

- **The Early Childhood Neurodiversity Affirming Collective**
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Digital Tools for Autistic Play Patterns



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Divergent

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Rather than viewing autism as a linear spectrum, ranging from "mild to severe" or "high to low functioning", Diverse Pathways understands autism as a constellation of traits that vary from person to person in presence, salience, and interaction. This means that autistic development is not simply more or less of something, but rather different combinations of ways of being, in how children sense, move, communicate, relate, focus, and play. These traits do not follow a neat pattern, and not every autistic child will share the same traits or experiences.



Autistic Constellation of Traits

adapted from Lowry, M. (2025). Reframing DSM Autism Criteria: A strengths-based perspective [Blog post]. LPP Clinical Practice.





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Autistic Play Profile

Primary Play Patterns

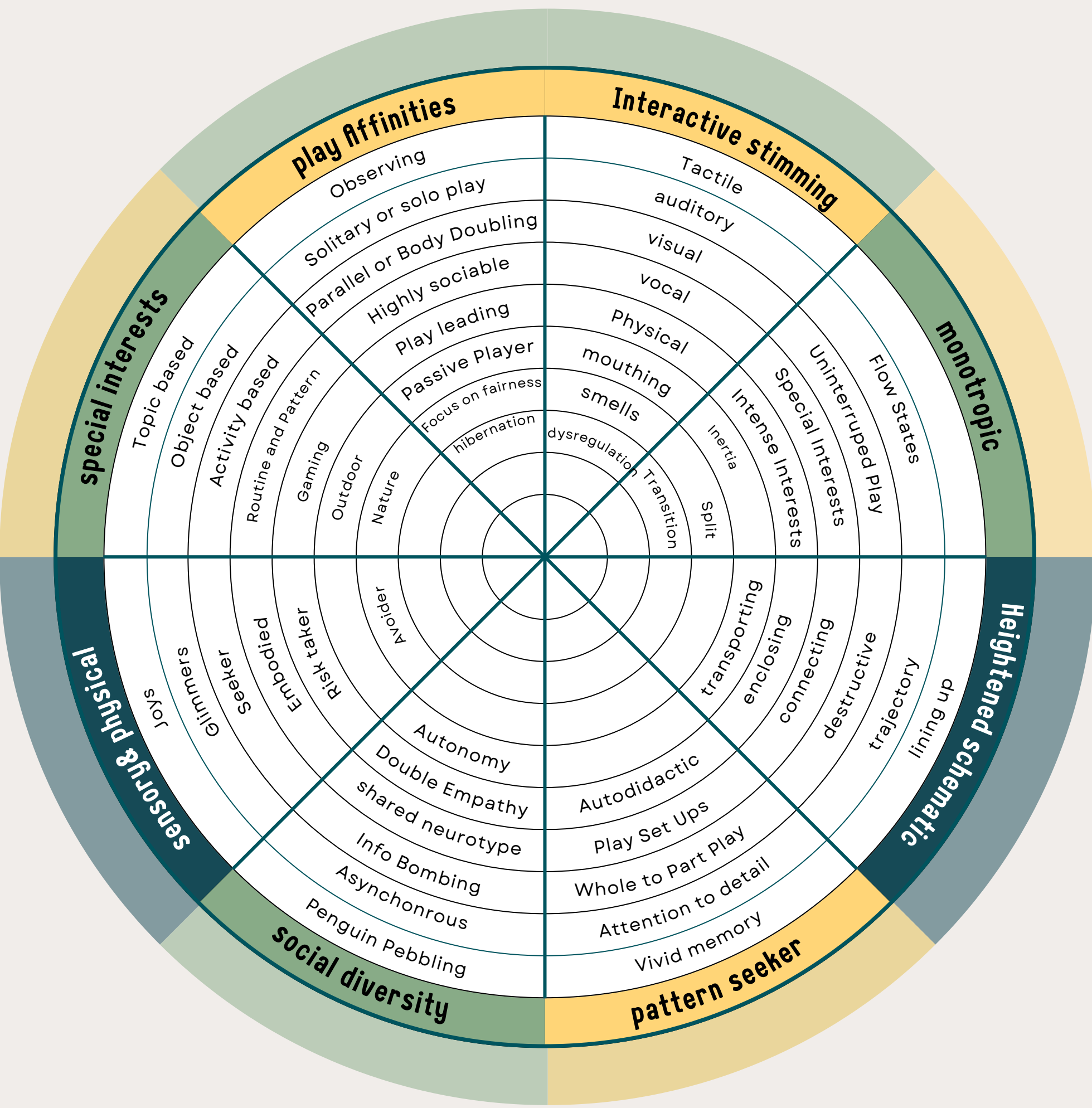
- What do you notice a child returns to again and again in play?
- What play types seem to support their regulation, focus, or joy?
- Do they lead or follow in play—and how do they express this?

Play Hibernations

- When does the child withdraw or resist engagement?
- What might the child be protecting (e.g. energy, sensory safety, autonomy)?
- Are there missed signals that the child is overwhelmed or misunderstood?

Play Scaffolding

- How might you support, not steer, their play pattern?
- What adjustments could help preserve their autonomy while inviting interaction?
- Is the environment flexible enough to allow their play style to unfold?



UNIQUE DEVELOPMENTAL INSIGHTS

What feels familiar here? What resonates with your child or the child you are supporting?

What might this look like beyond the description?

What strengths, interests, or ways of knowing and being are emerging here?

What might this pattern be communicating? What support?



How might the child describe or make sense of this pattern?

What small changes, ideas or supports are we exploring right now?

What might this pattern be teaching me about how I see development

Are there any knots or tensions in understanding the pattern?



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Play Spirals

- An alternative to stage theory is to explore children's play patterns through the idea of spirals. The spiral approach (inspired by Axelsson, 2024) recognises that play is rarely neat or sequential.
- Instead, it is a process of looping, intersecting, and moving in multiple directions. For example, if a child returns to exploratory play or spends time in solitude, this is not necessarily a regression or a deficit. Rather, it can signal what that child needs in that moment.
- Play spirals invite early educators to observe how children move in and out of different patterns, noticing how these loops connect and thread together over time.
- This perspective also helps you decide when, as a play partner, you might loop in, joining play in a meaningful way, and when to loop out, enabling space for autonomy and self-directed exploration.
- Children do not need us to be constantly interfering or interacting in their play.
- Instead, we can intentionally step in when our presence supports their engagement, and step back when their play is flourishing on its own.



Play Spirals



**AGAIN!
AGAIN!**



Stimming

Sensory Highs

Heightened schema

Flow States

Solitary Play

Monotropic Play

Penguin Pebbling

Parallel Play

Repetition

Daydreaming

Looping in and out of play patterns



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Looping in and out of Play Spirals



When to Loop In

- Ask yourself:
- Is the child signalling that they want me to join (eye contact, gestures, penguin-pebbling)?
 - Would my presence help extend the play or introduce new ideas without disrupting flow?
 - Is there a chance to scaffold a skill they are ready for (e.g., language, problem-solving, cooperation)?
 - Could joining help them access a material, space, or interaction they might benefit from?
 - Is the child showing signs of frustration or stuckness that I can help them work through?
 - Would joining strengthen our connection or trust in this moment?

When to Loop Out

- Ask yourself:
- Is the child fully absorbed, showing signs of focus and autonomy?
 - Would my presence risk taking control or redirecting their play away from their own ideas?
 - Is the child experimenting or problem-solving autonomously?
 - Are they engaging in self-regulation or sensory exploration that benefits from uninterrupted time?
 - Have I been in their play for a while, would stepping back now create space for them to lead?
 - Might the child feel pressure to perform, compensate or assimilate in their play?

The concept of Function Schmunction comes from Max Alexander of Play Radical and is a project and exploration of what autistic play culture is and can be. Autistic play is something that has been and continues to be misunderstood, invisibilized and at worst pathologised and prevented. Function Schmunction provides an affirming and creative alternative lens always from an autistic perspective. When you consider function schmunction, you are thinking about what that play patter is providing in that moment for that child, rather than feeling pressured by pre-defined outcomes or learning through play limitations.

Function
Schmunction

Loop in/Out?

Play Pattern

Function
Schmunction

Loop in/Out?

Play Pattern

Function
Schmunction

Loop in/Out?

Play Pattern

Understanding the Double Empathy Problem in Early Childhood



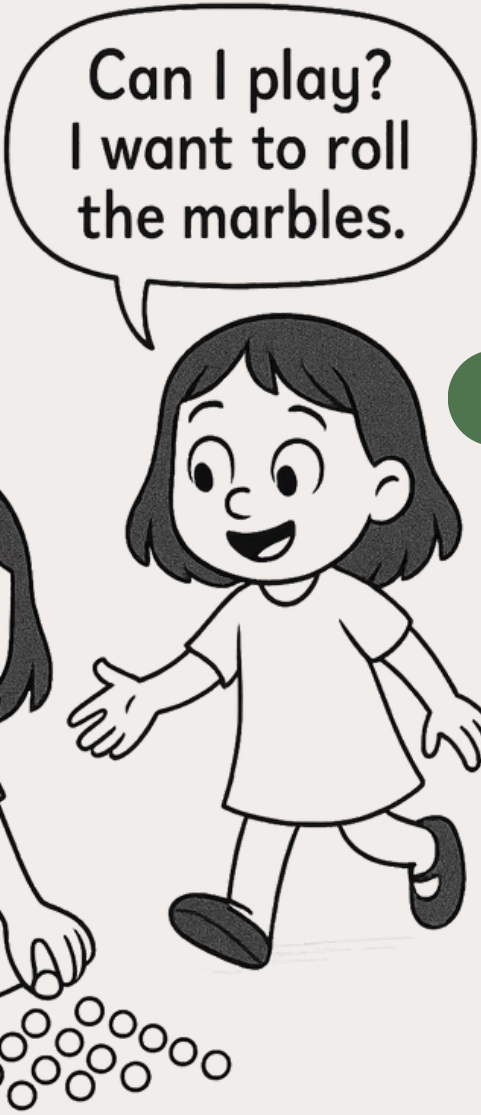
- Stirling (2025) describes the Double Empathy Problem as the disconnect between two individuals with different neurotypes, such as autistic and non-autistic, and the ways they uniquely approach interaction and play. A person's experience is shaped by many factors, including the traits of their neurotype, personality, beliefs, culture, and language. Together, these form their communication identity.
- Challenges arise when an empathy gap exists between the communication identities. For example, a non-autistic child thinking an autistic child is not listening because they are not providing eye contact. Unfortunately, non-autistic communication identities are often seen as the dominant and most desirable way to communicate, meaning the responsibility falls to the autistic person to bridge the gap. Interventions even exist to train them to take on this burden, often referred to as social pragmatic skills. This imbalance can lead to tension, misunderstanding, and judgement, and may result in the autistic child or adult masking, compensating, or assimilating to fit in. The Double Empathy Problem spans both communication and social diversity in play. The gap can form between adults and children, and between peers.

Examples of empathy gap in play...



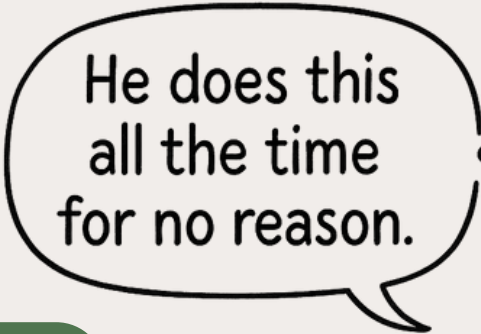
The autistic child is engaged in solitary play, carefully creating patterns with marbles. While marbles are often used for rolling, a non-autistic child approaches, wanting to join in with that purpose in mind. Neither child is doing anything wrong, but there is a mismatch in their play patterns and intentions. The autistic child might be encouraged to share her play experience or to adapt to the more typical way of using marbles. To help bridge the empathy gap, you could explain the autistic child's play pattern to the other child and provide additional marbles so they can play in their own way. This might take place nearby or in parallel, without disrupting the original play.

Autistic child



Non-autistic child

Empathy Gap in play initiation



Autistic child

Non-autistic adult

A non-autistic key person is becoming frustrated with an autistic child who refuses to “play nicely” at the water tray. In the key person’s view, the child’s splashing is defiant and has no value or purpose. In reality, the autistic child has a deep love for water play and gains many sensory highs and moments of joy from the experience. The only opportunity for water play is at the water tray. The child has previously been stopped from turning the taps on and off in the bathroom. In this moment, the key person is not able to see that the empathy gap is widened by a focus on behaviour rather than play. The gap can be closed by recognising and valuing embodied play and finding ways to increase access to water play.

Empathy Gap in understanding play pattern

Closing the empathy gap...



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Teach children that mutual exchanges can come in many forms, for example, one child might like to smile as a greeting whereas another child might love to high-five

Talk to children about different play patterns and communication identities

Don't enforce sharing and taking turns as a pro-social skill. Instead promote it as a flexible choice that will be relevant at different times.

Teach children about consent between each other i.e. ask permission for hugs, or to join in play

Use social stories to teach children about diverse social skills

Make multi-modal and whole-body communication accessible to all so that children feel equipped to connect with a diverse range of communication identities



Think about what intervention communicates to neurotypical conforming children if it is only ever autistic (or otherwise neurodivergent) children that are taken off for intervention groups. Early attunement should be utilised for ALL children

Consistently teach that no is not necessarily a rejection but a boundary

Special Interest Mapping

Child’s Name:	Age/Phase:
Neurodivergent Identity:	Completed by:



What Sparks joy? (you may wish to add photos)

Learning through my interests?	
Area of Learning	How I learn best through my inerestd
Highlight Personal, Social and Emotional Development Communication and Language Physical Development Literacy Mathematics Understanding the World Expressive Arts and Design Detail:	

Special Interest Mapping

Child's Name:	Age/Phase:
Neurodivergent Identity:	Completed by:



My strengths, motivators and play patterns

Sensitive Scaffolds	Parent x Carer Notes

My Special Interest Map

Child's Name:	Age/Phase:
Neurodivergent Identity:	Completed by:



My Way to a Good Day

A collaborative tool to explore a child's best days



What does a good day look like?

- Hattie enjoys quality time with her key person away from the main room, especially when it gets busy and noisy.
- Hattie loves the outdoors, especially risky play. She loves jumping and spinning.
- Being self-directed and able to complete her routines with an element of sameness.

What might I need to have a good day?

- The key person is currently trying to ensure that there are small bursts of 1:1 time outside the main space to play and spend time together. This supports Hattie's emotional regulation and increases her engagement when back in the main room.
- Free flow to the outdoors when possible.
- We are using visuals and sequences to maintain the sameness in routines.

What are the risks to a good day?

Hattie does not like to feel contained in the main playroom as she can become overwhelmed and dysregulated. Elected time out with a key person is important. When she does not have access to this, going outdoors and her routines, it impacts her wellbeing and learning experiences. These outlets optimise her learning, and so adaptations are a must.

My way to a good day

What does a good day look like?

What might I need to have a good day?

What are the risks to a good day?



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What does a good day look like?

What might I need to have a good day?

What are the risks to a good day?

My way to a good day

What does a good day look like?

What might I need to have a good day?

What are the risks to a good day?



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At home, a good day looks like...

Let's have
a great day.

Our family's priorities right now...

Things that help us prepare for the day...



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What we (family + educators) will do together to support good days:

Shared reflections box



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The Bees Framework

An exploration tool for sense-making behaviour in early childhood

Behaviours

Emotions

Energy

Senses

Overview

The origin of outward behaviours is more complex than a child simply choosing to misbehave or be defiant. Behaviours are not always the result of an immediate trigger and may be accumulative based on ongoing stressors or unmet needs. It is important to understand the broader developmental profile of the child, and their unique developmental pathway when deciding how to co-regulate alongside the child. This Bees Framework is an exploration tool that enables you to think more deeply about behaviour and to identify developmentally meaningful responses.





The Bees Framework

Behaviours

Emotions

Energy

Senses

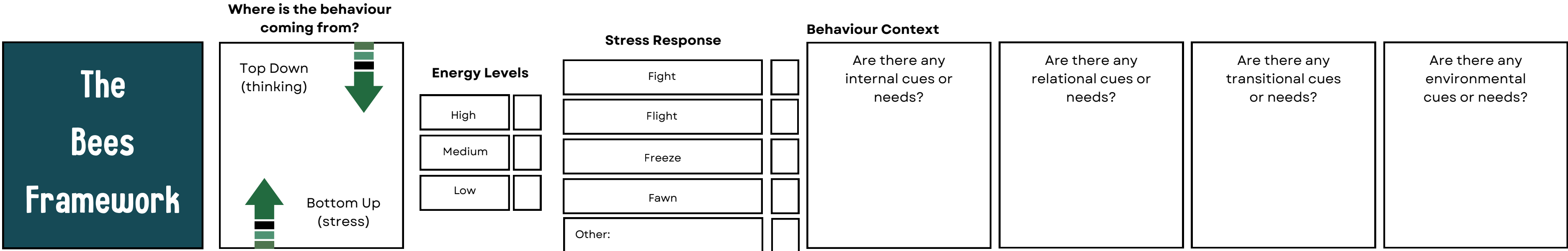
The **Bees Framework** is a reflective tool for understanding a child's regulation, healthy habits, energy states, stress responses, and underlying needs. It encourages educators to identify outwards behaviours non-judgementally and to think how this might connected to energy states, emotions and senses (amongst other things). Importantly, the framework is not intended as an **additional piece of paperwork** (nobody needs that). Rather, it intends to guide your thinking and processing when co-regulating behaviour that is ongoing or perplexing.

So why Bees? Bees communicate through signals and dances, much like behaviours, which may look puzzling but always carry meaning if we pause to interpret them rather than swatting them away.

Through an exploration, you will explore four themes:

- **Behaviour:** The “at the surface” actions you see, which may be signalling stress, frustration, confusion, or an unmet need.
- **Emotions:** The child's feelings and how they might be experiencing them in their body and mind (e.g. anxious, sad, overwhelmed, excited).
- **Energy:** The intensity or rhythm of the child's internal state, from flat or low energy to highly charged or restless.
- **Sensory:** The child's sensory experiences, including how they respond to sights, sounds, touch, movement, body awareness (proprioception), balance (vestibular), and internal signals like hunger or toileting needs (interoception).

The aim of the Bees Framework is to move away **ABC approaches** that focus only on stopping behaviours rather than deeply understanding them and supporting the child to find sustainable self-regulation responses based on their unique developmental profile.



Healthy Habits & Established Strengths	Behaviour/s:
Children do well if they can. It helps to notice what healthy habits they already have, and which strengths we can draw on so the child builds capacity rather than feeling on the “behaviour backfoot.” Example: A child may sometimes find group times overwhelming, but they have already developed the healthy habit of seeking out a quiet corner when they need space. Their strength is in recognising their own need for regulation. By honouring this and giving them choice, such as enabling them to sit on the edge of the group or join in later, we build on their existing self-awareness instead of focusing only on the behaviour of “not sitting still.”	It can be helpful to identify the primary behaviour you want to support, as well as any secondary behaviours that might follow. This makes support more manageable and prevents the child from feeling overwhelmed. If there are multiple behaviours, focusing on the primary one often has a ripple effect that eases the others. Example: A child may become frustrated when trying to navigate play with peers (primary behaviour). This frustration can then lead to withdrawal and low energy, where the child disengages from play altogether (secondary behaviour). By supporting the frustration in the moment, through scaffolding, co-regulation, or giving the child alternative ways to join play, you may also prevent the later withdrawal.
Are there any obvious stressors?	Emotions, sensations and cues
- Think about internal, environmental, transitional and relational stressors. - Are there any demands being placed on the child? - Do they appear to be in fight/flight/freeze or fawn?	- Are there any cues to the child’s emotions or experiences? For example, crying, pacing, being red faced. - Are they able to body map i.e. point to where they feel it in the body? - Are you able to model or engage in emotions talk to help make connections?
Sensory differences and needs	Co-Regulation Approach
- Consider the top five (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste) - Consider movement needs (proprioception and vesitbular needs) - Consider self-care needs - Consider interoception (body sensations, bodily functions and emotions) - Are there environmental factors that could be triggering, disrupting or do you know of glimmers and glows?	- What are the strategies, techniques or co-regulatory support you will try? - how long will you utilise if before reviewing? - How are these shared with family, and other key people?

The Bees Framework

Where is the behaviour coming from?

Top Down (thinking)

↓

↑

Bottom Up (stress)

Energy Levels

High

Medium

Low

Stress Response

Fight

Flight

Freeze

Fawn

Other:

Behaviour Context

Are there any internal cues or needs?

Are there any relational cues or needs?

Are there any transitional cues or needs?

Are there any environmental cues or needs?

Healthy Habits & Established Strengths	Behaviour/s:
Are there any obvious stressors?	Emotions, sensations and cues?
Sensory differences and needs	Co-Regulation Approach

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The
BEES
Framework

Behaviours

Emotions

Energy

Senses

Review	Next steps?



The Bees Framework

Behaviours

Emotions

Energy

Senses

Lineage and Reference Influences

This work draws on and is deeply indebted to a lineage of thinkers, practitioners, and visionaries who have shaped contemporary understandings of behaviour, regulation, rest, liberation, and neurodiversity:

- **Mona Delahooke** – psychologist and author of *Beyond Behaviours* (2019), who reframes child behaviour through a neurodevelopmental and relational lens.
- **Stuart Shanker** – originator of the Self-Reg framework and author of *Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life* (2016).
- **bell hooks** – Black feminist scholar and cultural critic, whose works such as *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *All About Love* (2000) illuminate the intersections of love, justice, pedagogy, and liberation.
- **Jennifer Mullan** – psychologist, activist, and author of *Decolonizing Therapy: Oppression, Historical Trauma & Politicising Your Practice* (2023).
- **Tricia Hersey** – founder of The Nap Ministry and author of *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (2022), reframing rest as a portal to liberation.
- **Sandra Dalton-Smith** – physician and author of *Sacred Rest: Recover Your Life, Renew Your Energy, Restore Your Sanity* (2017), articulating seven types of rest.
- **Dr Amy Laurent and Dr Jacquelyn Fede** – co-founders of Autism Level Up, whose frameworks reimagine energy regulation and engagement as accessible, affirming tools.
- **Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson** – authors of *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* (2011), bridging neuroscience and relational caregiving.
- **Sonny Jane Wise** – activist and author of *We're All Neurodiverse* (2022), whose work amplifies neurodiversity as identity, culture, and lived experience.
- **Lori Desautels** – educator and author of *Connections over Compliance: Rewiring Our Perceptions of Discipline* (2020), integrating neuroscience into trauma-informed practice.
- **Warda Farah** – speech and language therapist, educator, and writer centring anti-racist and neurodiversity-affirming approaches in communication and education.
- **Dr Abi Miranda** – educational psychologist and researcher advancing inclusive and strengths-based practice in early childhood education.
- **Hailey R. Love** – researcher and advocate whose scholarship on inclusive early childhood education challenges deficit framings of disability and calls for justice-oriented practice.
- **Liz Pemberton** (The Black Nursery Manager) – anti-racist trainer, consultant, and speaker amplifying equity, justice, and critical reflection in the early years sector.
- This lineage is partial and ever-evolving; I remain indebted to the wider communities of scholars, practitioners, activists, and children themselves who continue to inform and inspire this work.



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SIGN UP...

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