

Parenting Exceptional Children

A strengths-based approach to raising autistic, adhd, and other neurodivergent children.

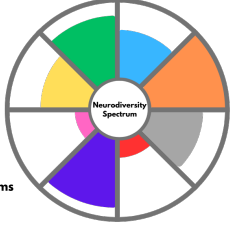
John Sharry
Session 2



www.solutiontalk.ie

1

A Spectrum of Needs




- Communication and Social
- Executive Function
- Attention and Interests
- Impulsivity and Energy
- Sensory Differences
- Repetitions/Tics/Stims
- Emotional Processing
- Health and Physical

www.solutiontalk.ie

2

The Importance of Connection

Good parenting is primarily about establishing warm connected relationships and this is no different for neurodivergent children.




You want your child to feel:

- understood, affirmed and loved by you.
- listened to and that they can communicate with you about anything.
- that you are their ally, on their side and there for them no matter what.
- that you are a safe person for them.

www.solutiontalk.ie

3

Homework



- Prioritise the times you **already enjoy** with your child. Be more available at these times.
- Try to identify **one new way to connect** with your child.
- Build a **'map' of your child's needs**. You can use the worksheet in the handout.
- Tune into your child's sensory needs and how they regulate

www.solutiontalk.ie

4

Talking With Your Child About Diagnosis

If your child receives a diagnosis, it is very important to talk to them about this.

- Start with strengths:** "Remember we went to see Dr J ... well, it turns out you are an ADHDER. This means you can have a turbo-charged mind, full of creative thoughts and energy."
- Identify role models:** If you or another family member are ND this is a good time to share this. Share how they cope and thrive with their ADHD.
- Explain challenges:** "The ADHD means that it can sometimes be hard for you to sit still at the table for homework – but there are lots of things that can help, such as sitting somewhere more comfortable, taking stretch breaks, using your wobble cushion, making a plan together..."
- Be creative:** Sit down and go through resources together - books, online resources (quizzes, checklists, tips), social media (infographics, memes, videos), podcasts.
- Let child have their own opinion:** "Dr J thinks you might be autistic.. What do you think?" – child does **not** have to agree with diagnosis.

www.solutiontalk.ie

5

Managing Challenges and Problems



www.solutiontalk.ie

6

The Parent Journey

Raising a neurodistinct child can feel like a journey with many milestones and challenges...

Preschool
Developing differently from peers.

School
Learning and social differences.

Adolescence
Peer pressure to fit in. Identity issues.

Young Adult
Exams, starting college or work.

www.solutiontalk.ie

7

Classic Problem Pattern

Trigger behaviour

Parent and child feel upset.
(relationship suffers)

Parent reacts
(criticizes or gets hurt)

Child escalates
(e.g. becomes dysregulated)

www.solutiontalk.ie

8

Pressing Pause

Better outcome
Relationship improves

Trigger behaviour

Parent presses the pause button

Parent chooses a more effective response

Parent feels confident
Child feels contained

www.solutiontalk.ie

9

Solving Childhood Problems

Pause

- How am I reacting to the problem?
- What responses work well already?
- What responses make things worse?

Tune In

- What is going on for my child?
- What needs is my child communicating?
- What is going on for me as a parent?
- What are my needs?

Respond

- What is the best way to respond?
- How can I address my child's needs?
- How can I address my own needs?

www.solutiontalk.ie

10

Tune In to your Child

Tip of the Iceberg

Meitdowns, **Avoidance**, **Shutdowns**, **Rudeness**, **Sensory Overload**, **Social Battery Empty**, **Too many demands**, **Fatigue**, **Burnout**, **Hunger**, **Rejection Sensitivity**, **Physical Pain**

www.solutiontalk.ie

11

Tune In to Yourself as a Parent

Panic
Will it get worse?

Feeling hurt
Why won't she talk to me?

Feeling disrespected
How dare he speak to me like that?

The psychologist told me I had to be stricter

This is important I need to follow through


What will other parents think of me?

I am a bad parent if I don't do this

www.solutiontalk.ie

12

Respond



The best response is....

- The response that works **for you** and **for your child**.


Response Rules:

- Find out **what works** and do more of it.
- If it is not working, do something **different**.
- Focus on **connection** and **relationships**

www.solutiontalk.ie

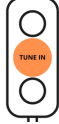
13

Solving Childhood Problems




Pause

How am I reacting to the problem?
What responses work well already?
What responses make things worse?



Tune In

What is going on for my child?
What needs is my child communicating?
What is going on for me as a parent?
What are my needs?




Respond

What is the best way to respond?
How can I address my child's needs?
How can I address my own needs?

www.solutiontalk.ie

14

Specific Challenges




Case Example: Struggling in School

Paul is struggling in school. He is agitated and anxious and often refuses going. His parents manage to cajole him to go most times but wonder for how much longer. The teachers say he is quiet in school, keeps up academically but is isolated at other times. When he comes home, he can be very dysregulated and has frequent meltdowns.


www.solutiontalk.ie

15


How is each part of the school day?




Stressed Very Often Stressed Sometimes I feel ok




Getting up




Journey




Assembly




Corridors




Writing




Breaktime




Questions




Groups




Lunch



1:1



Tests





Homework

www.solutiontalk.ie

16

Corridors






- Transitions can stressful
- Fear of bullying
- Executive function finding next class.
- Sensory noisy, fear of brushing against others, smells.

www.solutiontalk.ie

17

Breaktime






- Sensory Issues noisy, open space etc.
- Lack of structure no defined activities.
- Social challenges joining in groups, prefer 1:1 etc.
- Rejection sensitivity rather than talk, isolates themself.

www.solutiontalk.ie

18

Homework





- ▶ **Executive function skills**
getting started, prioritising, finishing etc.
- ▶ **Sensory issues**
need to move to concentrate, background music etc.
- ▶ **Emotional considerations**
bright kid being bored with rote learning etc.
- ▶ **Dyslexia** or other specific learning difficulties.

www.solutiontalk.ie

19

Responses: School Challenges



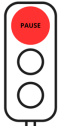
Co-problem solve with child how to address causes of worry

- ▶ **Brainstorm** with child about ways to make going to school easier. (arrival, plan for when anxious..)
- ▶ Set up a **buddy** system in school.
- ▶ Give child a **pass** so they leave lessons if need be
- ▶ Work with school to create a **plan**.
- ▶ Meet teachers **outside** school.
- ▶ Invite **friends** home to help with schoolwork.
- ▶ Identify **safe place** in school.
- ▶ Invite **friends walk** to school with child.
- ▶ Identify **safe person** in school.
- ▶ **Friends walk** to school with child.
- ▶ Give child **meaningful role** in school.
- ▶ Devise a timetable that **starts small**, builds gradually.
- ▶ Emphasise child **strengths** and favourite **activities** in school.
- ▶ Seek **professional support** (EWO, NEPS, CAMHS)

www.solutiontalk.ie

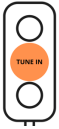
20

Solving Childhood Problems



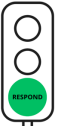
Pause

How am I reacting to the problem?
What responses work well already?
What responses make things worse?



Tune In

What is going on for my child?
What needs is my child communicating?
What is going on for me as a parent?
What are my needs?




Respond

What is the best way to respond?
How can I address my child's needs?
How can I address my own needs?


www.solutiontalk.ie

21


Three Types of Responses



Change yourself as a **parent**.



Change the **environment**.



Support your **child**.

www.solutiontalk.ie

22

Understanding PDA


Many ND children have a profile of PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) which can be more empathically framed as a Persistent Drive for Autonomy.

- ▶ Being PDA means children can experience **demands, requests** and even **questions** as **stressful** and **anxiety** provoking.
- ▶ More accurately, PDA children experience **repeated demands** as a **threat to their autonomy** and this invokes a strong 'fight, flight or freeze' trauma reaction.
- ▶ A **fight** reaction could be resisting or arguing back, a **flight** reaction could be refusing or avoiding and a **freeze** reaction could be shutting down or becoming mute.
- ▶ Remember there are many **strengths** to being PDA (independent, authentic, assertive, intrinsic motivation)

www.solutiontalk.ie

23

Change Yourself As a Parent



- ▶ Focus on **collaboration** and not **compliance**.

www.solutiontalk.ie

24

Be Collaborative


In guiding children, it can sometimes work better to be collaborative and give them space to decide.

Rather than:	Try:
"Please get dressed now"	"I left your favourite clothes on your bed."
"Show your video games to your cousin"	"Look, your cousin has arrived to play."
"What did you do in school today?"	"I see some of the kids were wearing football jerseys today" and pause.
Giving 'over the top' praise.	Give them a thumbs up or a hug they like or say a soft "thank you".
"Stop annoying your brother"	"Your brother is a little upset, how can we look after him together?"
"Please tidy up today"	I can't get all the jobs done... can you help me?"

www.solutiontalk.ie

25

Change Yourself As a Parent



- Adjust your **expectations** to match your child's needs and preferences.
- Focus on what is **most important** to you and let go the rest.

www.solutiontalk.ie

26

Adjusting Expectations and Rules

Reducing demands and adjusting your expectations based on your child's needs, can reduce unnecessary stress and create a much more harmonious home.

Rather than battling with his daughter to eat more varied foods, John accepted her more limited diet and gave her a vitamin supplement so he was less worried about nutrition. He realised that her eating the same favourite foods daily, helped her feel safe and contained.

In the morning routine, Alice decided to dress her son in front of TV where he was more relaxed and less aware of the sensory irritation putting on his clothes on.

Julie and Dave decided to travel separately to extended family social events so one could leave with their autistic son before he got too agitated and the other could remain with their other children so they did not miss out.

Tom relaxed his rules about video games as he could see this was when his son really relaxed after school. Tom joined in the video games at the weekends and his son loved to teach him how to play them.


Paul realised that his son was completely burntout by school and now need a complete break to recover and recuperate.

Tilly adjusted her expectations about household chores and let go her resentment that he daughter would not do them, recognising this was not the priority at the moment. Instead, changed household routines to make it easier for all.

www.solutiontalk.ie

27


Take a Break...



- Which **expectations are difficult** for your child due to their ND needs?
- Where do these expectations come from?
- Which expectations can you drop or adjust (at least for the short term) to meet their needs?

28

Change Yourself As a Parent




- Adjust your **expectations** to match your child's needs and preferences.
- Focus on what is **most important** to you and let go the rest.
- Be **collaborative** and **creative**.
- Understand your stress levels, prioritise your **self-care** and address your own needs.


www.solutiontalk.ie

29


Three Types of Responses



Change yourself as a **parent**.



Change the **environment**.




Support your **child**.

www.solutiontalk.ie

30

Change the Environment




Focusing on changing your child's world rather than changing your child in the world.

- Build better **routines** that suit your child.
- Include relaxed **sensory spaces** in the day so children can relax, unwind, and feel safe.
- **Sensory props:** noise cancelling headphones, tasteless toothpaste, crash pad, weighted blanket and vests, seamless clothes.
- **Collaborate** with teachers and activity leaders to create the right environment for your child.
- Seek **neuro-affirming services** (e.g. OT or SLT) to provide extra support to address your child's specific needs.
- Provide your child with opportunities to follow their **passions** and meet **other ND children**.
- Encourage others to learn about neurodiversity and to **appreciate different communication and learning styles**.

www.solutiontalk.ie

31

Support Your Child




- Co-regulate with them when they are **distressed**.
- Co-problem solve with them and coach them in **how to manage**.

www.solutiontalk.ie

32

Co-Regulation

Managing distress and meltdowns




- **Pause** and notice **your own triggers**
- **Tune In compassionately** to what is going on for your child
- Be a **warm and calming** presence.
- Be **close by** or **giving space** depending on what your child needs.
- Show you understand by **body language, tone of voice, what you say** (or don't say).
- **Physically comforting** your child in a way that soothes them (or not touching them if that works better).
- Reducing **sensory triggers** in the environment (dimming lights, turning TV off).
- Creating a **safe environment** that relaxes your child (sitting on bean bags, putting on music, giving them a drink, or a snack).

www.solutiontalk.ie

33

Co-Problem Solving



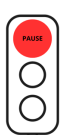
- Take time to talk through problems with your child and to come up with solutions together

- 1) Pick a good time
- 2) First Listen and Understand
- 3) Encourage your child's solutions

www.solutiontalk.ie


34

Solving Childhood Problems




Pause

How am I reacting to the problem?
What responses **work well** already?
What responses make things **worse**?



Tune In

What is going on for my **child**?
What needs is my child **communicating**?
What is going on for me as a **parent**?
What are **my needs**?




Respond

What is the best way to **respond**?
How can I address my **child's needs**?
How can I address my **own needs**?

www.solutiontalk.ie

35

Common Challenges




Case Example: Siblings Fighting

Paul 8 is autistic and likely ADHD. His needs to absorb lots of his parent's time to the neglect of his older brother Pete (11). Recently there has been lots of fights between the two which is very stressful. His mother has also observed Pete slugging and putting his brother down, and when she corrected him, he exploded and said he wished his brother had not been born.

www.solutiontalk.ie

36




Tuning In: Siblings Fighting

- ▶ When there are ongoing sibling challenges, the **core issue** is usually that one child feels that the parent loves the other child more.
- ▶ Many parents inadvertently reinforce this belief by **taking a side** in disputes.

www.solutiontalk.ie

37




Responses: Sibling Rivalry

- ▶ **Don't take a side** - Understand both of their perspectives equally.
- ▶ **Co-regulate with both** - "Let's all calm down/ let's take a break for a minute".
- ▶ **Co-problem solve together** - Sit down with both children and help them discuss ways they can get on. The focus is on finding a solution rather than analysing who is wrong.
- ▶ **Problem-solve individually** - Sit down with each child, without taking sides, listen to their perspective and help them find a solution - "How can you get on with your sister?" or "I need your help managing your brother."
- ▶ **Build your relationship with each child** - Set aside one-to-one time with each child, when you can enjoy their company and listen to them alone.
- ▶ **Support their relationship with each other** - Set up play/connecting time with both children supporting them playing cooperatively together e.g. put them on the same team.
- ▶ **Encourage and affirm together** - "You are great brothers sharing like that."
- ▶ **Always encourage both** - "I put out the plates and B you did the cutlery."

www.solutiontalk.ie


38

Solving Childhood Problems




Pause

How am I reacting to the problem?
What responses work well already?
What responses make things worse?



Tune In

What is going on for my child?
What needs is my child communicating?
What is going on for me as a parent?
What are my needs?



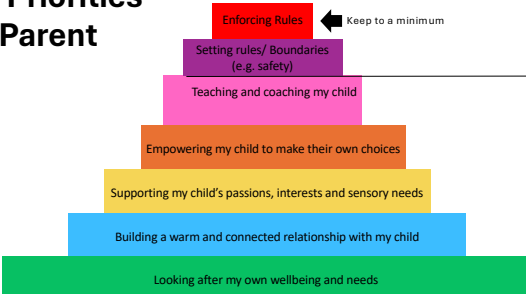
Respond

What is the best way to respond?
How can I address my child's needs?
How can I address my own needs?

www.solutiontalk.ie

39

Your Priorities as a Parent




The pyramid consists of six levels from top to bottom:

- Enforcing Rules (Keep to a minimum)
- Setting rules/ Boundaries (e.g. safety)
- Teaching and coaching my child
- Empowering my child to make their own choices
- Supporting my child's passions, interests and sensory needs
- Building a warm and connected relationship with my child
- Looking after my own wellbeing and needs

www.solutiontalk.ie

40



Parent- Self Care

In case of emergency put on your own oxygen mask first.

- ▶ Focus on your own **care** and **relaxation**.
- ▶ Get your **own needs met**.
- ▶ Let go expectations that **don't work** for you.
- ▶ Prioritise **one or two daily things** that relax and recharge you such as:
 - ringing a friend for a chat, listening to a podcast you love, walking the dog,
 - cooking a meal you like, spending time in nature, doing ten minutes meditation.
- ▶ Seek **support**, counselling, parenting group and neuro-affirming professional support.
- ▶ Identify what you need and find out what **works for you**.

www.solutiontalk.ie

41