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Communicating unmet needs: *The use of potentially harmful behaviours by Autistic children*

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Understanding why some Autistic
children use potentially harmful
behaviours

Kylie Butler, Holly Helprin, Dr Jasmine B. MacDonald and Lisa Tamiakis
Australian Institute of Family Studies

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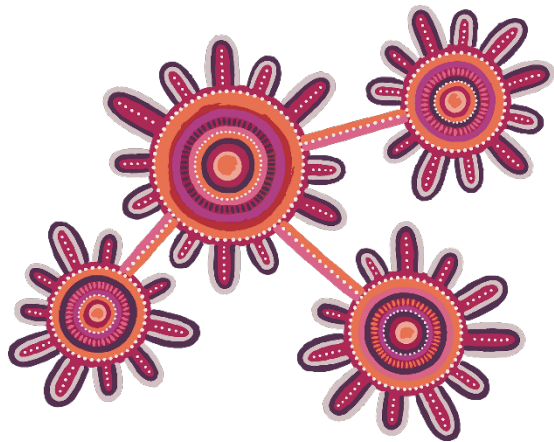


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Introduction



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The situation: Children's use of potentially harmful behaviours is challenging for many families

The problem: Important adults in a child's life often struggle to understand why children might use these behaviours and how to support them.

Today's presentation



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- What are potentially harmful behaviours?
- Why children sometimes use these behaviours
- Neurodiversity-affirming approaches for supporting children and families

What are potentially harmful behaviours?



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- **Physical behaviours** directed towards other people
- **Verbal behaviours** directed towards other people
- **Physical and verbal behaviours** not directed towards other people

Words matter!



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We use 'potentially harmful behaviours' and NOT
'violence' or 'aggression' because ...

... words such as 'violence' or 'aggression' can:

- imply an intent to harm
- be stigmatising or shameful



Reactive or proactive behaviours?

- It is much more common for Autistic children to use potentially harmful behaviours **reactively** than **proactively**
 - **Reactive behaviours** are impulsive or retaliatory
 - **Proactive behaviours** are unprovoked, goal directed, or a planned or delayed reactive response

Neurodivergence and potentially harmful behaviours



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Neurodivergent children may think, feel and function in ways that are considered less common, compared to 'neurotypical' children.

1. Sensory processing, needs and preferences
2. Social interactions
3. Routines and managing change

Using potentially harmful behaviours is sometimes a way children signal unmet needs relating to some of these differences

Sensory processing, needs and preferences



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Sensory differences can relate to:

- sight, smell, sounds, touch, taste
- balance and bodily awareness

Being under- or over-exposed to sensory stimuli can lead to stress, distress and feelings of being overwhelmed. This can lead to, or exacerbate, the use of potentially harmful behaviours.

Social interactions



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Autistic children may process and respond to social situations differently from non-Autistic children. This can include differences in:

- use of eye contact
- use and interpretation of facial expressions
- understanding of non-literal language
- perceptions of personal space and tolerance for other people being in their personal space.



Routines and managing change

Changes that Autistic children may experience differently to non-Autistic children include:

- everyday routines
- everyday transitions
- bigger life changes and transitions



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Neurodiversity-affirming practice in community mental health services

Holly Helprin, Lisa Tamiakis, Kylie Butler & Jasmine B. MacDonald
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Practitioners can support children who use potentially harmful behaviours and their families using **neurodiversity-affirming approaches**

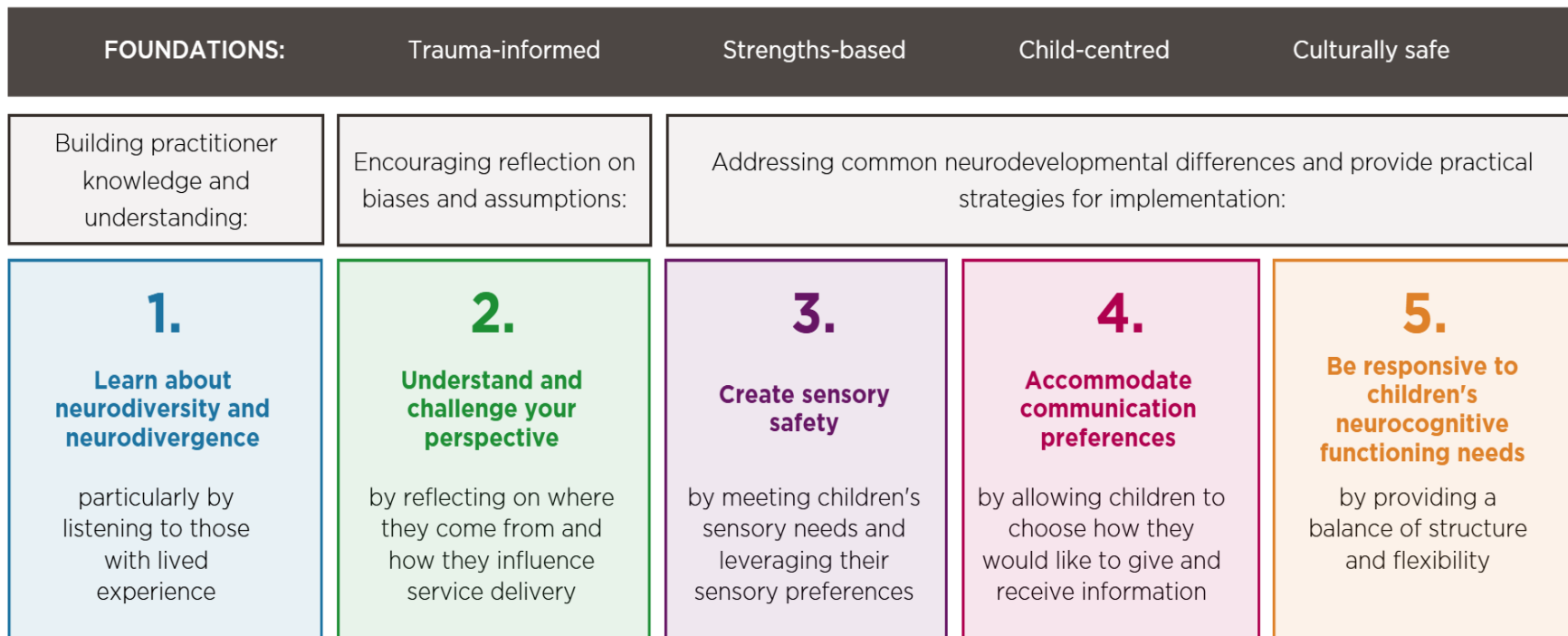
Neurodiversity-affirming practice



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A way of working that recognises, understands and respects diverse ways of thinking, learning and experiencing the world



Neurodiversity-affirming ways of working



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- Don't try to 'control' or 'fix' a child to fit in with neurotypical preferences and societal norms.
- Make adjustments to the environment to help meet a child's sensory needs and make socialisation feel safer
- Accommodate different communication preferences
- Provide a balance of structure and flexibility according to a child's preferences



Key takeaways: **potentially harmful behaviours**

- All behaviours, including potentially harmful behaviours, are a form of communication. Consider what unmet needs a child may be trying to communicate.
- Avoid words such as ‘violence’ or ‘aggression’ to describe potentially harmful behaviours used by children.



Key takeaways: **Neurodiversity-affirming practice**

- Remember that each child has their own unique strengths, challenges and ways of experiencing the world.
- Learn about neurodiversity and neurodivergence and embrace children's differences.
- It is the job of the important adults in a child's life to support children, including by adapting their environment where possible, using neurodiversity-affirming approaches.



Contact details:

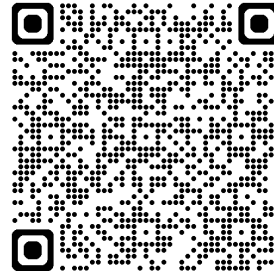
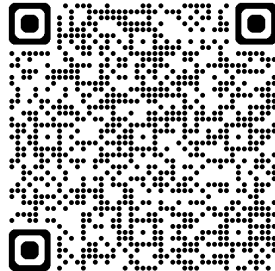
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Practice Guide:

*Understanding why
some Autistic
children use
potentially harmful
behaviours*



Practice guide:

*Neurodiversity-
affirming practice in
community mental
health services*

Online training:

*Neurodiversity-
affirming practice in
community-based
mental health:*

