Supporting Guidance for Autistic Play Patterns

Diverse Pathways FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Part One

Introducing Play Patterns

About

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This guide is designed to support you as you engage with the **Developmental Insight** on **Autistic Play Patterns**. Its purpose is to guide your thinking as you expand, diversify, and decolonise understandings of child development and self-directed play (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2010 and Souto-Manning, 2017) . Much of what we currently know about play is based on research that centres neurotypical-conforming and non-disabled experiences of play and learning. This then becomes the definition and measure of what is accepted as “normal” play (Mulder, Carter and Graf, 2019). When this occurs, we begin to see narratives that there is:

- a right way to play
- functional play
- purposeful play
- appropriate play

These adult definitions can lead to forms of play becoming marginalised or seen as needing remediation. **Play should never be used as a mechanism to suggest that a child is failing**, or that their play is deficient, disordered, or unskilled because it does not align with adult or pre-defined notions of what play should be. **Play is infinite and serves many functions**, all of which we will explore in this supporting guidance.

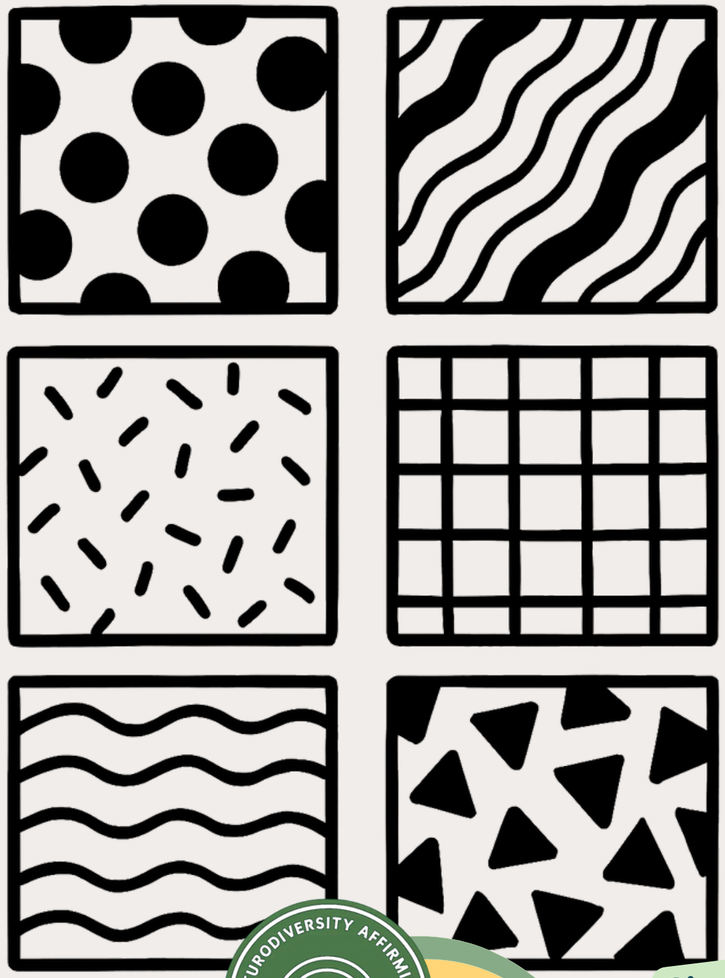
Goodley, D. and Runswick-Cole, K., 2010. Emancipating play: Dis/abled children, development and deconstruction. Disability & society, 25(4), pp.499-512.
Conn, C., 2015. ‘Sensory highs’,‘vivid rememberings’ and ‘interactive stimming’: children’s play cultures and experiences of friendship in autistic autobiographies. Disability & Society, 30(8), pp.1192-1206.
Souto-Manning, M., 2017. Is play a privilege or a right? And what’s our responsibility? On the role of play for equity in early childhood education. Early Child Development and Care, 187(5-6), pp.785-787.

Play must be the right of every child. Not a privilege. After all, when regarded as a privilege, it is granted to some and denied to others, creating further inequities. Play as a right is what is fair and just. Although children will engage in play differently, play is a child's right.

Mariana Souto-Manning (2017)

Why Play Patterns (Conn, 2015)

The term **Play Patterns** was chosen after reading an insightful, and profound article by Dr Carmel Conn, Associate Professor and researcher. Her paper, **"'Sensory highs', 'vivid rememberings' and 'interactive stimming': children's play cultures and experiences of friendship in autistic autobiographies,"** (2015) had a deep impact on my understanding of play within autistic culture. Conn uses the term play patterns, and this language immediately resonated with the collective. When we later discussed it with other educators, we found that imagining children's play through the idea of patterns helped us create a more unique and meaningful picture of each child's play and a deeper understanding of their individuality.



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To define or not to define play...

While there are many valuable descriptions of play, as a collective we have chosen not to offer a single definition. Defining play too narrowly risks limiting its infinite nature. The only person who can truly determine whether something is play is the player.

Eberle (2014) warns that attempts to define play functionally can create “patrols and borders” that restrict its possibilities. Instead, he encourages comfort in the vast potential of play and its capacity to transcend boundaries. Expanding these borders allows us to think more broadly about the forms of play that fall beyond neuronormative expectations and to challenge the persistent idea that there is a “right” way to play (Murphy, 2023).

Play is innate, boundless, and filled with endless possibilities. It is unique to each individual and can nurture both internal understanding and external connection. Drawing on the work of Helen Edgar and Rooted in Play, we align with the perspective that “Play doesn’t need to teach anything to be worthy... Play is not preparation for life; it is life... Real play, freely chosen, self-directed, often nonsensical, is where children build their sense of self, explore emotional landscapes, and experience joy on their own terms” (Rooted in Play, cited in Hughes, 2011; Lester and Russell, 2008).

Lester, S. and Russell, W., 2008. Play for a change: Play, policy and practice: A review of contemporary perspectives. London: National Children's Bureau.
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Play as a unique way of being. It is behaviour that involves perceiving, feeling, and acting in the world. Children engage in play by taking time and space for their own needs and desires, which helps them develop flexible and adaptable responses to their environment

(Lester and Russell, 2010, p.7).

Functions of Play

Play has increasingly been co-opted by the discourse of “learning through play,” which, while relevant in showing the educational value of play, also risks reducing its meaning. When play is primarily framed as a vehicle for measurable learning outcomes, it narrows our understanding and sidelines forms of play that do not fit neatly into curriculum goals or neuronormative expectations. Children’s sensory, repetitive, solitary, or highly focused play can be dismissed as less valuable because it does not easily demonstrate academic or social progress. This reductionist approach risks erasing the richness and diversity of play experiences by prioritising what can be observed, assessed, or aligned with predetermined developmental milestones, rather than recognising play as expansive, self-defined, and deeply meaningful in its own right.

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Part Two

Play, ableism and neuronormativity

Play and Neuronormativity

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One of the most liberating things an early years educator can do is resist the pressure to neatly **define**, **stage**, or **categorise** play which ultimately reinforces the message that there is a **right or ideal way to play.** The truth is that only the person who is playing can truly define what play is according to their own context. When we step back from the urge to mould play, we open space for the infinite, expansive possibilities of play. Trying to reduce it into tidy descriptions risks narrowing its meaning and centering only the kinds of play that **conform to neuronormative expectations**. This is not to suggest that there aren't play patterns that might feel uncomfortable for us or that reduce our bandwidth (others play can be dysregulating). Rather, we have to acknowledge that play is a complex process with many functions beyond learning.

Examples of neuronormativity in play

- Believing that play must follow fixed stages, with social play seen as the "gold standard" and ultimate goal.
- Labeling play as immature or delayed when it doe not align with age+stage based norms. For example, viewing a child as "behind" because they remain motivated by exploratory rather than *so-called* "functional" play.
- Insistence on *learning through play* by dismissing play that appears purposeless or not obviously linked to learning outcomes or emerging academic skills.
- Policing play that feels messy, embodied, or uncomfortable for adults. For instance, insisting children "play nicely" instead of honouring how they choose to express themselves and ensuring attuned environments.
- Treating play primarily as a developmental checkpoint, presuming deficits when a child does not engage in expected ways and then using play-based interventions to correct play.
- Valuing play only when it produces observable results (language, numeracy, social skills), which marginalises children whose immersive play is meaningful but not easily measured.

How does neuronormativity influence play?

- Neuronormativity imposes on early educators & specialists a notion of a "right" way to play, which must conform with typical and non-disabled behaviours.
- For instance, there is an assumption that social play is inherently superior, and if children do not advance through specific stages of play, it signifies a problem.
- This bias is evident when adults assume they have the authority to define children's play as meaningful and/or purposeful.
- Often then disregarding or intervening in play that does not make sense to them or needs more time to unfold. Furthermore,neuronormativity implies learning through play which is often linked to neuronormative and prescribed learning experiences and outcomes is the only valuable way to play.
- And yet play is infinite, chaotic and is a form of resistance, not compliance.

Lewis, T. A. (2021, January 1). Working Definition of Ableism. Talila A. Lewis. https://www.talilalewis.com/blog.
Image from: Eliza Fricker https://missingthemark.blog/

The Pathology Paradigm

Our education system is often dominated by a **pathology framework**, where developmental differences or disabilities are seen as problems to be “fixed” or normalised. This approach is unhelpful and limiting when supporting children’s diverse developmental experiences and trajectories. Diverse Pathways takes a neurodiversity-affirming approach which values differences and sensitively supports children.

Play is not considered to come naturally to the child
The child’s play is considered delayed, deficit and impaired.
The child’s play should be targeted to fix or eliminate the deficits within their play
The features of self-directed play are not afforded to the child, and their way of playing is not honoured or affirmed
The child needs to be taught how to play properly, functionally, appropriately and normally
The child’s way of playing is considered an inconvenience to others as it does not fit into play norms
The child's play is lacking in imagination, social skills and an outcome
Play-goals enforce neurotypicalism
Inappropriate play should be sabotaged
Consent is not gained for play-based intervention

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The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The Neurodiversity Paradigm enables us to explore alternative approaches to early education that focus on neutral associations with difference and disability, but there is also the expectation that as educators we will be strength's led and needs driven. The neurodiversity paradigm is a rejection of deficit systems that pathologise and dehumanise the very natural occurence of human needs. The Diverse Pathways for Early Childhood is driven by strength's led understandings.

The child's play is valid
The child's play patterns are respected and affirmed
Play is never sabotaged
Outcome measures of play focus on autonomy, self-advocacy, engagement, wellbeing and belonging
Special and intense interests are enabled
The child is given uninterrupted time to engage in self-directed play
The child has unique play preferences and patterns
Guided Play does not teach children how to mask
The features of play are honoured
Play-based interventions do not attempt to fix, correct or eliminate play
There is a clear ethics of care, including consent, dignity and responsiveness

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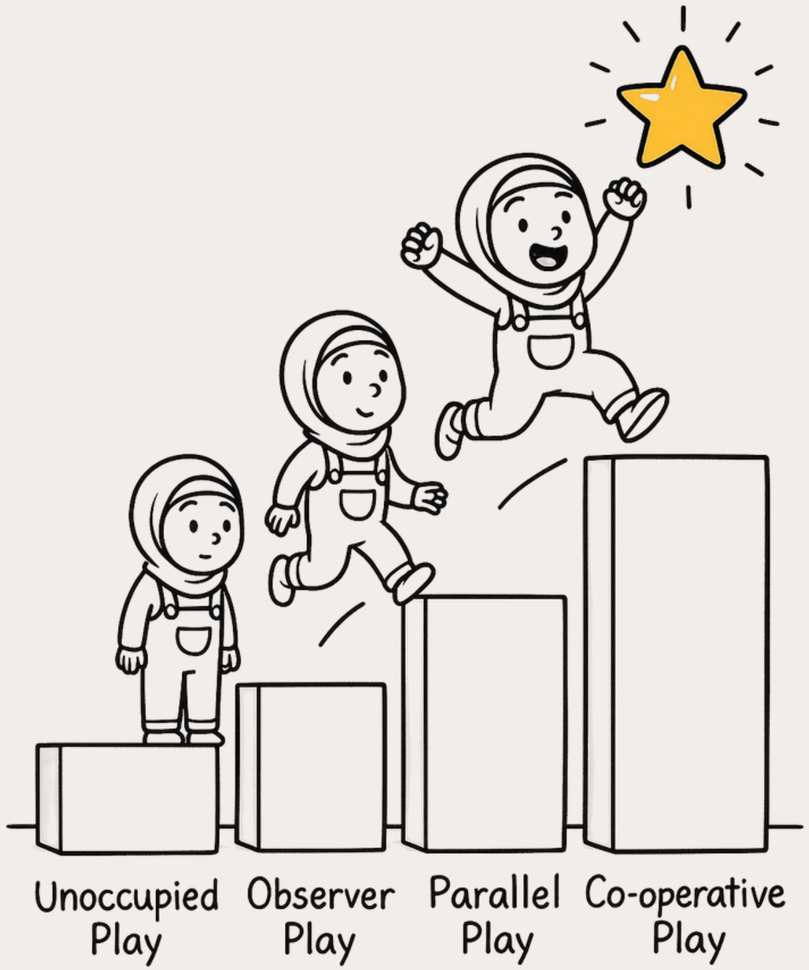
Part Three

The Play Framework

Stage Theories



- Most early years educators will, at some point, have learned about stage theories, whether in relation to developmental milestones or types of play.
- For many years, the mantra “stages not ages” shaped how we thought about a child’s developmental progress.
- However, these models are increasingly being questioned for their neuronormative implications, as they assume children will move sequentially through stages, often in a hierarchy that places certain skills or traits at the “highest” level.
- In reality, development is rarely so neat, tidy, or normative.
- In play, for example, it is often assumed that children progress from unoccupied play, to observer play, to parallel play, and finally to co-operative play which is presented as the gold standard.
- This framing means that if a child moves between stages, or spends longer in one than another, they may be viewed as deficient. Such prescriptive models fail to reflect the fluid, varied, and often “messy” nature of play and development.

moving towards a neuroaffirming play framework

The Play Framework

Play Patterns (Conn, 2015)	The preferences and forms of play a child naturally engages in.
Play Frequencies	The energetic and relational states of play. For example, self-directed play, guided play, and playful instruction. Frequencies replace the idea of a linear continuum, offering a more fluid way to understand how play shifts across contexts and relationships.
Play Spirals ((Axelsson, 2022)	The motion and direction of play patterns over time, marked by flow, repetition, and return. Children loop in and out of play patterns depending on their needs at that moment. Early attunement supports educators in recognising those needs, instincts, and desires.
Play Hibernation (Axelsson, 2022)	The temporary withdrawal or reduction of play patterns. For example, if a child does not feel safe to play, their play may enter a period of hibernation.
Diverse Pathways	Recognises the multiple, unique, and valid pathways each child may take in their developmental journey.

What play frequency is needed?

Play Frequencies describe the different energetic rhythms that emerge between children and adults during play. Just like tuning into a radio signal, we need to sense the right frequency, whether a child is bouncing in their own flow, co-regulating through shared rhythms, or engaging in guided or playful instruction. Each frequency carries its own possibilities for connection and discovery. By attuning to these frequencies, educators can recognise when to bounce alongside, roll gently toward, or pause to let the play find its own rhythm, ensuring play remains dynamic, relational, and developmentally meaningful.

Self-Directed Play

Adult-led

Guided Play

Co-Constructed

Playful Instruction

Adapted from Pyle, A. and Danniels, E. (2016) 'A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play', Early Education and Development, 28(3), pp. 274–289. doi: 10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771.

The Features of Self-Directed Play

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Self directed play is characterised by a number of features, and may or may not result in pre-defined learning, or an outcome. Self-directed play serves many functions including learning, developmental gains, rest, processing, self-regulation, seeking and avoiding (not exhaustive). Children's play is often sanitised as an innocent pursuit but is complex, uncomfortable at times and reflects power and privilege.

Self-directed play is the experience of:

(1) initiating, directing and maintaining play which is not dictated to by an outside authority.
(2) being intrinsically motivated and self-determined meaning it is conducted for its own sake rather than for some reward outside of itself. i.e. playing "nicely" or "calmly" is boring to many children but they will control their play to please the adult.
(3) structured by mental and social rules or guidelines created or agreed upon by the players. These cannot always be seen by the observer. For example, a child may have a mental pattern when engaging in repetitive play.
(4) Is paradoxical seeking pleasure/processing pain, freedom/resistance, stress-free/stress-full states
(5) taking physical, social and emotional risks to explore the "messiness" of internal and external lived experiences

Gray, P., 2013. Free to learn: Why unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life. Basic Books.
Trammell, A., 2023. Repairing play: A Black phenomenology. MIT Press.

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.

Looping in and out of play patterns

Axelsson, S., 2022. The Original Learning Approach: Weaving Together Playing, Learning, and Teaching in Early Childhood. Redleaf Press.

Play Hibernation (Axelsson, 2022)

Historically, when a child's play is not immediately obvious to us, or cannot be easily linked to an area of learning and development, it is not uncommon for educators to assume that play does not come naturally to that child. While there are circumstances that may affect a child's ability to access their play instincts, such as adversity, trauma, or illness, assuming that play does not come naturally to autistic children overlooks the diverse ways children play.

Axelsson (2022) introduced the term play hibernation in The Original Learning Approach to describe moments when play temporarily withdraws. As a collective, we have expanded this idea, recognising that a child may not always feel safe to play in their own way, and that we may therefore see the hibernation of play patterns.

Think of a child who playfully stims or enjoys big-body play but is told to stop or "play nicely," or a child who prefers solitary play but is continually encouraged to play socially. When environments do not offer the right fit, play may retreat into hibernation, and with that hibernation can come play deprivation, as the child seeks safe spaces to express play in their own way.

Play and Energy Accounting

The first **Developmental Insight** focuses on play because it is an aspect of human behaviour that is innate and essential for children to thrive. Yet play is something that continually needs defending for all children. In particular, autistic children have long been subjected to the belief that they do not know how to play and therefore require remediation.

However, access to play for autistic children is not only a developmental need and a right; it also has the potential to significantly support wellbeing. To consider wellbeing, we explore play through the lens of **energy accounting.** For autistic children, play is not only about fun or learning, it is a vital way to feel balanced, safe and nourished. Daily life often asks them to process more sensory, social, and emotional information than their bodies and brains can comfortably manage. Play becomes a space where they can restore, regulate, and release that energy in their own way.
Through play, autistic children can:

- Replenish energy by engaging in predictable, soothing, or deeply focused play that helps them feel at-ease and grounded.
- Use high energy through movement, sensory play, or joyful repetition that brings balance back to their nervous system.
- Protect energy by choosing when, how, and with whom to play. This is an early form of self-advocacy and self-care.

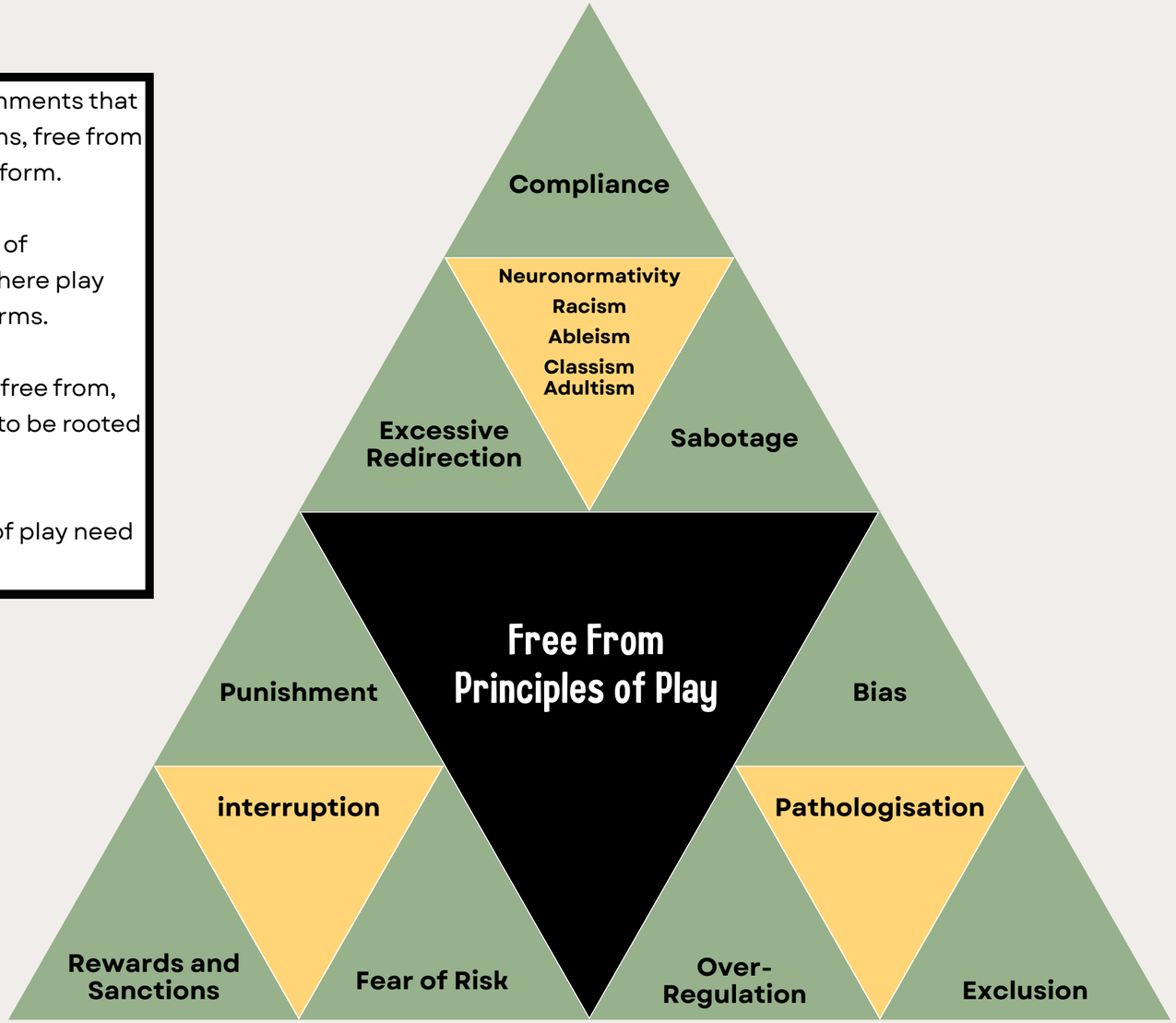
When adults respect these play freedoms, they support the child's natural instincts to manage their own energy and wellbeing. In this way, play acts as an energy regulator, helping autistic children stay connected, safe, and ready to engage with the world in a way that feels comfortable to them.

Energising or Draining Play

Play can be energising and it can be draining. The purpose of access to self-directed play is to ensure that children can loop into play patterns that meet their needs in the moment. For example, a child being drained by social demands during in play, might need energising through access to solitary play, or engaging with toys that relate to interests. We have to develop a trust in children's instincts that they will often choose play patterns that satisfy their needs. We must also pay attention to isolation and hibernation from play where there is a need.

Free From Principles of Play

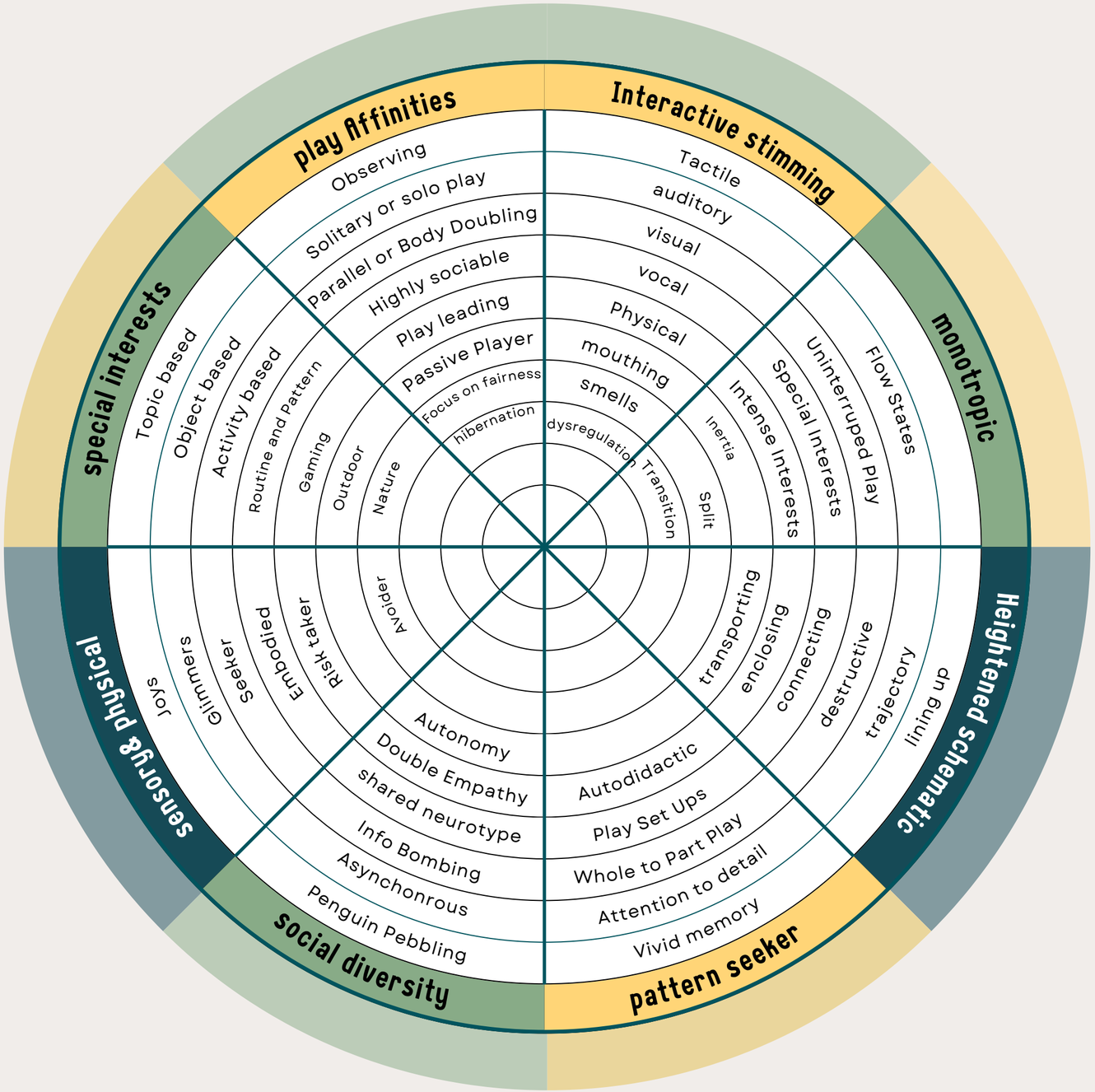
- freedom in play means facilitating environments that are free from neuronormative expectations, free from the pressure to perform, progress, or conform.
- Freedom in play is not about the absence of boundaries, it is about creating spaces where play can expand, move, and belong in all its forms.
- So as we think about what play should be free from, we can also reflect on what we want play to be rooted in.
- What else do you think our expectations of play need to be free from?



Principle	Definition
Compliance	When play is controlled or shaped to meet adult expectations rather than the child's intrinsic motivation. Children are expected to follow directions, limiting autonomy and authentic expression.
Neuronormativity, Racism, Ableism, Classism, Adultism	The structural and cultural forces that privilege certain ways of being, learning, and playing while devaluing others. These biases define which play is seen as "normal" or "acceptable."
Excessive Redirection	Constantly steering, correcting, or managing play instead of allowing it to unfold naturally. This interrupts curiosity and can signal to the child that their instincts are wrong.
Sabotage	When adults intentionally or unintentionally disrupt, withhold, or undermine play opportunities – often to enforce control, compliance, or performance outcomes.
Punishment	Using consequences or withdrawal of play opportunities to manage behaviour. This communicates that play is conditional rather than a right and vital source of wellbeing.
Interruption	Frequent verbal, physical, or environmental disruptions that prevent children from sustaining flow, focus, or immersion in play. Often framed as "teachable moments," these can fragment engagement.
Rewards and Sanctions	Systems that use play as currency – offering it as a reward or removing it as punishment. This turns play from a right into a tool of behavioural control.
Fear of Risk	When adults prioritise safety, order, or comfort over children's exploration. This limits opportunities for physical challenge, experimentation, and self-discovery.
Bias	When adult perceptions of value, capability, or safety in play are influenced by stereotypes, identity markers, or cultural assumptions about certain children or behaviours.
Pathologisation	Framing a child's play style as a symptom or deficit rather than a valid form of self-expression or communication. For example, labelling repetitive or sensory play as "abnormal."
Over-Regulation	When rules, schedules, or adult structures dominate the play environment, leaving little room for spontaneity or self-direction.
Exclusion	When children are denied access to play spaces or peer interactions because their ways of engaging are misunderstood or seen as disruptive.

Part Four

The Autistic Play Profile



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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?

Reference & Lineage List

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