

2025

EDUCATION

Autistic Kids at School

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FROM THE EDITOR

Autism Spectrum Disorder is not new, but thanks to the Neurodiversity Affirming Community, it is now seen as neurodivergence rather than a disease to be cured. Many Autistic adults are on social media talking about their lives openly and honestly. Although stigma continues in many communities, there are now community groups for parents to learn more about raising an Autistic child. Chances are you have several Autistic students in your school.

Inclusive classrooms are also not new, and vary significantly between school districts. Some districts are “fully inclusive” and have no specialized classes while others may have specialized classes and schools. It’s important to remember that there is no perfect approach and families should always have input as to where their child is educated. Support should be dependent on the child and their needs rather than their diagnosis.

Storying or storytelling is one way to include diverse learners in our classrooms and by using multimodal learning with all students. (Farndale and Reichelt, 2023). Working with a culturally responsive lens and including families allows teachers to access student and family’s “funds of knowledge.” When we encourage students to tell their stories, we provide a valuable means of connection. Our Autistic students may struggle with oral communication, so finding personally meaningful ways for them to communicate is of utmost importance.



EDITOR AND TEACHER



Inclusive Classrooms

I have an Autistic student coming into my classroom! Now what?

Remember that no two children are the same, whether they are Autistic or not. Hopefully you get some background information upon registration but even if you don't, by considering their sensory needs and communication style you will be on your way to supporting them well.

This article and website were created to give you some guidelines as you start teaching Autistic students in your classroom.

"I am different, not less" - Temple Grandin

- Consider how your room is set up: is there space for the student to stand up, walk on their toes, bounce?
- How bright are the lights and can they be adjusted?
- Is there a lot of noise that make noise-cancelling headphones an option?
- Does the student use AAC? If so, check in with your Speech-Language Pathologist and the family. AAC should always be available and charged.
- What activities can the student do to help them regulate their bodies and emotions? Sensory bins? Alphabet letters? Puzzles?
- What signs does your student show that indicate they are getting upset? What helps them?
- What students in your classroom will benefit most from your new Autistic student? What students may struggle? How can you approach the change? Parents can help with the language around talking to other students but generally being direct is best!

An Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis requires a medical doctor or registered psychologist. Children are often diagnosed around preschool age but there are no limits to age at diagnosis. In Calgary, we have a specialized diagnostic clinic.

Communication Bill of Rights

People have a fundamental right to communicate in all parts of their lives. These communication rights promote full participation across the lifespan. They include:

1. The right to dignity and respect in all interactions.
2. The right to meaningful communication that is culturally and linguistically appropriate.
3. The right to be addressed directly and not be spoken for or talked about as if not there.
4. The right to receive a response to all communication, even when the desired outcome is not possible.
5. The right to participate across settings as full communication partners.
6. The right to interact socially and to build and keep relationships.
7. The right to be given—and to understand—information about objects, actions, events, and people.
8. The right to ask for or refuse objects, actions, events, and people.
9. The right to express preferences and feelings, make comments, and share opinions.
10. The right to make choices from meaningful options.
11. The right to access services and supports for communication across the lifespan.
12. The right to individualized, working augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems and other assistive technology (AT) at all times.

This is the third iteration of the NJC Communication Bill of Rights. The NJC originally developed it to ensure the basic rights of persons with severe disabilities to affect, through communication, the conditions of their existence (NJC, 1992). In 2016, a second version added three more socially focused rights (Brady et al., 2016).

The Communication Bill of Rights was created by the National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons With Severe Disabilities (NJC). This page is taken directly from the American Speech-Hearing Association website.

AAC

Model without expectation!

We show the student how to access things on their device, such as “places, bathroom.” Hand-over-hand or forcing the child to hit a button to get something is not neurodiversity affirming practice.

AAC stands for Augmentative and Alternative Communication, and refers to core boards, speaking devices, and sign-assisted language. Individuals with a variety of disabilities may use AAC - those with Autism, acquired brain injuries, motor and speech disabilities, etc. People of all ages use AAC whether long or short term.

AAC is the user's voice so it is imperative that it accompany them at all times. Device charging should be done at night or nap time. In school, this means the device goes to music class, lunch, gym, etc. Students learn how to use the voice output appropriately and teachers should have high expectations of users.



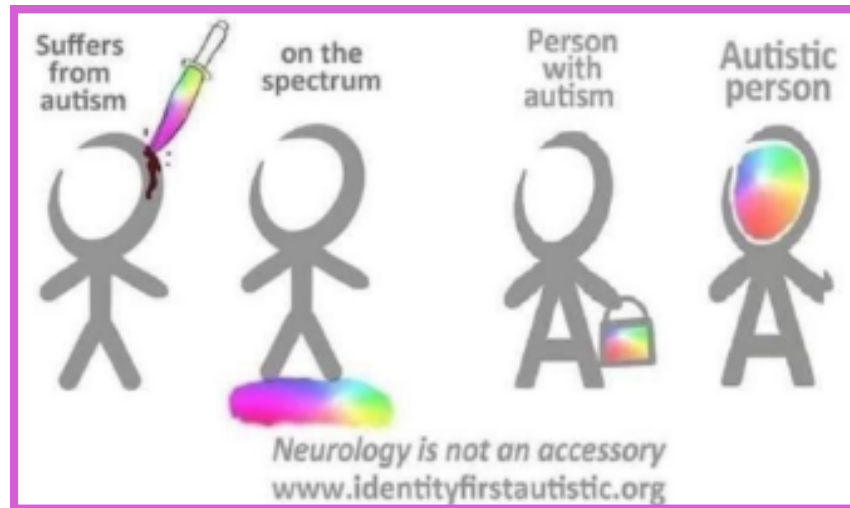
This is an example of TouchChat, a voice output program made by PRC Saltillo. This home page can also be printed to be used as a 'low-tech' core board.

AUTISTIC AFFIRMING COMMUNITY

This page is about how Autism is talked about in social media and by some Autistic adults.

Upon diagnosis, many doctors will state a 'level' of Autism (generally 1, 2, or 3). These levels are based on symptoms at the time of diagnosis but are subjective (<https://www.autismcanada.ca/diagnosis>).

Labels such as "high functioning" and "low functioning" are similar to the diagnostic levels, and are not part of Neurodiversity Affirming Practice. According to SLP Steve Wenger (@speechdude), the high functioning label "negates the need for support," and the low functioning label "undermines dignity and disrespects autonomy." The term "Aspergers" is no longer used.



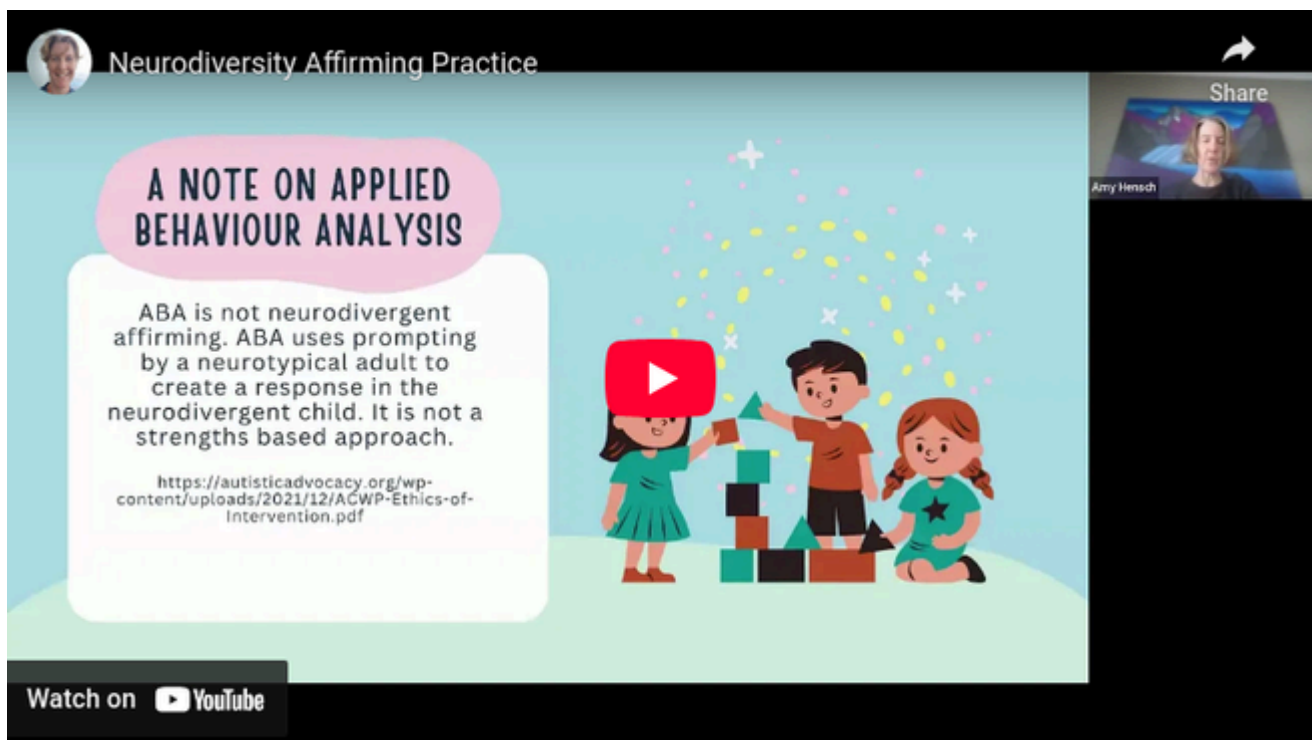
The puzzle piece is generally seen as ableist. First created in 1963 to symbolize the 'tragedy of Autism,' it was made and is used without input from Autistic people (Crosman, 2019).

"Identity First" Language is often preferred. This means we refer to a child as "Autistic," not "with Autism" (The Autism Self-Advocacy Network). The person cannot be separated from their Autism. I say that my son is Autistic rather than "he has Autism." Of course we refer to the child by name! And if other language is preferred, please respect and use it.

As the saying goes, if you've met one Autistic child, you've met one Autistic child (Stephen Shore). Autistic children are just as complex and individual as any other group of children.

Neurodiversity Affirming Practice

Please watch the video below about Neurodiversity Affirming Language (please note this is the same video as on the home page of amyhensch.com).



In thinking about Neurodiversity Affirming Practice, consider Gestalt Language Processors and how we think about our children who echo what we say. Is it an annoyance? Are we accepting echolalia as communication with meaning?

When we respect all communication and never force a child to communicate in a specific way or to say specific things, then we are honouring that child's autonomy and strengths. This means that we model communication without expectation! We don't force a child to say specific words or force them to use an AAC device.

GESTALT LANGUAGE PROCESSING

Most of us learned to talk by mimicking sounds, then combining sounds into words, phrases, etc. This can be referred to as “Analytic Language Processing.” In contrast, Gestalt Language Processors (GLPs) process language in chunks, or ‘gestalts’ that have meaning beyond the words themselves. For example, my son used to say “we’re having a heck of a barbecue!” when he was a bit overwhelmed in an excited (rather than anxious) way. This Gestalt was never about having a BBQ, never broken up, and always expressed as a complete phrase.

GLPs begin their language acquisition journey with memorized whole phrases before breaking them apart into smaller and smaller pieces. Later they learn to break apart these Gestalts and create unique phrases (Blanc, 2022 and Peters, 1983). See the triangle below: the Analytic Language Processors work from the tip to the wider base while the Gestalt Language Processors work from the wide base to the single sounds at the tip. Many of us, neurodivergent or neurotypical, use a combination of both.

Natural Language Acquisition



Adapted from Marge Blanc's work at
communicationdevelopmentcenter.com

GESTALT LANGUAGE PROCESSING

Decades ago, Barry Prizant (1982) and Ann Peters (1983) talked about Gestalt Language Processing in Autism and the need for more research into how and why the children in their practice were using phrases to communicate something that wasn't indicated in the phrase itself. For example, a Gestalt Language Processor might say "Stop! Get back!" whenever they feel unsafe, repeating something yelled to them by a worried parent. We may assume that they don't understand what they're saying, but Gestalts are not meaningless!

GLPs often remember phrases that are rich in emotion or intonation: "Stop! Danger!" "Kachow!" "Happy and you know it clap your hands!" Some Gestalts might be obvious, but others may take some detective work to figure out what meaning is behind it. It's important for us to remember that the meaning of the Gestalt goes beyond the meaning of the words themselves, and the Gestalt is never meaningless. Accept all forms of communication, whether it is verbal or non-verbal.

Marge Blanc (2022) proposes six stages of Gestalt Language Processing:

1. Whole chunks that are not broken up. Imagine no spaces between the words: "Ifyou'rehappyandyouknowitclapyourhands." We respond by enjoying their company, singing new songs or new words to familiar songs, and commenting with whole phrases that lend themselves well to multiple situations: "let's go to the park!" or "let's play with blocks!"

2. Chunks are broken up into shorter parts and combined: "let's go ride the bus!"

3. Single words and 2-word combinations as they build their vocabulary. This is the first stage of using unique words that are not echoed.

4. Word combinations without proper grammar: "friend name Amy."

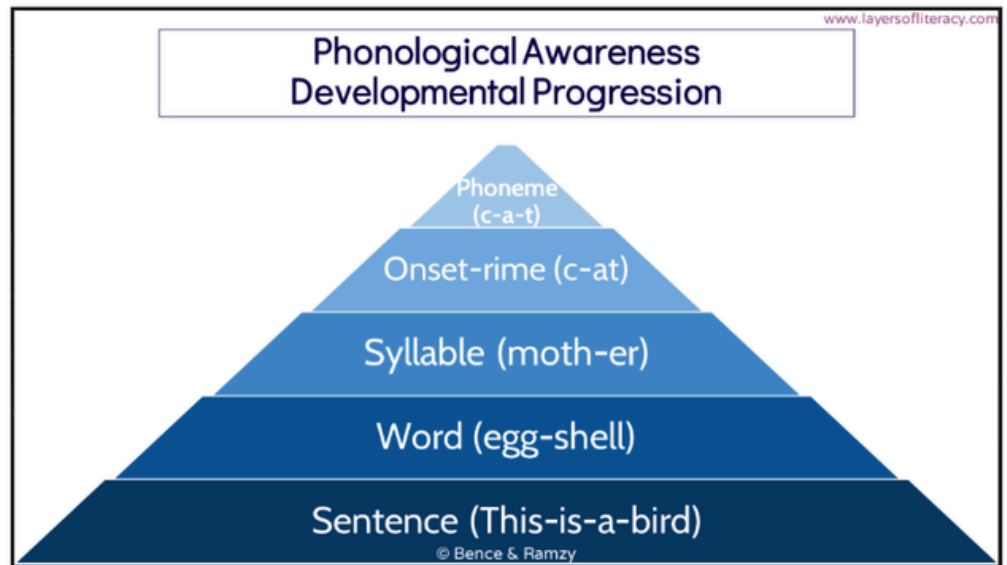
*This is the first stage where the child is able to answer questions.

5. Grammar improvement and 'wh' questions.

6. Complete grammar.

*Note that GLPs are not able to answer questions until stage four. Asking questions may cause frustration and the child is likely to repeat the question rather than answering.

GESTALT LANGUAGE PROCESSING



The above diagram (Ramzy and Bence, 2022), shows phonological awareness development in typical children. I notice that it begins with sentences, just like Gestalt Language Processors do! Maybe we're not so different!

How did you learn to say "nice to meet you," or "thank you?" You likely didn't hear it for the first time broken up into sounds; you heard it as a complete phrase and you realized the meaning in context.

References on Gestalt Language Processing:

Blanc, M. (2022). [The natural language acquisition guide: Echolalia is all about gestalt language development.](#)

Peters, A. M. (1983). *The Units of Language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.

Prizant, B. M. (1982). Gestalt Language and Gestalt Processing in Autism. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 3(1), 16–23.

Prizant, B. (2024). The neurodiversity movement and GLP: A crucial alliance for now and the future [video].

Ramzy, M., & Bence, M. (2022). Literacy instruction through the Layers of Reading Development. *Early Childhood Education*, 48(1).

GESTALT LANGUAGE PROCESSING

Gestalt Language Processing is not researched, nor is it accepted by many speech-language pathologists or linguists. It is prevalent on social media and there is a lot of buzz in special education. So what's the issue?

Bryant et al. (2025) reviewed the GLP theories proposed by Prizant (1982), Peters (1983), and Blanc (2022) and noted the binary of Gestalt *versus* Analytic language processing and how that binary is harmful. Every child is a complex and unique communicator and this should never be debated. In addition, Marge Blanc places GLPs in one of six stages, which also doesn't respect their uniqueness and complexity.

Beals (2024) is a linguist who did not find evidence that Gestalt Language Processing is actually a different form of language processing from Analytic Language Processing. They noted that when language is unchanged from the initial utterance, there is no reason to think that the phrase has been analyzed and given new meaning. Instead, this repetition is indicative of a language delay.

Using fewer repeated phrases as language skills are developing is not due to an advancement in Gestalt Language Processing, but a part of Analytic Language Acquisition, says Hutchins (2024). Hutchins goes on to say that the discontinuity of the six stages created by Blanc (2022) do not represent child development accurately. Instead, "development is a slow, gradual process characterized by incremental quantitative change" (p. 8).

My personal experience has found that the theory of Gestalt Language Processing is useful along with a strengths-based approach that involves the child's parents. I find the notion that all communication has meaning to be an important part of my practice. I don't follow the stages specifically, as I find that in a classroom this is impossible to manage. However, adding phrases such as "let's stay safe" have helped many of my students to remember the lessons in Social Stories.

Beals, K. (2024). A Linguist's Take on Blanc's Proposition of Gestalt Language Processing and Natural Language Acquisition: An Implausible Theory at Odds with the Research. *Current Developmental Disorders Reports*, 11(1), 163–170.

Bryant, L., Bowen, C., Grove, R., Dixon, G., Beals, K., Shane, H., & Hemsley, B. (2025). Systematic review of interventions based on gestalt language processing and natural language acquisition (GLP/NLA): Clinical implications of absence of evidence and cautions for clinicians and parents. *Current Developmental Disorders Reports*, 12(1), 1–14.

Hutchins, T. L., Knox, S. E., & Fletcher, E. C. (2024). Natural language acquisition and gestalt language processing: A critical analysis of their application to autism and speech language therapy. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 9, 1–20. **12**


STIMMING

Stimming used to be called 'motor stereotypes' and suppressing it has often been a priority for educators and caregivers. You may see stim suppression as an IPP/IEP goal, but this is not Neurodiversity Affirming Practice. Autistic adults have told us that stimming is an important adaptive mechanism that continues to be judged negatively by neurotypical people (Kapp et al, 2019).

What does stimming look like? Anything! Arms flapping, jumping, watching snow fall through my fingers, or looking at an object for a long time. It's individual! Discuss with the child and family, but overall I recommend allowing stimming. The video below explains why, by two people with lived experience.



What is Stimming? This is a great video discussing stimming and why it's such a negative experience to have it suppressed.



To stim is to
breathe...
Honour the
stim...

Ode to the Stim

H stims...
I stim too...
bounce and wiggle
twist a lock
hold tight to that 'calming rock'
fiddle and fold
squint and spin
squeeze
and then begin again
shoes too big so toes can move
wiggly legs that find their groove
Tom Sawyer pockets with fidgets galore
quiet hands are such a bore

Leah Kelley, July 2013
Thirty Days of Autism
humanitysdarkerside.com

Kapp, S. K., Steward, R., Crane, L., Elliott, D., Elphick, C., Pellicano, E., & Russell, G. (2019). "People should be allowed to do what they like": Autistic adults' views and experiences of stimming. *Autism*, 23(7), 1782–1792.

SENSORY NEEDS

SENSORY INPUT

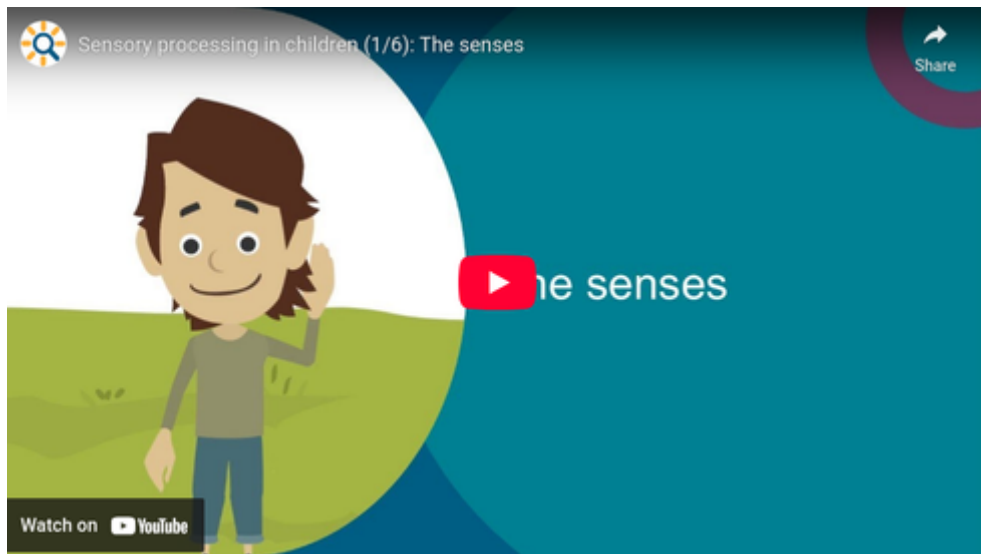
Take a moment to check in with your senses. What do you hear, see, taste, smell, and feel? There's air touching your face, clothes touching your body, surfaces that your body is supported by. There are noises in and outside the room you're in, and sights that are near and far away. How does your body feel? Is anything tight? Sore? Are you wishing for something to be different?



Watch Virginia Spielmann explain sensory processing

The STAR Institute provides valuable resources on sensory processing. This page has an excellent introduction to our eight (yes, eight!) senses:

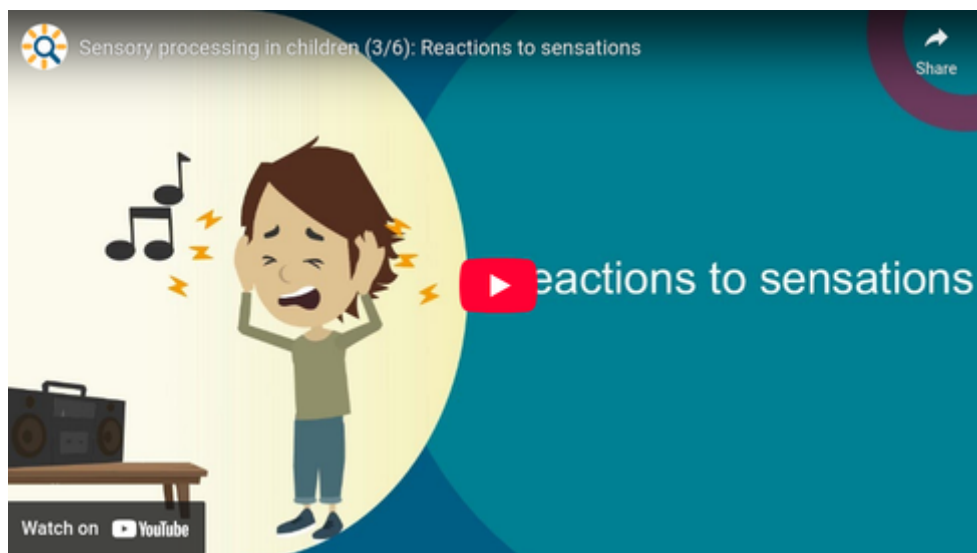
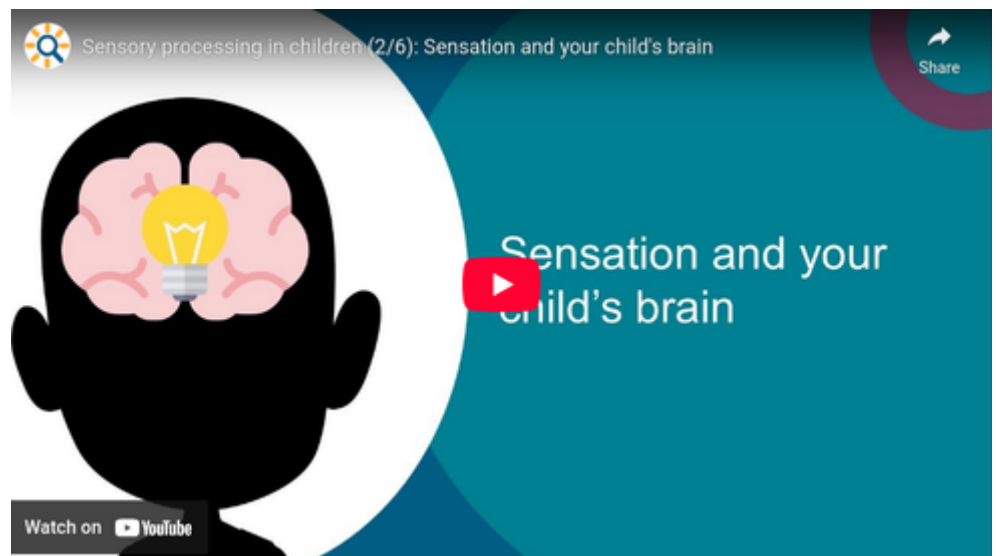
<https://sensoryhealth.org/basic/understanding-sensory-integration-process>



These videos, created by an occupational therapist with Alberta Health Services, explain sensory processing in children.

Autistic children often struggle with sensory processing, but all humans have sensory needs. In order to be emotionally regulated, our senses must be regulated.

Research has shown that emotional regulation affects reading comprehension. Click [here](#) for a link to a mini review of those studies.



Just like we all like and dislike different foods, we have different reactions to sensory stimuli.

Our reaction to sensations changes as we adapt. Our sensory threshold and habituation change depending on the situation and the child.



Sensory overload!
Too many sensations at the same time cause our cups to overflow. Our reactions to overload are individual.

Identifying lower and higher thresholds in our students to help prevent sensory overload. Remember some students may need more sensory input, not less.



CONCLUSION

WELCOME TO THE NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMING CLUB!

Please take time to explore the rest of my website to learn more about Social Stories and Gestalt Language Learning. For more information on Neurodiversity Affirming Practice, @speechdude on Instagram is a good place to start. Also check out @amazing_autistic_abby, which is a parent account of an Autistic girl who is also a Gestalt Language Processor. @bohospeechie also discusses Gestalt a lot. Once you get going, there is no stopping you! Shine your beautiful light in your classroom and beyond.



REFERENCES

These are the articles I read prior to creating my website. There are several different themes that I used in order to discover research: Assessment, Multimodal Literacies, Early Literacy, Oral Language, Social Stories, and Gestalt Language Processing.

Authors and year of publication	Purpose/Aim	Results
Assessment is part of all teaching. Assessing students with Autism and possibly speech delays can be challenging. I wondered how we can assess these students in a neurodiversity affirming way.		
Lonigan, Allan, and Lerner (2011)	How can assessment guide early literacy practices?	Assessment is useful only if used to guide interventions, and not all children need the same degree of assessment.
Tarekegne Tsegaye, De Bleser, and Iribarren (2011)	Do literacy skills affect ability to perform on aphasia tests?	Low literacy increases difficulty in performing tasks such as sentence to picture matching. Differentiation is needed.

Multimodal literacies are important for all students, as we teach in the age of technology. Perhaps they are even more important for our students who are multimodal communicators (meaning that they may use alternative and augmentative communication devices, sign-assisted language, etc.). These two articles provide a theoretical basis for multimodal literacies.		
Farndale and Reichelt, 2023	How do diverse children communicate stories and how can children's storying be encouraged?	There is urgent need for autistic students to be assessed multimodally.
Kress (2001)	Multimodal Literacies	Every mode has limitations, including text and verbal speech. How do we use multiple modes to communicate?
Pahl and Rowsell (2012)	Connecting home (out-of-school) literacies to schooled literacies	Considers materials, community, multimodal literacies in and out of the school setting.

REFERENCES

<p>Early literacy research was crucial to my project as I looked at how we teach both neurotypical and neurodivergent students to read. I wondered how to differentiate for Autistic students and English Language Learners. And I wanted deep knowledge into best practices in early literacy</p>		
Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000	Are emergent literacy skills (preschool) predictive of later reading skills (grade one)?	Positive correlation between pre-reading skills in preschool and reading skills in grade one.
Saracho and Spodek, 2005	How do play and literacy connect?	Literacy-rich play environments support emergent literacy skills.
Jones, Clark, and Reutzel, 2012	Practical advice on teaching "Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge"	Letter name and sound taught together, in short lessons. Lots of repetition.
Silinskas, Lerkkanen, Tolvanen, Niemi, Piokkeus, & Nurmi (2012)	What is the association between parents' reading frequency and children's reading skills from kindergarten to grade one?	Parents read more with kindergarteners with higher reading skills but in grade one, parents read more to struggling readers.
Curby, Brown, Bassett, and Denham, 2015	Are preschoolers' social-emotional competence skills related to their pre-literacy skills?	Positive correlation between social-emotional competence and pre-literacy skills.
Grolig, Cohrdes, Tiffin-Richards, Schroeder, 2019	Does dialogic (shared) reading also foster inferential and literal narrative comprehension? And are these skills maintained?	Positive effects on inferential and literal narrative comprehension and on vocabulary depth and breadth, sustained for at least five months after the study.
Silinskas, Sénéchal, Torppa, Lerkkanen, 2020	How can the Home Literacy Model be advanced to include child interest in reading and from kindergarten to grade two?	See above study. In addition, it was found that child interest in reading was not correlated to other factors. And shared reading activities decreased over time.
Eccles, van der Linde, le Roux, Holloway, MacCutcheon, Ljung, & Swanepoel, 2021	Does music instruction improve phonological awareness?	No correlation found between regular and additional music instruction on phonological awareness.

REFERENCES

Maureen, van der Meij, & de Jong, 2021	Do storytelling activities enhance literacy development?	Literacy development existed across all conditions on standardized tests. Storytelling group showed more improvement on non-standardized posttests.
Majorano, Ferrari, Bertelli, Persici & Bastianello, 2022	Does the intervention improve literacy skills? Does improvement show in all areas of PA? Intervention: descriptive language, phonological awareness, vocabulary games, and shared book reading/storytelling. Home and school program.	Students in the experimental group showed greater skills in basic phonological awareness.
Nova Scotia Dept of Education and Early Childhood Development (2022)	Progression of Essential Reading Skills	A table of 'essential' skills required for reading based on the science of reading.

Social Stories have been a big part of my work in early intervention and I wondered about the research behind them. What makes them work? Now I wonder how a social story might be useful in literacy education.

Karkhaneh, M., Clark, Ospina, Seida, Smith, & Hartling (2010)	Do social stories have an impact on the targeted behaviours in students with Autism?	Studies showed a positive effect but stories were general and effects were only measured short-term.
Taberner and Calvo, 2020	Do picture books help Autistic students develop sociability, verbal skills, and imagination?	This article perpetuates Autistic stereotypes and aims to make Autistic students less Autistic (more neurotypical).
Wright, B., Blackwell, J. E., Bell, K. J., Teige, C., Mandefield, L., Wang, H. I., Welch, C., Scantlebury, A., Watson, J., McMillan, D., Standley, E., Attwell, L., Carrick, H., Taylor, A., Taylor, O., Hodgkinson, R., Edwards, H., Pearson, H., Parrott, S., Marshall, D., Varley, D., Hargate, R., McLaren, A., & Hewitt, C. (2024)	Do social stories have a positive impact on social responsiveness in Autistic children? Are they a cost effective intervention?	Positive results as well as cost-effectiveness of social stories were shown. These advantages were shown at follow-up at six weeks and six months.

REFERENCES

Donnellan (1984) - an article on having high expectations for our disabled students	The least dangerous assumption	A chapter on evaluating teaching practices for autistic students based on the criterion of ultimate functioning and the least dangerous assumption.
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Oral language development impacts literacy learning, but I wondered how? Is delayed oral language always indicative of literacy struggles? I learned what struggles in oral language are more likely to lead to literacy learning challenges.		
Denne, Langdown, Pring and Roy (2005)	Does phonological awareness training combined with speech therapy improve outcomes on both speech production and literacy?	Improved phonological awareness in the group given the instruction, however results were short term and quite mixed.
Anthony, Greenblatt Aghara, Dunkelberger, Anthony, Williams, & Zhang (2011)	Are preschool children with speech sound disorders at risk for later reading difficulties?	Difficulties in representation related phonological processing may be related to students' later struggles with phonological awareness and reading.
Boada, Boada, Pennington and Peterson (2022)	Do speech errors affect phonological awareness?	Sequencing deficits in oral language showed the strongest relationship to later literacy difficulties.
Alvis, Brumbaugh, & Tambyraja (2024)	Can targeted phonological awareness intervention in children with speech sound disorders improve both speech sound production and phonemic awareness?	Integrated phonological awareness intervention was an effective method of simultaneously improving speech production and phonemic awareness skills.

REFERENCES

<p>Gestalt Language Processing was a big part of my work in early intervention and it is fairly new in practice. I wondered if there was research behind Marge Blanc's work and how best to support these students.</p>		
Blanc (2022)	Framework for therapy interventions for Gestalt Language Processors	'Delayed Echolalia' is not random or pathological but is part of Gestalt Language Processing, a natural form of language development.
Prizant (1982)	Introduction to Gestalt Language Processing. With Peters's article, formed the basic for the recognition of Gestalt Language Processing.	Gestalt Language Processing is a form of delayed echolalia seen in Autistic individuals. It involves rigidity and makes it harder for them to communicate.
Peters (1983, 2021)	With Prizant's article, formed the basis for Gestalt Language Processing being recognized.	Language is often first learned in chunks. Having memorized chunks makes breaking down easier. Utterances are evaluated and frames may be changed.
Beals (2024)	To critique Gestalt Language Processing (GLP) from a linguistic lens	What Blanc and Prizant call 'gestalt' is echolalia caused by Autism and is indicative of speech delays.
Hutchins, Knox, and Fletcher (2024)	To critique Gestalt Language Processing and the speech therapy recommendations surrounding it.	Critique of the GLP stages and their accompanying therapies, and that the stages are seen as discontinuous. GLP stages are seen as not strengths-based, too general, and not research-based.
Bryant, Bowen, Grove, Dixon, Beals, Shane, Hemsley (2025)	To critique the Gestalt Language Processing stages and their therapeutic interventions.	Found a lack of studies and evidence to back up diagnosing individuals as Gestalt Language Processors, and therefore a lack of evidence of GLP specific therapeutic modalities.

Additional research		
Smith and Smith, 2000 - this article discusses how teachers need support for inclusion to work.	Why are some ECE teachers successful with inclusion while others are not?	Four themes were identified: Training, Class load, support, and time - all needed consideration for inclusion to be successful.
Erickson and Koppenhaver, 2020	A how-to guide on teaching reading and writing to students with complex disabilities, especially AAC users.	Students with disabilities have the right to literacy instruction, but they require targeted instruction for many years.