



Emily W. King, Ph.D., Child Psychologist

# Supporting Neurodivergent Kids at School & Beyond

[WWW.LEARNWITHDREMILY.COM](http://WWW.LEARNWITHDREMILY.COM)



## WHO AM I?

- ★ Child Psychologist & former School Psychologist
- ★ Worked with hundreds of neurodivergent kids, teens, parents, and teachers over the last 20 years
- ★ I'm also a parent to neurodivergent kids
- ★ My first book called THE NEURODIVERGENT LEARNER will be out in 2026

## **WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?**

We are all neurodiverse from one another.  
Some of us are neurodivergent.



# WHAT IS NEURODIVERGENCE?



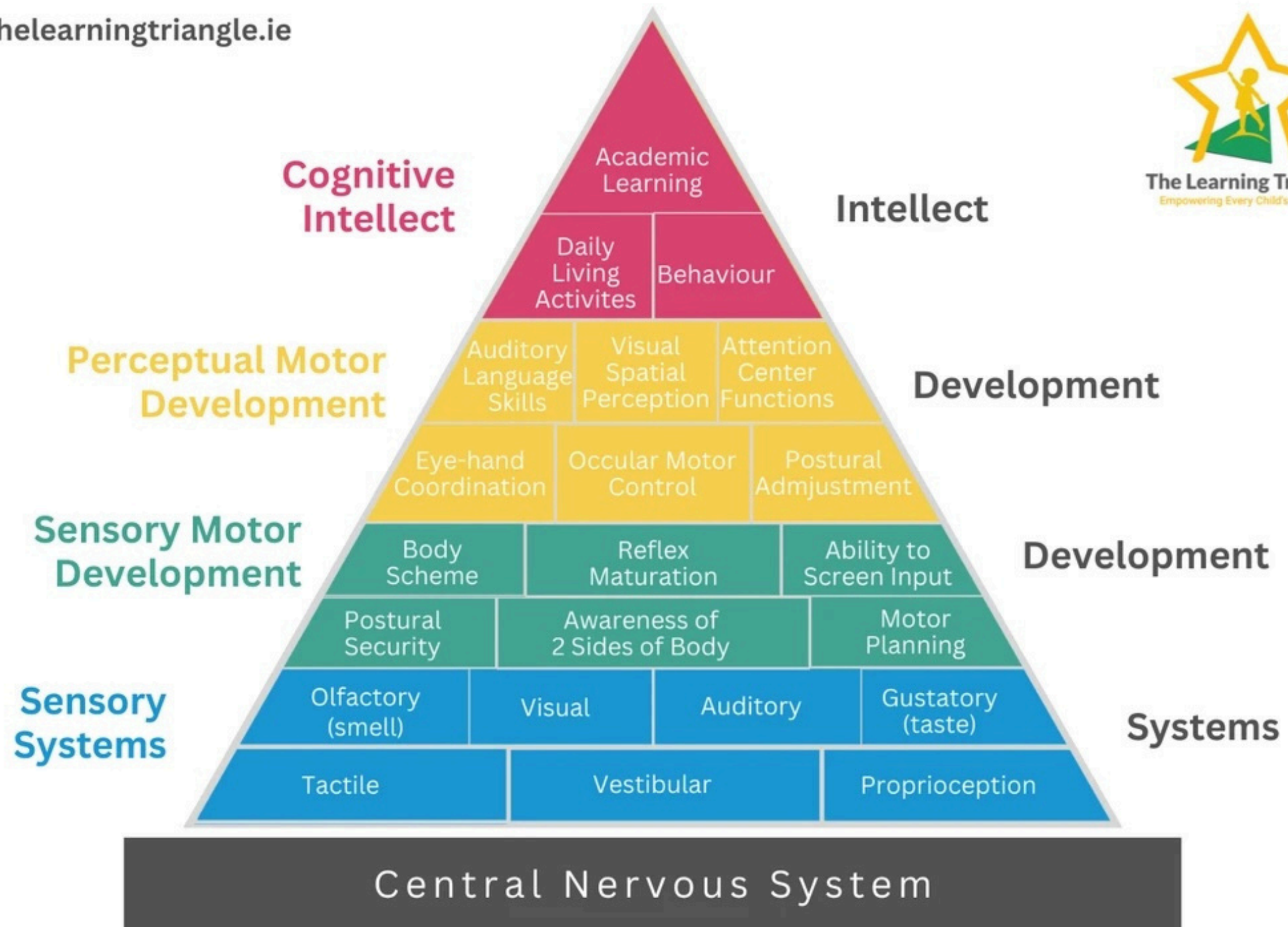
- ★ Autism
- ★ Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- ★ Learning Disabilities
- ★ Giftedness
- ★ Twice-exceptional
- ★ Asynchronous development



## **A WORD ABOUT DIAGNOSTIC LABELS**

No two children with the same diagnostic label are the same.

Labels help kids gain access to support and help them understand and identify with their neurotype.



## HOW KIDS FEEL SAFE

- ★ Safe in my body, this place, and with these people
- ★ Familiar, friendly, and routine connections
- ★ Feel seen, valid, and understood by the adults around them
- ★ Feel teachers and parents keep showing up even when it's hard





## SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM



### Stress Response

*Revs you up, preparing you to fight, take flight or freeze*

- Heart beats fast
- Breath is fast and shallow
- Pupils of eyes expand (can make you sensitive to light)
- Gut becomes inactive (difficult to digest)
- Blood rushes to your skeletal muscles and away from your brain, making it hard to think clearly
- Hormones rush through your body, making you feel anxious
- Expend your energy

## PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM



### Relaxation Response

*Calms you down, preparing you to rest, think and restore*

- Heart beats in slow, rhythmic pattern
- Breath is full and slow
- Pupils of the eyes shrink
- Gut is active (helps you digest and absorb the nutrients from your food)
- Increased blood flow to gut, lungs and brain
- Hormones rush in, lifting your mood and helping you to relax
- Conserves your energy

# Vagus nerve (CN X)



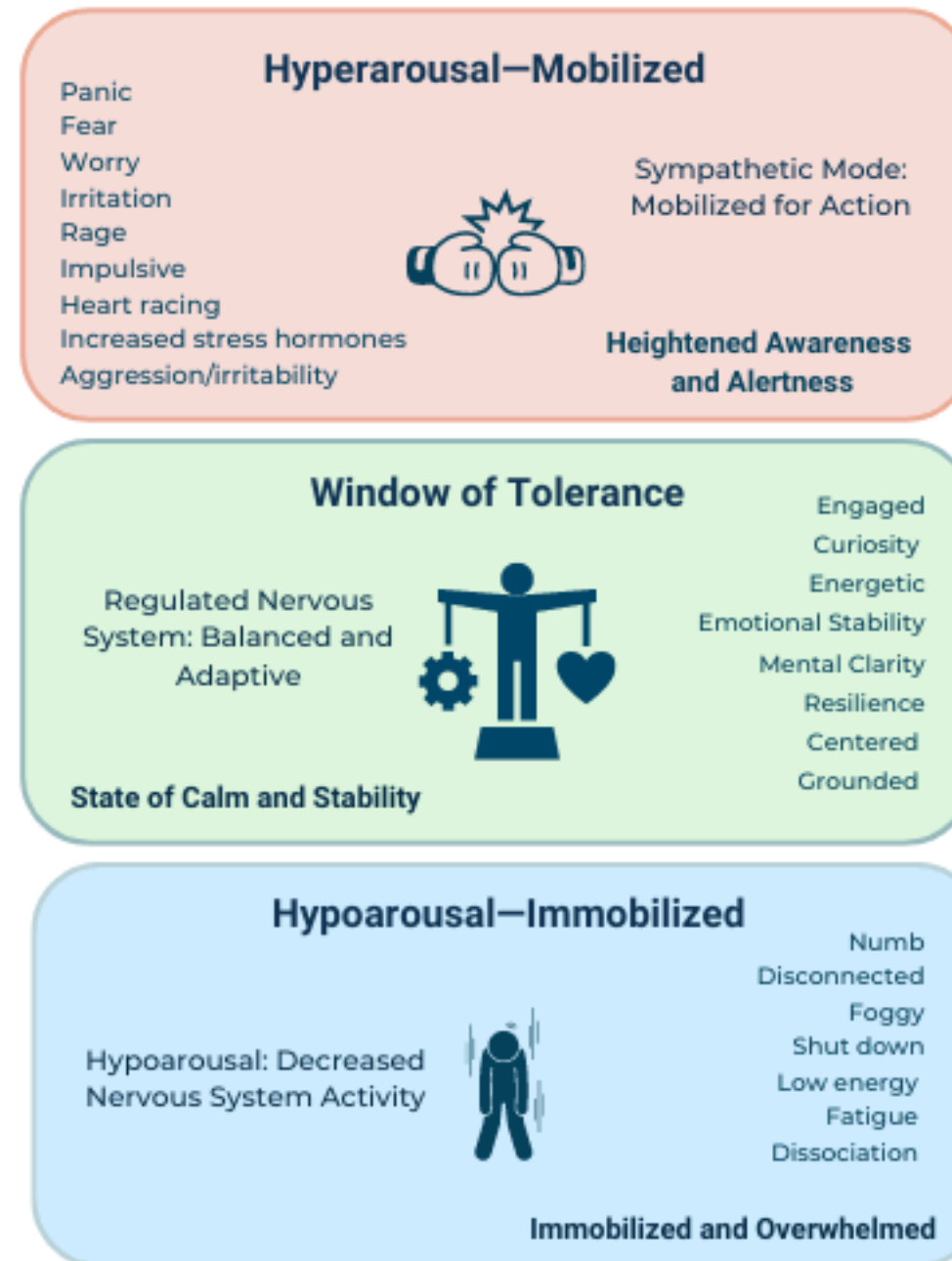
Anterior view



Lateral view

# The Window of Tolerance:

## How to Better Handle Stress



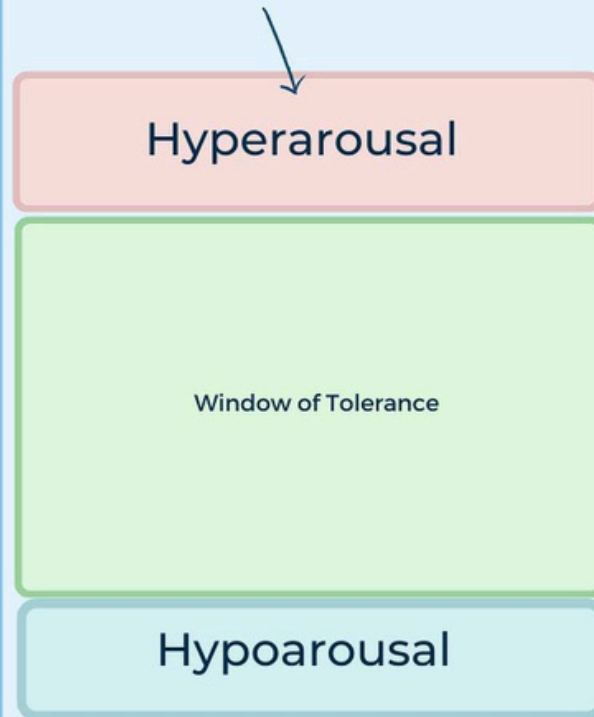
Dr. Neff | [www.neurodivergentinsights.com](http://www.neurodivergentinsights.com)

**Neurodivergent**  
insights



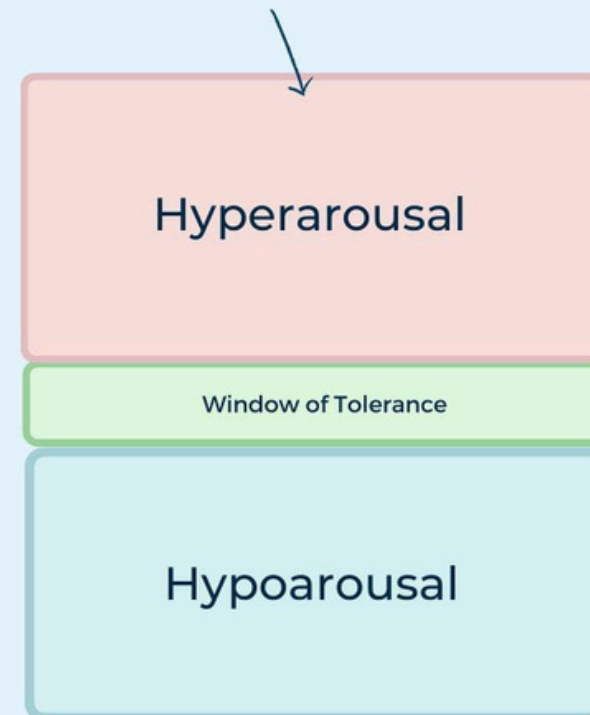
# The Window of Tolerance Explained

So some people's window of tolerance will look like this:



This person can handle a lot of stress before entering a stressed state!

And other people's may look like something like this:



This person likely spends much of their time in a stressed state.



## WHAT EXPANDS THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE?

- ★ Lowering sensory demands
- ★ Adding time/slowing down
- ★ Safe connections with others
- ★ Predictable environments/people
- ★ Incorporating interests

## AUTISM & LEARNING

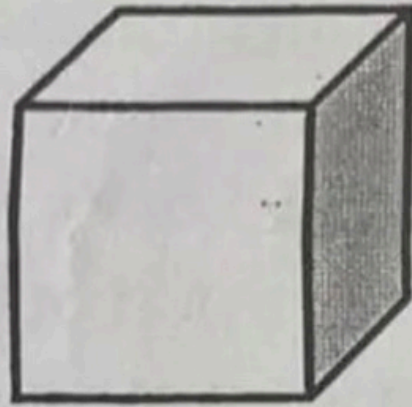
- ★ Rote versus abstract academic skills
- ★ Hyperlexia & the connection between social skills and reading comprehension
- ★ Some autistic students can be good at rote math but not abstract math
- ★ Writing requires the most executive functioning and is often the greatest anxiety producer





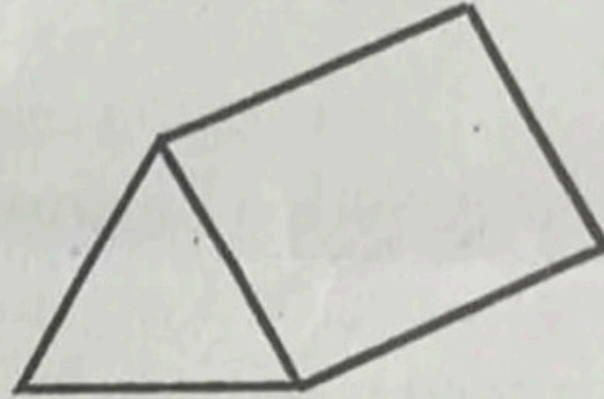
Name each of the following shapes.

1)



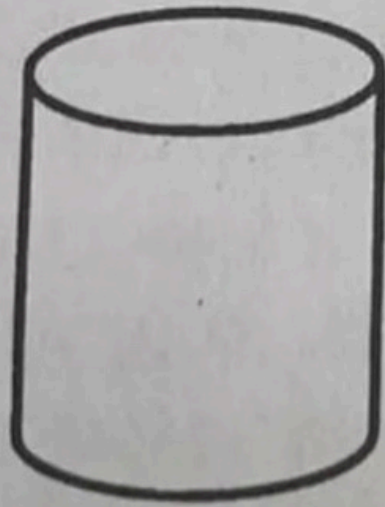
Lulu

2)



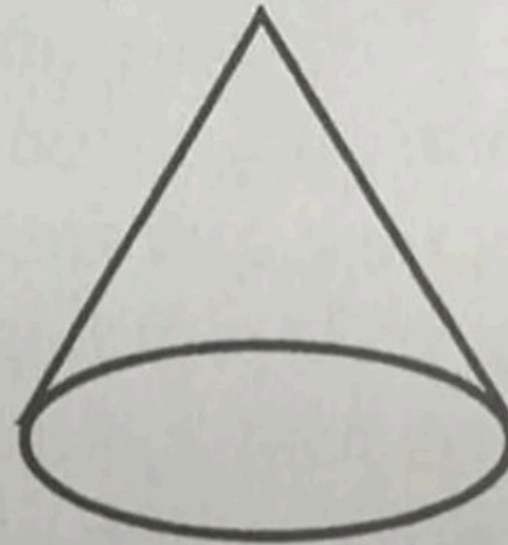
Maxwell

3)



Olivia

4)



Quinton



## HOW LEARNING CAN FEEL TO AN AUTISTIC CHILD

- ★ It's too loud in here, I can't focus.
- ★ I can't focus on this unless I'm interested in it. I'm not choosing not to work, I'm just can't work on THIS topic.
- ★ I'm not motivated to work on this because I don't see how it will be important to my life or interests.





## ADHD

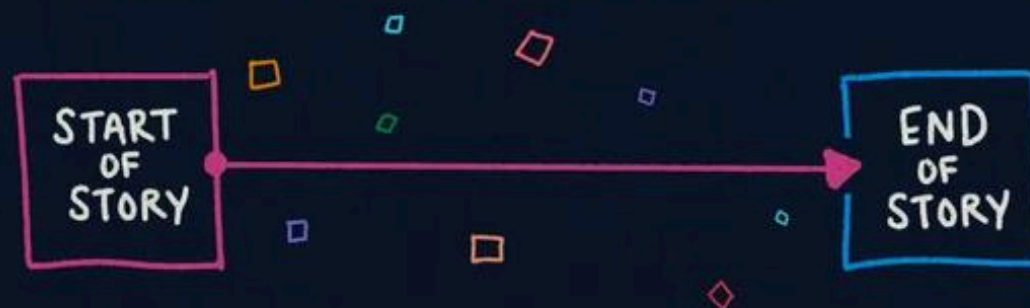
- ★ The three types of ADHD and how early we can diagnose them
- ★ Treatment includes a blend of medication and environmental support
- ★ The strengths of hyper-focus and creativity
- ★ The role of sleep and movement



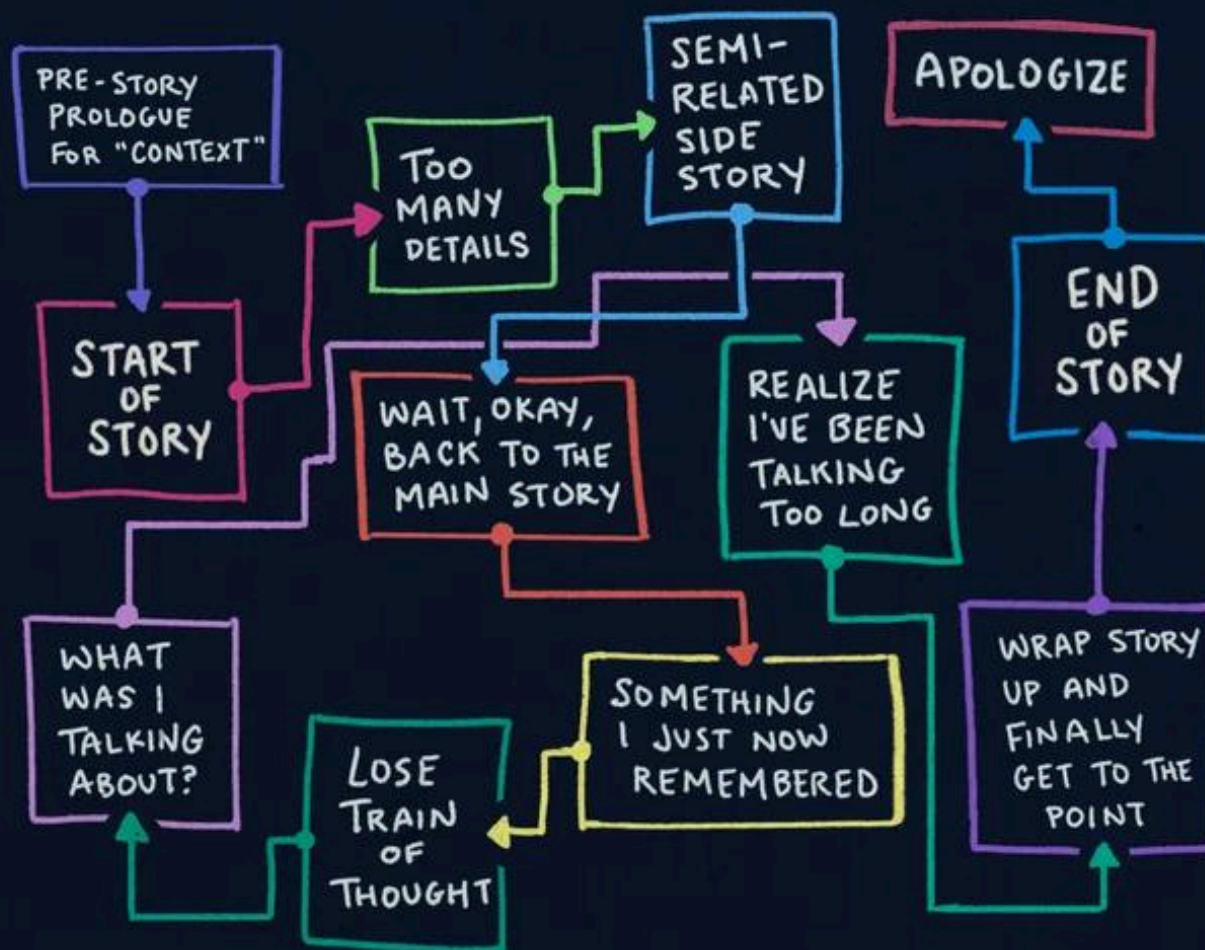
A study that appeared in School Psychology Quarterly underscored the importance of recess for kids with ADHD: “Results showed that levels of inappropriate behavior were consistently higher on days when participants [with ADHD] did not have recess, compared to days when they did have it.”

<https://www.additudemag.com/the-right-to-recess/>

## NON-ADHD STORYTELLING



## ADHD STORYTELLING





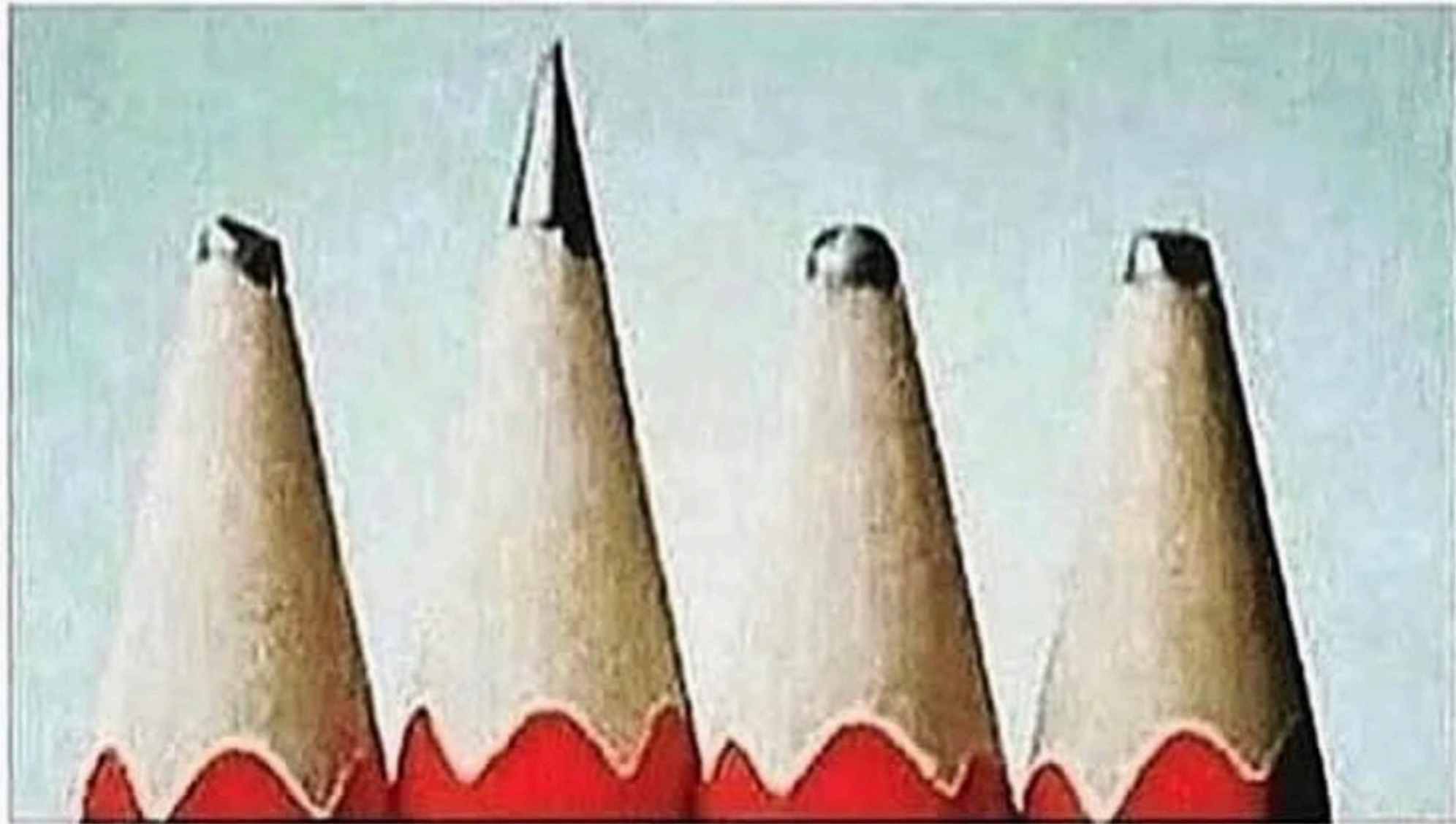
## HOW LEARNING CAN FEEL TO THE CHILD WITH ADHD

- ★ I'm being asked to do something that feels too long or too much
- ★ I understand it, but I can't focus to get started
- ★ I'm spending all my energy staying in this seat so I can't focus on this work
- ★ Am I not smart?  
Why can't I show what I know?





It's easy to look sharp when you haven't done any work







## **SUPPORTING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING**

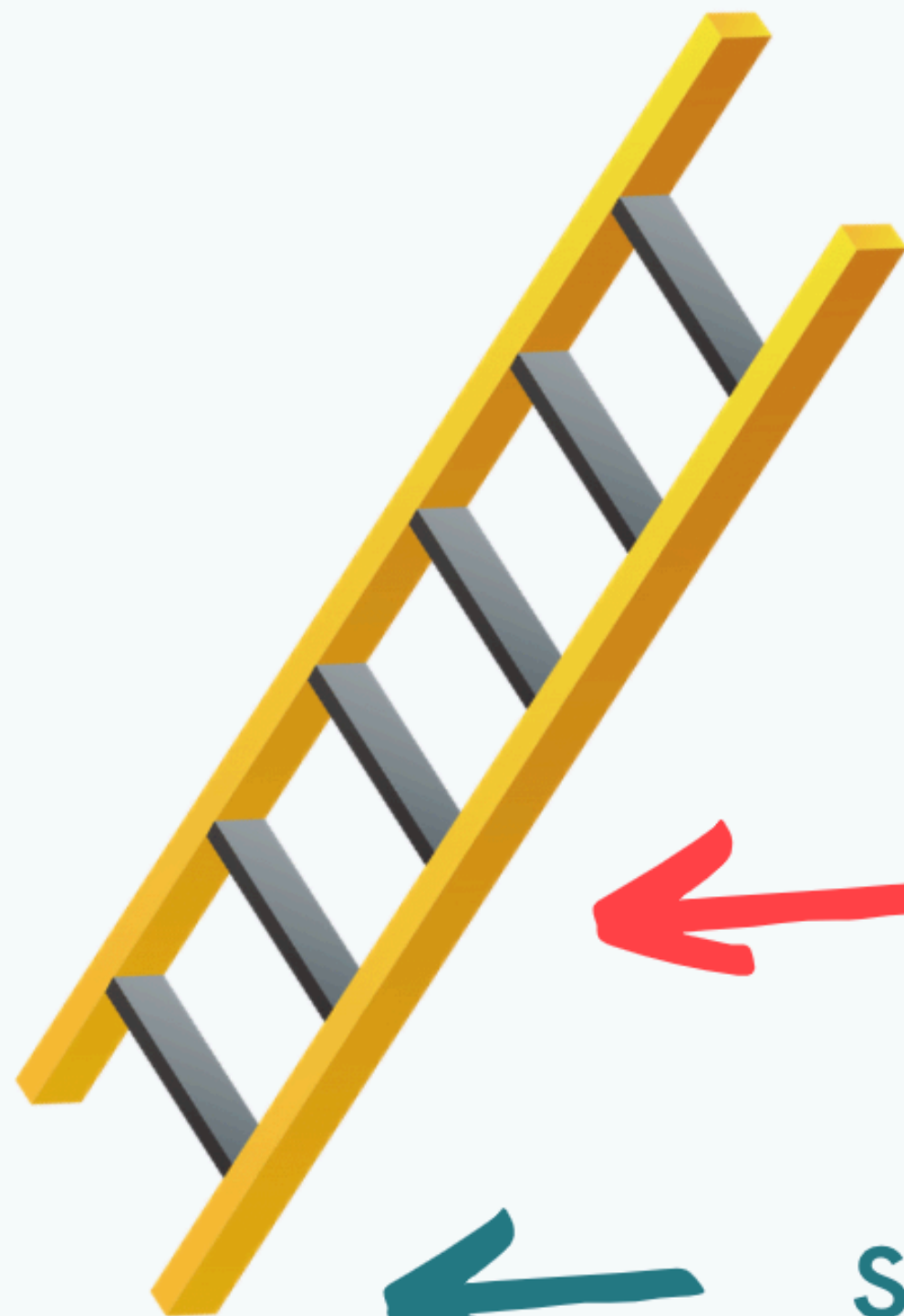
- ★ Planning – visual workplans
- ★ Organizing – regular clean-outs
- ★ Initiating – being ready is Step 1
- ★ Focusing – match brain speed
- ★ Self-monitoring – start with what they can do independently





## THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY OF LEARNING

- The unknown
- Skill + Interest = Motivation
- Executive functioning needed
- Frustration tolerance
- Emotional stamina to keep going



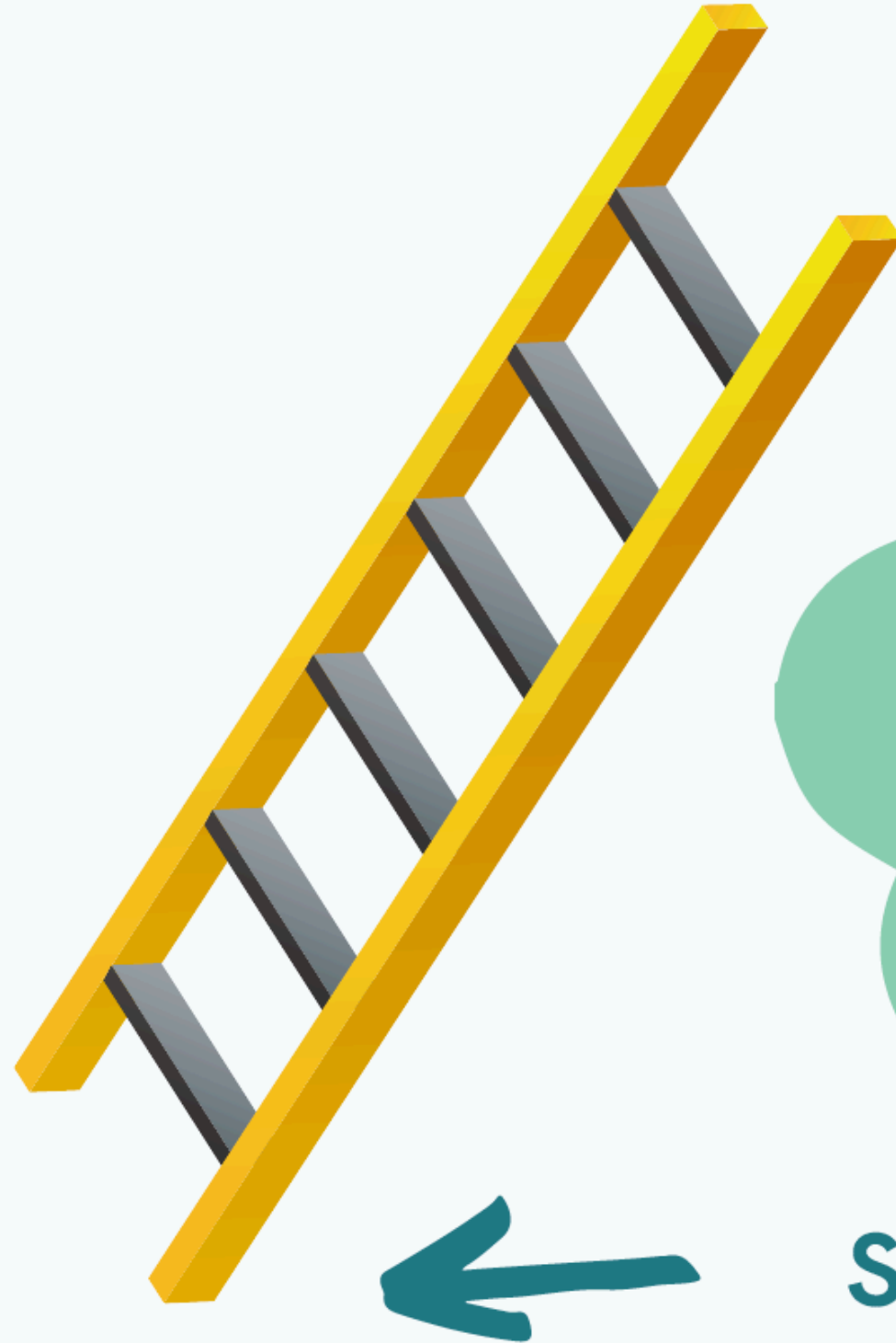
**Expectation**



**ANXIETY**



**Skill Level**



**Expectation**



**Skill Level**





## WHAT IS THE TRIGGER?

- School avoidance?
- Transitions?
- A limit has been set?
- Something feels effortful?
- Social conflicts?



## WHAT ARE THE PATTERNS?

- Time of day?
- HALT (Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired)
- Certain person?
- Certain task?
- Certain limit?





## YOU FOUND THE TRIGGER

- Is working on this skill right now worth it?
- Can you eliminate the stressor?
- How can you reduce demands?
- How can you increase supports?
- How can you increase connection?



## SKILL LEVELS



- **Not yet (Do it FOR):** These are the skills your child does not yet developmentally have
- **Emerging (Do it WITH):** These are the skills your child can only do when well rested, fed, and in a good mood
- **Mastered:** These are the skills your child can consistently do on their own regardless of mood or fatigue

## REDUCING DEMANDS

- Canceling activities
- Prioritizing sleep and play
- Slowing the pace
- Working together
- Incorporating interests



## INCREASING SUPPORTS

- Make it visual!
- Make it routine
- Add structure
- Add interests
- Add regulation with music or movement








## HOW EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING IMPACTS MOTIVATION

- Short attention spans
- Delayed gratification
- When tasks don't feel relevant
- Find what's motivating and work backwards from there

# The Backwards Timeline

FINDING YOUR CHILD'S MOTIVATION



Get started  
with my  
worksheet

Complete  
classwork  
for grades

Graduate  
from high  
school

Get a job to  
earn money

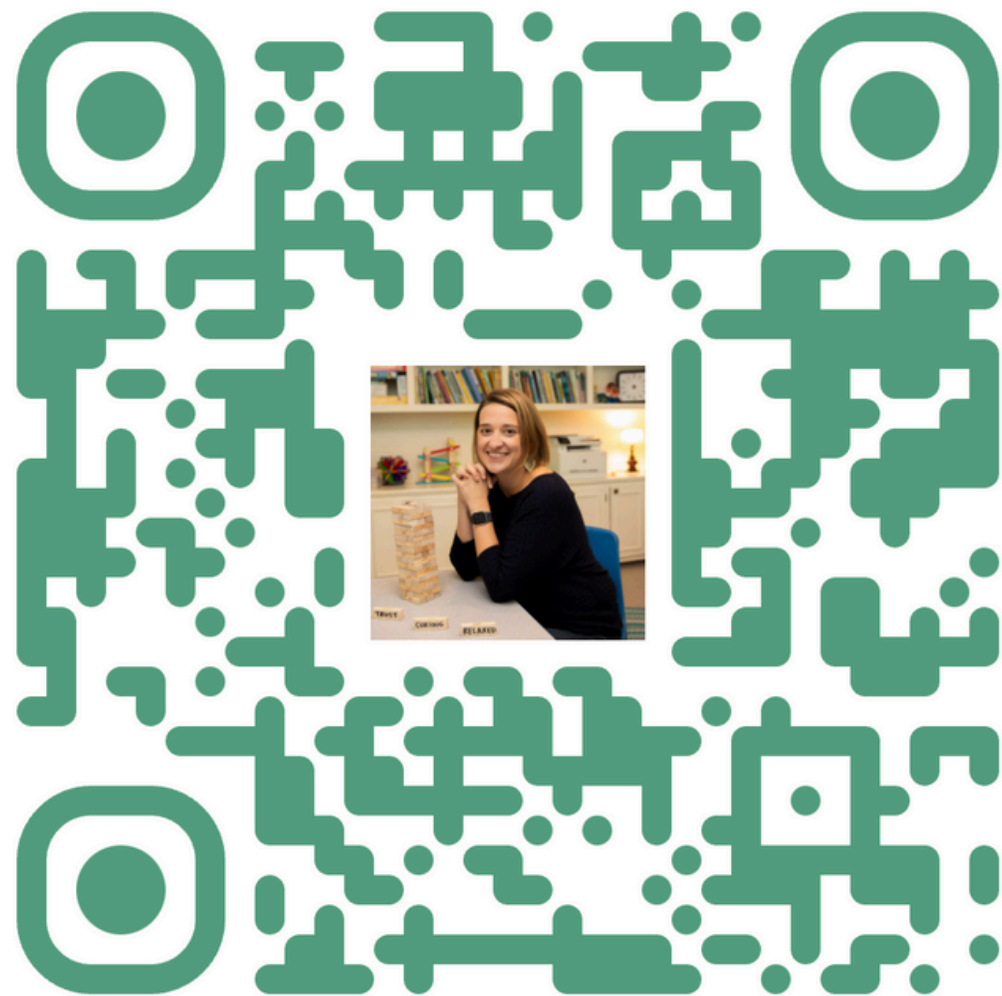
Have money  
to live on  
my own



## WHEN TO USE EXTERNAL REWARDS

- ★ Jumpstarting a new routine
- ★ Encouraging a new experience
- ★ Goals for establishing rewards:
  - 1) Help your child identify what feels rewarding to them
  - 2) Fade the reward as intrinsic motivation or a routine sets in





# Q & A

**Keep learning with me:**

- Online workshops for parents
- Professional Development for educators
- Subscribe to my Substack for resources



## **NEXT WORKSHOP**

Friday October 3, 2025  
12:30pm ET / 9:30am PT

### **Navigating School with Your Neurodivergent Child**

Register when you get the email!