



A WRDATF Planet Youth Webinar



Supporting Neurodivergent Teens Experiencing Social Exclusion

A webinar for parents of teenagers

With
Dr Malie Coyne
Clinical Psychologist and Author



Drawing on her clinical expertise, Planet Youth findings, and her own parenting experience, Malie will discuss why belonging is vital for young people and how exclusion can affect self-esteem and mental health. She will share compassionate, practical strategies to help parents strengthen communication, support resilience, and navigate the challenges of peer rejection in today's technology-driven world.

Parents will leave with reassurance, tangible tools, and the opportunity to have their questions answered.

Monday the 19th of January

19.00 – 20.15

Register [here](#); or via QR code at:



Moi

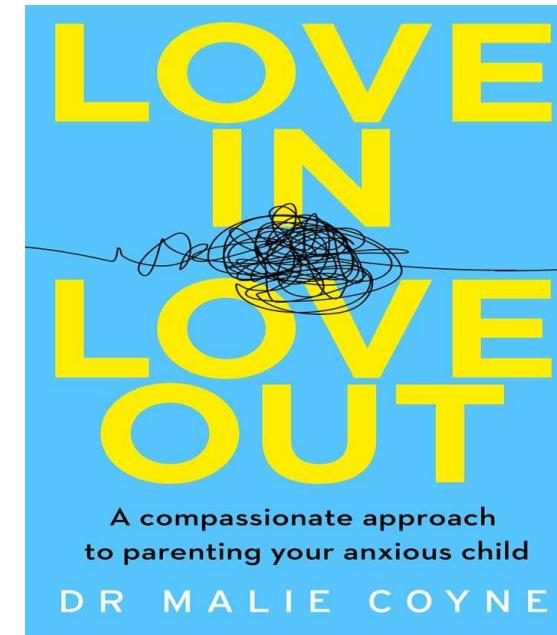
Chartered Clinical Psychologist

U.O.G. Psychology Lecturer

Author “Love in, Love out”

A Lust for Life Schools Programme Psychological Lead

Compassionista



Webinar is shaped by Parent Questions

Building on **Previous Webinar** on Social Exclusion - ****Watch back**
Same pain, different lens: What social exclusion looks like for **ND teens**
Parent questions tell us where the **real struggles** are

Common themes across many families

Difference ≠ deficit



School avoidance linked to social overwhelm

Social misunderstanding; Intent vs impact

Rejection sensitivity and fear of being hurt

Confidence knocked by bullying/past exclusion

Withdrawal as protection, not lack of interest



Inclusion without 'belonging' and 'safety'

Connection and finding 'safe people'

Motivation dips after repeated social failure

Online spaces as both refuge and risk

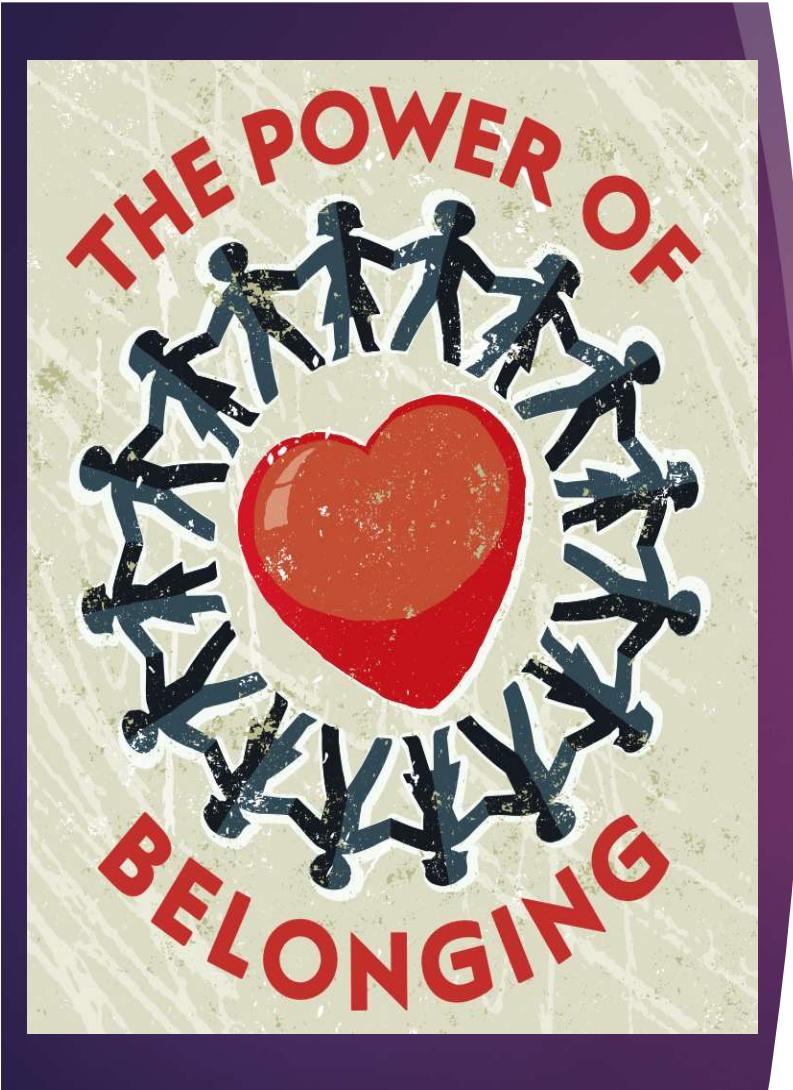
Parents carrying blame, worry, uncertainty



BELONGING gives young people:

- ▶ A sense of **safety and connection** —
“I matter, and I have a place.”
- ▶ A buffer against **stress and anxiety**.
- ▶ Confidence to **explore and take risks**.
- ▶ Foundation for **resilience and emotional wellbeing**. A **fundamental human need**.
- ▶ The **courage to be themselves**.

 “**Belonging isn't a luxury; it is oxygen for the teenage brain.**”





Inside the Teenage Tricky Brain: Rejection amplified (especially for ND Teens)

- 💡 **Identity exploration:** “Who am I?”, “Do I fit in?”, “Where do I belong?” -  intense
- 👀 **Heightened social radar:** Hyper-aware of peers, social comparison & FOMO — craving belonging while being sensitive to signs of exclusion or misunderstanding
- 💔 **Negativity bias on overdrive:** The brain holds onto rejection more than praise — “Velcro for the negative, Teflon for the positive.” - especially after social knockbacks
- 🔥 **Emotions take charge:** Intense feelings; stress and overwhelm feels stronger; clear thinking and regulation harder in the moment.
- 🎁 **Reward centres are supercharged:** Peer approval feels especially powerful, risk-taking or masking can feel worth it to avoid rejection very rewarding.



For neurodivergent teens, rejection doesn't just hurt more — it lands deeper, lasts longer, and shapes how safe they feel being themselves.

What's important here is that this isn't about **neurodivergent teens being 'too sensitive'** or lacking resilience. Their brains are doing exactly what they're designed to do — scanning for safety and belonging.

When a young person has experienced **repeated misunderstanding, exclusion, or being 'the odd one out'**, the brain learns to stay on high alert. So small social moments can feel **very big**.

Understanding this helps us respond **with compassion** rather than correction — and it reminds us that strong reactions are signals, not character flaws.



ND Differences That Shape Social Experience

ND brains **process social information differently**

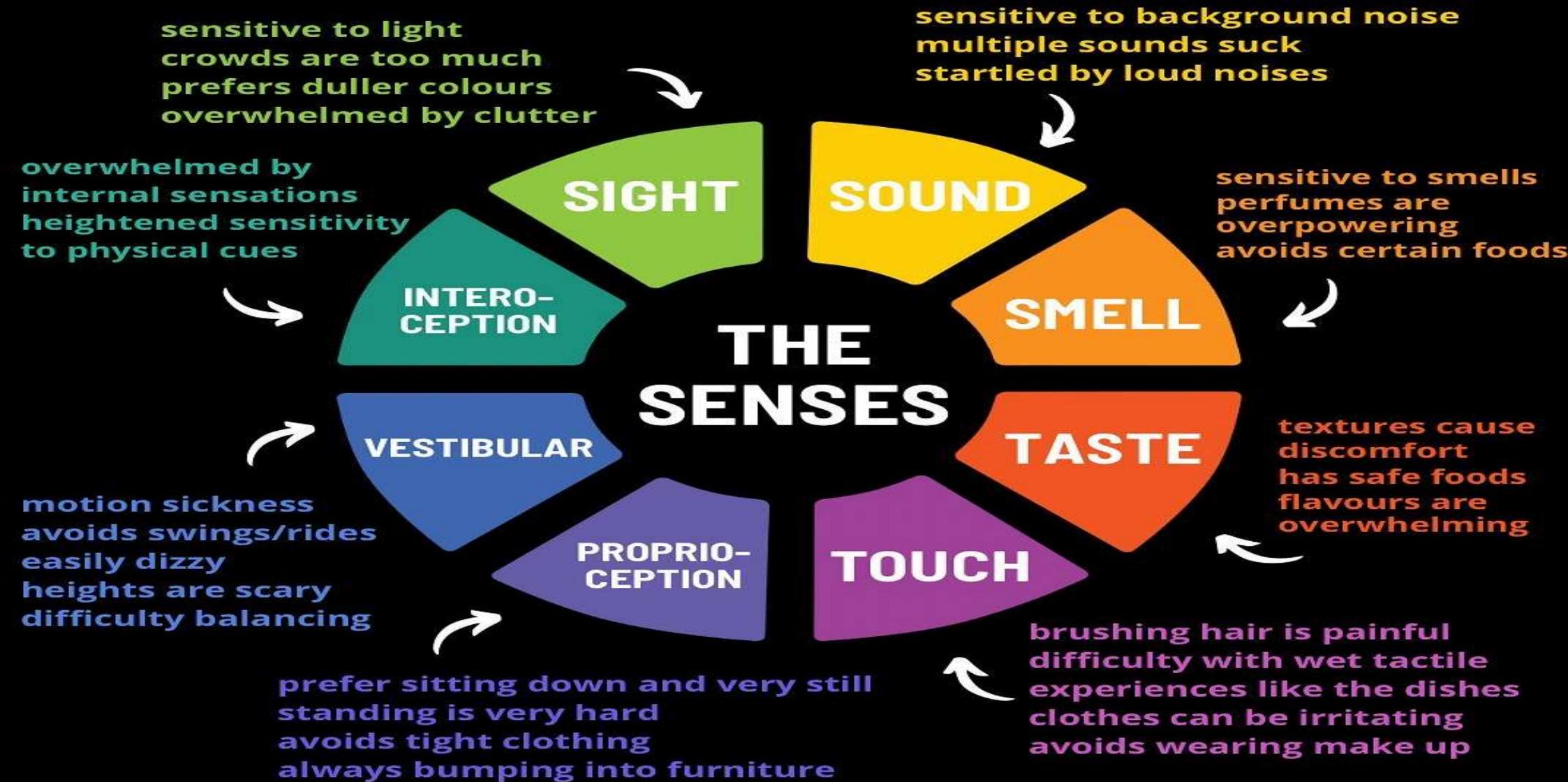
Social rules often implicit, not explained

Sensory sensitivity and overwhelm

Emotional intensity and **regulation challenges**



HYPERSensitivity AND THE SENSES



Psychosocial Functioning & Identity in ND young people

- Differences in self-regulation can make it harder to learn from social experiences, **impacting relationships and self-esteem**
- Negative feedback from others can become a guide for self-judgement
- **Double disadvantage:** neurodivergent differences *plus* increased risk of misunderstanding, rejection, or exclusion by peers
- Perceived negative messages about differences can become **internalised as identity**
- Behaviour differences → peer exclusion → **sadness, shame, isolation**₁₀

Rejection Sensitivity In ND Teens

Social interactions are often processed **literally and personally**

Missed context or tone can lead to **assuming harm was intended**

'Direct communication' may **unintentionally offend others**

Past rejection primes the nervous system **to expect threat**

Exclusion **can be internalised**, leading to withdrawal and self-doubt

*Exclusion lights up
the same regions of
the brain as
physical pain.*

Real vs. Perceived Exclusion – Both HURT!

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is described as extreme emotional sensitivity and pain triggered by the perception of rejection. It is important to note that the rejection does not have to be real; **even the perception of rejection triggers a real pain response and protective reactions.**



Being different means being frequently rejected

Acute memory of past rejection

RSD

PTSD IS COMMON IN NEURODIVERGENCE



Intense sensory & emotional reactions

Difficulty reading tone

Tired of being underestimated

THE DOUBLE EMPATHY PROBLEM



- Struggle to communicate with neurotypical people
- Have successful social interactions with other autistic people
- Feel pressure to mask or pass as neurotypical
- Feel socially isolated in neurotypical settings

I may...

- Frequently misinterpret communication of autistic people

- Have successful social interactions with other neurotypical people

- Assume that autistic people lack social skills

- Benefit from a society that rewards neurotypical social skills



Social interactions are bidirectional.
Understanding another neurotypes' social interactions
is NOT just the responsibility of autistic people.

Inclusion, Burnout & Withdrawal

“You belong here ONLY if you cope like everyone else.”

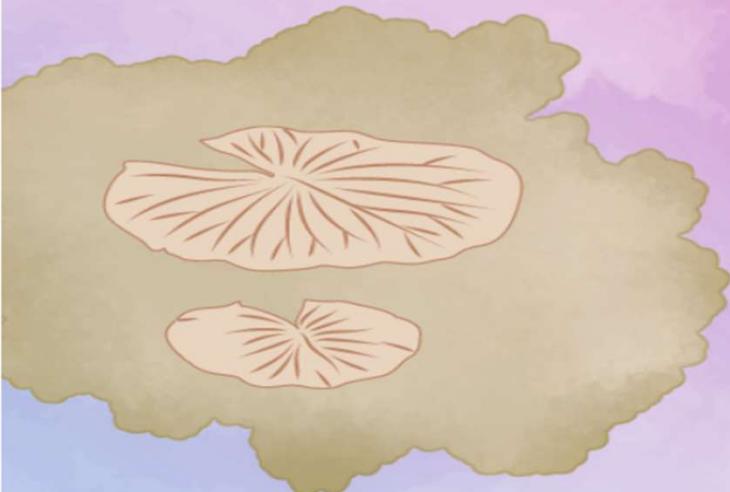
Social isolation is often **protective, not a lack of desire to belong**

Inclusion without adaptation can increase shame, anxiety, and self-esteem issues

Withdrawal/retreat is often a **nervous system response to cumulative stress, not failure**

True inclusion means adapting environments to support regulation, dignity, and authenticity

Plants can't thrive in the wrong environment



It needs the right environment to grow and be happy

A water lily would shrivel up and die if you tried to grow it in a desert with no water



Different people also like different things in order to thrive



- morning person
- loves planes
- hates beans
- very good at problem solving



- very creative
- likes spending time alone
- loves animals
- hates loud noises



- very active
- likes to be around other people
- loves spicy food
- night owl

School Avoidance

What's happening

School becomes linked with threat

Sensory, social & emotional load builds up

Masking leads to exhaustion

Fear of getting it wrong grows

Nervous system moves into protection



**How do we
get them in?**



**What makes
school feel unsafe
right now?**

How to understand it

Distress, not defiance

Avoidance is communication, not laziness

Regulation must come before reintegration

Pushing increases anxiety and shutdown

Safety, flexibility and collaboration enables return

Returning to School After Exclusion

BACK TO SCHOOL



What Re-Entry Needs

Small steps, not all-or-nothing

Emotional safety before attendance targets

Sensory and social load considered

Clear safety plans reduce anxiety

Regulation before reintegration

How Parents Can Help

Prepare emotionally, not just practically

Use calming, collaborative language

Practise coping for difficult moments

Plan recovery time after school

Review and adjust together

Phones: Lifeline and Landmine



What's Happening

Phones offer connection and regulation

Also amplify exclusion and comparison

Online silence often taken very literally

Rejection stays visible and replaying

Catch-22 between needing and hating phones **Build off-screen anchors of safety and identity**

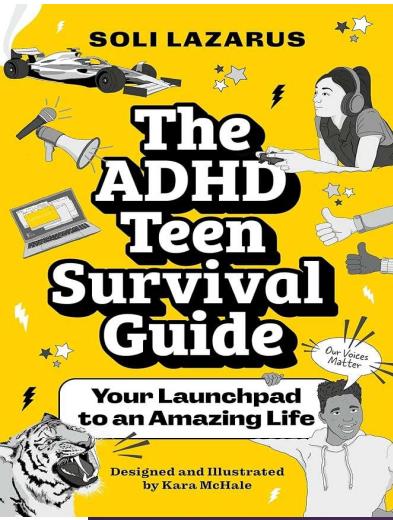
How Parents Can Help

Validate first — acknowledge how painful online moments feel

Avoid reactive bans; stay calm and curious

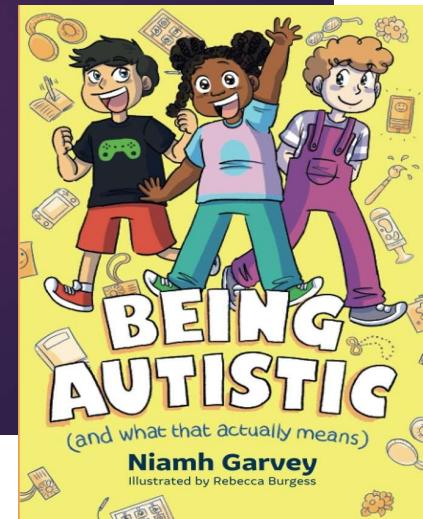
Name double role of phones (helpful & harmful)

Collaborate on protective boundaries (mute, limit, pause)

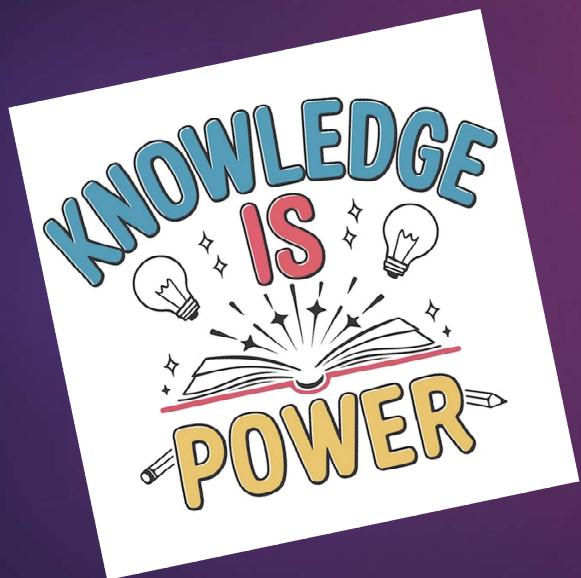


Psycho-education:

Understanding how my ND
brain works



The power of Psycho-education



Helps teen understand themselves,
not blame themselves

Reduces shame by explaining
“*this is how my brain works*”

Normalises difference: “*I am not broken or alone*”

Builds language to explain needs / ask for support

Supports self-advocacy and informed choices

Protects self-esteem

COMMON NEURODIVERGENT BEHAVIOURS

STIMMING

E.g. repetitive movements or sounds like hand-flapping, rocking or humming



HYPERACTIVITY

Excessive levels of activity or restlessness, difficulty sitting still



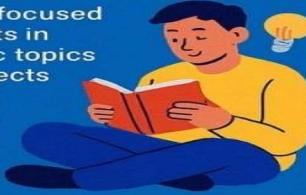
SENSORY SENSITIVITY

Over or under-reacting to sensory input like noises, lights or textures



SPECIAL INTERESTS

Highly focused interests in specific topics or subjects



SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

Challenges with social communication, such as difficulty making eye contact



EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION

Difficulties with things like planning, organizing or managing time



THE EFFECTS OF MASKING ON AUTISTIC PEOPLE



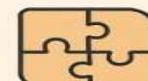
Exhaustion or burnout



Delayed diagnosis



Anxiety or depression



Loss of identity



Trouble forming authentic relationships



Lower self-esteem



Masking is survival, not acceptance.
Let's create spaces where authenticity is safe.

Key Messages ND Young People Need to Hear

Your brain works differently — and that's okay

Struggles are not character flaws

Needing support is not failure

You don't have to mask to belong

Belonging comes from being understood, not changed

Your strengths and challenges can exist together

★ STRENGTHS OF NEURODIVERGENT MINDS



Unique thinking

- Sees problems from fresh angles
- Offers creative solutions



Attention to detail

- Spots patterns and errors others miss
- Great for analysis and quality



Deep knowledge

- Intense interest leads to expertise
- Passionate about learning



Empathy & sensitivity

- Deep emotional insight
- Strong connection with others



Hyperfocus

- Deep concentration on passions
- High productivity in areas of interest



Creative & imaginative

- Strong visual thinking
- Innovative ideas and storytelling



Logical & analytical

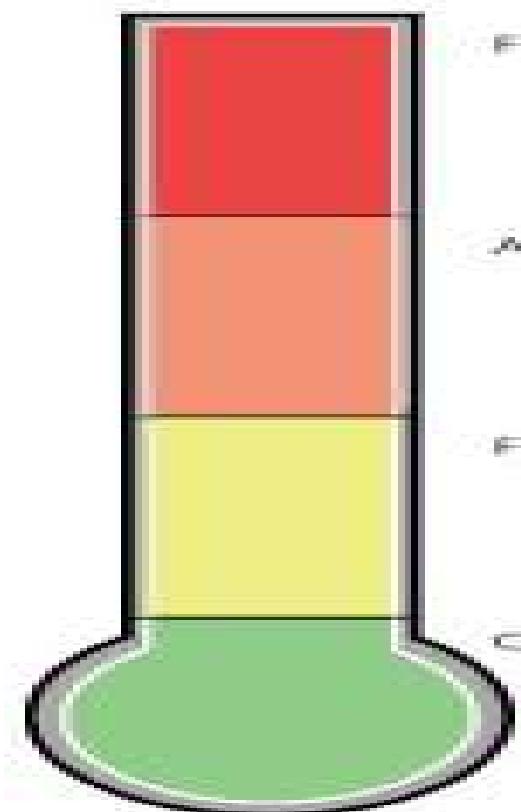
- Excellent at breaking down complex problems
- Strong in systems, coding, and strategy



Resilience

- Adapts to challenges
- Builds creative coping strategies

Degrees of emotions



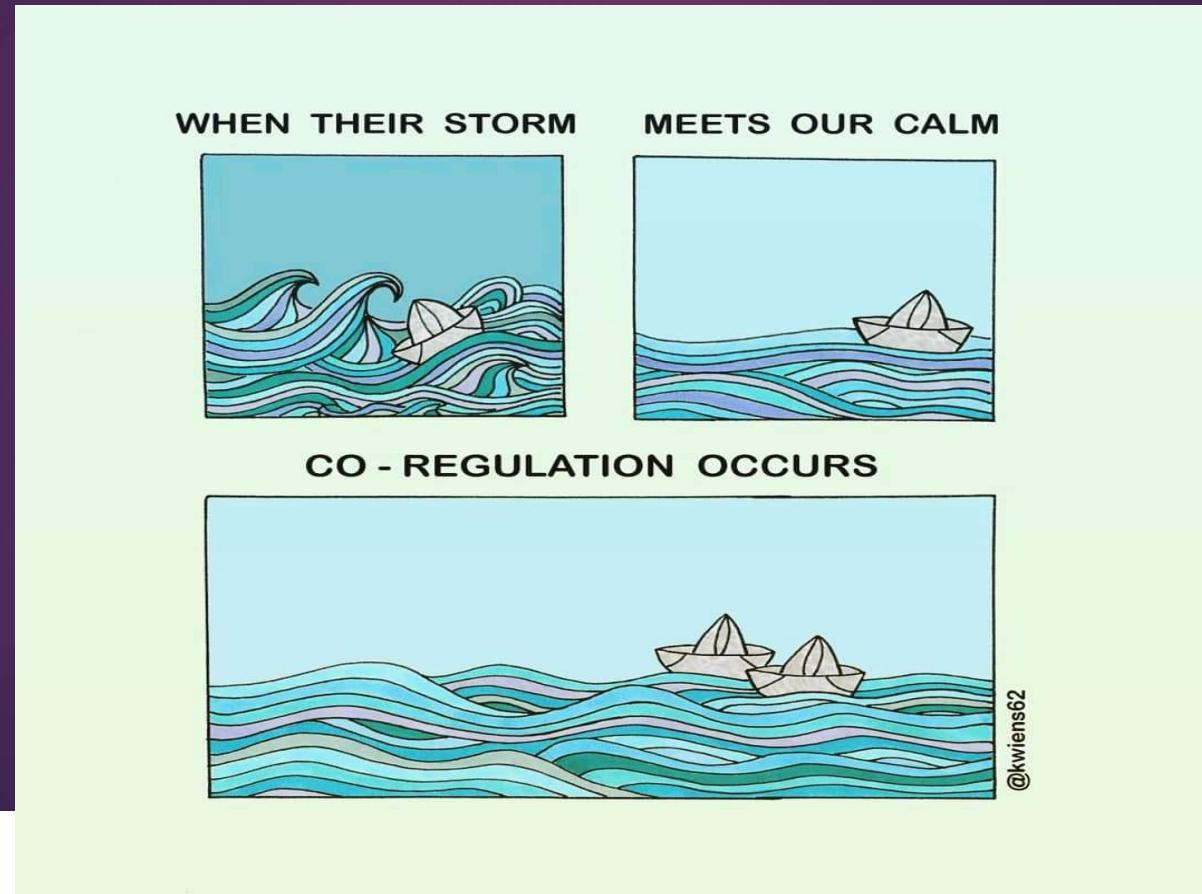
RED ZONE – This zone is when we are overwhelmed by our emotions. When you are in this zone you are out of control and have trouble making good decisions.

ORANGE ZONE – This zone is when you are about to lose control.

YELLOW ZONE – This zone is when you have a small loss of control.

GREEN ZONE – This zone is like a green light – you are good to go. You may feel happy, calm, and focused.

Emotional Regulation Strategies



The 4 S's of Attachment

SAFE

Parents are not a source of fear. Children feel safe and are protected from physical, emotional, and relational harm.

SEEN

Parents are empathetic. They work to understand and respond to their child's inner experiences.



SOOTHED

Parents are present and attentive when their child is distressed. Soothed children learn how to understand and regulate their emotions.

SECURE

Parents are a secure base for their child from which to explore, and a safe haven for them to return.

♥ The **QUALITY** of your relationship provides them with a psychological immune system for threats...

When you
smile at me,
I learn that I
am lovable...



**How Parents Can Help



- ▶ **Validate first** — acknowledge the hurt before exploring what happened
- ▶ **Stay curious**, not corrective (“*What else might have been going on?*”)
- ▶ **Name rejection sensitivity** when past hurts amplify current reactions
- ▶ **Separate feelings from facts**, gently and together, once calm
- ▶ **Make social tools explicit; Teach practical tools** (e.g. asking to join, repair phrases)
- ▶ **Focus on repair, not perfection** — perspective-taking develops through safety, time, and modelling

Regulation Supports ('Feelings Fixers')



🏃 Movement Supports

🌿 Calming Supports



🤝 Connection Supports

💭 Thinking Supports

Regulation Supports (1)



MOVEMENT SUPPORTS

Helps release built-up energy

Walking, stretching, pacing, jumping

Rocking, swinging, or rhythmic movement

Tidy-up bursts, carrying something heavy

Sports, dancing, trampolining

Best for: Anger, restlessness, overwhelm, shutdown with agitation



CALMING SUPPORTS

Deep pressure (weighted blanket, tight hug if welcomed)

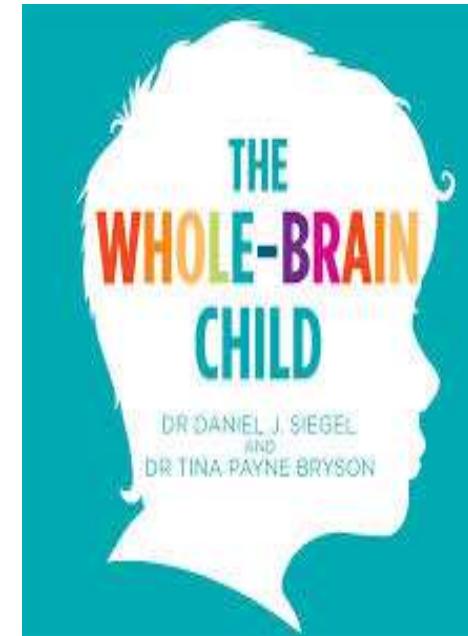
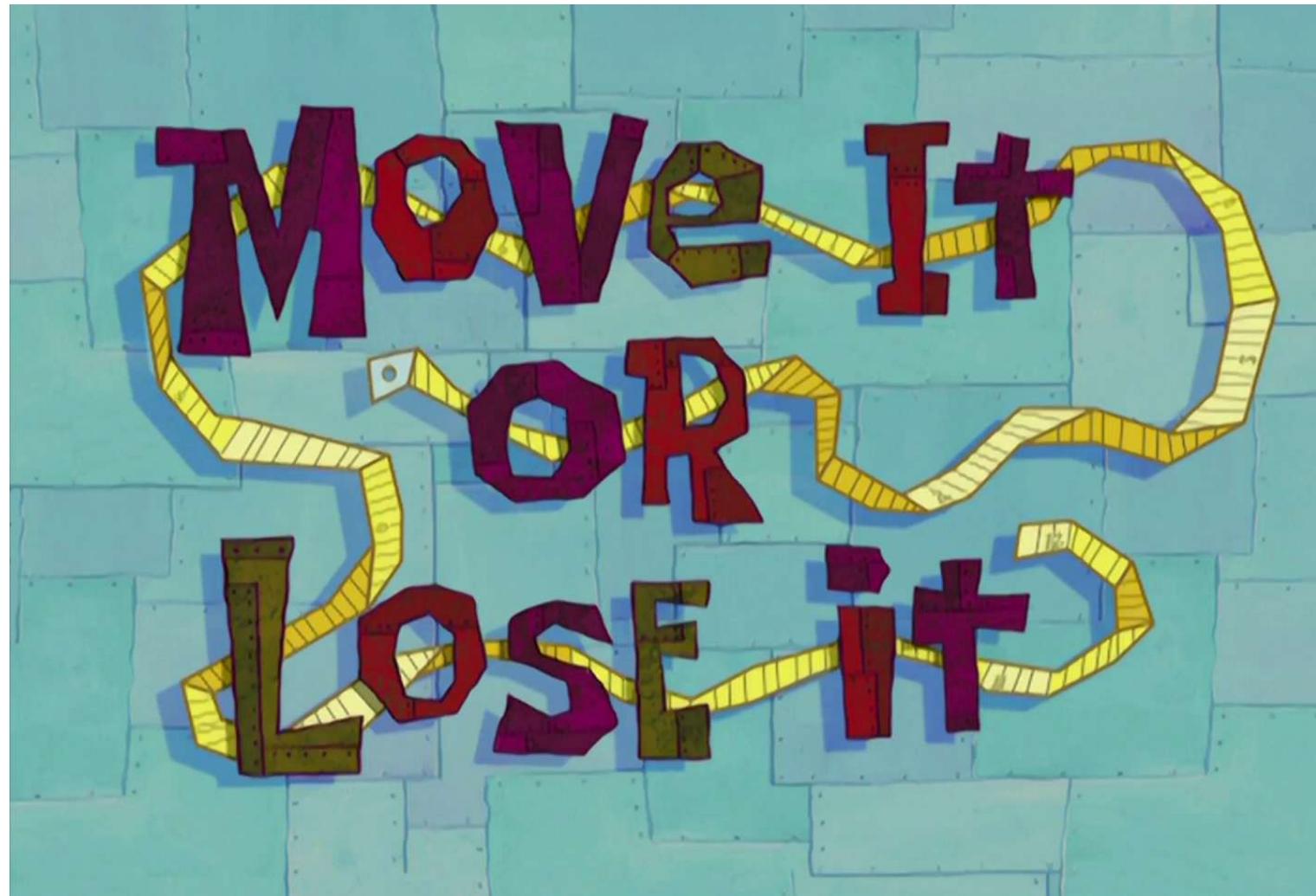
Slow breathing, box breathing, humming

Quiet space, low lighting, noise-cancelling headphones

Warm shower, bath, or wrapped blanket

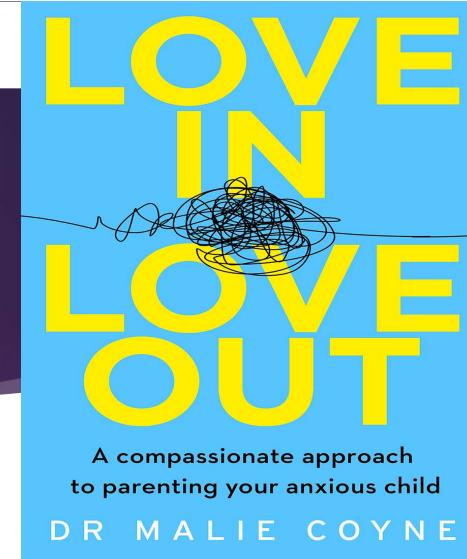
Sensory regulation (fidget, soft textures)

Best for: anxiety, sensory overload, emotional flooding



Anchoring Strategies

- ▶ Dragon Fire Breath
- ▶ Shaking on Purpose
- ▶ The 5-4-3-2-1 Game
- ▶ Figure - 8 Breathing
- ▶ Butterfly Hug
- ▶ Heartbeat Exercise
- ▶ Sensory Activity:
Soothing box
Slime
Glitter jars



Regulation Supports (2)

CONNECTION SUPPORTS

Sitting beside a trusted adult in silence

Watching a show together

Petting an animal

Sending a text or emoji to a safe person

Shared activity (drawing, gaming, baking)

Best for: loneliness, rejection, shame

THINKING SUPPORTS

Naming the feeling (“This feels like rejection”)

Separating facts from interpretations

Writing or drawing the worry

Gentle reframes (“What else might be going on?”)

Coping statements (“This feeling will pass”)

Best for: rumination, rejection sensitivity, social misunderstanding

Role-Playing Difficult Situations

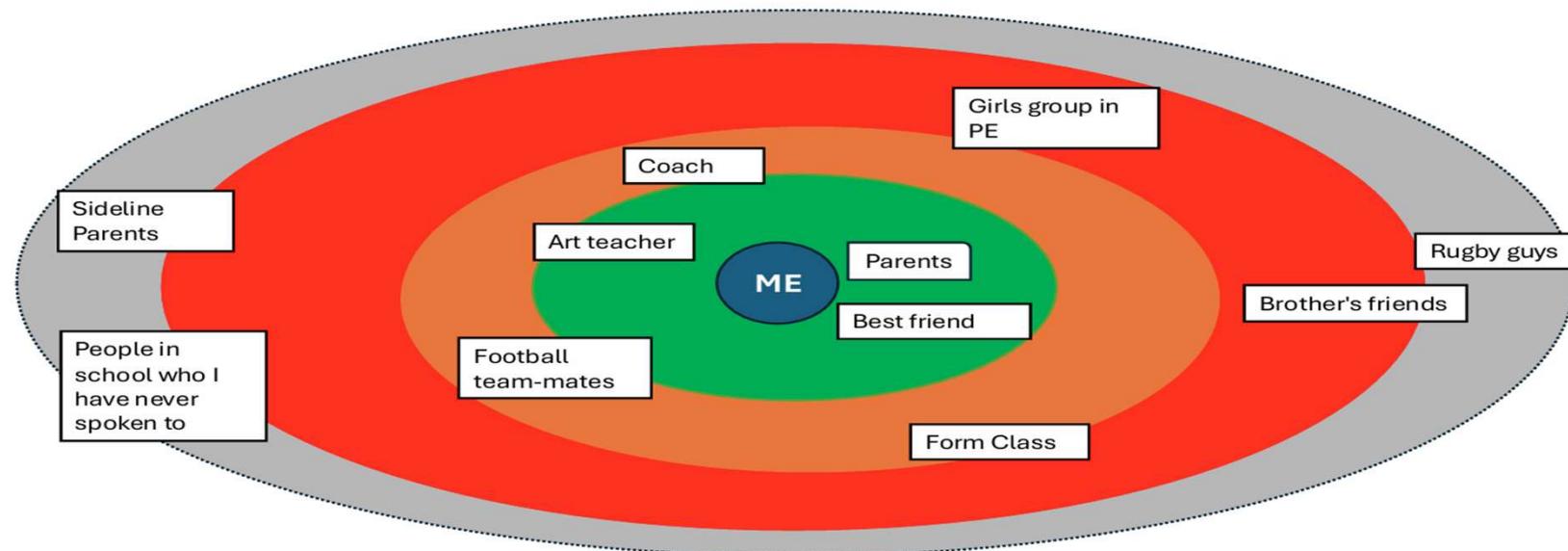


ASSERTIVENESS SCENARIOS ROLE PLAY

Three cards representing assertiveness scenarios, each with a title and a small illustration:

- ASSERTIVENESS SCENARIO #4**
While Mei is finishing a math worksheet, Carlos keeps distracting her by poking her and making jokes.
- ASSERTIVENESS SCENARIO #20**
Levi keeps copying Serena's homework, even after she tells him to stop.
- ASSERTIVENESS SCENARIO #7**
Brianna waits in line for the swings, but when it's finally her turn, Elijah cuts in front of her and says, "I was here first."

Whose opinions matter? My circles of influence...



MAPPING OUT **WHOSE OPINIONS TRULY MATTER** BUILDS PERSPECTIVE, SELF-WORTH, AND RESILIENCE.

Fostering Belonging

ND teens often need multiple safe adults, who understand their differences, to feel truly seen and supported

A wider neuro-affirming network protects mental health & supports regulation / resilience

Be an ally: Respect their need for recovery and space after social effort

“You don’t have to be liked by everyone to belong somewhere.”

Celebrate kind, attuned mentors — adults who “get” your teen

Model being a ‘villager’: respect difference, challenge exclusion, include

Encourage shared activities that fit their interests, sensory needs, and energy — creative projects, clubs, online communities, animals, volunteering, or small groups

From Blame to Partnership

- Parent perception of blame increases isolation, stress and self-doubt
- Parental stress is often felt by ND young people
- Parental stress is often felt by ND young people
- Fear of judgement can lead families to withdraw from supports
- Blame shifts focus away from adapting environments
- Partnership, not blame, supports belonging and connection

Building Your Compassionate Voice

1. What actually happened?

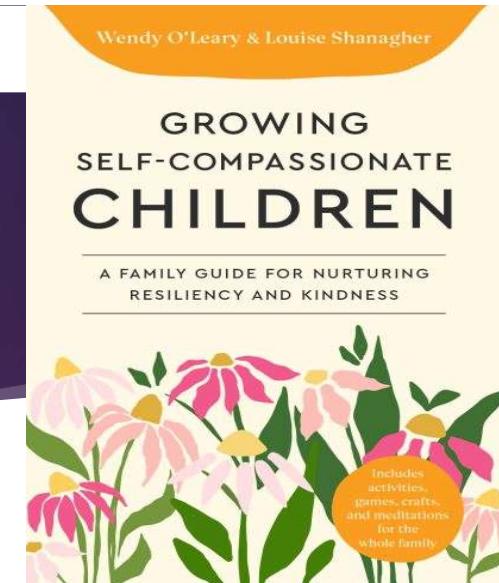
(Facts, not feelings)

2. What meaning did I take?

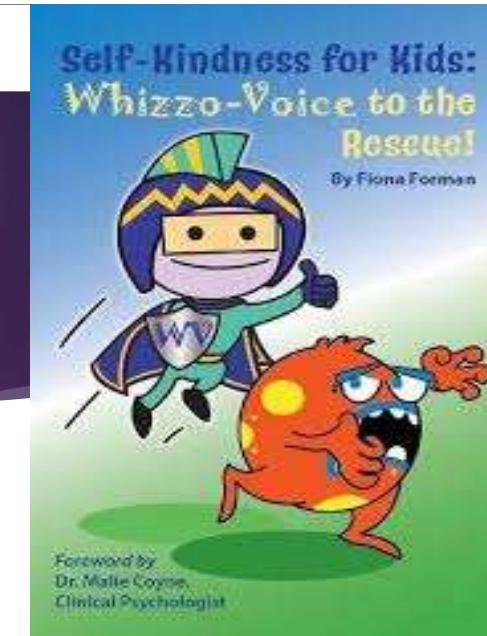
(What story did I tell myself?)

3. Is there an alternative meaning?

**(What would a kinder voice say?
What would I say to someone close?)**



Taming your Inner Bully



mantra

noun man·tra \män-trə also 'man- or 'mən-\

: a sound, word, or phrase that is repeated by someone who is praying or meditating

: a word or phrase that is repeated often or that expresses someone's basic beliefs



3 Pillars of 'Good Enough' Parenting

1. Learn to trust your **gut instinct**

2. Let go of the **fallacy of perfection**

3. Get to know **yourself** as a carer and **prioritize self-compassion**



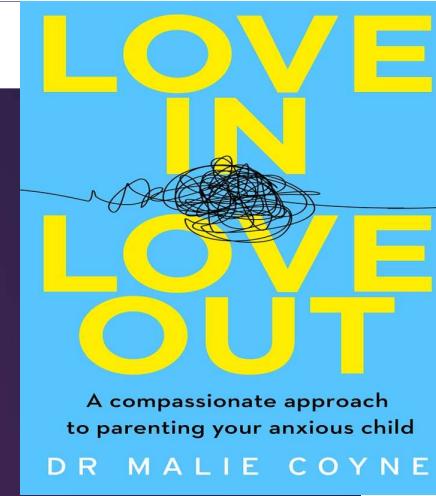
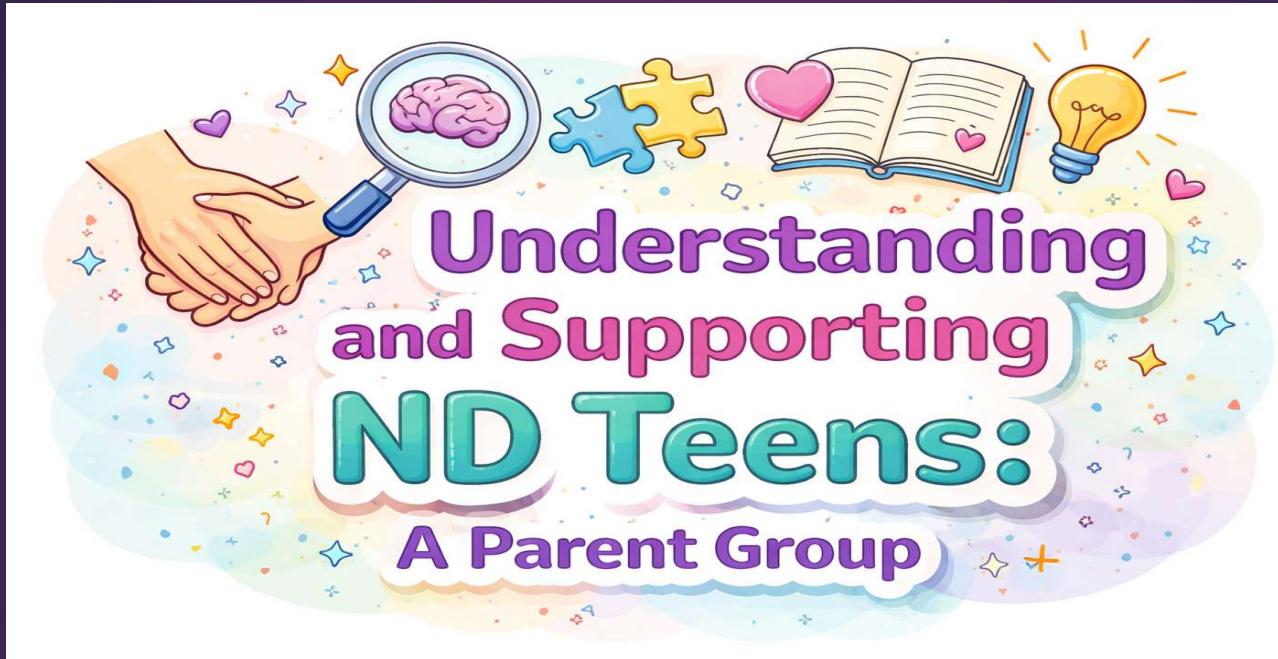


When our children feel left out or rejected, it's tempting to jump in and fix it, but what they need most in that moment isn't our solution, *it's our steadiness.*

And that's when *our calm becomes their courage.*

— Dr. Malie Coyne —





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