



Wisconsin Department of
Children and Families

Understanding Autism and Adapting to Meet Individual Needs



- Understanding Autism
 - Current research
 - Definitions
 - Areas of challenge
 - Common characteristics
- Before Making Adaptations
 - Understanding child development
 - Knowing the child
 - The meaning behind behavior
- Making Adaptations
 - Supporting the child in your classroom



Understanding Autism

- Current research

- Effects an estimated **1 in 36 children** in the U.S. (2024 data)
 - 1:27 Boys
 - 1:116 Girls
- Characteristics of autism emerge as early as **6 to 12 months**
- Can be reliably diagnosed as early as **age 2**
- But the average age of diagnosis is typically ***after the age of 4**

** Minority groups tend to be diagnosed later and less often*



Understanding Autism

- Definitions

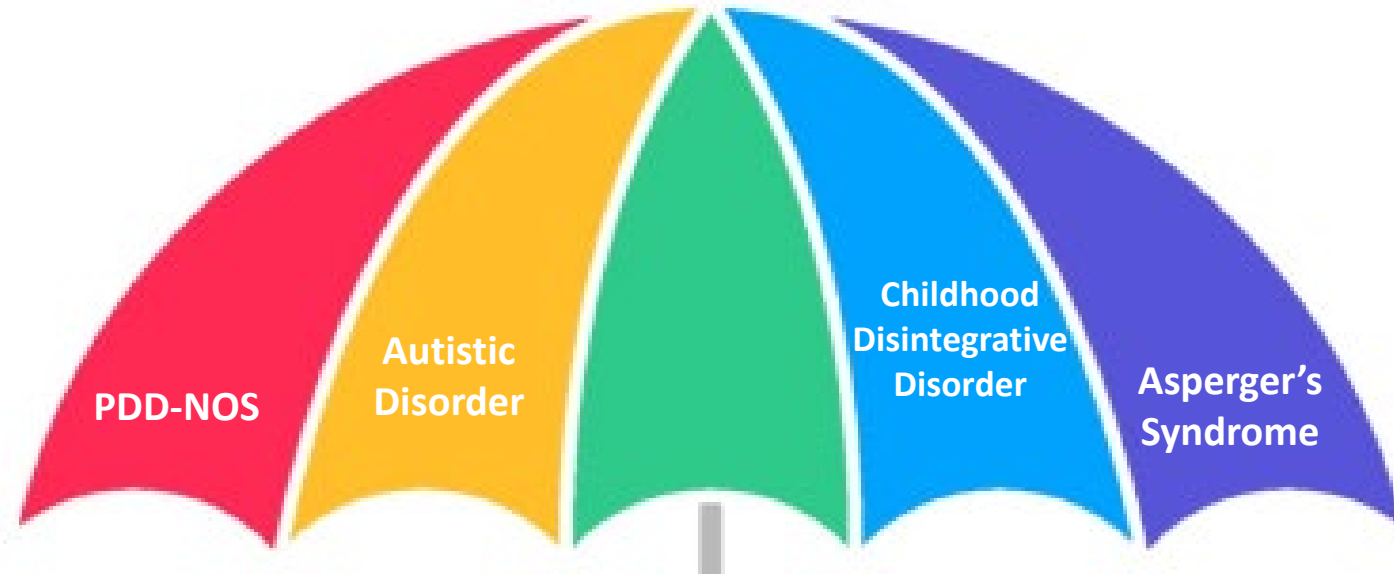
- Medical **Diagnosis** — <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/hcp/diagnosis/index.html>
 - Definition found within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)
 - Requires a comprehensive diagnostic evaluation conducted by a qualified healthcare professional (e.g., Child Psychiatrist, Child Neurologist, Developmental Pediatrician, etc.)
- Educational **Determination of Eligibility** — <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sped/pdf/elg-autism-guide.pdf>
 - Criteria found within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
 - Each state has their own specific criteria to determine if a child is eligible for special education services under the category of autism
 - Autism specific testing is performed by a licensed school psychologist and/or autism specialist

IMPORTANT - A school DOES NOT diagnose a child

Autism Spectrum Disorder

An umbrella term for 4 distinct autism diagnoses

SPECTRUM means it will affect individuals differently and with varying levels of severity



Understanding Autism

- Areas of challenge

- **Social Interaction**

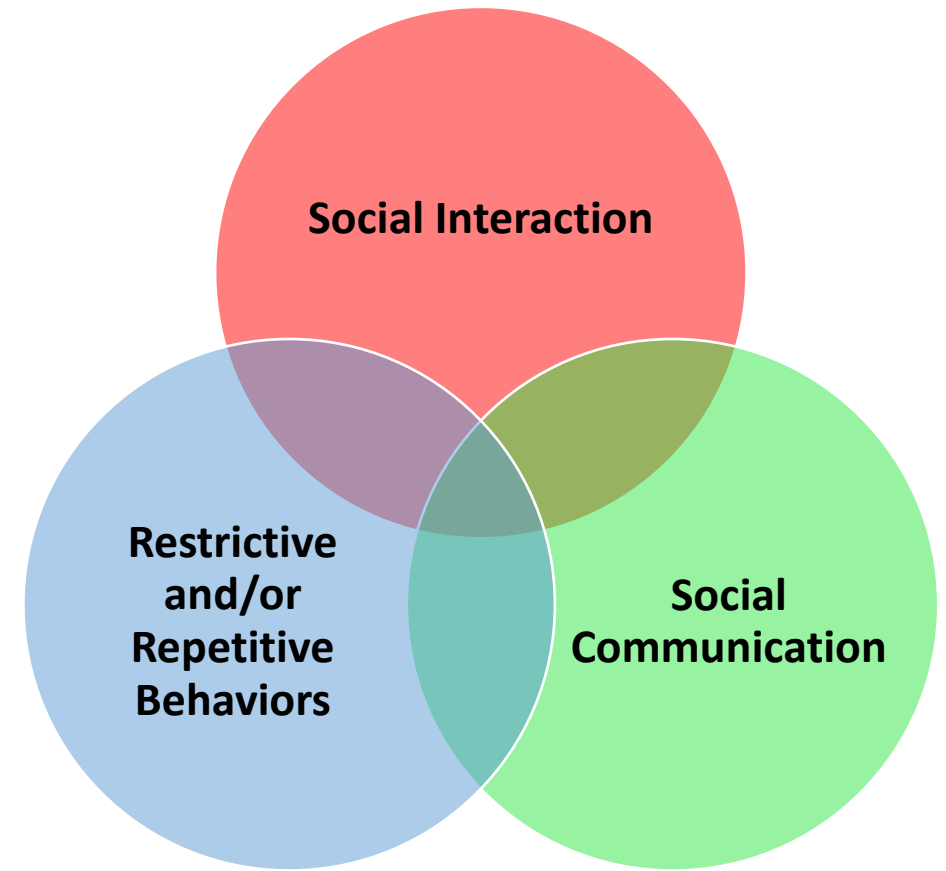
- Difficulty developing relationships and understanding social contexts, emotions, social rules, etc.

- **Social Communication**

- Deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication

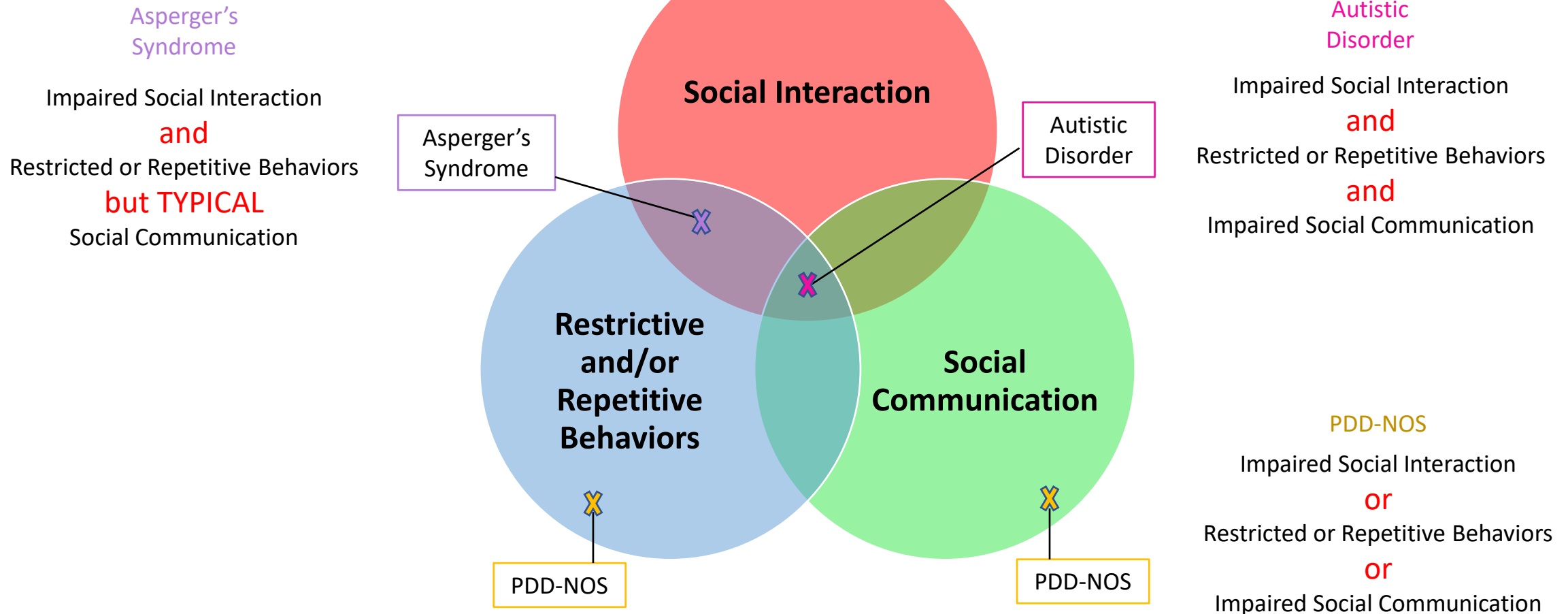
- **Restricted and/or Repetitive Behavior**

- Engage in stereotyped or repetitive movements, play, speech, etc.
- Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routine, and ritualized patterns



Understanding Autism

- Areas of challenge



Common Characteristics

- *Social Interaction*

How might this look in your classroom or program?

- Little or no response to their name
- Difficulty understanding or recognizing emotions (their own or a peers)
- Difficulty understanding social norms (e.g., sharing, personal space, etc.)
- Difficulty engaging in reciprocal/back and forth interactions (e.g., returning a smile, playing peek-a-boo, responding to a question, etc.)
- Limited use and understanding of non-verbal communication (e.g., eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body language, etc.)
- Difficulty sharing focus or following the focus of someone else (joint attention)
- Trouble participating in pretend play

Common Characteristics

- **Social *Communication***

How might this look in your classroom or program?

- No speech, delayed speech, or unusual speech
 - Difficulty forming speech sounds, use exaggerated sing-songy tone, self-talk, etc.
- May repeat or echo words/phrases (echolalia)
- Difficulty answering questions or following directions
- Tend to name items or objects instead of using language to interact
- Difficulty expressing their needs with words or correct language
 - May say “You want water?” instead of “I want water.”
- Appear to be unaware when people talk to them (in a world of their own)

Common Characteristics

- Repetitive/Restrictive Behaviors

How might this look in your classroom or program?

- May flap hands, spin, rock, make sounds, etc.
- May have highly restrictive interests - trains, vacuums, specific colors, etc.
- Fixate on tiny details to the point of distraction/disruption
- Difficulty adapting to change - daily schedule, the order things are done, how a toy is being played with, etc.
- Reliance on routines and repetition
- Order or line up toys instead of playing with them
- Unusual or intense reactions to sensory input - touch, sounds, smells, textures, lights, etc.

Let's shift gears and talk about how to support the children in your classroom.

Before Making Adaptations



Making adaptations to support a child's individual needs doesn't have to be difficult.

But there are a few things that you **MUST** understand:

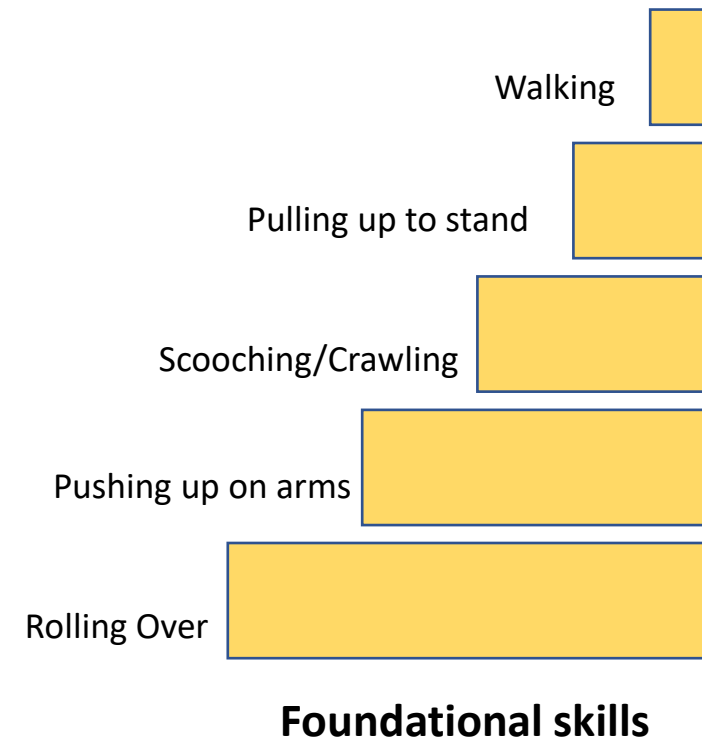
1. How children develop
2. Each child and their strengths and interests
3. The reason behind a behavior or action

Before Making Adaptations

1) Understanding child development

- Child development is a process **every child** goes through
- Most children learn or reach developmental milestones during predictable time periods (e.g., ages and stages)
- Milestones/skills develop in a sequential manner, building on the one that came before
 - A child should have certain foundational skills in place before they develop newer, more complex skills

Take the example of learning to walk



Knowing where a child is in the sequence will help you plan and support them in learning the next skill.

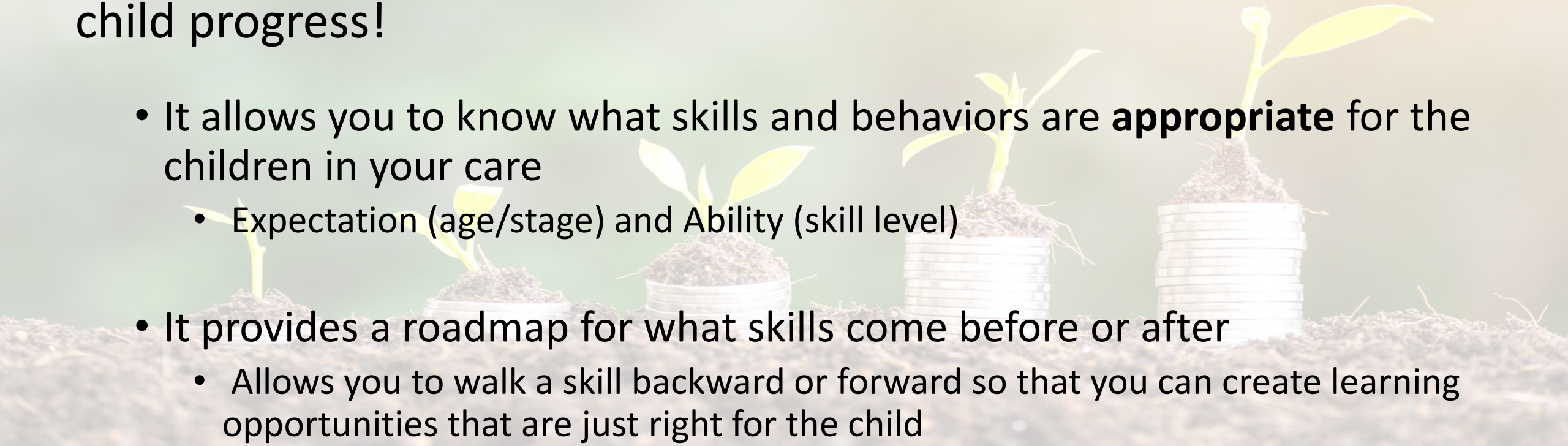
Before Making Adaptations

1) Understanding child development

Main Takeaway:

Your understanding of child development is crucial to helping a child progress!

- It allows you to know what skills and behaviors are **appropriate** for the children in your care
 - Expectation (age/stage) and Ability (skill level)
- It provides a roadmap for what skills come before or after
 - Allows you to walk a skill backward or forward so that you can create learning opportunities that are just right for the child



Before Making Adaptations

2) Knowing the child

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

- Core Consideration #2 – Individuality
 - “The characteristics and experiences unique to each child, within the context of their family and community, that have implications for **how best to support their development and learning**”

It is the responsibility of the early childhood educator to get to know each child as an individual and as a member of their family and community



Before Making Adaptations

2) Knowing the child

Individual diversity

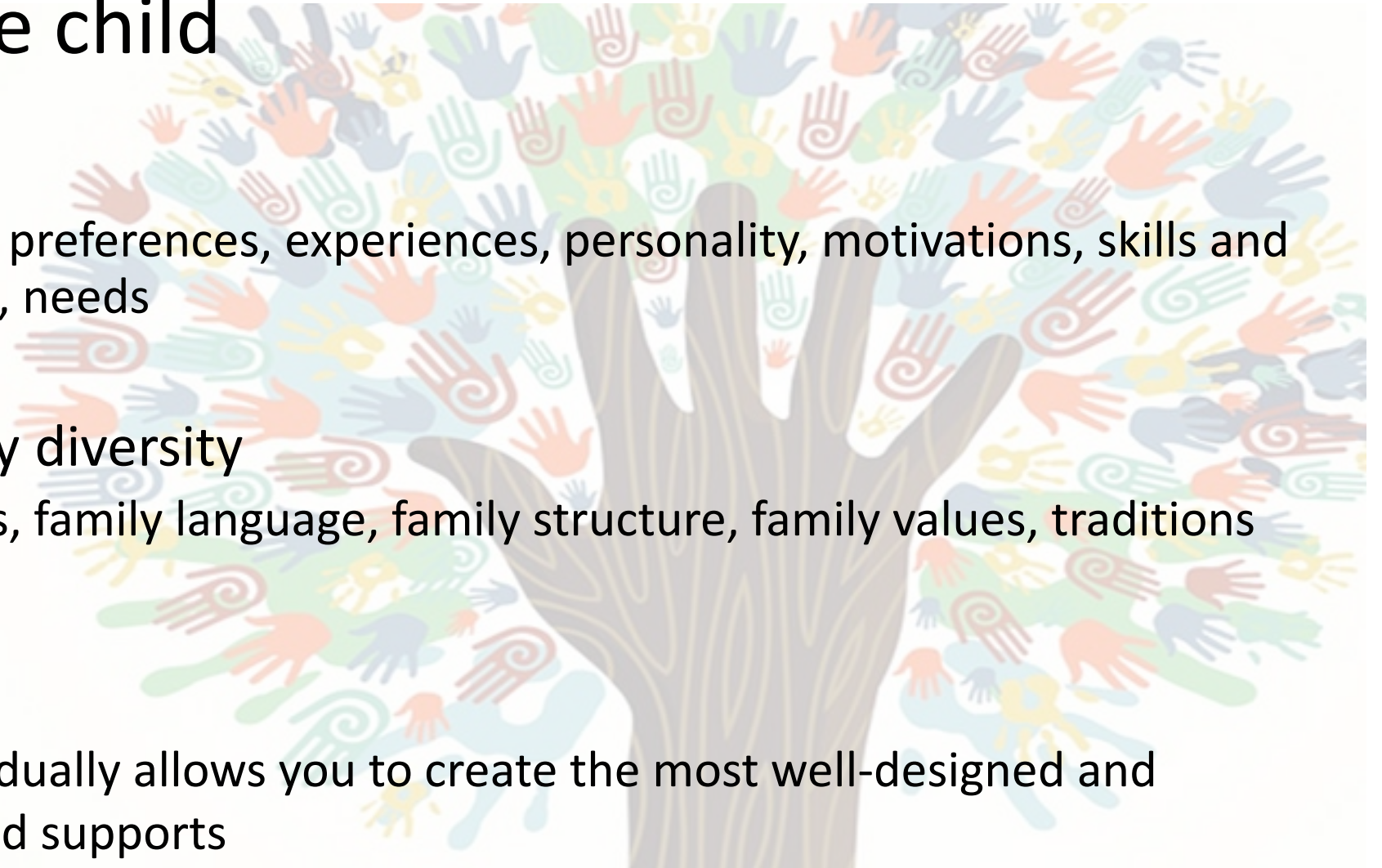
- Interests, strengths, preferences, experiences, personality, motivations, skills and abilities, knowledge, needs

Family and community diversity

- Cultural experiences, family language, family structure, family values, traditions

Main Takeaway:

Knowing each child individually allows you to create the most well-designed and functional adaptations and supports

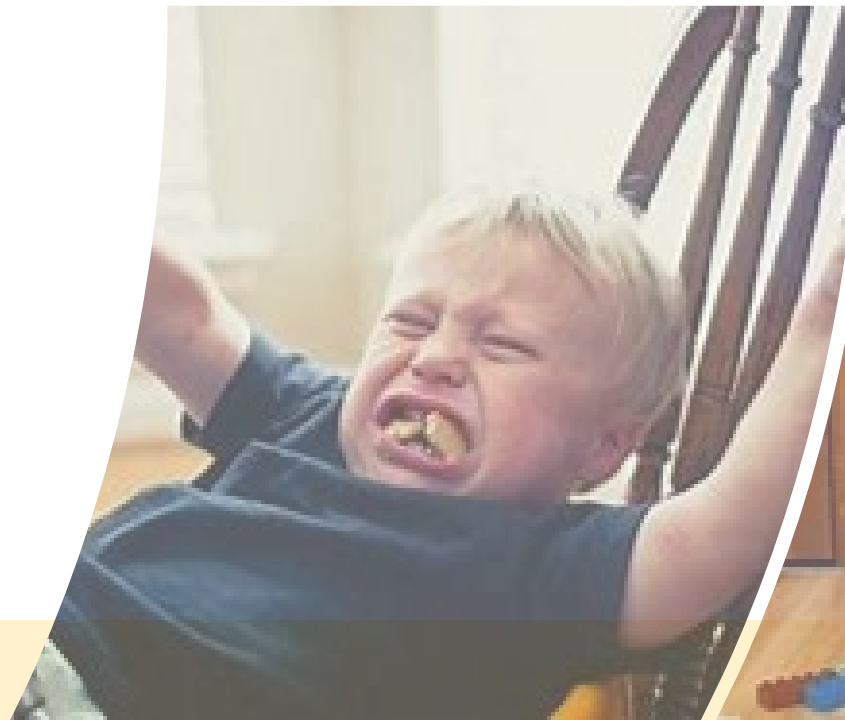


Before Making Adaptations

3) Meaning behind behavior

Tantrum vs Meltdown

- Think about each word and how you would describe/define it
 - What does it look like?
 - What is the function?
 - Why does it happen?
- Are these things the same or different?



Example Scenarios

- Tantrum – You take your child shopping, and down one of the aisles they see a toy they want. You tell them that you are not buying any toys today. They begin to whine and keep asking for the toy. With every no, they get louder and then start crying and finally throw themselves on the floor.
- Meltdown – The school has a special event that is taking place at 10:30, the same time as story time. The teacher decides to skip story time so they can attend the special event. A child in the class is upset with the change and begins yelling. They don't understand why there isn't going to be story time. They begin crying and end up throwing themselves on the floor.

Before Making Adaptations

3) Meaning behind behavior

Tantrum

- * “Want” directed
- * Purposeful/driven by a goal
- * Need/want audience
- * Aware of your presence
- * Use protective/safety factors
- * Resolves if goal is accomplished

Age: 1 to 5 years



Meltdown

- * A reactive mechanism, usually to being overstressed, overwhelmed, or dysregulated
- * Not goal dependent
- * Continues without attention
- * Safety may be compromised
- * May require assistance to gain control

Age: Through adulthood

These two things may look the same but would your response be the same?


Before Making Adaptations

3) Meaning behind behavior


Main Takeaway:



Knowing the reason (or function) behind a child's behavior or action will help you develop the most effective strategy or response



The Functions of Behavior



Pull up a **SEAT** to learn WHY challenging behaviors occur and how to respond most effectively.



S		E	
sensory		Escape	
why? These behaviors provide access to sensory stimulation. It feels good to engage in the behavior.	when? Sensory behaviors occur at any time, in the presence or absence of another person.	why? These behaviors remove an undesired situation or person.	when? Escape behaviors occur at a time in which something is viewed as being too hard, too boring, or too loud.
How to Respond: Teach a functional replacement behavior that provides compatible sensory input. For example: If a child puts non-edible things in their mouth, provide them with access to a chew tube or gum.		How to Respond: Teach the child to request a break when needed. Divide tasks into small parts or give within activity choices. For example: If a child flops out of their chair during a work session, provide them with access to a break card.	
			

A		T	
Attention		Tangible	
why? These behaviors provide a reaction from others. They are often described as "acting-out" behaviors.	when? Attention seeking behaviors occur at a time in which the child desires a social interaction with another person.	why? These behaviors provide access to highly preferred items or activities.	when? Tangible seeking behaviors occur at a time in which the child desires a specific item or activity.
How to Respond: Teach the child to request and receive positive attention through engaging in desirable behaviors. For example: If a child screams to gain attention, provide them with access to praise for having a quiet voice.		How to Respond: Teach the child to ask for, wait, and/or exhibit a specific behavior prior to granting access to the item. For example: If a child begs to use the iPad, allow them access following the completion of a task or chore.	
			

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Adapting to support...

- Children experiencing strong emotions



Validate the child's concerns or emotions – their reaction may not make sense to you, but that doesn't mean it isn't real for them

Strategy: Teach Emotional Literacy – Identifying and labeling emotions

- I see that your fists are balled up. Are you angry/mad that our schedule has changed?
- Jason, if you're sad, you can say, "I'm sad" or "I'm crying"
- Your hands are covering your ears, are you feeling overwhelmed?

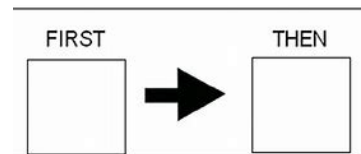
Recognizing Feelings		
	Looks like:	Feels like:
Embarrassed		I feel like everyone is looking at me. I feel confused.
Angry		Things are not going my way. I feel bad inside. I feel grumpy.
Upset		I feel unhappy. I need someone to listen to my problem and help me solve it.
Happy		I feel good inside! People are treating me nicely, and I am enjoying others.
Calm		I feel quiet and peaceful. Nothing is bothering me.

Proactive Strategies

- Help the child understand what's going to happen next to help relieve their anxiety
Visual timers or reminders - We have 3 minutes until we clean up or when the sand runs out, it's time for circle



- First/Then
First Story – Then Fidget



- Provide options
Give them possible options for how they might calm themselves down



Adapting to support...

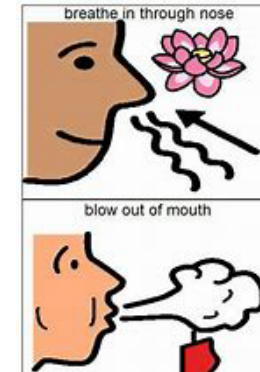
- Children experiencing strong emotions

Teach self-regulation and de-escalation strategies

- Pyramid Model - Tucker Turtle
- The Incredible 5-Point Scale
- The Alert Program – How does your engine run?
- Deep breathing
- Counting to 10
- Provide choices for ways to calm down

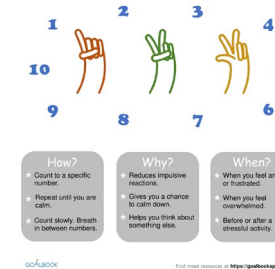
Teach social skills

- Create social/scripted stories to explain expectations and build skills and awareness
- Provide a model or example of the appropriate behavior

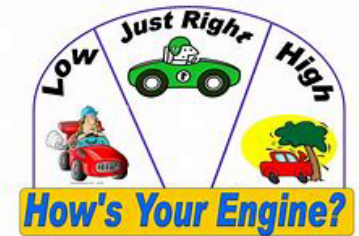
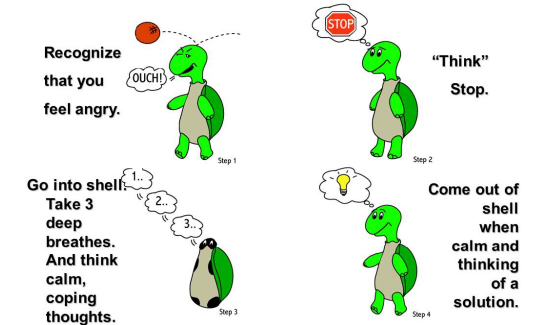


Calming Strategy

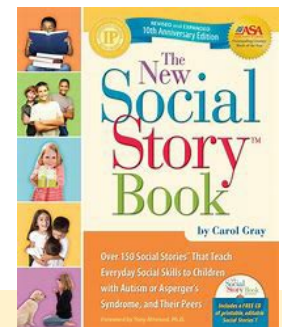
Count



Turtle Technique



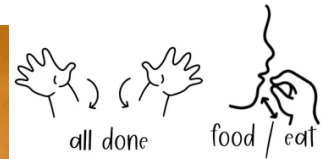
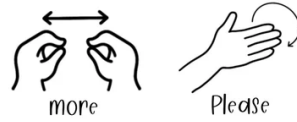
Sensory Break Choices



Adapting to support...

- Children having difficulty communicating

If behaviors often stem from a difficulty communicating...
then figuring out how to meet this need is critical!



Introducing a communication approach:

- Use what you know about the child to develop a functional and effective way for them to communicate (e.g., their abilities, interests, etc.)
- Think about the many ways a child could communicate - Visual supports, sign language, gestures, approximations, assistive devices, etc.
- Make sure it's generalizable across settings (e.g., child care, home, playground, community, etc.)



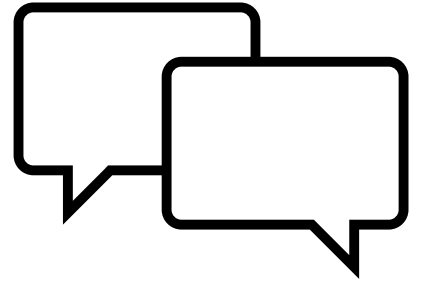
Visual schedules/supports

- Help organize the child's day (or individual activities) into smaller, more manageable steps or chunks of time
- Help to reinforce expectations you have for the child within activities or routines (e.g., we keep our hands to ourselves, etc.)



Adapting to support...

- Children having difficulty communicating



Things you can do to promote communication:

- Talk
 - Talk, and talk some more, about what you and the child are doing (build vocabulary and associations)
- Encourage
 - Listen and respond positively to the child's sounds and words; show them how important their attempts are
- Read and sing
 - Choose books and songs that are familiar and interesting to the child; point and label pictures; vary your voice when singing or reading; teach rhyming words
- Model
 - Provide a positive model for the child to follow; show what your mouth is doing when making a certain sound
- Describe
 - Introduce words that teach size, color, texture; use comparison words (hard/soft, loud/quiet, big/little)
- Play
 - Play games that include following directions; encourage pretend play with peers; expand the conversation through interactions
- Ask
 - Questions help a child think about their actions/play in greater depth (who, what, when, where and why and don't forget how)

Adapting to support...

- Children who are dysregulated

Sensory diet

A set of sensory strategies put in place to help a child regulate their body and minimize their stress/anxiety

Movement/Proprioception – swinging, rocking, jumping, running, spinning, etc.

Touch/Deep Pressure – fidgets, bear hugs, back scratches, weighted blanket, heavy work activities, exercise ball, etc.

Listening/Auditory – listen to music, humming, white noise, quiet place, wearing headphones, etc.

Looking/Vision – look at mobiles, colored lights, wear sunglasses, picture book, etc.

Smell/Taste/Oral – chew gum, using appropriate chewy's, essential oils, eat sweet or sour foods, crunchy or chewy snacks, blow bubbles, scented lotion, etc.



Adapting to support...

- Children attempting a new skill

You can't expect a child to do something they don't know how to do (and don't assume they know how to do it)

Strategy: Pre-teach skills

- Break the skill into smaller, more manageable parts and teach each part
 - Scaffolding or task analysis
- Differentiated Instruction - Adapting instruction to meet individual needs
 - DAP (Individuality) Use the child's interests to motivate learning of the new skill

Ways to differentiate (meet the different needs of a child):

- **Offer flexible materials** – Think about how children can use the materials you provide, can the children pick the materials/toys themselves?
- **Offer flexible learning options** – Do the children have to sit on the floor? At tables? Can they walk around? Are they grouped together? Why?
- **Offer flexible ways to respond** – Do the children have to raise their hand to respond? Can they touch items or just use their eyes? Do they all have to do the same things in the same way?



Adapting to support...

- Children using inappropriate/challenging behavior

Important: These are behaviors that are **challenging to us** as adults

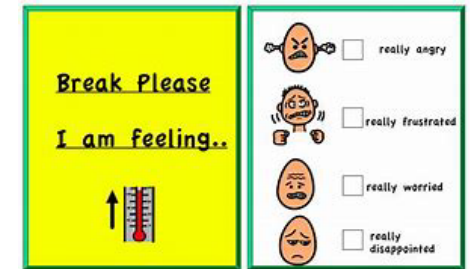
Strategy: Teach a More Appropriate Replacement Skill or Alternative Response

- Replacement skills need to serve the **same function** as the challenging behavior
 - Instead of hitting to get out of a difficult task, the child learns to request a break
 - Instead of sitting crisscross, they're given a choice of how to sit
- Replacement skills need to get the reinforcement to the child reliably and effectively
 - Usable by anyone/easily generalized (the less complicated the better)
 - Functional and reinforceable across settings
- Replacement skills need to be quick and easy to access
 - If it's easier to hit than to find the break card or a communication device, then that's what the child will do
 - If the child chooses to sit in a special chair, that chair needs to be available immediately, or the child may run off or leave the activity

Break Time Choices



Can I _____ ?



Adapting to support...

- Children using appropriate behavior

It's important that we recognize and acknowledge the good stuff kids do!

Positive Reinforcement

Encouraging statements point out specific facts

"I noticed how you kept your body in control when you didn't get to use your favorite green crayon. Does your body feel good?"

but don't evaluate them.

"I really like your picture. Nice job!"

Encouragement vs Praise

Encouragement – Non-judgmental, point out facts, reinforcing language

- E.g., "You really worked hard putting those toys away." or "I bet you feel proud for finishing that puzzle."

Praise – Focuses on what the adult thinks or feels

- E.g., "I love your block tower!" "You did a great job!"

Adapting to support...

- Children using appropriate behavior

Is it wrong to use praise? No

Especially if we link the praise to a skill or expectation the child is working on.

Strategy: Behavior Specific Praise

Positive verbal acknowledgement of a desirable behavior

The Magic Equation

Child's Name

+ Positive Statement

+ Observed Behavior

Behavior Specific Praise

Scenario

Jason is working on requesting a break when he feels overwhelmed by a task.

Behavior Specific Praise

Jason, I like the way you asked for a break when you wanted to ride the trike, but it wasn't your turn.

The Wrap Up

1

Understanding Autism

- Current research
- Areas of challenge
 - Social Interaction
 - Social Communication
 - Restrictive Behaviors

2

Before Making Adaptations

- Child development
- Knowing the child
- The meaning behind an action or behavior

3

Making Adaptations

Supporting:

- Strong emotions
- Communication
- Dysregulation – sensory
- Skill development
- Challenging behaviors
- Appropriate behavior

Understanding Autism

- Resource Page

Autism Speaks – Statistics and Facts

- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-statistics>

ASD Toddler Initiative (Learning Modules)

- <https://asdtoddler.fpg.unc.edu/learning-modules.html>

CDC – Autism Spectrum Disorder

- <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html>

Autism Focused Intervention Resources & Modules (AFIRM)

- <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/node/137>

Autism Navigator

- <https://autismnavigator.com/>

Child Mind Institute

- <https://childmind.org/guide/guide-to-autism-spectrum-disorder/>

First Words Project

- <https://firstwordsproject.com/16-by-16-lookbooks/>

Evidence Based Practices (Modules for supporting children with Autism)

- <https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices>

Making Adaptations

- Resource Page

Sensory

- <http://blog.brookespublishing.com/10-modifications-for-learners-with-sensory-issues/>
- <https://www.inclusivechildcare.org/sites/default/files/courses/swf/Sensory%20Intervention%20Strategies%20and%20Environmental%20Adaptations.pdf>

Visual Supports

- <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/module3b/handout2.pdf> (challenging behavior)
- https://www.ctdinstitute.org/sites/default/files/file_attachments/TnT-News-VisualSupports-Oct12.pdf (toddlers)
- [https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/presentations-and-webinars/Take a look visual supports for learning.pdf](https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/presentations-and-webinars/Take_a_look_visual_supports_for_learning.pdf)

Creating visuals

- <https://connectability.ca/visuals-engine/>

Making Adaptations

- Resource Page

Social Stories

- <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities/article/social-stories>
- <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/scriptedstories/tips.html>
- <https://vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/tipsheets/socialstoriestips.pdf>

Emotional Intelligence and self-regulation

- <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2017/teaching-emotional-intelligence>
- <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/emotional-behavioral-self-regulation-know>
- <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/fostering-emotional-literacy-young-children-labeling-emotions>

Task Analysis – Breaking a Task into Smaller, More Manageable Steps

- https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/fdscontent/uscompanion/us/static/companion.websites/9780199358779/pdf/Website_Task_Analysis.pdf
- https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/sites/autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/files/TaskAnalysis_Steps_0.pdf

Making Adaptations

- Resource Page

Challenging Behaviors

- https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/SocialEmotionalSkills_solution-kit_cue-cards.pdf
- <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/using-pyramid-model-prevent-respond-challenging-behavior>
- <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/behavior-has-meaning>
- <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/infant-toddler-behaviors-can-challenge-adults>
- <https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-web/lab-wpcontent/sites/96/2020/02/07211731/Hot-Buttons.pdf>
- <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/summer2021/discipline-guidance>

Evidence Based Practices (Modules for supporting children with Autism)

- <https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices>

Replacement Skills

- <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwwb11.pdf>
- <https://autismclassroomresources.com/what-are-replacement-behaviors-and-wha/>