

Neurodivergence and the Strength-Based Classroom

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➔ Today's outcomes

- ➔ List three ways in which you can change the environment to be more positive, strength-based, and respectful of neurodivergent individuals.
- ➔ Identify an individual's strengths and modify instruction to highlight these strengths.
- ➔ Identify inadvertently disrespectful statements and modify language to support a learning environment of respect and safety.

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Using respectful language



Identity-first



Person-first

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Tree analogy



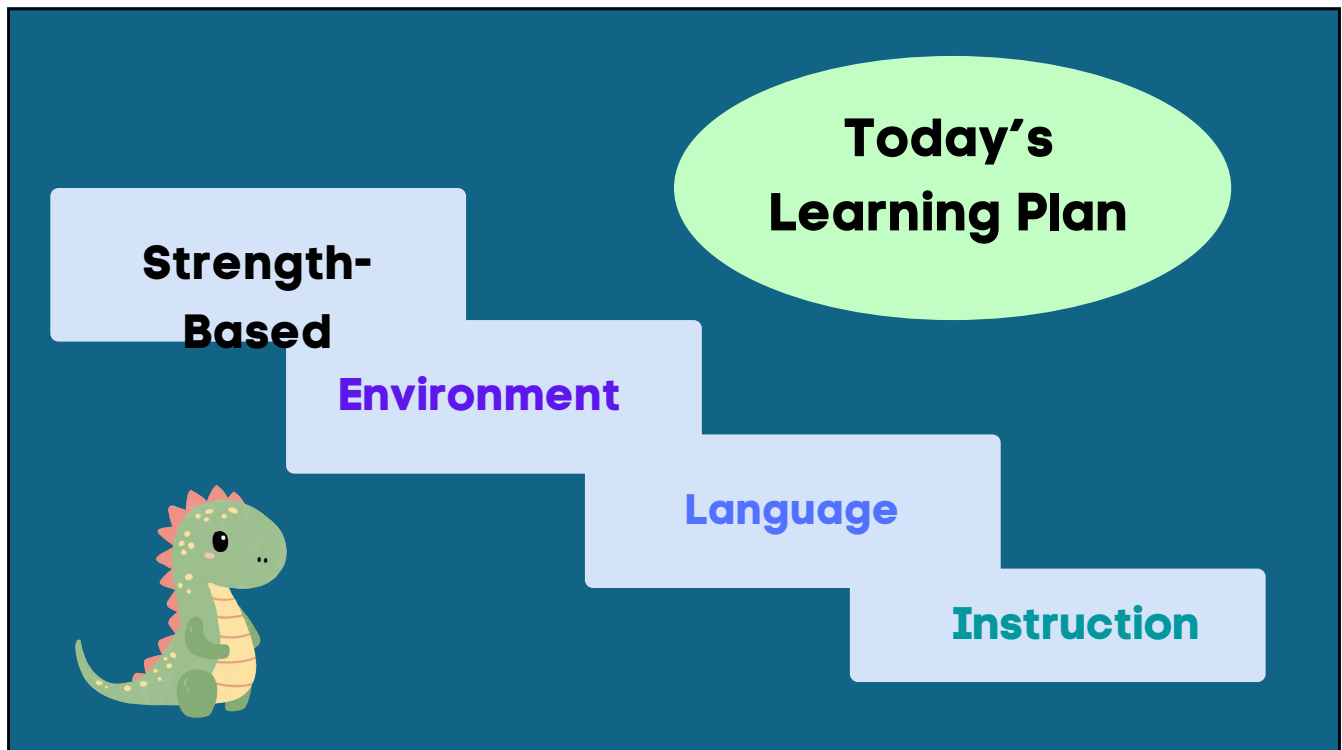
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What is a strength-based classroom?

- Comprehensive approach
- Includes all stakeholders: students, educators, families/caregivers, school staff
- Incorporated into all aspects of the classroom: instruction, curriculum, supports, physical
- Parent/caregiver trainings & staff development
- IEP process

All elements focus on affirming the worth and value of the participants

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Why is this important?

- Centered around strengths instead of weaknesses
- Shows respect for neurodivergent individuals
- The classroom becomes a safe space
- Emphasis on emotional regulation rather than behavioral “control”
- Empowers ND individuals to become part of the educational process, at any level of support



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What is wrong with the current model?

- Designed and run by neurotypical people.
- Focuses on deficits rather than strengths.
- Students are seen as passive participants.

**Nothing about
them, without
them.**

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Perspective-taking is a two-way street

The Double Empathy Problem

Autistic person may struggle to:

- Read between the lines
- Overcome other peoples' misconceptions
- Manage sensory distractions

Both parties may struggle to understand each other's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and differences.

Non-autistic person may struggle to:

- Form positive first impressions
- Recognize and understand autism
- Imagine autistic sensory difficulties

adapted from <https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2021.554875>

Strength-Based Environment

A positive & respectful classroom

- Perception—how we see our students
- Listening to our students and encouraging self-advocacy
- Expectations based on student strengths and interests
- Using mindful language



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Positive language and mindset are vital

How we talk to students, think about students, and teach our students informs the classroom environment.



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Model and use positive language EVERYWHERE

LARGE GROUP ACTIVITIES (Calendar, Music Group, Listening Center)

- These activities are used to practice skills in a group and to develop socialization, waiting, and turn-taking skills. Skills learned in this setting can be generalized to and from other areas of the room.
- Each activity should be adapted to a child's ability level, so that each child may participate.



PLAY A GAME

- Students can play a game with other students or with an adult.
- Games can be simple, but can still focus on turn-taking and rules.
- You can adjust game play or rules based on individual abilities and interests.



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Form positive relationships

- Get to know your students and staff
 - Share something about yourself
 - Learn about your students' families
 - Have fun together!



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Self-advocacy



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Strength-Based Environment Takeaways

- Use mindful, positive language.
- Base your expectations of students on their strengths and interests.
- Form positive relationships.
- Listen to your students.
- Encourage self-advocacy.

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Strength-Based Language

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What is strength-based language?

Strength-based language is . . .

- . . . affirming and mindful.
- . . . focuses on an individual's strengths.
- . . . can grow and evolve.



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How to adjust our language

Commonly heard	Check our perceptions: investigate and ask questions	Affirming version
He knows how to do this! He just doesn't want to.	What is causing him discomfort? (create checklist)	He seems dysregulated.
She's just seeking attention.	Why is this a bad thing?	She's trying to interact and engage with us.
They have nothing to say. or They don't care.	Am I misinterpreting their actions? Do they have an effective way to communicate?	Talking is not the only way to communicate.

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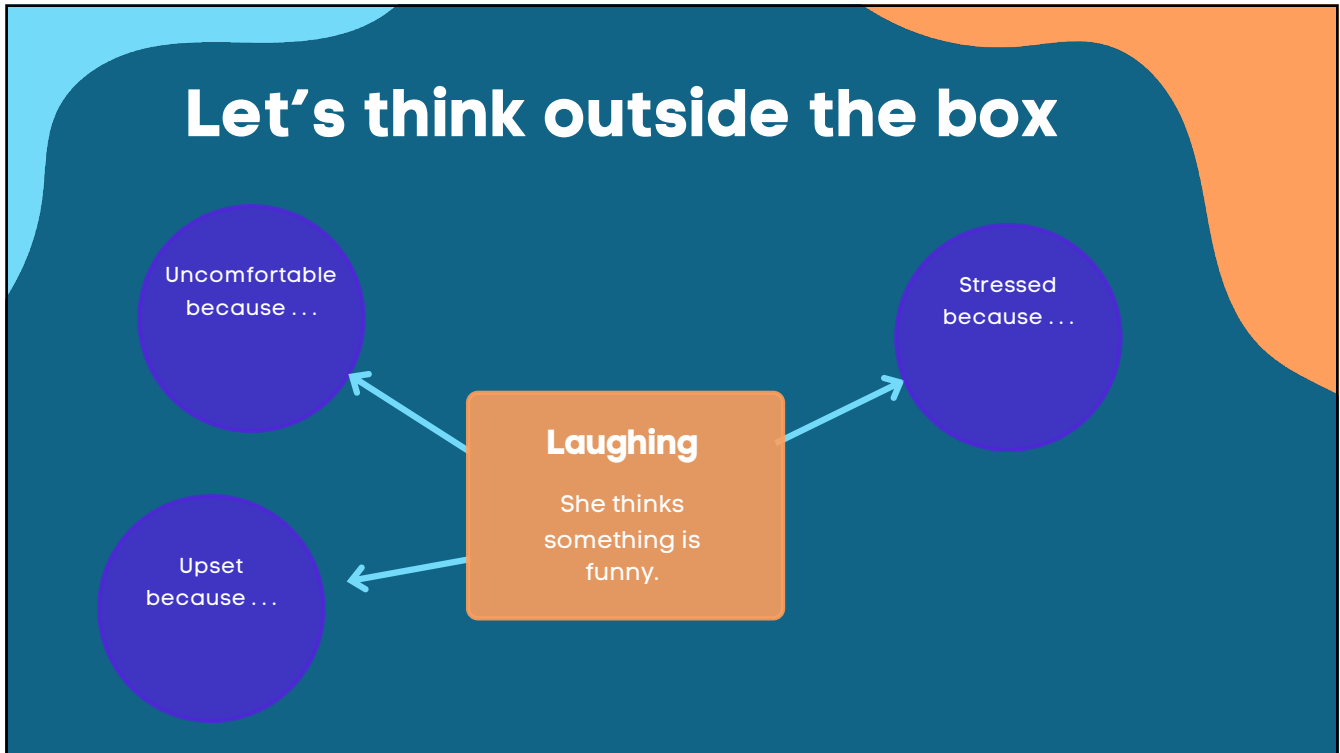
Meet Alex.

Alex is sitting in class. Suddenly one of her friends gets very upset and throws a book. The teacher is angry at the other student. Alex starts to laugh.



Why is Alex laughing?

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Why is Alex laughing?

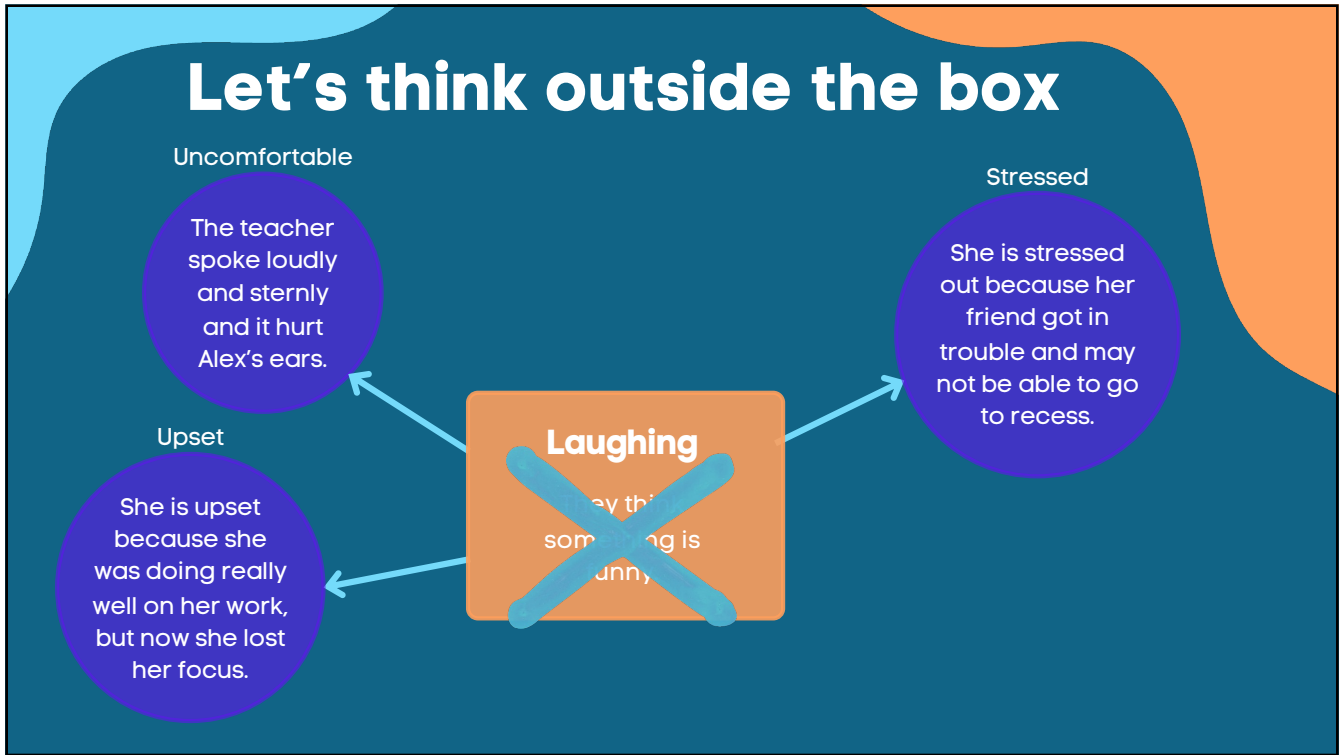
Amused: She thinks it's funny that her friend got in trouble.

Stressed: She is stressed out because her friend got in trouble and may not be able to go to recess.

Upset: She is upset because she was doing really well on her work, but now she lost her focus.

Uncomfortable: The teacher spoke loudly and sternly and it hurt Alex's ears.

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The old way of teaching listening

Imposed unrealistic standards that don't support the neurodivergent brain, inadvertently causing blaming and shaming and resulting in masking.

Masking is the conscious or unconscious attempt by autistic people to suppress or hide their autistic characteristics in order to "fit in."

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Whole Body Listening—Revised Version

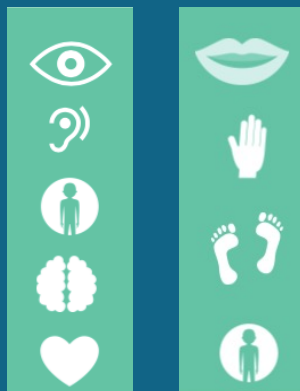
WHOLE BODY LISTENING
How Does Your Body Help You Listen?

All brains and bodies listen and learn differently.
It is important to know what works for YOU!

EverydayAttention.com

People listen in different ways, using different parts of their bodies.

Respect the person's way of listening, even if it doesn't look the way you expect it to.



elizabethsautter.com

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Repeating phrases exactly as others have said them

Creating scripts to use in social situations

COMMON SIGNS OF **AUTISTIC MASKING**

AT A GLANCE
Dr. Megan Anna Neff

Using behaviors learned from watching other interactions

Practicing facial expressions and body language

<https://neurodivergentsights.com/blog/what-is-masking-in-autism>

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Strength-Based Language Takeaways

- Check our perceptions: investigate and ask questions.
- Be mindful of the language you use.
- Think outside the box.
- People listen in different ways.

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Strength- Based Instruction

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Universal Design for Learning

How do you modify curriculum to meet the needs of the individual while still maintaining rigor?

- A framework designed to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners
- Research-based
- Designed to guarantee access to and participation in meaningful and stimulating activities for ALL students

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The importance of strength-based instruction



- Increased engagement = Increased learning
- Presenting learning activities without forced social interaction allows students to focus on relevant information
- Increases likelihood of generalization of skills

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How do I identify student strengths?

- Learning style
- Special interests
- What skills/activities are they good at?
- Ask them



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Utilize student learning style



Where does student already experience success?



Make learning meaningful for the student

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What is a student's learning style?

Visual—learn best from books, pictures
color-coding, visual aids

Auditory—use audiobooks, role-playing,
repetition, music

Tactile/Kinesthetic—benefit from moving
and touching, hands-on projects, freedom
to stand or move while working



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Theme teaching



- Choose themes that reflect student interests
- High-interest topics
- Incorporate theme into all parts of instruction—literacy, math, art, science, leisure, morning meeting/circle time
- Introduce students to new topics to test interest

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Examples of student interest-driven themes



Legos
Flags
Art and artists
Amusement parks
Kites
Taylor Swift



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Strength-Based Instruction Takeaways

- Identify student interests.
- Identify student learning style.
- Don't force social interactions during instruction.
- Use creative theme teaching.
- Differentiate instruction by personalizing learning.

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Let's listen to ND voices



- Listen to your students and seek out other neurodivergent voices.
- Try to involve autistic voices in decisions about the classroom.
- Neurodivergent voices provide insight that the neuromajority needs.

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The big takeaway



- We need to shift our perceptions.
- We need to model and lead with respect and regard.
- We must keep growing so that we can support and affirm students in every way possible.

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Resources

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Questions

For more information and ideas, go
autismmovingforward.com

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