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Loudoun County Public Schools, Gifted Education Advisory Committee Meeting, Thursday, May 15, 2025

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[00:00:04] Oh, it is on. Okay, there we go. Good evening. I would like to call to order the gifted education advisory committee for Loudoun County Public Schools for this evening and want to thank everybody for attending. This is a joint session of both GIAC as well as SEAC because of the subject that we are addressing tonight, which is twice exceptional children. And so just to introduce myself. My name is Tom Ketchum. I think I've met many of you in the past. But for those that don't know, I've been involved in education advocacy for a little over 17 years between

[00:00:42] serving on gifted advisories, special education advisories, as well as I serve on the equity committee here in Loudoun County. And for all of those thousands of hours in meetings and reading policies and reading compliance and guidance documents and sitting through webinars and training sessions and everything else.

[00:01:06] My most intense and enduring education has really come as a result of being the father of four children that have been identified as twice exceptional or 2E children. Now, I think of my children as infinitely exceptional, as I hope all of you do as well.

[00:01:27] However, the term twice-exceptional has a very specific meaning in education, as you may know. It refers to children who are identified as gifted and also have a disability. These children have an above-average ability or talents in various areas, and they also have a learning or behavior or emotional or perhaps some health challenges that require support as well.

[00:01:50] Twice-exceptional students are often misunderstood because their strengths can mask their challenges, or their challenges can mask their strengths. For example, a gifted child with dyslexia may be able to keep up with grade-level reading through context clues and through memory, but may silently struggle with decoding.

[00:02:09] Or a child with auditory issues may underperform or shut down in class, leading others to overlook their strengths and their potential. My oldest is 23. He is brilliant, creative, a very deep thinker, charisma for days.

[00:02:26] He's a very talented athlete, and yet he has a crippling sleep disorder and suffered from a very serious visual processing disorder and talk about masking. He played baseball at a very high level. He even played on a scout team for the Atlanta Braves and it was during that process that we learned that he could not change his focus from near distance, sorry, from far distance to near distance very easily in a way that all of us do all the time. And so as a result of that, and this was corrected through some training and therapy, but it also

[00:03:03] meant for the first 10 years of playing baseball, when he was fielding one hoppers to first base or when he was hitting the ball, he was doing it purely by instinct and instinct alone. He couldn't see the ball. It also meant in the classroom, he struggled to take notes from the board among various other issues. The tension between his ability and his access has been a defining feature of his journey. My 18 year old is equally brilliant with a very sharp wit, tremendous artistic talent an extraordinary ability in mathematics, yet she carries the invisible weight of severe anxiety.

[00:03:40] Imagine being capable of excellence, but gripped by panic every time you walk into the classroom. However, anxiety does not cancel out her many abilities, and her many abilities do not negate the need for support. My 15-year-old is a warrior. She is inventive, academically gifted, far, far beyond most of her peers, and she asks questions that few adults have even considered about the world. Her reading level reached college level before age nine, and her retention is exceptional.

[00:04:13] The only question in her future is just how many PhDs she will achieve. She also spent most of elementary school going back and forth to UVA to see specialists as she struggled with some very difficult gastro issues that she has had since birth. These were so disruptive, she could barely eat. And why would you when food causes you pain? It affected her physical growth and her participation. She's fought it with great success, but the tightrope remains ever-present. She needs both acceleration and accommodation. And then there's my 11-year-old. She has managed to master

[00:04:52] many of the talents of her older siblings and added her own brilliance and flair and creativity. Among other challenges, she has struggled with speech and language delays, but as a result of hard work and therapy, has become a very skilled public speaker. She is truly, truly gifted in mathematics, and an exceptional equestrian who beats most adults in competition. Like her siblings, though, it is a constant challenge to balance the need to push herself while also advocating for flexibility and compassion. What binds all four of my children together is this dichotomy,

[00:05:33] profound strengths existing alongside significant challenges. They don't fit neatly into boxes, and that's where, frankly, systems have often failed them. I found that many provide for the giftedness or accommodate the disability, but very rarely both. These kids don't get to split themselves into two. As a parent and as an advocate, I've spent almost two decades trying to build bridges between departments and services, between mindsets, between expectations and reality.

[00:06:07] So what I have learned is this. Twice exceptional kids do not need us to raise the bar or to lower the bar. They need us to widen the path. So thank you. I want to introduce Liz Crotty, who is the Chairwoman of our Special Education Advisory Committee, and she can talk to you a little bit about what we do on SEAC. Good evening, everyone. It is so wonderful to see so many parents and people who have come out this evening for this presentation. I know I am incredibly excited for

[00:06:44] it as well. Tom spoke so beautifully about his own children. I also, I have three children. All three are identified for special education. Two of my kiddos are on that more interesting spectrum of very high strengths and then some very complicated issues that come into play, too.

[00:07:07] So I feel that very deeply, and I am looking for more strategies on how I can help our kids. SEAC has always been very aware of our students who are twice exceptional. We have a lot of parents involved in our advisory committee who also have these challenges.

[00:07:28] And as a SEAC, we are mandated by Virginia regulations. We focus a lot on looking at the policies for LCPS and making sure that they are representing all of our students.

[00:07:43] And so we do look at it very closely from trying to take into that perspective of all types of disability. and that includes our twice-exceptional students. We also look at different initiatives that we think need to be in place so that all of our kids can succeed.

[00:08:02] I know in watching a lot of the school board presentations this year, I have been tremendously impressed with the presentations on our gifted education, on our English language learner education, and I just sit there struck by how many similarities there are for the needs of our English language learners population as well as our gifted education and our special education population.

[00:08:30] We all need to have access to those opportunities that let our kids fulfill their potential and have different ways of approaching their education so that they get the most out of their school day.

[00:08:46] So that is something that we always have in mind at SEAC, And we look for those kinds of opportunities where we can introduce things like co-teaching and things like that so that, you know, our kids aren't just sitting there in class bored and, you know, having all sorts of struggles.

[00:09:04] So, you know, please, if this resonates with you, please always feel free to come and join our SEAC community. We really do look to represent all of our learners over there. and this is an exciting collaboration, and I hope we're going to get more opportunities to work with GX because we really do all have so much in common with each other in trying to make sure that we have the absolute best school division possible, and we have a big group of members that work very hard and have a lot of meetings to really explore in depth areas like literacy and math,

[00:09:43] the specialized instruction, meaningful inclusion for our kids, making sure that they feel supported and accepted in their school communities and their activities. We also have our policy subcommittee, which is, as you can imagine, fairly in-depth and fun.

[00:10:01] And then we have one that's focused on transition for our students who, you know, what comes next? You know, and how do we get them there? And how do we start thinking about that earlier? year. You may have heard about the transition center that we advocated really strongly for this year, and we're very fortunate to get that off the ground. And for some of our students, and I can think of one of my own kiddos, like, you know, she is so brilliant, and I am sure she's going to head off to college and she's going to

do great things, but she has some physical disabilities and things like that where she may need some more explicit instruction

[00:10:38] because of her learning profile so you know don't just think of some of these opportunities as just for those students or just like they are there for all of our kids who need that level of differentiation and support so i know i am so excited to be here tonight i'm going to pass this back to tom if you ever have any questions or want to learn more about SIAC we usually meet The first Wednesday of every month, and you are welcome to come.

[00:11:09] We also broadcast our meetings. They're also posted on our website if you'd like to go back and check them out. But if you have any questions, reach out to the SEAC chair. Next year's SEAC chair will be Shanaz Khan, so I will be the past chair, but she's going to be fantastic, and Tom's going to be on our executive committee next year as our vice chair of membership, which we are very excited about.

[00:11:32] So I will pass the mic back over to him. But thank you all for welcoming us to your committee this evening. And we're very excited to be here. So thanks very much. I'm going to pass it over to Ashley, who's going to introduce our speaker this evening.

[00:11:49] And again, thanks, everyone, for attending. And I think we're all anxious to hear the upcoming presentation. So Ashley, if you would. Wendy, you want to come up here with me? I'm going to come up here with you. Yay! Hi, guys. My name is Ashley Spiegel, and I am a special education supervisor for the school division.

[00:12:07] I'm really glad to be here tonight and being able to support our partnership. I'm going to turn it over to Wendy for a moment. Go ahead. So I'm Wendy King. I'm the supervisor for Gifted Education, and I'm thrilled that all of you are here. And I want to extend a very special thank you to my colleagues.

[00:12:26] Where did she go? There she is. In the special education office, as well as all of our SEAC members who are here tonight. Can you just raise your hand? If you're a member or a participant in SEAC. There we go.

[00:12:43] And to all the families here who are interested in learning more about how to support our twice-exceptional students. So thank you so much for being here. We are really together today because I think everybody in this room recognizes that our twice-exceptional students deserve thoughtful and coordinated support so that we can honor the full complexity of who they are.

[00:13:15] Gifted in special education is often seen as separate worlds. But for 2E students, those worlds have to come together. It is intricate that they are a part of their world. And the collaboration is really symbolic and it is essential. So tonight's joint meeting really is a step in that direction for us to deepen not only our collaboration, which we already go through and do, but be able to see ways that we can continue to meet each of our students' needs by listening, by learning, by working together to ensure that our 2E students in Loudoun County thrive because that's ultimately everyone's goal.

[00:13:50] And we just look forward to a continued conversation and hearing your insights and ideas and experiences to really help us continue to develop a more inclusive and responsive educational environment for our twice-exceptional students.

[00:14:11] So again, thank you so much for being here. And we now are very fortunate to have Patty Peterson come up. She is the chair of GEAC, the Gifted Education Advisory Committee, and she is going to

introduce our very special guest for tonight. Thank you. Thank you, Patty. Thanks.

[00:14:27] Hi, I am Patty Peterson. I'm a gifted resource teacher at Algonquian Elementary, And I'm co-chair of GIAC, although we're going to be seeking a new co-chair because our other has decided to move to Fairfax. We're losing her. So keep it in mind, we'll be holding elections in the fall. So please think about it. All right. It is my pleasure tonight to introduce Dr. Matt Zagreski. He is a child psychologist and a professional speaker. He has a book whose name is a tongue twister, so hang in there for me. He's the co-founder of the Neurodiversity Collective.

[00:15:04] He's the co-host of a podcast, Nerding Out on Neurodiversity, and the author of his book, which will be available tonight, Neurodiversity Playbook, How Neurodivergent People Can Crack the Code of Living in a Neurotypical World.

[00:15:20] Did I get it? All right. Thank you. I think you are going to be very happy that you came tonight. I've had the pleasure of listening to Dr. Zagreski prior to tonight, and he employs humor, but also very concrete practical strategies that you can utilize with your children and as teachers we came away with lots of great ideas to help us in our classrooms. Tonight he's going to address you know a neurodiversity how our brains impact our thoughts our feelings and our behaviors and

[00:15:55] how the challenges of being gifted and neurodivergent impact making friends building relationships, regulating your emotions, and understanding others. So Dr. Zagreski, thank you so much for coming. Okay. I can honestly say I've never been introduced by that many people before.

[00:16:23] That was great. Also, this is a terrifying room. I feel like I'm on some sort of tribunal, like I've done something wrong, like it's giving war crimes. So let's see if we're all still friends tonight. I am so honored to be here. I've had a great relationship with Loudoun County for the last couple years, and it really is a place where to get these two communities in the same room is the goal of what I do. And this, I mean, there was just so much synchronicity here. That just

[00:16:59] doesn't happen. You know, gifted education is special education, but for a long time, they've it on the same side you know the opposite sides of this chasm right so when we realize we have so much more in common than we have a separate then we start working together we gather our resources and our strengths and our compassion to work together for our kiddos everybody wins one of the things we're going to talk a lot about tonight is the concept of universal design right universal design shows us that the best practices for gifted and special education learners are just the best

[00:17:35] practices for learners. So the things your kiddos need, every kid in Loudoun County would benefit from. From the top of the charts to the bottom of the charts and everywhere in between. We're going to talk about how to make that happen this evening. Okay. Clickity,

[00:17:53] click, click, click. Solid start. Solid, solid start. Technology. You'd think I did. I do

[00:18:39] this again. When in doubt, unplug it and plug it back in. I mean, for those of you who are 80s kids like me, we blow in the video game cartridge to make it work. This guy knows what I'm talking about. All right. Technology. All right. So we got a lot of goals today. Now I'm going to start by saying you guys are going to get these slides, right? So you're going to get these slides. So engaging this, whatever way works best for you. If you're a person who takes notes, takes notes. If you take pictures, take pictures, get my good side, which is probably, you know, when I'm actually out of the room. And we're going to send these out there because like,

[00:19:19] want you guys to know what I know. Everybody in this room is doing their best. So from a ground rules perspective, you may hear some strategies you've already tried. You may hear some strategies that you've tried and failed at, but other families in here may not have tried them. So we're going to try and keep an open mind. We're going to meet everybody where they are, right? It is incredibly challenging to work with this population. And the things that work for our kids now may not work for them in two years, or the things that didn't work two years ago may work for our kids in the future.

[00:19:52] so we're just trying to keep that out over there and most importantly this is the kind of conversation that elicits a lot of people talk about their kiddos in a very personal and private way and i love that because that's what makes this real just do me a favor and protect the confidentiality of the people in this room there was one situation the reason i have that thing up there is i was giving a talk way out in the pacific northwest and i gave this exact same talk the next day the person who hired me to come out there was like so one of the parents used something that came up in that meeting to try and get that kid out of special education, out of the advanced reading class.

[00:20:32] And it was heartbreaking, right? It's the thing. So we're just going to say, we're just going to protect each other's confidentiality because everybody in this room is on the same team, right? We're all advocating for our kiddos, our kiddos for whom the world is not built, right?

[00:20:49] We're all asynchronous in that way. We may not be asynchronous in the same way, right? It's kind of like in high school where it's like there was the kids who listened to the popular music and then it's like I was more like an alternative pop punk like Blink-182 but I had way more in common with the Metalheads than I did with like the Britney Spears once again, child of the 80s, right?

[00:21:12] So it's like, you know, if you're alternative then let's all be alternative you might be all about Avenged Sevenfold and I might be Toby Keith we can still get along, right? We're all on the same team here. Alright, let me tell you guys a story. So, the year is 1991 And my parents have decided to take me to the Connecticut Children's Museum in Hartford, Connecticut.

[00:21:37] If you've never been, you're not missing much. And we wander through the Children's Museum, and there's an exhibit there on hydroelectric power. And you can imagine the water is sliding down a slight incline and landing in a pool.

[00:21:54] And you have to take Legos and build a hydroelectric dam on the little side of water. And my parents look at the slide, and they go, oh, that's kind of neat. And then they wander off to the rest of the museum. 90 minutes later, my mom goes, hey, Matt, what do you think of this?

[00:22:12] And I'm not there. Now, parents, that's everybody's worst nightmare, right? You're in a public place, and your kid's just not there. So they quickly backtrack. It's not a big museum. And they found me at the hydroelectric station. I had taken off my shoes and socks, And I was standing in the water fixing their hydroelectric dam because it was inefficient.

[00:22:35] As this poor non-plus security guard's like, um, excuse me, could you please get out of the water? The museum closed ten minutes ago. And I was like, it's not better yet. And I tell this story because it's hilarious. I tell this story because that story's not in any parenting playbook.

[00:22:54] What to expect when you're expecting, not that. And in case you're sitting there thinking that you've done that with your kids and you're struggling, you're embarrassed because of that let me tell you this my parents who were in charge of me they are both clinical child psychologists so if they can screw

that up I hereby give you guys permission to make a few mistakes along the way because I turned out mostly fine you know it's great so what are some of the myths about gifted and twice exceptional kids what are some of the myths there's a lot of misinformation out there everything's easy if you think

[00:23:32] everything's easy for a gifted kid you should hear me sing sometime it's not pretty. If there's nothing or any help, our colleagues down in North Carolina, the name of their podcast is They'll Be Fine. Hey, parents, will our kids be fine? Okay, what else? They'll get good grades. What else? Hands folded, sitting perfectly upright. Yes, ma'am. Yes, sir. Yeah,

[00:24:06] no, no. What else? Comfortable with challenge. Boy, do we have an interesting relationship with challenge. What else? We're nerds. Now, I'm a professional nerd, but I was not as growing up.

[00:24:30] I was very much like, no, I'm just like everybody else. I enjoy WWE because that is what was popular in the late 90s. Lots of myths out there about our kids, right? Gifted kids are good at everything.

[00:24:46] Gifted kids can't have learning challenges. Gifted kids don't have ADHD. As a school psychologist at a very ritzy district in Pennsylvania told me once, you can't be gifted and autistic. And I'm like, my caseload screams otherwise, sir.

[00:25:02] Because the problem is, and Loudoun County, thankfully, is the exception that proves the rule, is a lot of the stakeholders have these myths. So as a parent advocating for your kid, you're not just fighting misinformation, you're fighting misinformation at the very top, right?

[00:25:20] And that's why I share my slides, because if you can send this to an administrator, you can send this to a teacher someday and be like, here's the playbook for my kid. Then we're all speaking the same language and our work gets a lot easier. So let's talk about what it is to be a parent.

[00:25:40] As Tom shared so beautifully before we're talking about his four kids, you see the strengths and the weaknesses. You see the challenge. You see the journey. So parenting is about love. It's about setting meaningful boundaries. As I said to my son this morning, no, you can't have ice cream for breakfast.

[00:25:57] He's like, but I can have ice cream later. I was like, yes, you can. But not now. Keeping our kids safe, very important. Supporting them through their endeavors. I'm sure they didn't get all those baseball games just on their own, right? Definitely not. Do I have a lot of sports parents in here?

[00:26:16] All those early mornings, those swim meets, those long drives to East travel, everything. I was a theater kid, too, and my parents were like, I have to buy you what kind of makeup? And I'm like, I know, it's a whole thing. It's fine. Yes, I know, it's shocking that I was a theater kid.

[00:26:32] Yeah, I know, we're all very surprised by this. Giving them access to opportunities, whether that's coming through something like coming to this tonight or driving them to that gifted summer camp or driving them to UVA for an enrichment class, right? Teaching them things, facilitating their growth, meeting their needs across the board, the high highs, the low lows, and everything in between, and vitally, raising the kids you have.

[00:27:01] I'm gonna tell you guys one of my all-time favorite stories. Now, I see kids from all over the country. One of the kids I've been working with for years, so his dad was a very big deal college football player.

[00:27:19] He was on the cover of magazines level big, right? Dad is 6'5", 240, big dude. His kid got mom's genes. Kid is 5'6", 110 pounds. And dad's like, he could play football.

[00:27:35] He could be the kicker. I'm like, he's going to be the goalpost, right? So his kid, who not into football, he doesn't really want to do that. And dad's like, but sports are good. They build character. They build teamwork.

[00:27:51] They build resilience. All of those things are objectively true. But if the sport doesn't work for your kiddo, then the sport doesn't work for your kiddo, right? Now, the funny thing about this family is that the daughter got dad's DNA.

[00:28:09] She actually is, she's a very high-level rugby player, and dad gets that. Dad speaks that language, right? But he had a really tough time connecting with his son. Hey, you know, like, speak to the dads in the room. It's like, you know, you're like, well, you got a son. Like, I'm going to throw the ball around with him. That's a thing I'm going to do.

[00:28:25] That was not a thing he was ever going to do with his kid. His kid was super into LARPing. Anybody know what LARPing is? What's LARPing, sir? Now, you look like you're familiar with a LARP. I don't know. Familiar with the term.

[00:28:46] I dabble, he says. I dabble. All right. So, Dad is like, I just don't get it. I mean, like, what, you're dressing in costumes and you're running around? I'm like, oh, like a football tailgate? Yeah, I like to stir the pot a little bit. But I was like, listen, do me a favor.

[00:29:02] There's a big LARP event out by you guys this weekend. Your kid's going to go, just do me a favor. Go for a half hour. You know, it starts at 9, go till 9.30. And if you hate it, you'll never hear me say it again. And he's like. So, you know, Saturday morning comes, 9 o'clock rolls around, doesn't text me.

[00:29:23] 9.30 doesn't text me. 10 o'clock doesn't text me. I'm like, I get it. You know, it's not his thing. I really was hoping he was going to try it. At noon, my phone dings. And there is the picture of the sun. He's an archer, so he's got his elvish ears.

[00:29:40] He's got his bow and arrow. And then there's dad behind him dressed as an orc. He's got a giant pickaxe, and he's got covered in blue face paint. And dad texted me, I was wrong. This curse word rocks.

[00:29:58] And I'll tell you this. He told me later, he's like, I had the best conversation with my son that I had had in 10 years on the drive home from that LARP event because dad had met his kid where he was. That was hard for him.

[00:30:15] - That's not easy, dad went way out of his comfort zone. Right, this isn't like, oh, I played football but my kid wants to play soccer, I can figure that out. This is, I played football and my kid is dressing like an elf and running through the woods. And dad doesn't go to every LARP event, he doesn't go to all of them, but he's become this sort of pseudo-celebrity in the field.

[00:30:36] Whenever his son shows up, he's like, is your dad coming, is your dad coming, is your dad coming? He's realized, he's like, it's like football. There are teams, there are plays, there's pageantry around it. And now they're so much closer than they ever were because there isn't this giant chasm between them anymore.

[00:30:55] There isn't this, like, we don't speak the same language. They found a place to meet. And when we were wrapping up this session, Dad's like, I finally got what you meant. He's like, I'm now raising the kid I have, not the kid I thought I was going to have. And that's a powerful thing.

[00:31:14] So let's talk about our terms here. So a neurotypical brain is a brain that functions largely with normal expected parameters. Somewhere between 70 and 80% of the population is neurotypical. So, general rule of thumb, four out of five.

[00:31:32] Four out of five people are neurotypical. Their brains do basically what they're supposed to do. Society is built for and around these brains. So let's say, ah, hi, your name is? One more time, Laurie. Now, Laurie, let's say you're gonna have everybody in this room over to your place for dinner afterwards.

[00:31:49] I just volunteered you for this, you're welcome. What would you make for all 50 people in this room? Salad, I love that, right? Salad, basically everybody can eat a salad. Now, would you put in your salad, would you put in any croutons?

[00:32:12] See, chef's kiss, right? In a less understanding person I randomly picked from the audience, usually they say things like meat. You anticipated that as like a salad, everybody can eat a salad, right?

[00:32:27] So the reason that this is important as a metaphor is that if you're doing a dinner party and you want to cook chicken, that's fine. You don't need to throw all of your chicken away to make salad, because everyone can eat salad. You just want to make sure that there is a salad on the plate, too. And if you don't have gluten-free croutons, you don't put the croutons in there.

[00:32:45] You have a salad dressing everybody can eat. The idea here is that if 80% of the population's brain works largely one way, it makes sense that society is built for and by those people. What we're advocating for is for society to flex and meet the needs of our kids, too.

[00:33:03] Because if everybody's got chicken, but I come to the party and I'm gluten-free and vegan, I deserve to have something I can eat too, right? My wife doesn't eat mammals. And when we go to weddings, I'm usually like, oh, I'll have the steak. And she's like, oh, I'll have the vegetarian option.

[00:33:20] And it's almost always a baked potato on a bed of lettuce. Now, that's not a meal. That's not dinner. It's just a baked potato on a bed of lettuce. So the idea here is like, it shouldn't just be enough. It should be what you deserve. That's why this is equity, not equality.

[00:33:39] So neurodivergence is a term for someone's brain, processes, learns, and behaves differently than what's considered typical. And neurodiversity is all the brains in the world. Now, I'm gifted in ADHD.

[00:33:55] So even if I was the only neurodivergent person in this room, and given that you are giving up your Thursday evenings to learn about this stuff, I'm guessing I'm probably not the only neurodivergent person in this room, even if I was, we would all be neurodiversity together because it's the diversity of human brains.

[00:34:14] Now, all of this has turned into a real movement, the neurodiversity movement, and it comes down to this idea that there's no right way to think, learn, or behave. If you could sum up this move in one sentence, the ethos is differences aren't deficits.

[00:34:35] If you think about Tom's son, who couldn't pick up the differences in the baseball, right? You couldn't track that change. That's a difference, but he was good enough to play, was it minor leagues for the Atlanta Braves? Did I get that right? Scout team. I mean, that's pretty high level baseball, right?

[00:34:50] That's like probably 95th percentile of all the baseball players on the planet, right? That difference is not necessarily a deficit. The kids I know who are ADHDers who have a tough time sitting still, if that gets accommodated, they can do incredible academic work, right?

[00:35:08] They can be great productive members of community. They just need that to be accommodated. So the difference isn't fundamentally a deficit, But because the system is set up for and by neurotypical people, difference is seen as less than. So let's see, I'm seeing about, I would guess, a dozen people in here who wear glasses.

[00:35:31] And probably some of you wear contacts. So some differences in our society we accommodate, right? I wouldn't come up to you and say, oh, I'm sorry. Most people in this room aren't wearing glasses. I'm going to need to take yours. That's going to work out really well for you, right?

[00:35:48] You're like, please don't take my glasses. I really need them. So some differences we accommodate for, we are just asking for our stuff to get accommodated as well. Now, over time, the neurodiversity movement has turned into a social justice movement. That it's so much more than just the classroom.

[00:36:06] It's the workplace. It's society. I mean, I am, as a professional speaker, I spent a lot of time in airports. They're only, I used to not see a lot of sensory-friendly spaces in airports. Now, almost every marriage or airport has one.

[00:36:22] Newark Airport, which is my primary airport, has three. Sports arenas have these now, right? Philadelphia Eagles, I lived in Philly for many years, they've really pioneered what those spaces look like for neurodivergent people in stadiums.

[00:36:38] I consult a lot with theater groups, trying to make theater sensory-friendly performances. I just took my kids to Pete the Cat, the musical, and it was a sensory-friendly thing. And it was great, because a lot of these kids couldn't access the theater, or they couldn't access professional sports.

[00:36:53] But with a few accommodations, we can. That's why it really is a social justice movement. We want everybody to be able to access the things they want, and if there are simple accommodations we can do to make that happen, we should do those accommodations.

[00:37:10] So here's our neurodiversity rainbow. We have ADHD, Tourette's syndrome, autism, dyslexia, ODD, ADHD, anxiety disorders, auditory processing disorder, visual processing disorder, sensory processing disorder, giftedness, there's a lot of things on there.

[00:37:30] And the intersection of any of these things would make a kid twice exceptional. Now here's the really fascinating thing about brains. One neurodivergence predicts an other one at a significantly higher rate.

[00:37:46] If you have ADHD, the chances that you have Tourette's are 71%. That's really high. If you're ADHD, you're significantly more likely to be gifted. If you're autistic, you're significantly more likely to be dyslexic.

[00:38:05] If you have a tick disorder, you're significantly more likely to be dysgraphic. I think the way the field is moving is that within the next 10 to 20 years, you're going to be able to diagnose people as neurodivergent and put qualifiers in there because the psychology system was built off the medical model. The medical model is the street, right? If you break your ankle, you have a broken ankle, but our brains don't work that way. Our brains are almost quantum, right? So there's this idea that one difference predicts all these other differences. So we know we have a different brain. Now let's talk about what is different

[00:38:43] about the brain. So I think we're going to sort of start inside outing this rather than top downing it. I think that's, I think it's a good thing. I think it's how the field should move. All right. Now what I'm going to ask is, let's see. Hi, would the five of you at this table, would you guys mind coming up front and helping me out with something? Let's give a big round of applause, yeah? All right. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, you thought you guys were going to be safe. You're not. Hi, your name is Patty. Patty, can you Give me a favor to stand right here.

[00:39:18] Patty is the most important person, guys. We love Patty. Yay, Patty! All right, now let's all make friends, all get nice and close to each other. Yeah, brilliant. Okay, so here's what we're gonna do. This is what development looks like in a neurotypical kid, right?

[00:39:36] Patty is 12 years old. Patty is 12 academically, intellectually, physically, socially, and emotionally. She's 12 across the board. Now, and your name is? Sati. And your name is? Jenny.

[00:39:51] Prati, could you talk to Jenny? Yeah, pretty easily, right? You guys aren't that far apart. Now, in a neurotypical brain, things largely hold together. Now what I ask you to do, Jenny, is take seven steps that way, take four steps that way, take six steps that way, take four steps that way.

[00:40:11] In a neurodivergent brain, development becomes asynchronous. So what we have here is we still have Patty's 12, but now we have Jenny who's intellectually 18, academically 15, socially eight, emotionally seven.

[00:40:30] Look how spread this is. Now, Sethi, could you still talk to Jenny? It would be a lot harder, right? So you have to work that much harder to spread the difference. The more spread a system is under, the more strain a system is under.

[00:40:45] The more strain a system is under, the harder it has to work to hold it together. Now, part of the reason I demonstrate this is that because 80% of the world is neurotypical, 80% of the world develops synchronously. Most 11-year-olds are 11 in everything they do.

[00:41:02] Our kids look like this. In the field, we call this the rule of five, that every neurodivergent kid is really five kids. So for all the parents out there, so Tom's got four kids, they're all neurodivergent. Tom, you've got 16 kids.

[00:41:19] No, you've got 20 kids, math was never my thing, right? Math is hard. So think about it, and if you teach gifted kids, and you've got 12 kids in your classroom, everyone's like, oh, you're so easy, you've got the gifted kids, you have 60 kids in your classroom, and it feels that way, right?

[00:41:35] All of you are walking around with your multiple gifted children, multiple neurodivergent kids at home, You're like, is that why? Is that why I feel this way? Yes! Because of asynchronous development. You guys can sit down. Give a big round of applause, guys. Love the shirt, by the way.

[00:41:52] So the idea here is that, largely speaking, when you've got a neurodivergent brain, academic and intellectual skills tend to get more, and social-emotional skills tend to get less, because there's a finite amount of energy to go around.

[00:42:14] So if theoretically we've got six sections and each of them is getting about 6 ½%, I'm sorry, 16 ½%, what we're going to do in this situation is you've got skills, academic, and intellect, and let's say instead of getting 16.5%, they're all getting 30%.

[00:42:33] Okay, so 30 plus 30 plus 30 is 90. That means the other three sections are only getting 3.3% developmental energy because there's a finite amount of energy to go around. Don't get more because you have a different brain, right? And this is really important because for a long time we thought gifted brains were bigger brains.

[00:42:54] When Einstein died and they cut open his head for the craniotomy, they were like, it's not any bigger than anybody else's brain. What's that all about? What it was, it was richer. It was deeper. There was more neural connections. And that's where this asynchronous development really shows up, that in many areas of the gifted brain, there are significantly more neurons than there would be in a neurotypical brain.

[00:43:18] So one concrete example of this is that the two hemispheres of our brain are connected by something called the corpus callosum. In neurotypical people, there's between 70 and 100 million neurons in the corpus callosum, the thing that connects our two hemispheres. Now that's a lot of neurons, right?

[00:43:34] I don't care what it is, 70 to 100 million of something is a lot of something. In gifted kids, it's closer to 300 to 400 million. We're taking it and upping it by a factor of somewhere between three or four. That's a lot, right? So the thing, it's not just, oh, this is a bigger cheeseburger, it's a better cheeseburger.

[00:43:55] It's Kobe beef, it's the best aged cheddar, it's the apple with smoked bacon, they put the good sauce on there, right? You know what I'm talking about, right? And the reason I start all of this with talking about asynchrony is, one, is the more neurodivergent your kid is, the more ease your kid has, the bigger the spread they're going to be.

[00:44:17] But as parents and as teachers, we tend to float upwards to the highest level our kid is capable of functioning at. So if you have a nine-year-old who thinks, acts, and speaks like a CEO, they're like, excuse me, mother, pursuant to my request to have chicken nuggets for the annual meal, excellent, we'll circle back, right?

[00:44:42] You're like, wow, look how mature and thoughtful and articulate my kid is. I'm going to treat my nine-year-old like a 19-year-old because that's how they sound sometimes. Which means that when they inevitably have challenges or behaviors, as all kids do, they have further to fall because our expectations have floated upwards for them.

[00:45:04] Now, we are all guilty of this. I'm a child psychologist. I am a gifted adult. I am an expert in this. And I still struggle with this with my own two kids. Because sometimes my six-year-old's like, dad, I thought that it would be nice for me to sweep the foyer. So I did that. I'm like, that's amazing. And then last night when I was putting her in bed, she was like, you're the worst daddy ever because you can't find my library book. And I was like, I miss the very mature version of you. So when we are intervening with our kids, it is vital that we stop and remember how chronologically

[00:45:42] old this kid is. Because a lot of the behaviors we see are better explained for how chronologically old this kid is rather than how old they act right now my favorite version of this is i worked with a family there was a very neurodivergent family you always used to joke that we should just put like adderall and prozac in the house water right just really just like level them all out uh a lot of you're like wait that's an option so mom had created this very elaborate system you know when you go to ikea and you buy those calyxes right like the four by four things she had bought her a

[00:46:20] calyx and there was a different laundry bin in each thing of the calyx for every different kind of laundry dirty clean dirty clothes dirty formal clothes dirty informal clothes soccer gear blah blah blah

blah blah blah and her and her kid was not using the system and mom was very upset about this she was complaining about it to me in session I was like well you know what Emily I'm gonna tell you this um remind me real quick how old is your kiddo she's like she's nine like Emily is this a system a nine-year-old can use she's well she's very smart yes she is

[00:46:54] she's also nine so we scaled the system down to there was a basket for dirty clothes and a basket for clean clothes and once her kiddo mastered that system then we started adding in some nuance right we're all guilty of it because if a kid can do amazing things it's easy to think they're gonna do amazing things all the time. Oftentimes the thing they're struggling with make a lot of sense for kids that age. All right. So we're going to talk about the four biggest pillars that make it challenging

[00:47:31] to raise a neurodivergent kiddo. Executive dysfunction, communication styles and differences, emotional regulation challenges, and community connection. I really like you guys are taking pictures of this. It's a very pretty slide. There's also like no information on it, but you know what?

[00:47:51] It's vibes. We're just here for the vibes right now. All right, executive dysfunction. This is still my favorite meme of all time. Not that you ever have to deal with that, my friend, right? I'm telling you.

[00:48:07] I could have built an awesome fort out of all the planners they got me as a kid that I never used, right? Great coasters, above average Frisbees. Not good for homework. So all of the stuff that happens in our brain when it comes to executive functioning is right here in the front, the prefrontal cortex.

[00:48:27] This is our executive functioning skills. Planning, follow-through, task initiation, task completion, organization, self-regulation, time management, sustaining attention. All the things we need to be functional humans, right? Vitally, this part of the brain is responsible for behavioral inhibition.

[00:48:48] So let me ask you guys this. What is the capital of the great state of Virginia? So in a room full of educated people, not a single one of you raised your hand. No one ever raises their hands, guys. I've done this all over the country.

[00:49:04] One lady in Kansas did once, and I was like, "You ruined this for me, Sharice!" She was like, "What'd I do?" I'm like, "Don't worry about it." Because here's the thing, and that's the experience of gifted kids in classroom all over the world, is they know the answer. Why would you raise your hand if you already know the answer?

[00:49:22] This drove me crazy as a kid. I'm like, "It's seven, the War of 1812, carbon!" And they're like, "You have to raise your hand?" I was like, "Why, I know it!" Can't we just skip this stuff? Where's the skip screen? Where's the skip tutorial button? doesn't come with one so we're not inhibiting that behavior our brains go ready fire aim not ready aim fire I love when kids come to these it's so great so what happens is that our brain has all these neural connections right there's all these neurons and they're all flashing to the prefrontal cortex which

[00:49:58] job is to sort and triage all the information and our brains are really bad at triaging so instead of a nice orderly thing our brains look like belt way traffic ever right now usually I have to like look up the local terrible road to make this joke but it's it's greater DC any road ever terrible right now ideally all of these cars would be sorted and they would have a nice list and there would be someone going you wait you go you wait you go until the bottleneck has cleared instead our brains trying to do everything at the same time

[00:50:38] most people sit in class like I'm paying attention to the teacher later I will pee later I will go to soccer later I will do my homework our brains are like I'm sitting in class paying attention to the teacher I also need to pay well do I have soccer later what's going on outside the window is my friend talking to me what are we having for dinner later do I have homework and all these things are all happening at once and to use a super hot off the presses pop culture reference do you guys remember the three stooges remember in every episode they never know they would try and walk through a door at the same time and they would get stuck that's what our brains are our brains like I'm going to do everything at

[00:51:12] once, so you end up doing nothing. When the system is stressed like this, it makes more mistakes. The more mistakes the brain makes, the more stressed out it gets. The more stressed out it gets, the more mistakes it makes. So what I tell my clients all the time is that if you have that ADHD paralysis and you're trying to do 11 things at the same time, what we're going to do is arbitrarily pick one. I don't care if you have to flip a coin, right? I'm trying to do my science homework, practice piano, go to soccer practice, eat dinner, text my friend, play Minecraft, and walk the dog, and also buy something for my mom's birthday.

[00:51:47] Okay, ready? Actually, you know what? There's too many times that. We're going to do D&D reference here. I'm going to roll an eight-sided die. All right. We got a seven. That means I'm practicing piano right now because then you're doing something creates behavioral momentum so we can start doing something.

[00:52:05] Now, how does all this work? Cognitive controls, like executive functioning, use a lot of energy to gain, retain, and relay information comes from the neurotransmitter dopamine. It's an excitatory neurotransmitter. the best way to understand dopamine is that it gives you the thing.

[00:52:22] You do the thing, dopamine's like, ooh, I like that, do it again. Dopamine creates what we call a microcircuit. So you need dopamine to get tasks done, but you gain dopamine for doing the tasks. So it's like that thing, like who here goes to the gym?

[00:52:40] Right, it's like, oh, in this very tight shirt I'm wearing? Yes, I do work out, thank you. Now, your name is sir? Matt, oh, fabulous name, Matt, there you go. Matt, what do you like to do at the gym? Shocking.

[00:52:57] - So, you go to the gym, you lift your weights. Now, you go to the gym with a certain amount of energy. Lifting weights costs energy, right? But then that magical thing happens when you leave the gym with more energy than you showed up, right? That's the magic of the gym, right? It's like, why do I have more weights after doing, let me guess, five sets of 20 on the bar of like 220?

[00:53:19] Every time, right? I've actually been following you so I can make this one joke. But that's the idea, is that it costs energy to do the thing, but ideally, our brains are giving us more dopamine for having done the thing than it costs to do the thing. So if you're brushing your teeth in the morning, let's say that costs three dopamine, you get five dopamine for brushing your teeth, so you end up plus two.

[00:53:40] The idea is that each one of those plus dopamines, hi sweetie, you're, she was doing an awesome walk, it was very cool. The idea is that every time you do something, that's all being added into a bank, and we can withdraw from that bank to do further activities.

[00:53:58] The problem is that when you're a gifted kid, your threshold to get dopamine is a lot higher. And really, this is neurodivergence across the board, is that it costs us more dopamine to do things. The

flip side is that we get more dopamine when we do a thing we really like.

[00:54:17] So it might cost us 10 dopamine to brush our teeth, which is more than the average person. But if we read a book we really like, we get 1,000 dopamine. Whereas most people are like, I don't know, it's a book. So what, 10 dopamine, I guess? We're like, no, no, no, Percy Jackson is the greatest thing that's ever happened in my dark life.

[00:54:36] So the idea here is that the more we do stuff that reaffirm us and put gas in our tank, we're gonna have more to pull from when we need it. The problem for most kids going through public education is that most of their days are things that draw from their dopamine and don't return it.

[00:54:54] So we end up in a dopamine deficit. As you end up in a dopamine deficit, you have to borrow from tomorrow's dopamine to get through today, and that's where burnout comes from. How many of you guys, parents, have kids come through the door at the end of the day and fall apart that after-school restraint collapse is exactly what we're talking about here it is a failure of the dopamine micro circuit because not enough dopamine is coming in to do the tasks and our kids are so over scheduled these days they come in and it isn't be like oh watch after-school cartoons and have some handy snacks and like maybe we'll like connect around five o'clock for dinner this is like okay your home

[00:55:33] great put your backpack down put your karate gear on we're gonna go from karate to Latin, and after Latin, we're going to go CCD after CCD. Try and do 90 minutes of homework before you go to bed by 11. By the way, this kid is eight. If we don't give time for the system to rest and recover and restore, we are just burning ourselves out. If you've read the book, The Race to Nowhere, this is what he's talking about. It's become this arms race, and we're not taking care of our kids' bodies and brains in this race to be good at something in the future. The only thing that's guaranteed is right now let's do right now so we can do the future later however that shows

[00:56:11] up now if you are struggling with this lack of dopamine return you can hack the system by giving yourself more rewards now parents always say to me it's like well rewards i don't know like i don't want to reward my kid for this why i'm not saying you have to buy your kid a pony many of you would probably have a stable at this point right a high five a fist bump an attaboy that's enough that's enough positive reinforcement to put a little bit more dopamine into the system right and that's

[00:56:44] the thing rewards are your friend we're going to use them strategically now as our brains grow up is this this is still it's the best gift i've ever found and i just like it's just so perfect because the idea is that evolutionary speaking it makes more sense to be less it's evolutionary to be less regulated when you're little because if you're two you might not have the words to be "Excuse me mother, I would like some milk."

[00:57:16] And then you're like, "Meh!" And people give you like toys, candy, walk outside. Bluey, um, um, um, bouncy, um, um, um, Santa Claus, um, um, um. And then you finally end up at the thing. But the older you get, more control becomes socially and developmentally more appropriate.

[00:57:36] Now, one of the things that we see a lot here as the prefrontal cortex develops is that for neurotypical people, it fully develops somewhere between the ages of 20 and 25. Now, if the prefrontal cortex helps us make good decisions, that's its job. The fact that it doesn't help to our early 20s may explain some of the choices some of us made in college.

[00:57:57] This is a judgment-free space. But for neurodivergent kids, the prefrontal cortex doesn't fully develop until somewhere between 32 and 38. We're adding another decade of development. And when I

see kids in the early adulthood, right, because my practice used to be just about kids.

[00:58:16] And now I say, like, my best ages are 8 to 28 because I'm helping kids navigate that early life thing. I got kids like I got the great job like oh man I got this amazing job in Baltimore and I'm working at a really cool company I do all these things but I got fired after two weeks because I never made it to work on time ever. I got this super cool apartment in this like retrofitted condo and it's so awesome I love it and I haven't paid my rent not because I don't want to but because the part of my brain that helps me plan and do things is less developed. Now it's important to remember

[00:58:52] this isn't a light switch it's not like you don't have one then you do but it's a dimmer switch it's just coming online a lot slower and what the research shows is that the gifted brain in particular well really every neurodivergence comes with executive dysfunction it all comes with prefrontal cortex challenges some more so than others adhd being primary there but one of the things we see is that a lot of the struggles what our kids have as they're growing up don't come from mental health challenges, it comes from goodness of fit.

[00:59:27] Because if you're in a school that says kids are wiggly, that kids like to live with their hands, that kids need recess, what you see is behavioral referrals go down, diagnoses go down. The kids who have IEPs at 504 are the kids who really need them.

[00:59:44] I was at a school in northern New Jersey. This was two years ago. And this was a kindergarten classroom. And the teacher was very old school. and she was screaming at this little girl to put her feet on the ground.

[01:00:02] This little girl was not tall enough for her feet to be on the ground and have her back against the back of the chair. So this teacher, a veteran teacher, decided that she was going to ruin her whole class because this kid's feet weren't on the ground.

[01:00:19] Developmentally, it didn't make sense for her, but we were wondering why this kid was acting out. We were wondering why this kid was a behavioral problem in school. If your teacher is screaming at you to put your feet on the ground, I'm sorry. Looking around, many of your feet are on the ground, not all of yours.

[01:00:35] Do you think that bothers me at all? You're doing the things you need to do to regulate to be in this moment right now. We let adults do it. Why don't we let kids do it? So a lot of that stuff is that goodness of fit with the natural executive functioning challenges our kids have.

[01:00:54] All right, you ready? All right, cool, come on up here. All right, can we give my special assistant a hand? All right, so you're gonna help me demonstrate Scooper. Scooper is the best technique to give instructions to kids with executive functioning challenges. Autism, ADHD, giftedness, across the board. Now, Connor, right? So, Connor, at your house, when it's time for dinner, what does your mom do? Calls for dinner. And does she call quietly

[01:01:30] or loudly? Loudly, right? Parents, how many of us are guilty of this, right? I do it too. I do all the cooking in my house, and I'm like, kids, dinner! And of course, they're downstairs in the

[01:01:44] basement playing. They're like, "What?" I'm like, "Turn up!" Like, "What?" Before I know it, I'm yelling at my kids. Is that what your house sounds like? Yeah. And you look like a very good mom, right? So it's like, we all do it. So the first step is to be in the same place as our children. I am in the same place as

him. The second thing is, C is clear instructions. I know what I'm going to ask them to do before I get there. A lot of those parents are sort of like the Plankton meme, where it's like, what are you going to do now? I don't know. I didn't plan on getting this far. Well, if my kids actually listen to me, great, now what do I do?

[01:02:15] All right, now what I'm going to ask you to do is I'm going to want you to go to the back of the room there and get me one of the bags of Skinny Pop popcorn, okay? Clear instructions. And then I'm going to ask him to repeat them so I know he's got them. What do I want you to do? My man.

[01:02:31] And then I'm going to say, on time, I'm going to set a time to do the task. Because here's the trick, parents. If we don't set a time, our kids are going to do what we like to call the magical land of later. Because in the magical land of later, that's when I'm going to go to the gym.

[01:02:48] Matt already went to the gym today. I'm going to go to the gym later. And then you say to your kid, you should do your homework. I'm going to do it later. 2 a.m. when they decide to do their homework, it is technically later. They're not wrong. So I want you to do it after I count down from five.

[01:03:04] Okay? Then he's going to perform the task that I'm going to evaluate it. All right? So ready? Five, four, three, two, one, go. Oh, oh, he hit his, he hit his egg. There was roadblocks.

[01:03:22] All right? He's coming up, he's coming up, he's coming up. He's got it. We are evaluating. Did he do the job? Reward? My man, you can go sit down. Give him a big round of applause, guys. He did great.

[01:03:40] So the idea here is that's what scooper looks like. We're building a lot of structure and scaffolding around the instructions we're trying to give our kids. Now, you don't have to give all seven steps of scooper every time. But if you're having a day where you're just not connecting with your kids, follow the rules of scooper.

[01:03:58] And you're going to realize you're going to just get a lot of stuff if you're cutting through the noise. And you notice in this, I gave him a high five. That was enough reward. I need to give him a dollar. I need to buy him a pony. Fine, we'll go to Aspen, right? You guys all have places in Aspen, right?

[01:04:16] Who doesn't these days? But that's a good framework around this. Okay, another one here is the mindset of Ohio, or only handle it once. The problem with most things is we all have too much stuff to do.

[01:04:32] So we just hold it in our brains. And the problem with trying to hold it in our brains is it's like trying to carry water in a colander. The water is going to fall out of the colander. So when you are given a task, if you can do it immediately, do it immediately. If you can't, set yourself a physical reminder to do it later.

[01:04:50] In the morning, I'm like, okay, I have to get my kids to school, and then I have to go do this other thing. So I sell myself a reminder on my phone. So after I drop off my kids at school, which is usually around 9 o'clock, then I go, you have to go to the grocery store. I'm like, sweet, because I will forget that every time.

[01:05:09] So, you know, my favorite tool in the entire world is the Gmail, like, send email later button, because I got a lot of emails. And I'm like, okay, I can't respond to this email right now. Send it an hour from now, and then it's out of my brain. I don't have to hold it. 'Cause what I find is that when I try to hold it, I inevitably forget stuff.

[01:05:26] So, one of the things we've seen a lot that's really effective is set yourself a double alarm. If your kid don't need some time to decompress after school, from 3:30 to 4:30, at 4:30 you can do, we have to start doing homework.

[01:05:43] From 3:30 to 4:30, you can play Minecraft, you can fight a bear, you can do whatever it is you want to do, right? Don't fight bears, just making sure, right? Don't fight bears. The idea here is if you set a reminder for 4:30, that's gonna get your kids' attention, but it may not change their behavior.

[01:05:58] So then you set a second reminder for 4:30 too. 'Cause it's gotten the attention, the second reminder hooks the attention. And I do this for myself, and I'm like, all right, time to do the thing, and I'm like, right, right, right, right, right, but I'm still kind of in the zone. When that next reminder comes in, it's like, Oh my God, fine, I'll do it.

[01:06:17] So only handle it once. Communication styles and differences. It's not what you say, John, it's how you say it. That is basically every kid I see. The goal of life is that we are trying to model what we call pro-social communication.

[01:06:36] Now you're gonna go out there in the world and you're gonna see a lot of stuff that's asking our kids to be nice. And I'm here to tell you guys that nice is not the goal. Nice is a great way to get stepped on. It's a great way to make sure somebody takes your lunch money. Instead, we're trying to be pro-social, which means my needs matter and your needs matter.

[01:06:55] So what I'm going to do is, can I have your Stanley? Excellent. Matt gained a \$30 water bottle. Now, did you want to give me your Stanley? No, of course not, right? Because I could sell this.

[01:07:11] I'm going to pay for my gas to go home, right? But what you did was nice, and we socialize a lot of kids to be nice. So let's rerun this and give it back to you. Can I have your Stanley? Was that nice?

[01:07:27] No. Was it pro-social? because you defended your needs, and that doesn't mean I got what I wanted, but then we can step into that space like, is there another way for me to get water in this room? There's water right over there, right?

[01:07:43] Problem solved. That's pro-social. So the idea here is what we see with kids, is kids try to be nice, and they try to be nice so many times that it's like death by a thousand paper cuts. They're nice, nice, nice, nice, nice, nice, until finally somebody asks for another thing that's too much, and they blow up.

[01:08:02] Everyone's like, whoa, I thought Johnny was so chill. It's like, well, because Johnny has said yes to 3,119 things today, and he's lost his damn mind. Modeling pro-social. Now, sometimes being nice is the pro-social response.

[01:08:18] Sometimes being nice is like, if I have three pieces of gum and you want a piece of gum, cost me nothing to give you a piece of gum. That's nice. That's fine. But what we see is we're trying to model this idea that my needs matter too. Because if we don't do that, what happens is your needs matter, your needs matter, yours needs matter, until the kid way over crux and then only their needs matter.

[01:08:40] So, also, neurodivergent people tend to be something we call context independent. All right, how many of you guys have been to a Washington Commanders game? Okay, now you go to a Commanders, okay, I'm going to talk, is that a Stone Harbor shirt?

[01:09:03] Jersey! All right, your name is Sir? Tom? Great to meet you, Dr. Matt. All right, so, Tom, you've been to a Commanders game, right? Now, does your behavior here in this workshop look the same as it does at a Commanders game?

[01:09:20] No, right? I see no alcoholic beverages in front of you. You're not doing the fight song, right? We're not cheering for Jayden Daniels. So it's very different. So what Tom's behavior is is context dependent. He's changing his behavior as the different stakes of the different contexts present themselves.

[01:09:38] You're in a different meeting with your boss. You're gonna be different as a meeting with your boss, as you are at home, as you are talking to me, than you are at a game. Neurodivergent people tend to be context independent. We are how we are all the time, no matter what.

[01:09:53] So your kiddo who is like sort of quirky and offbeat and a little bit silly is going to be that way in class, which is probably fine. And their social skills group, which is definitely fine. And at a funeral, which is way less fine. Do you want to hear the joke about the dead body?

[01:10:11] Right? So what we want to do is we want to teach our kids how to what we call code switch. Adapt your behavior for what the situation demands. And if you don't know what the situation demands, Find someone you can ask for that situation.

[01:10:28] That's really what my book is all about. Because if we don't do it intentionally, we end up masking. And we end up trying to be the same thing all the time. That costs a tremendous amount of energy, right? You guys see the Barbie movie? You know, the first part of the movie where everyone's really happy.

[01:10:44] And she's like, do you guys ever think about death? That's what it looks like. When the mask slips, it's very jarring. So what we're trying to do instead is be like, hey, there are times it's appropriate to talk about death. And there are times where it's not appropriate to talk about death. And there are times you can ask, hey, can I talk about death right now?

[01:11:03] That's being context dependent, right? You're adapting to the needs of the situation. We're also going to focus on what we call pragmatic communication. Pragmatic communication is the implied meaning of words. Now, the implied meaning of words is something that our kids tend to really struggle with.

[01:11:21] Because most communication is done for and by and to neurotypical people. Oh, good, she's back. I was wondering, do you think I can borrow her for something? Awesome. Hi, sweetie, what's your name?

[01:11:36] Amari, hi, I'm Dr. May. It's really nice to meet you. Now, Amari, could you do me a favor? Could you sit down? Awesome. Now, Amari, let me ask you this. Why did you sit in a chair? Is that what I told you to do?

[01:11:53] What did I tell you to do? Oh, OK, Secretary, could you read back the transcript, please? So what it is, I told you to sit down, right? You sat down in a chair, which is the logical thing to do.

[01:12:09] But how this plays out in classes all over the country is that if a kid is a more rigid, concrete thinker, the exact instruction I gave Amari is to sit down. So Amari sits right on the ground. And they're just like, excuse me, young lady. You shouldn't be sitting in a, you should not be sitting on the ground. You're like, why?

[01:12:24] You told me to. You told me to sit down. So I sat down. Now you did the smart thing. You sat in a chair. You understood the pragmatic communication, the implied meaning of something. Now for all of us 80s and 90s kids, the best way to understand pragmatic communication is the way we imply different meanings with how we deliver words.

[01:12:43] So how many of you have seen the TV show Friends? Usually a pretty safe-ass in a room full of white people. So think about it. It's the difference between how you doing and how you doing. Now, the words are the same, but the pragmatics, the implied meaning is very different, right?

[01:13:04] So you did an awesome job, kiddo. Thanks for your help. So that's what we're trying to do. And when your kids don't know how to do this on their own, we use metacommunication skills. We talk about talking. when we talk about talking, we set expectations and we help ourselves do better.

[01:13:22] How many of you ever gotten a text from your partner that says, "We need to talk"? Super fun text message to get, right? If the next text message from your partner is, "I have plans for the weekend," or, "The vet had something weird to say about the cat," or, "You will not believe what the Johnsons are up the street are up to now."

[01:13:41] More context regulates our anxiety. Without context, we tend to get more anxious. So, metacommunication's a really good way to regulate ourselves. Now there's a lot of neuroscience behind social skills and we're really just starting to unpack it.

[01:13:59] One of the things we're gonna talk about here though is the power of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons exist in our temples and on the top of our head. And what mirror neurons do is we are social creatures. So it's evolutionary selected that we do things other people are doing.

[01:14:17] So imagine this, when we're hunter-gatherers, right, and we're in a clearing and one of the people here's something in the bushes and they go hmm if your brain sees what they do go should I do that too hmm maybe you stayed alive because maybe there was a disabled-toothed tiger in the bushes right so paying attention to what other people do has helped keep us alive but the problem is is that most of that behavior is done on a neurotypical wavelength so imagine that neurotypical wavelength is like four four time right through one two three four one two three One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four.

[01:14:56] Most people are on that beat. Neurodivergent is like 16/16th time. One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four. Every so often, it syncs up, and every so often, you're aligned. But it means you're missing a sizable percentage of what's actually happening because your brain is moving on a different frequency.

[01:15:18] Now, my favorite way to demonstrate mirror neurons is that if you do something that's socially relevant, this is a hot room, and we've all had long days, I'm thirsty, so I'm gonna have a drink.

[01:15:35] All of your brain's just fired as though you were having a drink of water too. And it's sending your body a signal, am I thirsty? Do I need a drink of water? I love doing this with my college students 'cause I'll do that and they'll be like, are you a witch?

[01:15:51] And I'm like, no, I just know how your brains work. A more simple version of this is, have you ever been in a room when somebody yawns? And all of our brains are going, am I tired too? You're parents, you're not tired, right?

[01:16:08] You're somewhere beyond tired. You're in the upside down. We also wanna model what we call cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility is the mental ability to switch between thinking two or more different concepts or to think about things simultaneously.

[01:16:26] Cognitive flexibility is fundamental to how therapy works 'cause you have to hold different thoughts in your head at the same time. We call this dialectic thinking. So how many of you guys have kids who are really competitive?

[01:16:41] Oh, I'm shocked, right? So you have a kid, like, I didn't win at the race or the spelling bee or whatever, so therefore I suck. Any of you heard that before? Now I can tell a kid, you didn't get what you want, so you're not the best, but you finished third in the whole state of Virginia in the science bee.

[01:17:00] So I got to tell you, you also don't suck. That's dialectic thinking. I don't have what I want, but that doesn't mean I'm terrible. That's what therapy is all about, because you're holding space for that. Like, I may not have the social skills I want, but it doesn't mean I have no social skills. So the idea here is cognitive flexibility also involves the idea of perspective taking.

[01:17:23] Gifted kids tend to be, neurodivergent kids in general, tend to be very myopic. What we think is right, because we're very smart, and everyone should listen to us. Usually a pretty safe question to ask, actually I'm going to ask you just because of your shirt, what's the best Star Wars movie? Who thinks it's Return of the Jedi?

[01:17:43] You got one. Now, I'm an Empire Strikes Back guy. I think those are one and one A, right? Those are the two best. Now, for a lot of neurodivergent kids, if her answer is my answer, I'm like, yes, you are also smart like me and are good.

[01:18:01] And if I don't agree with you, you are dumb and stupid and terrible. And neither of those things are true, right? What matters is we both like Star Wars, and we like Star Wars enough that we can have a meaningful conversation about it, right? So that's the perspective-taking thing, that other people have different thoughts, feelings, opinions, strengths, and weaknesses than we do.

[01:18:21] but because our brains are so loud it tends to suck up all the bandwidth right so we're like no i'm right you're wrong end of story now one of the other pieces here is the idea of in a way to apply this cognitive flexibility is the idea of intention versus impact now gifted kids and neurodivergent kids in general are the masters of what i like to call i didn't mean to kids in the class and you know the teacher's like okay i'm gonna call on somebody else what's the capital of Virginia and the kid's like, "Uh, Virginia Beach?"

[01:18:59] WRONG! You heard that kid's feelings. I didn't mean to, I was just trying to help him. I'm helping, I'm a good citizen. So the idea here is that our intention matters, but the impact of our action matters more.

[01:19:18] Your name is sir? What's that? Jorge, Jorge, could you do me a favor? I'm gonna throw this water bottle to you, Jorge. All right, here you go. Nice job, Jorge, throw it back to me. Nice job, Jorge, I'm gonna throw it back to you. He's got it, he's good. Jorge, just throw it back to me.

[01:19:34] Ow! Jorge, why? I thought we were boys. So do you guys think Jorge woke up this morning and decided to shatter my wrist with his very heavy water bottle throw? Look at this wrist, it's just broke, it's shattered right now. Right, do we think Jorge did that, guys, on purpose?

[01:19:53] Does that change the fact that my wrist is broken? I call this the baseball test, right, because if you're throwing a baseball back and forth and I miss the catch and it hits me in the nose and breaks my nose, it doesn't matter that Jorge didn't mean to break my nose, my nose is still broken, and right now that's more important.

[01:20:10] If you can't adapt the cognitive flexibility to say that, yes, my intention mattered, but right now the impact of my action is bigger than what I intended, then we're gonna apply that cognitive flexibility, that perspective taking, to having a much better social interaction.

[01:20:25] Because once I understand that Jorge was not trying to shatter my wrist with his water bottle throw, I'm gonna be like, yo, dude, I know you didn't mean to. Can you drive me to the ER, though? Because seriously, this hurts a lot, right? It's a much better impact downstream. Then like, why'd you break my arm? I didn't mean to, but it still hurts.

[01:20:42] Well, I didn't mean to. Not meaning to doesn't change it, right? I spent most of my adult life trying to teach my younger sister how to play frisbee. I played a very high-level ultimate frisbee player in college. I was like, you're really athletic. We should play frisbee. And every time I tried to teach her how to play frisbee, sooner or later, the frisbee would hit her in the nose.

[01:21:00] And she's like, you suck. I'm like, I didn't mean to. Why does this keep happening? So the idea here is that other people don't understand our thoughts behind our motivations. So if we can explain them, that's great.

[01:21:15] But we have to take care of the person who's hurt first. And then parents, specifically for you guys in the room, we're going to talk about what I like to call the supervillain test. Let's see. All right. I have not picked on this guy for a second.

[01:21:33] He thought he was safe. Trying to go all Lex Luthor on me over here. Hi, what's your name? Dan, how are you, Dan? Do you have kids, Dan? Excellent. Dan, do you ever fight with your kids about screen time, Dan? You've won this round, Dan.

[01:21:52] I'm going to come back to you later. Do you have kids at home? There we go. Do you have kids at home? Excellent. Do you guys fight about screen time?

[01:22:09] Sometimes, right? Yeah, that's good. So the idea here is, screen time is an easy example to use, right? Because if you have kids at home who like screen time, are they calmer when they're on screens? And sometimes as parents, do we just need 20 minutes to ourselves to get something done?

[01:22:28] So it's like, look, Coco Melon. Look, Minecraft. Look, something from Disney+, I don't care. I have 20 minutes of relative peace in this house. So what kids tell me all the time, they want more screen time.

[01:22:44] They're like, well, I'm happier if I have screen time. And mom, you need me to be happy. So we're going to treat this like a logical fallacy. We're going to say, you're right. I do need you to be calm sometimes. And I know you're happier on screens.

[01:23:00] And you know I need to get stuff done. So logically, if I had you on screens, then our lives would be easier. But here's the tricky part. If I know you're going to be happier on screens and I need to get stuff done and I'm still asking you to get off screens, I must have a pretty good reason to do that, right?

[01:23:18] It's either that or I'm a supervillain. Now, the idea here is that it's so absurd that it gets your kid to listen to you. You're anticipating their argument and then sort of bracketing them to move back towards you, right?

[01:23:34] Now, you don't have to like what we're doing, But what I find is in these family therapy conversations, it's like, no, it's like, listen, I know you want to go to the Taylor Swift concert. I do, I really do. And I know it would make you so happy, and I want to make you happy. I also don't have \$17,000.

[01:23:52] So I can acknowledge that everybody in this house would be happier if you went to the Taylor Swift concert, but since it's not realistic, the reason I'm not letting you go is not because I'm a supervillain. It's because it's not possible. You know, every so often, my son, he only asks to go to the beach in the winter.

[01:24:13] I'm not sure why. He's like, can we go swimming at the beach? And I'm like, it's seven degrees out. No. He's like, why not? I'm like, well, buddy, because you'd get cold and then you'd get sick, and I don't want you to get sick. It would be much easier for me to say yes to him and help him do that and get that little victory as a parent.

[01:24:31] But since it doesn't always work that way, we can use the supervillain test to sort of bracket those conversations. And then last but not least, we have third-door solutions. Now, neurodivergent kids are really good at pulling us into what we call zero-sum games.

[01:24:50] Zero-sum games are about, say, either they win or we win. Now, I'm here to tell you guys, that's not how most of life works. Most of life, effective teaching, effective parenting, effective therapy is about compromise.

[01:25:09] Because it isn't they win or we win. It's how do we all win, right? So, let's see. If you offer your kids veggies for dinner, right, you gotta eat these carrots. And they're like, I will eat zero carrots.

[01:25:25] And you're like, I want you to eat some carrots. It feels like there's no middle ground there. Either they win or we win, right? Kids get us what I call give up or give in. So I'm either giving up, you're like, you know what? I don't even care. Don't eat any carrots. I hope your eyeballs fall out of your head, right?

[01:25:42] Or you're digging in and you're like, you know what? None of us are leaving this freaking table until you eat a freaking carrot. I don't care if it's like one of those old movies and like the calendar pages whip by really fast. This is where we die. So what we can do is like, you know what, eat carrots?

[01:26:00] Let's have a healthy fruit or vegetable instead. I'll eat an apple. Eat an apple. That's compromise. That's a third door solution. The idea here is when we meet our kids in the middle, we show them that their opinions matter and we hold boundaries as parents, right?

[01:26:17] That's what the most effective compromise is. So, okay, now we are very short on time because you guys have been such a great group. We've really gotten deep on some stuff, which is super cool. You guys are gonna get these slides anyway, so don't worry about that. I wanna show you two more things and then we'll stop, okay?

[01:26:34] This is a really good one. All right, everybody do me a favor. If you are able, give me a thumbs up. Thank you for giving me a thumbs up. I am doing a good job. That is exactly the joke, the laugh the joke gets every time. It's not a good joke, right?

[01:26:50] But while you're giving me a thumbs up, take a look at your thumbnail. That's the size of your amygdala. The amygdala is the source of fight-or-flight emotions in our brain. Now if you're able, take your other hand and clap them together. In neurodivergent kids, the amygdala can be up to twice as large.

[01:27:09] Why does giftedness have a seat at the table for neurodivergence? Not only is it more neurons, the amygdala is often twice as big as it is in neurotypical kids. Why do our kids have such big feelings? It's because their brains are literally bigger in the emotional part of their brain. And we talked about how that prefrontal cortex, which is a weaker job at regulating behavior, that's that intersection, right?

[01:27:29] You've got the engine of a 2026 Ferrari Testarossa and the brake system of the tricycle you drove when you were two. It's not a great combo. It would probably help you on the beltway, but still. So, all right. We're going to move through this.

[01:27:44] La, la, la, la, la, la, la. All right. So, let's see you guys are going to get all these things. Here, this is what I wanted to end up. I always like ending on this. So, have you ever read the book Aided Twist Scientist? So, this is a page from the back of the book, and I tell you, that's what this is all about.

[01:28:04] right so it's a little hard to read so I'll read it to you so at this part of the book Ada has filled the entire hallway in their house with scribbles and scientific notations trying to figure out how to solve this problem and her parents come in and initially they're mad and then they stop and they think like our kid is exceptional for doing this thing and they decide to support her on her journey so the poem reads and that's what they did because that's what you do when your kid has a passion and a heart that is true they remade their world they're all in the act of helping young Ada sort fiction from fact. She asked lots of questions. How could she resist? It's all in the heart of a

[01:28:40] young scientist. You guys are living that right now. You gave up your Thursday evening to learn about the science and strategies to parent kids like our kids. You are part of the solution. You aren't parent to the kids you thought you were going to have. You're parent to the kids you actually have. If you can stay in this space, things will get better for you. I promise you that.

[01:29:05] Because when we use knowledge, knowledge is not just power. Knowledge is empowerment. And I hope you're leaving our time here together tonight feeling more empowered. Because our kids deserve our best. And right now, you all have a lot more tools in your toolbox. Give your kids what they need.

[01:29:21] So perfect timing. So here's how you can give us feedback on this presentation. If you scan that QR code, it's also how we're going to send you the slides. Also send them out to Wendy to send them to you. You guys were an incredible audience.

[01:29:36] Thank you so much. Please give a big hand to our two student helpers. They were amazing. You guys are great. Love that.



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