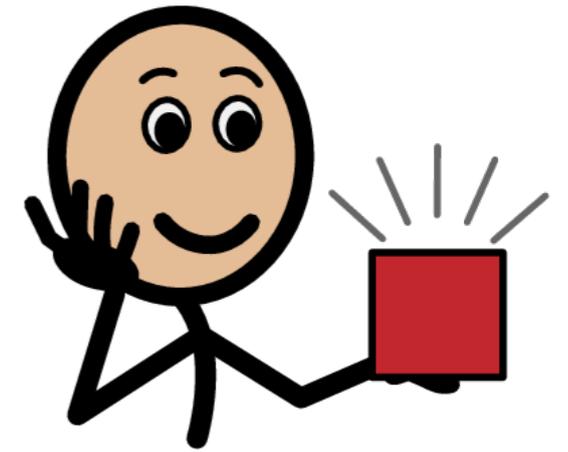
Embrace neurodiversity

- Don't try to make autistic people just like everybody else.
- If telling autistic people that we're weird could make us normal, there would be no autistic people left.
- Our bodies are good bodies.
- Our brains are good brains.
- Autistic learners should be welcomed and valued as they are.



Let autistic people be happy

- Autism isn't all pain and impairment.
- Noticing things that others don't.
- Finding fascination in things most people don't appreciate.
- Pleasure in sensory experiences that others overlook.
- The positive aspects of autism also need to be accommodated.
- Make room for joy.



Matan Jewish Disability Acceptance and Inclusion Pledge

- I acknowledge that ability, disability and humanity coexist, and I pledge to see my students as they are.
- I will not look past their disabilities; I will seek to understand. I will not overlook their abilities; I will seek to support them effectively.
- I will not ignore the humanity of my students; I will remember that they have individual interests and a perspective of their own and that they were each created in the image of God.

matan

