

# Getting Started in an Autism Class



Mary Mc Kenna 2024 Instagram:  
[marymckenna\\_autismsupport](https://www.instagram.com/marymckenna_autismsupport)

# Personal History

- **Set up Ireland's first Early Intervention Autism Class in Scoil Mhuire Ballyboden**
- **Masters in Autism Birmingham University 2005**
- **SESS 2010: 6 seminars a year: 'Teaching Young Autistic Children'**
- **Worked on Post graduate programmes in St Pat's; Froebel, St. Angela's, UCD, Trinity**
- **Early Retirement 2018: NCSE Associate continuing to run my seminars but also doing school support visits.**
- **This year's NCSE seminars:**
- **October 22<sup>nd</sup> : Dublin; 21<sup>st</sup> January: Sligo; May 27<sup>th</sup>: Cork (See [ncse.ie/tpl](https://ncse.ie/tpl))**

- **2021: The Children's Clinic, Sandycove, Co. Dublin providing post autism support to parents re: how best to support their children to thrive**
- **Supporting teachers through courses (on-line and face to face) throughout the year in DWEC and in-school staff talks**
- **Bi-monthly Support workshops for teachers who have previously attended my courses.**

- My gratitude to the INTO for inviting me to share my thoughts and ideas this afternoon
- And for all their work behind the scenes advocating for increased resources to support us in supporting our neurodivergent pupils

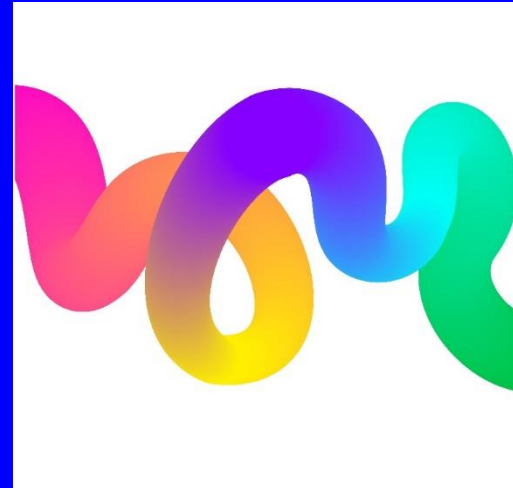
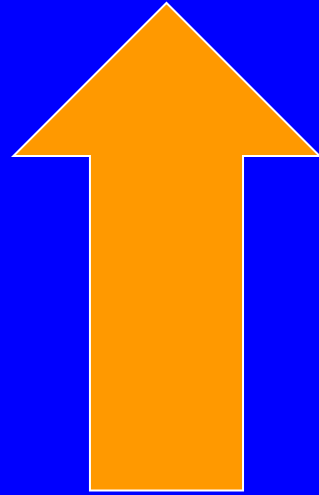
# Your first month in the Autism Class

- You may be feeling .....
- Energised,
- Excited,
- Overwhelmed,
- Exhausted,
- Lost?

# Mainstream

- Most likely you're leaving mainstream.... Where I'm guessing you felt comfortable, competent and secure in your role as teacher.
- Dr. Maureen Gaffney:  
3 things we need:  
Closeness, autonomy and competence  
'Your One Wild and Precious Life' (2019).





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# You may need to reconsider your identity...

- Especially if your idea of a good teacher is the one who has great control over her class.





- It takes time to build new competence.
- Guard against overwhelm. Your biggest critic can be **YOURSELF!**
- You might find the following slide helpful.....

# BEWARE: Unforeseen Competence Crisis



- Please exercise patience.....
- New competencies under construction!

*Any change, even a change for the better, is always accompanied by discomforts.*

Arnold Bennett

Changing roles can be perceived as a time of stress and uncertainty.

Although it can be hard, it doesn't have to be scary. It can offer its own opportunities to learn and grow and be surprised.

Let's see if we can see it as an opportunity to grow and learn and.....

**....weave our own new path**



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# Imagine you're in mainstream or SET with 26 pupils, many of whom have complex needs

- And your principal makes you an offer:
- They tell you:
- ‘I’m going to take responsibility away from you for 20 pupils and ask you to support just 6
- Then I’m going to allocate you your own environment which you can design specifically to support these 6 pupils to thrive
- AND
- I’m going to allocate two extra personnel (SNAs) solely to support these 6 pupils to thrive’.
- I hope this can help you reframe this as a wonderful.....

# OPPORTUNITY!



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- It may not feel like that to you right now. You can be under pressure from everywhere to be all set up, timetabled and functioning impressively already.



- I'm here to invite you to start smart to avoid rushing off in a direction that won't support your six pupils and you, yourself to thrive as the months progress and into the future.
- Sometimes we're so uncomfortable with the unknowing, that we insert routines and activities just to make us feel productive and teachery, rather than routines and activities that make sense



# Making Sense of our Role

Theo Peeters' advised that when dealing with professionals just starting out in Autism Support, always tell them that the most important aspect in training is not applying recipes but trying to adopt 'autism thinking'. ([www.lookingupautism.org](http://www.lookingupautism.org) Vol 3. No.6).

He encouraged us in training to put on our autism lens and embrace the culture of autism.

Teachers who had 5 training sessions, felt that they knew enough....

# Some of you....

- May be setting up a brand new Autism class in your school. Some of you may be taking over in an already established Autism class from another teacher.
- I don't know which is easier. Setting up a new class can be daunting, but also exciting. You're designing the environment from scratch. It's a clean slate. Exploring how best to make it work for your pupils can be massively full of possibilities but that, in itself, can be overwhelming.
- Taking over in an already established class can mean that so much of this is done already. The discerning question here is how well does the existing set-up and established routines serve this year's class? Is it supporting the pupils to thrive? Beware the routines that no longer serve your pupils!

- Sometimes they are continued simply because ‘that’s the way we’ve always done it’
- One teacher on a summer course who was transitioning into an already established class was grappling with the ‘behaviour’ of a pupil who dropped to the ground every day when they went for a walk around the school grounds. The group discussion that ensued centred initially around how to support this pupil to co-operate on the walk until I questioned ‘why exactly is it important for her to go on this walk everyday?’ The answer was because that’s the way they’ve always done it’.
- So, far from perceiving the dropping down as an undesirable response, we should respect and celebrate her way of communicating that she didn’t want to go on this BORING walk!
- Consider letting go of systems that no longer serve and make room for more effective practices.

# AsIAm Definition

- **Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability or difference which relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others, and how they experience the world around them.**

# Neuro-affirmative Terminology

- Preferred Language of the Autism Community
- Autistic rather than ‘with autism’ or ASD
- Neurodivergent and neurotypical
- Autism (Support) class as opposed to unit
- Best practice: Ms Mc Kenna’s Class or Mary’s Class
- <https://www.transportforireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AsIAm-Language-Guide.pdf>

# Videos to watch in your own time...

[\(28\) Human Neurodiversity Should Be Celebrated, Not Treated as a Disorder | Op-Ed | NowThis - YouTube](#)



[\(84\) Amazing Things Happen - by Xander Amelines - YouTube](#)

- Rita Jordan said there were only 2 things you needed to be a good teacher for Autistic pupils:
- A dirty old rainmac and a cigar

# Columbo



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# I'm wondering if we just need ....

Curiosity as Tina Payne Bryson suggests

If we are curious, we can work out each individual pupil's angle

And if we're curious about their angle/perspective and we 'get' them, we can ....



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.....align our teaching style to their learning style

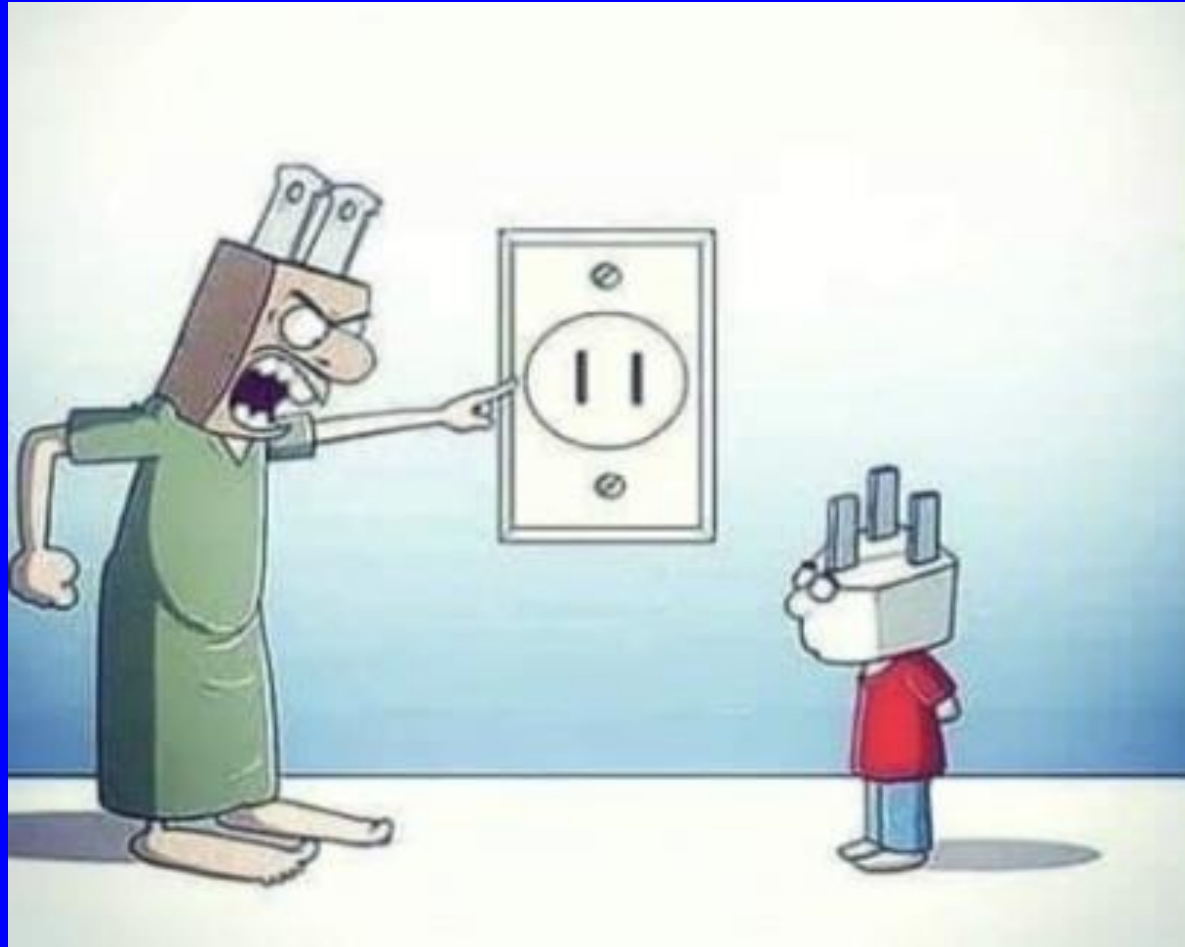
Because everything else is a waste of energy at best and harmful at worst.

I was so lucky to have a MDT...

# **Beechpark Multidisciplinary Team Members**

- **Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) (Toilet training)**
- **Occupational Therapist (OT) (Fine-Motor Skills Group)**
- **Speech and Language Therapist (SLT)**
- **Psychologist In-house assessments**
- **Psychiatrist**
- **Social Worker**

# A bit like me doing my Fine motor skills programme!



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# So it might be safe to presume that the cavalry is not coming.....

- A lot of teachers are having to rely on their own and their school's resources
- We may just be our own most valuable resource!



# Do check out....

- Your school's local Children's Disability Network Team(CDNT
- Some teachers have got support

# DSM-5 (2013)

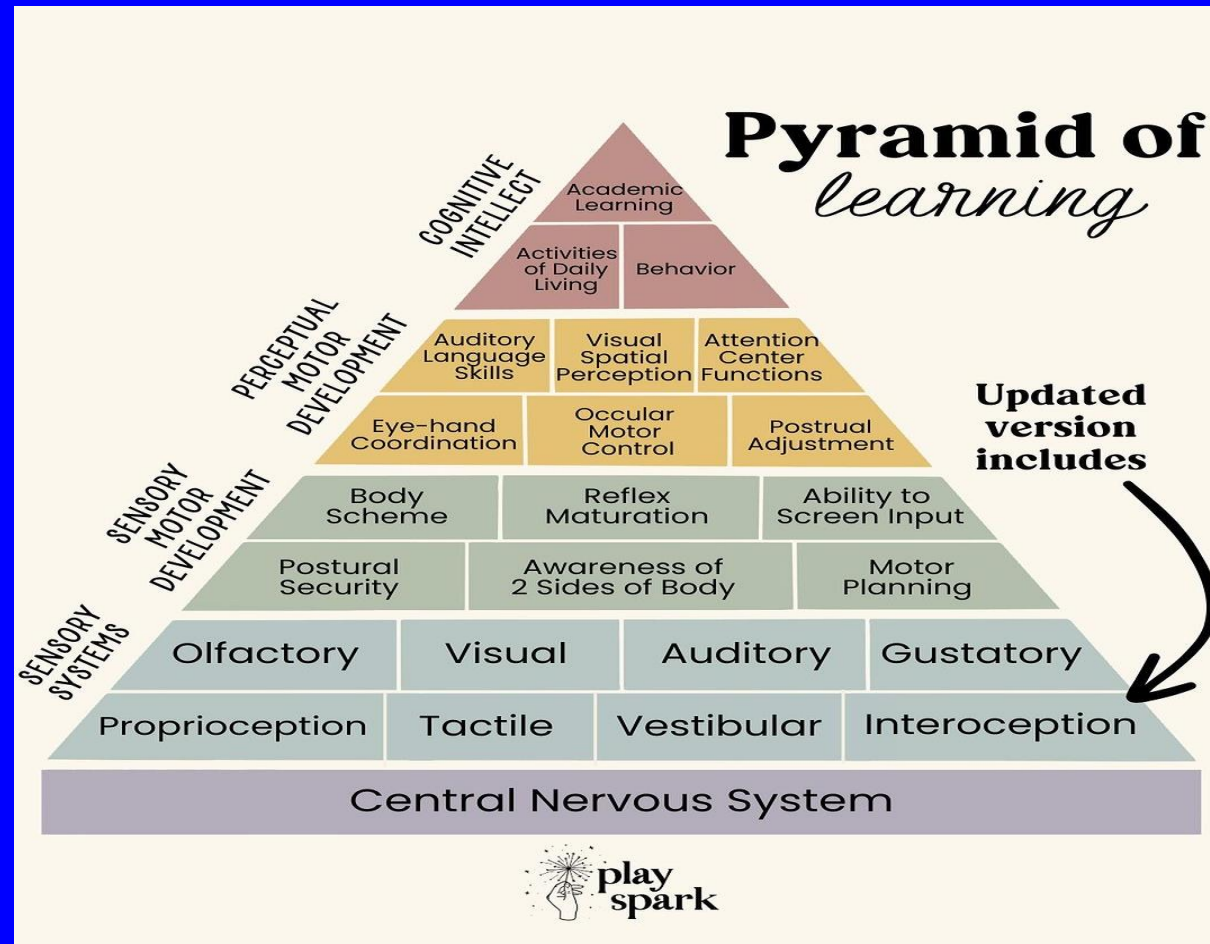
- Criticism: Removal of Aspergers
- Strength: Acknowledgement of sensory differences

# Therefore we know....

- Anyone who has been identified as Autistic since 2013 needs us to consider the sensory component of how they process and learn.
- Take a moment to register your body....
- What do these children need in order to have an easy body?
- And how can we provide it?
- **Regulation: First Pillar of Support in an Autism setting!**



# The Sensory Pyramid of Learning



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# Recognition of Sensory Struggles

- Setting up an environment that supports regulation and reduces stress
- Importance of gross motor and sensory built into the fabric of each day, not just movement breaks
- Having sensory regulation opportunities in the immediate environment will avoid the need for migration to a sensory room. Because I guess that you may have realised already that transitions are the most stressful part of any day

- Not every child needs to lower his activity levels. Some need ‘rev’ing up to get that easy body.
- See Alert Program® suggestions on how to get their engine running just right
- Mary Sue Williams & Sherry Shellenberger, both OTs
- tell us that self-regulation ‘is that inner drive that moves us through the day – sometimes frenzied, sometimes mellow, and sometimes attentive and focused’.

- “If your body is like a car engine, sometimes it runs on high (hyped up), sometimes it runs on low (lethargic), and sometimes it runs just right (alert and focused). But it’s not just children. We are all self-regulators.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wVH5vA3Syc>
- Some teachers work with Zones of Regulation (Lindsay Lindsay & Jeremy Sanbrooks) : Blue; Green; Yellow; Red.
- **The best way to support a child’s regulation is to co-regulate so take care to support your own just right engine!**
- To learn about co-regulation. See Tina Payne Bryson:
- [https://youtu.be/dRMaei\\_XUGo?si=xbOyRS6v4WpE9iaQ](https://youtu.be/dRMaei_XUGo?si=xbOyRS6v4WpE9iaQ)

*“An escalated adult cannot  
deescalate an escalated  
child.”*

*-Mathew Portel, 2019*

# Take time to be that co-regulator and become consciously present to your pupil.....

Try practising

**PART:**

- Presence
- Attunement
- Resonance
- Trust

Dan Siegel on YouTube

(Clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA School of Medicine) and author of The Whole Brain Child with Tina Payne Bryson.

**“THE  
OPPOSITE  
OF  
ANXIETY  
ISN’T CALM  
IT’S  
TRUST”**

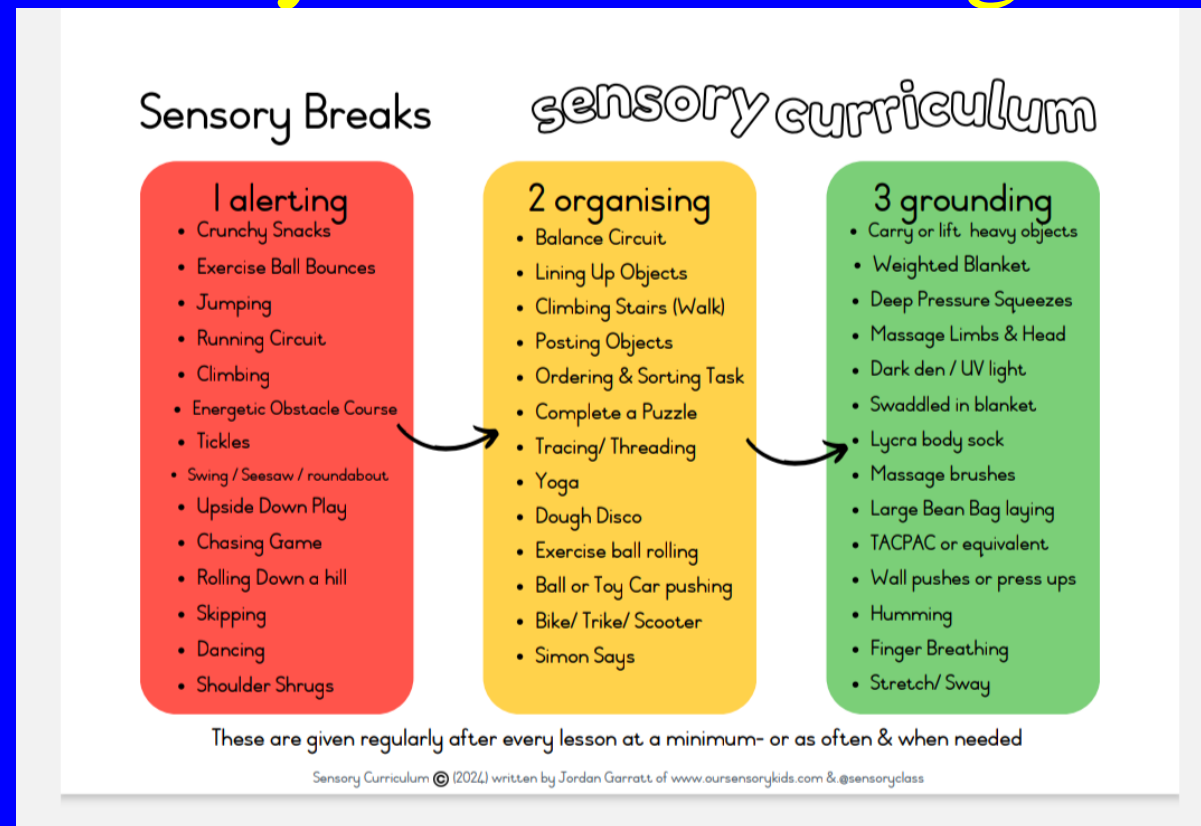
Barry Prizant



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# From Jordan Garrat

[www.oursensorykids.com](http://www.oursensorykids.com) and  
sensoryclass on Instagram



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# You might like to consider a Daily Gross-Motor Group

- September is about processing the classroom environment so there's no rush to spread further until you can read their bodies and judge that they're ready to process a new opportunity
- Maybe in the next few weeks, explore placing attractive activities placed in hall
- Allow time to process the new (hall) environment: no structure or rules. Bubbles; balls; bikes; hoola hoops; giant bricks; PE equipment?
- On a good day when they have easy bodies, try a little structured activity and build upon and expand slowly from there

# And to prove

- That it's not just my idea of what's important, you can see the eight domains of support outlined in Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools....

# Autism Good Practice: Guidance for Schools; Supporting Children and Young People (Gov.ie, 2022)



- Learning **Environment**
- Language and Communication Development
- Social Development
- **Emotional** Development
- **Sensory** Processing
- Functional Skills for Daily Living
- Academic Development
- Behavioural Development

# So many of these domains can be supported by **PLAY** at every age

- I came to see play as the pupil's passionate 'Pursuit of Happiness' (borrowed from the title of a Will Smith film 2007)
- But sometimes their first experience of adults (in an educational setting) was as a highly annoying interrupter of that pursuit. More a demander than a collaborator! Self-led play facilitates easy bodies...no threat!
- School Inspection



# Play Play Play

- **Play develops creativity, intellectual competence, emotional strength and stability and feelings of joy and pleasure, the habit of being happy.**
- **(Piers & Landau, 1980)**

- We can use this passion instead of trying to fight it
- Fighting can be exhausting!
- Control can feel like subjugation of the will. You're stripping them of their agency. This seems to add to anxiety and increase fight or flight (which makes the job and the day harder for EVERYONE)
- Inviting them into relationship where their agency is honoured allows a give and take approach where they can eventually feel regulated enough to co-operate with a demand/request without it threatening their very being.
- (Mary's 6 steps to Trust and Co-Operation through Relationship)



# Otherwise

- You might be inviting/supporting a constant state of escalated stressed Central Nervous System caught in terror
- When we understand this, we are less surprised at the threat response (Fight/flight/freeze/fawn) where the only immediate means available to the pupil is to use his body to rescue himself
- Perhaps you might consider viewing ‘behaviour’ more as a **Central Nervous System response.**
- **See Dan Siegal to learn about his** Hand Model of the Brain:  
<https://youtube.com/watch?v=Kx7PCzg0CGE&feature=shared>

# What To Teach?

- **Schools often teach what they are good at teaching, not what the pupils need to learn (Charles Handy)**
- **What do these children need to learn?**
- **How do I teach them this?**  
**By working out the answers to 3 questions**



# Question 1: *Who are you?*

- What are your strengths, interests, **passions**?
- What lights you up/engages you?
- What/who do you relate to?
- What/who do you respond to?
- How do you perceive the world and the people in it?
- What is your family dynamic?
- What has been your physical/ intellectual/emotional experience up to this point?
- What are the things that you can do with ease and what are the things that challenge you?
- What matters to you (as opposed to what's the matter with you) (Trudy Meehan) ?

## Question 2: Based on Q.1, *What do you need to thrive?*

The student needs those teaching and caring for him to observe him and find his developmental level so we can meet him where he's at (see him and know him / answer Q.1) Sometimes we feel pressurised to stay battling with a particular level of curriculum e.g. the senior infant curriculum because the student is 6 years old. But developmentally the student could be at a developmental level of 18 months or 8 years. I personally feel that a developmental level is a better indicator of where to start than chronological age / typical class grouping.

They need to be invited to see the world as an inclusive place where it is safe to relate to others and build relationships of trust rather than being stuck in an escalated 'fight or flight' state.

*Connection, relationship and honor do not have a price tag, they are not made from wood or plastic, and they do not fit any certain set of guidelines*

# Remember why these children are in your class

Because they have been formally identified as autistic which signals to us teachers that they process the world in a different way.

Can your Columbo work out how they're seeing the world?



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# WHAT THEY DON'T NEED IS.....

- Us believing that we need to
- ***treat the autism i.e. make them more like us!***



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## **Question 3: *How will I support you to thrive?***

- This answer defines our new role. Our job is to support each pupil to thrive. It also informs our SSP.
- Each child will be different. Some may thrive with increased structure and predictability, while others may thrive with a gentle departure from rigidity of routines and increased freedom to explore and find their own passionate pursuit of happiness.
- I can't answer it for you. You're the Columbo for your pupils. Put on your rainmac. Go forth and investigate!

- Keeping forensically focused on how we support each individual student to thrive can strip away a lot of the peripheral energy-wasters. Let's try aligning our teaching style to the learning style of our pupils.
- This same focus should inform our.....

# Timetabling and Planning

- Gather your meaningful data while observing and learning about your 6 pupils
- And base your planning on this, forensically designed to support each individual to thrive. I found the observation profile to be really user-friendly in *Autism in the Early Years* (Stevenson, Dunlop, and Cumine). For all ages!
- A successful routine observed today can form the plan for tomorrow and so on until you have a library of successful routines that inform the shape and content of your days. Always leave room for flexibility especially our own!
- Some of you may already have sophisticated means of recording your assessments/observations. For those who are seeking the simplest place to start, perhaps take a school copy / notebook for each child and jot down your observations as you go e.g. their favourite things and activities, successful support practices, organically building up to a School Support Plan (SSP). I used to hold my IEP/SSP meetings in October / November with a review date set for Spring

# Timetabling

Start with a blank template for a day and put in basic routines i.e.

- Entry and welcome
- Snack
- Home time

Build it accordingly, adding successful routines as you go along. The needs of the pupils should be informing the shape of the day, not the other way around.

Starting off blindly adhering to a generic timetable that is not tailor-made for your pupils can lead to a lot of wasted energy and frustration



# My 3 Suggested Pillars of Support

No. 1: **Regulation** i.e. Support them to achieve an easy body so that they can be open to engagement in the world around them

No. 2: Support them to make connections and build relationships and **make sense** of this world designed by neurotypicals for neurotypicals (by neurotypicals)

No. 3: Support them to access **Opportunities**

So often opportunities are prioritised from the beginning because the school rightly has policies of inclusion. Sometimes the student needs time to process the environment and the basic daily experience before being exposed to the wider school environment and all it can offer.

# **Establishing Relationships of Trust: Inviting them into relationship Attracting them in to invest in the Bank of You**

- How attractive are you to be around?
- What have you got to offer them? What has school got to offer them?
- Set out your stall for facilitating their passionate pursuit of happiness. Group lesson video: ‘How do you get them all sitting down paying attention?’

# Warning:

- Don't waste this special highly important introduction time by putting them off with too many demands
- It could mean that they don't invest and this can lead to disengagement in the long run.
- Let's set ourselves up for continued success!

**A simple and effective methodology for starting to build trust is through our use of language.....**

- So simple....

# Marte Meo

The Marte Meo Programme for autism is a developmental support programme which can be used in daily interaction moments. The central focus is to encourage the child to use 'their own strength' to advance and stimulate developmental process. Labelling the child's actions i.e. "You're pushing the car." "You're looking at...." "You're jumping up and down." "You are laughing.", ensures that language modelling is attached to real and meaningful experiences and emotions of the child.

# Marte Meo Contd.

## A. Connecting and Following:

- Attentive Waiting; Child's own initiative; Follow initiative; **Name initiative.**

## B. Positive Leading:

- Taking the lead; Say what the child can do e.g. You can sit here; you can give me that; you can take that box. Informing, instead of correcting.  
Example...nose/tissue

**Naming rather than questioning....we've all fallen into the trap at some stage of filling the silence with questions!!!**

- **Golden Gift of Learning Part 1:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66uC8hJR8dM&t=83s>
- 
- Golden Gift of Learning Part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVygl1tWWBY>
- 
- Early Childhood Ireland: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6lnkSqEtrk&t=444s>
- Don't be put off with the age profile in the videos. This communication and connection style supports children of all ages and even ourselves!

# Prioritise Regulation and Connecting

- Just like a puppy is not **just** for Christmas,
- **Regulation and Connection** are not just for September
- They're for every month, every week, every day, **ongoing!**
  
- As are the 3 questions: Who / What / How. Nothing stays the same. Everyone's evolving at different rates. We're always learning if we stay curious



- Designing the environment to support your 6 individual pupils' regulation needs sets everyone, including you, up for success!



# Some ideas for Classroom Set-Up



- Using Structure in Environment to Support Sense-making from the TEACCH programme
- Blue Activity Table

# Reading Corner



# Snack Table



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# Workstation



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# Work with Teacher Table



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# Circle Time



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# Gym Room



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# Shoe Table



# Sand Area



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# Daily Schedules

What will  
we do today?

Thursday



Thursday



snack time

A blue card with a white background showing illustrations of a glass and a bowl of snacks.



toilet

A blue card with a white background showing a black outline of a toilet.



group time

A blue card with a white background showing a teacher pointing at a board and three children sitting at desks.



coats on

A blue card with a white background showing two coats, one blue and one purple.

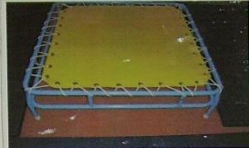


walk

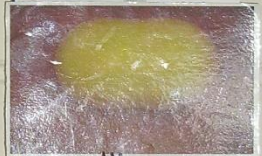
Finished

A white sign with a red 'X' and the word 'Finished' in blue. A smaller sign with the word 'walk' and a walking stick icon is partially visible behind it.

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trampoline  
floppy island



rolling  
slide



ball pool

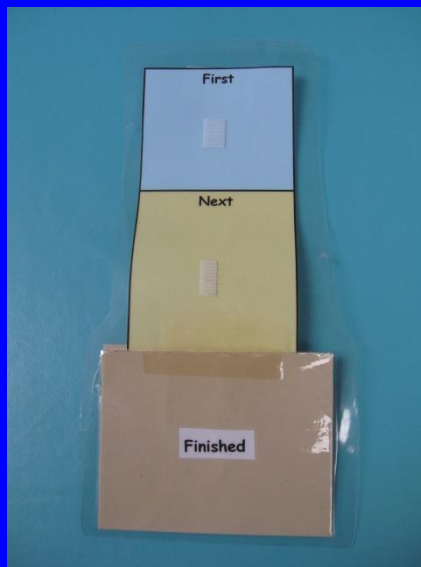
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X



# Video of Sacred Heart Junior NS from their website May 2022

- <https://www.sacredheartjns.ie/news/autism-awareness-and-acceptance-month/?p=2&>
- Helen's video of Sacred Heart JNS Killinarden Autism Den

# Visual supports throughout environment



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# Using visuals to support their regulation and sense-making throughout the day



<https://lessonpix.com>

Or Boardmaker; Widgit, Twinkl; Google Pics

To see how one teacher (Jordan) uses visuals to support making sense in her classroom, watch.....

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C2kcAyPNPNs/?igsh=a2I1bTNidjhwa2N3>



# Exploring Augmentative and Alternative Communication Systems

- On an individual basis
- What does this child need in order to thrive as a communicator?
- What will support him in relationships with others?

# NCSE Website for Courses

- NCSE.ie
- TPL and In-school Support: Request an advisor to give a presentation on Autism to whole staff during *Croagh Patrick Hours* or request and advisor to visit your school to support you
- Register for seminars to learn about TEACCH, PECS, Social Stories, Intensive Interaction, Sensory support, Attention Autism.....Look them up
- Look up my 'Teaching Young Autistic Children' if you'd like to hear about my six-step programme to trust and co-operation through relationship

# Middletown Centre for Autism

- [www.middletownautism.com](http://www.middletownautism.com)
- Register
- Training for Professionals
- Also for parents
- On-line learning and browse webinars e.g. Attention Autism

# AsIAM Autism Friendly Schools Programme

autismfriendlyschoools@asiam.ie

- Real neurodiversity awareness and acceptance requires us to redesign our environment AND our responses. Otherwise, we might be all stuck in a continuing cycle of escalation, terror and lack of safety!

# Think about your own 'Passionate Pursuit of Happiness'



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And work it into your life so that you can bring your own regulated body into school each day and be an effective co-regulator for your pupils

- Because.....

*“An escalated adult cannot  
deescalate an escalated  
child.”*

*-Mathew Portel, 2019*



# Video Links

- Video Zones of Regulation:  
<https://youtube.com/watch?v=2Rk7sAJvaoo&feature=shared>
- The Hand Model of the Brain:  
<https://youtube.com/watch?v=Kx7PCzg0CGE&feature=shared>
- Window of Tolerance and Emotional Regulation (Dr Dan Siegel)  
<https://youtu.be/TNVlppGz0zM?si=6N5nzVDkSUcowV1c>

# And remember....

No need to beat ourselves up for when things go belly-up! There are enough other people doing that already!

Look at the mistakes as **learning opportunities** (Anne Collins) that help to inform our future practice and make us better able to offer better support tomorrow.

When you feel you're being pulled in a million different directions and being distracted from the main job which is supporting your 6 pupils to thrive, remember to

Beware the seduction of perfection!

Leonard Cohen advises us to...

*'Forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack, a crack in everything.*

*That's how the light gets in!'*

# Books that may help to answer your questions.....

- My book with Orpen Press expected Spring 2025

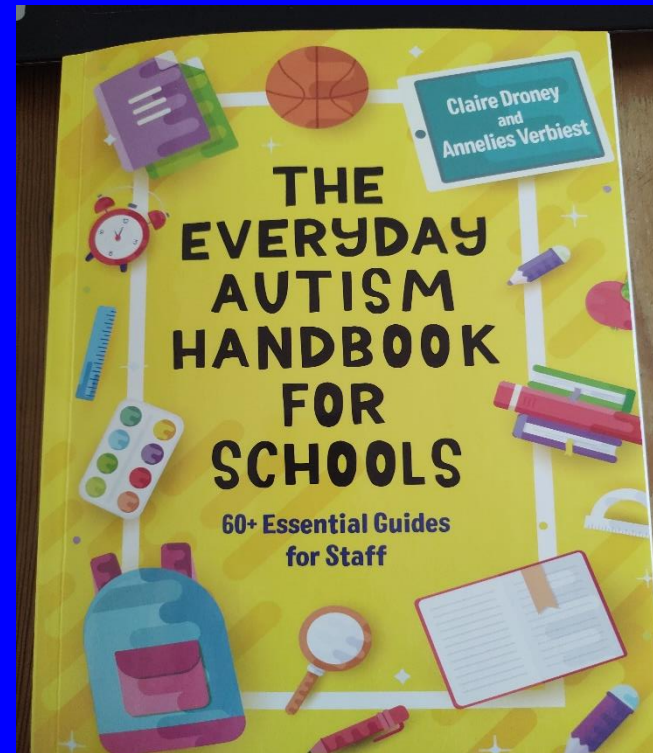


# Published (2022) in electronic format and sent to schools

- Google it now and download it if you haven't got it already
- 
- Autism Good Practice; Guidance for Schools; Supporting Children and Young People

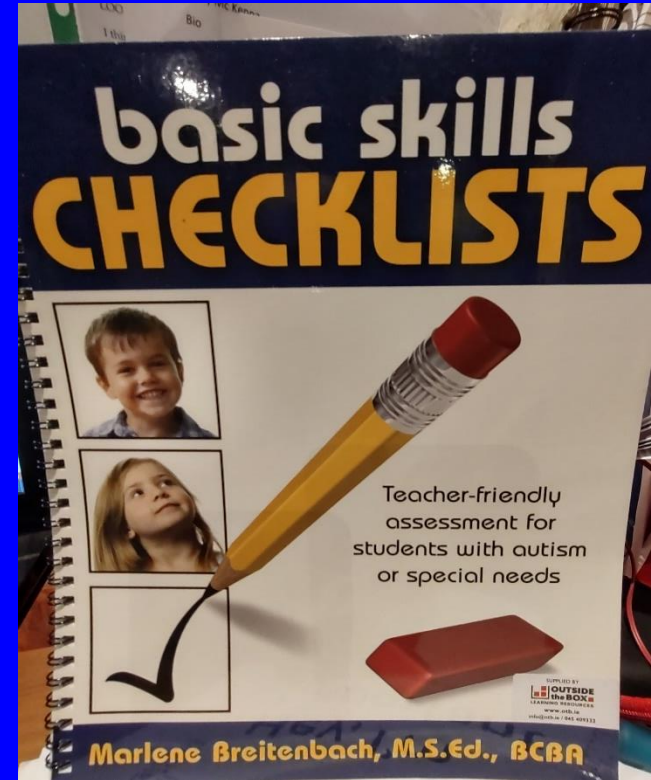
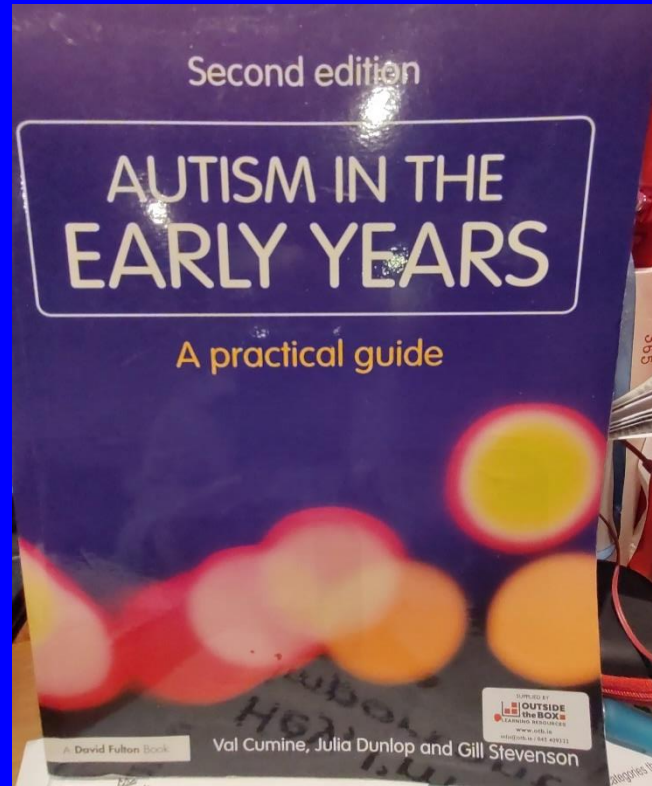
# Claire has a really good tip re: Velcro...

- *The Everyday Autism Handbook for Schools: 60+ Essential Guides for Staff*
- published 2021 Claire Droney and Annelies Verbiest



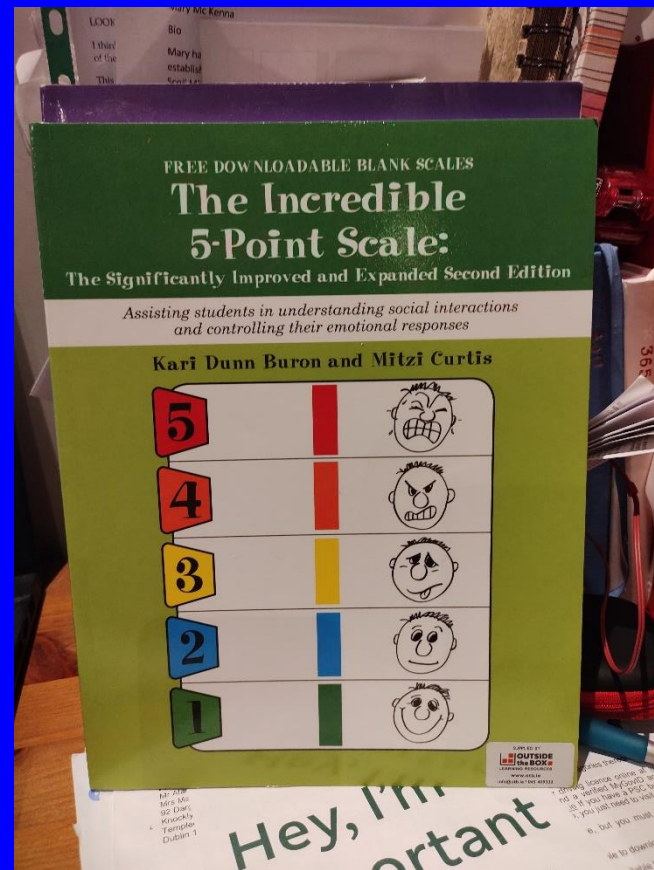
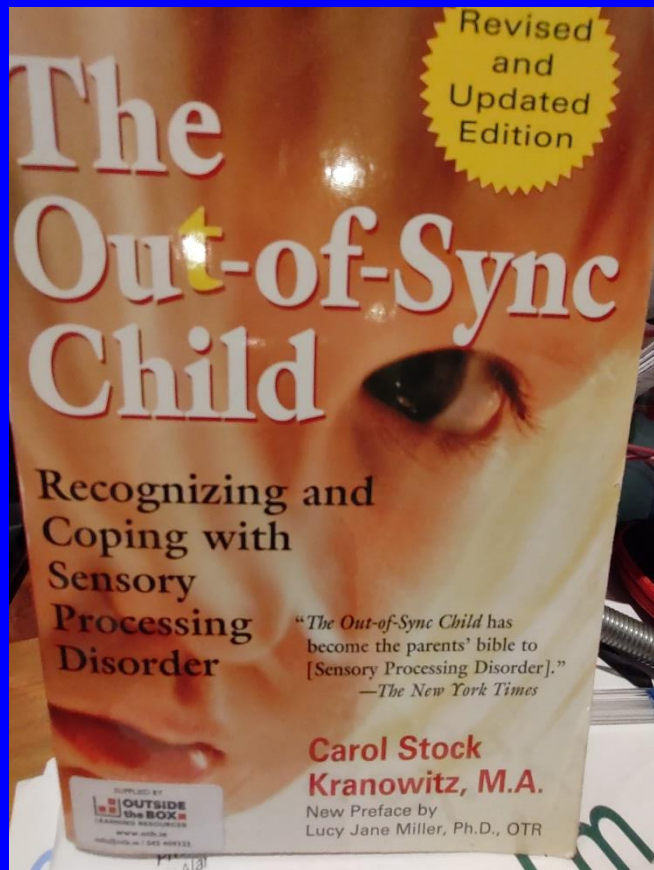
- Autism from the Inside Out: A Handbook for Parents, Early Childhood, Primary, Post-Primary and Special School Settings
- by Ring, Emer; Daly, Patricia; Wall, Eugene (Eds.)



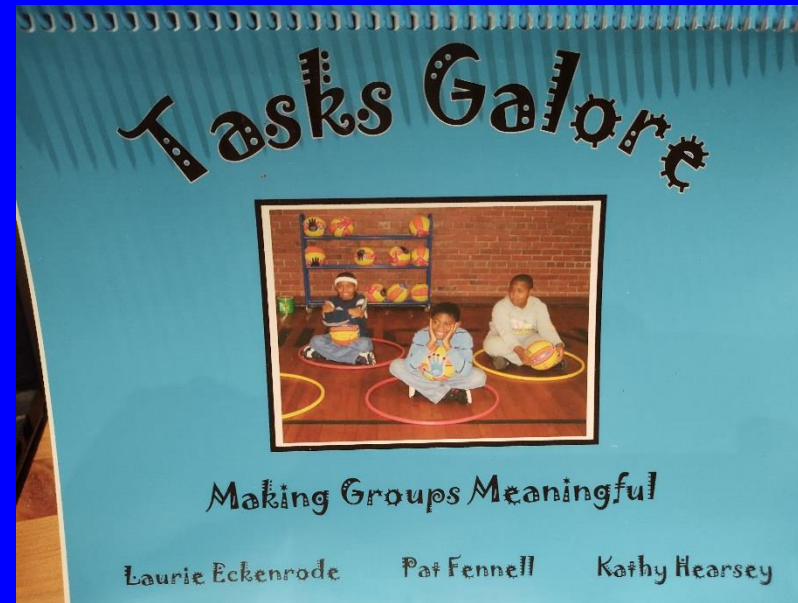
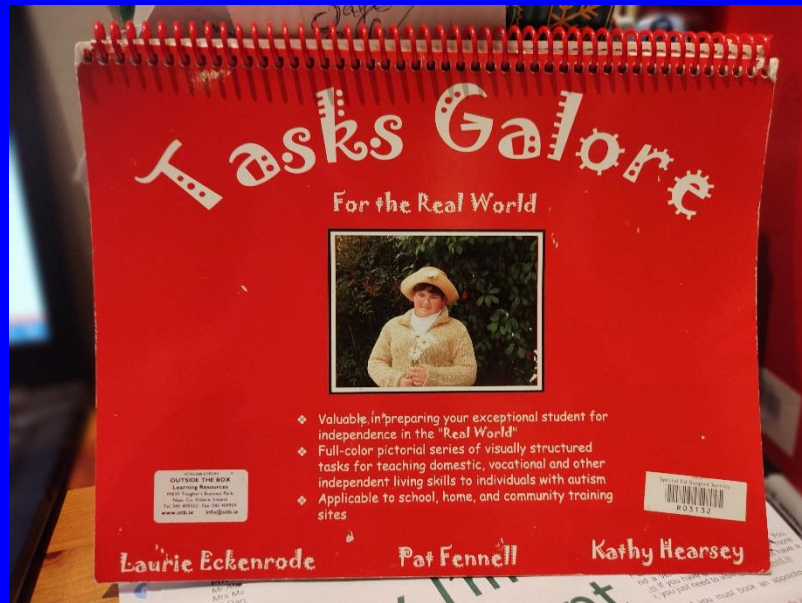


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# Articles

- Mc Kenna, M, (2009) Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD): A personal approach. The SLD Experience for professionals, parents and those working to support children and young people with severe and profound learning difficulties Issue 54,p3-6
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*Ring, E., McKenna, M. with Wall, E. (2014)  
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Batlmannsweiler, Schneider Verlag Hohengehren  
GmbH, pp. 207-229.*

# A Blessing

*“May the sacredness of your work bring healing, light and renewal to those who work with you and to those who see and receive your work.....”*

*.....May your work never weary you.*

*May it release within you wellsprings of refreshment,  
inspiration and excitement”*

**(Anam Cara, John O Donoghue).**