



# Parent Training: Understanding, Supporting & Safeguarding Autism & Adolescence

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# Understanding Adolescence in Autistic Young People

**Key message:** Adolescence is not “worse autism” — it’s autism *plus* rapid physical, emotional, social, and neurological change.

## Things to consider

- Puberty can amplify existing autistic traits
- New demands (school, friendships, identity) increase stress
- Skills may look like they’ve “gone backwards” due to overload
- Masking often increases, especially in girls and gender-diverse teens

# AUTISM IN TEENAGERS

EVERY SINGLE AUTISTIC PERSON IS DIFFERENT, BUT THESE ARE COMMON IN AN AUTISTIC TEEN'S PRESENTATION



- DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING NON-SPOKEN SOCIAL CUES & SARCASM
- CONFUSED BY 'TEEN TALK'
- VULNERABLE TO BULLYING
- DIFFICULTY WITH SELF CARE
- FEELING LIKE THEY DON'T FIT IN OR BELONG, DIFFICULTY WITH IDENTITY
- TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OWN ROUTINE IS TRICKY
- DIFFICULTY FORMING OR NAVIGATING FRIENDSHIPS
- SCHOOL ATTENDANCE DIFFICULTIES
- STRONG SENSE OF JUSTICE
- DEMAND AVOIDANCE OR OVER COMPLIANCE (OR BOTH)
- MISINTERPRETING/ MISREMEMBERING EVENTS/ SITUATIONS
- HIGHER LEVELS OF ANXIETY / DEPRESSION

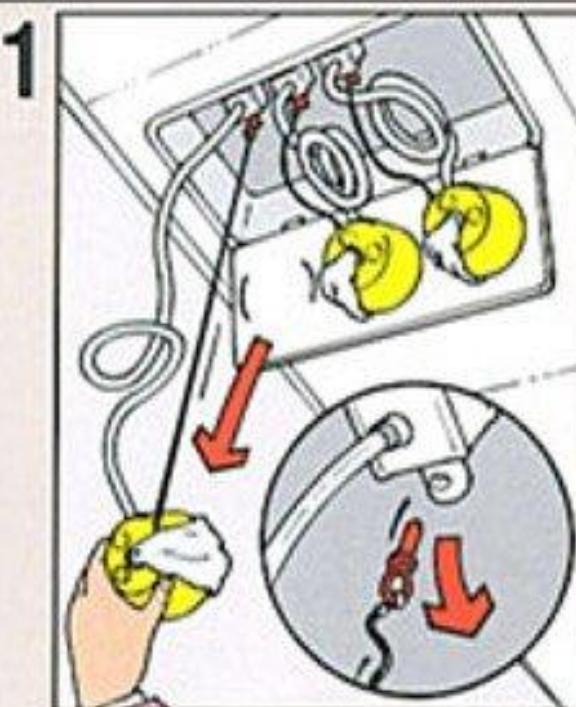
Designed by Sunshine Support: Award winning SEND Consultancy  
Using information from our research and own neurodivergent experiences  
[www.sunshine-support.org](http://www.sunshine-support.org)

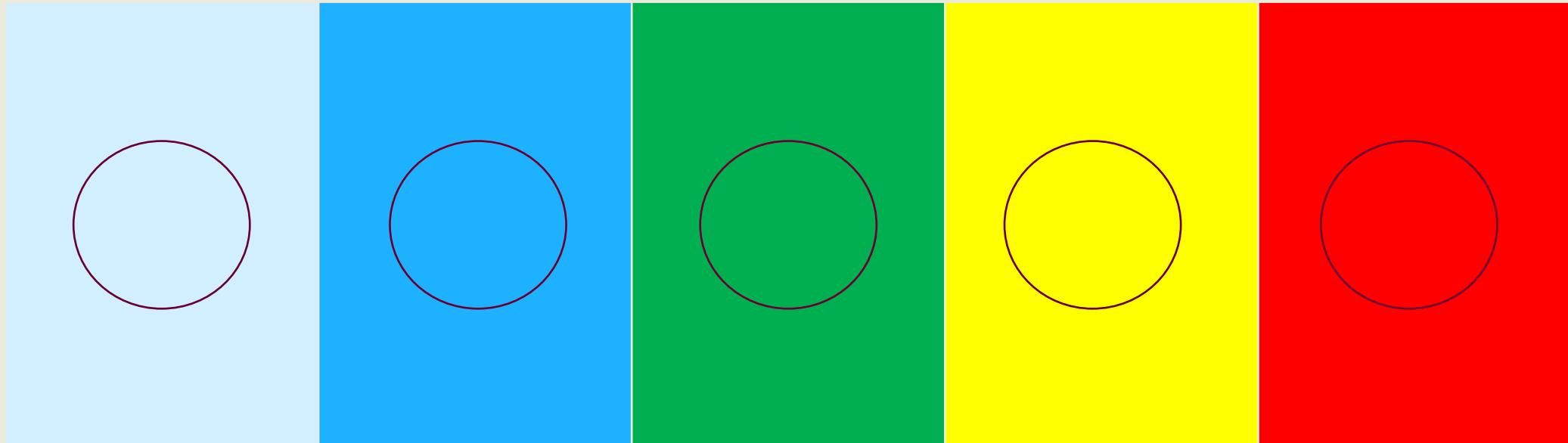
# Future-Ready Skills for Teens with Autism

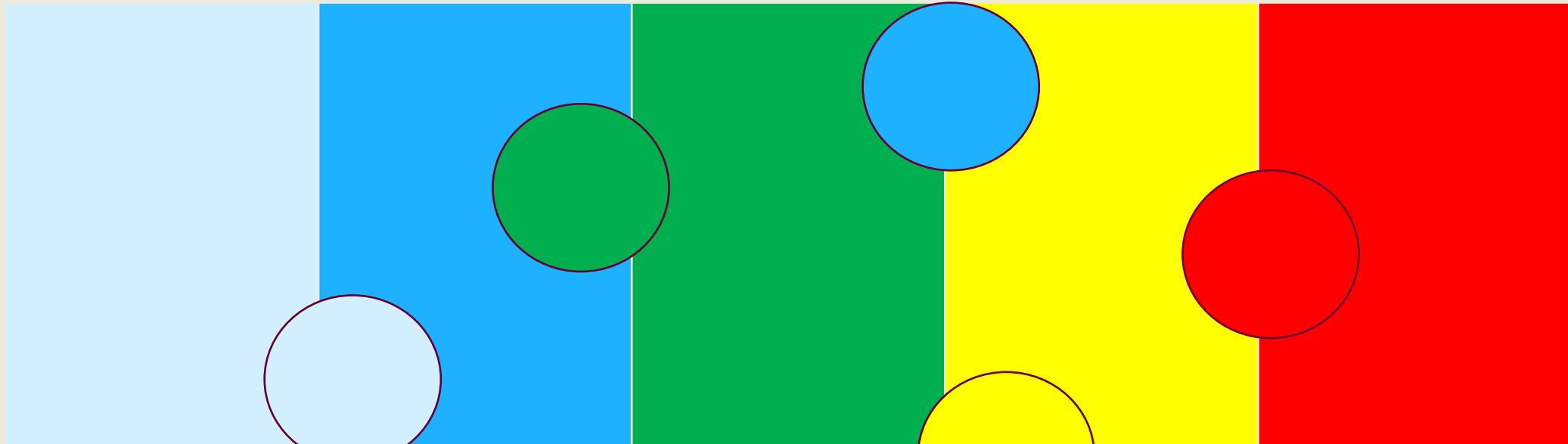
Exploring these areas with your teen gradually prepares them for adulthood and helps them discover their strengths and interests in the process.



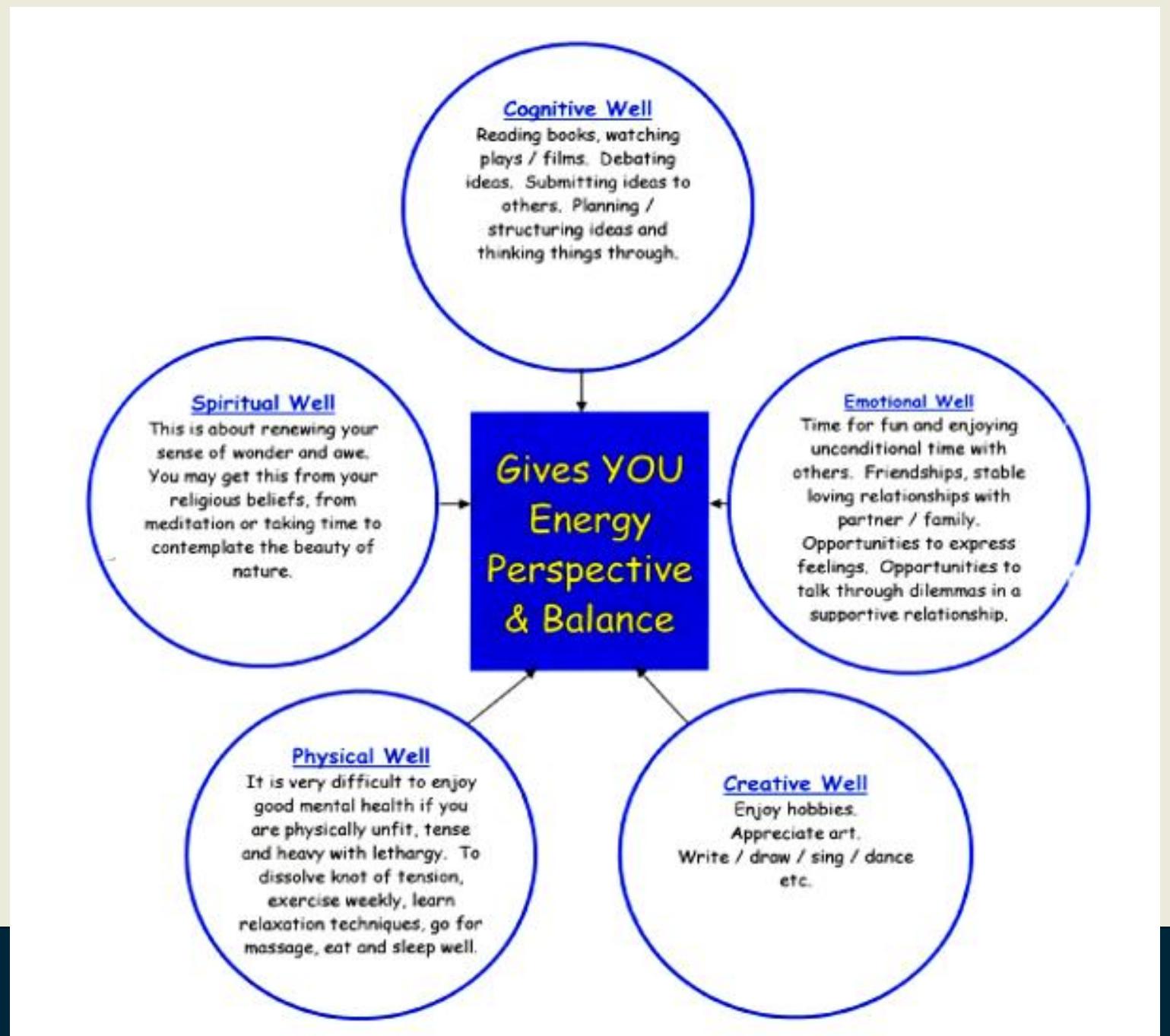
“...Place the oxygen mask on yourself first before helping small children or others who may need your assistance.”







# Wellbeing Wells



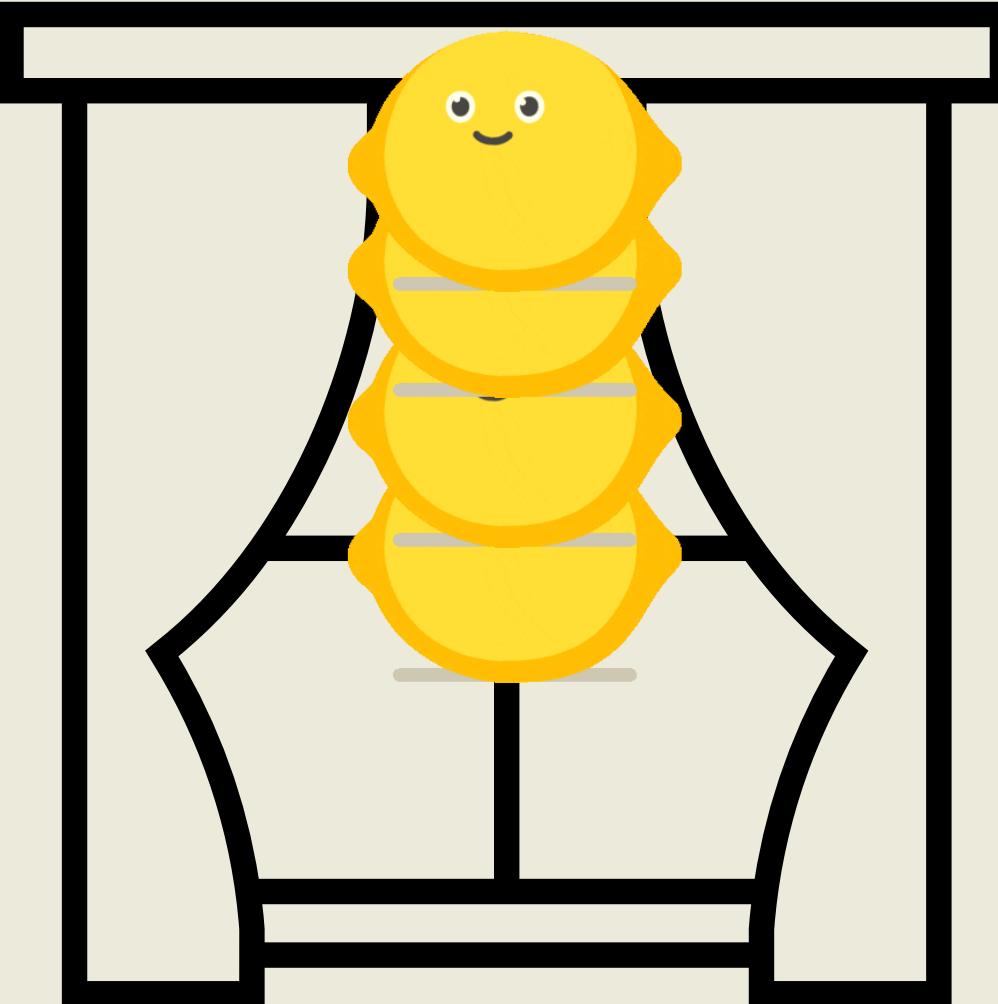
# Supporting Emotional Regulation

- Self regulation- self care, self soothing
- Mutual regulation- Safe Secure Support
- Develop emotional literacy- naming and expressing our emotions
- Talking about strategies that work and when they don't work- rebuild and learn from our mistakes
- Practicing strategies
- Reset- micros resets / big reset/ full reset
- Emotions log / diary / tracking
- Review what works- what are we going to start, stop, do more of, do less of



# Overwhelmed: Meltdown

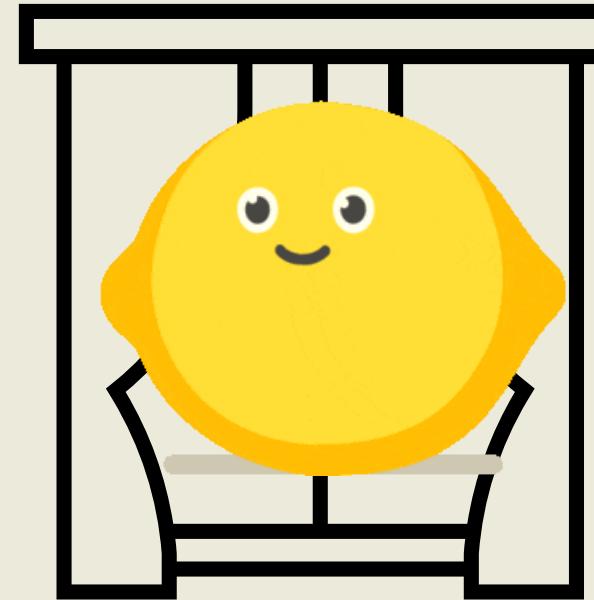
Window of  
Tolerance-  
Dr Pooky  
Knightsmith



Underwhelmed: Shutdown

Window of  
Tolerance-  
sometimes  
our window  
is very  
small

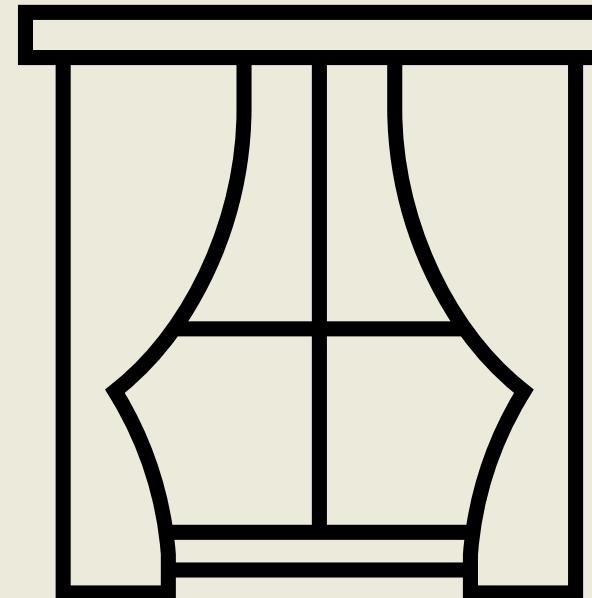
Overwhelmed: Meltdown  
Fight or Flight



Underwhelmed: Shutdown  
Freeze or Collapse

# Overwhelmed: Meltdown Fight or Flight

Is the  
window  
open?



## Underwhelmed: Shutdown Freeze or Collapse

## Age and Stage (Not Just Age)

Autistic adolescents may develop **unevenly** across areas.

Area	What you might see
Physical	Puberty may be early or late
Emotional	Big feelings, younger emotional responses
Social	Desire for friends but difficulty managing them
Cognitive	Advanced thinking but poor impulse control



Think about something  
you were able to  
overcome.

What strategies do you  
have to support your well  
being?



# Behaviour of Concern – When to Ask for Help

**Behaviour is communication.** The goal is to understand *what the behaviour is telling us.*

- Behaviours that may signal concern
- Sudden aggression or self-injury
- Sexualised behaviour that is unsafe or inappropriate
- Withdrawal, shutdowns, or refusal to attend school
- Significant sleep disruption
- Escalating meltdowns with no recovery time
- Loss of skills or sudden anxiety

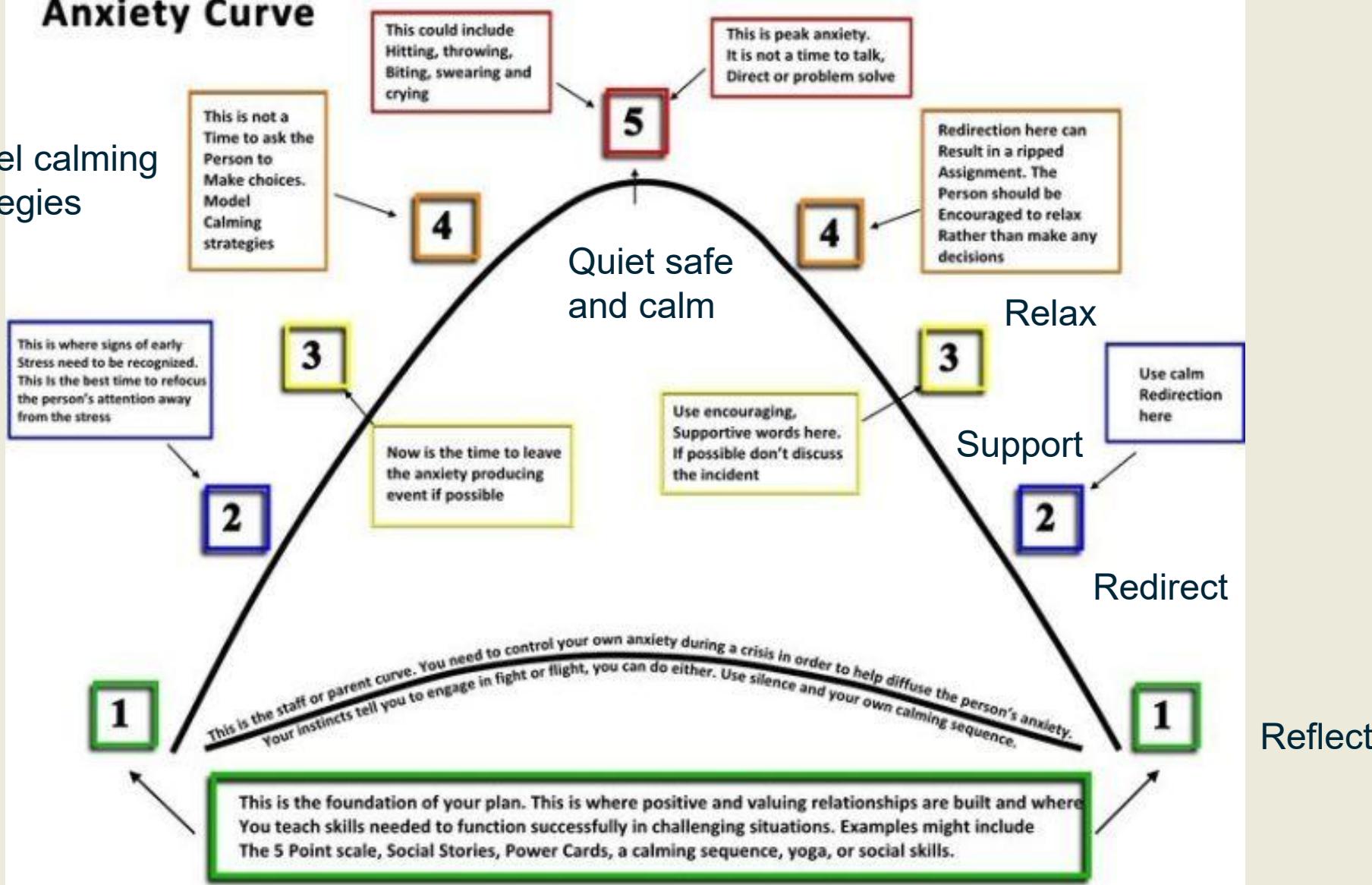
## When to seek help

- Risk to self or others
- Behaviour is **new, escalating, or persistent**
- You feel unsafe, overwhelmed, or unsure
- School is unable to support without external input
- Asking for help is a *protective action*.

# Anxiety Curve

Recognise triggers and distract or divert

Model calming strategies



# How to Support Behaviour

**Shift the question from:**

“How do I stop this behaviour?”

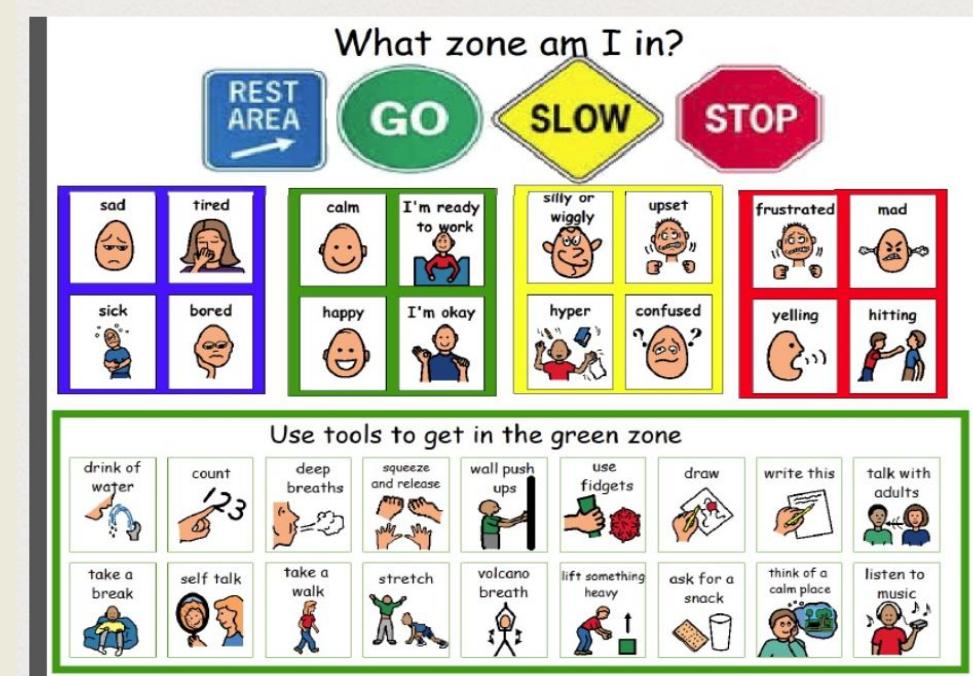
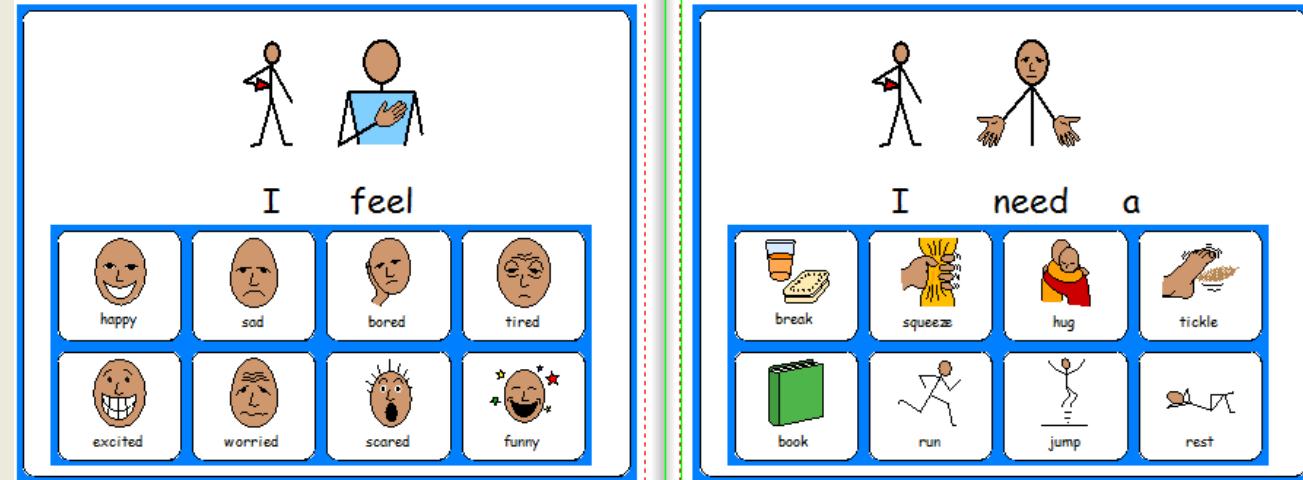
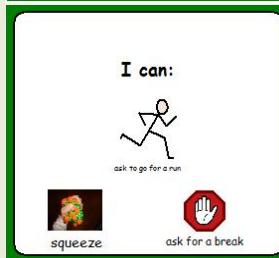
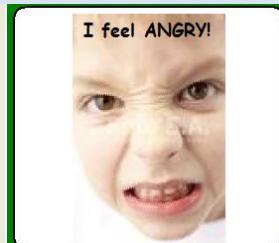
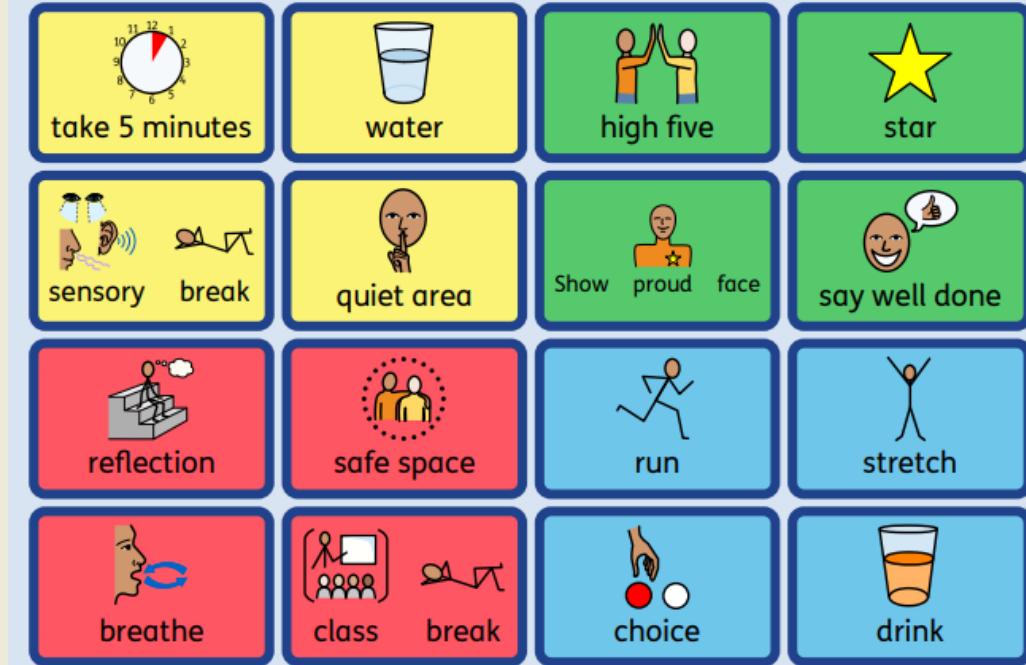
To: “What need is not being met?”

## Core support strategies

- Reduce demands during high-stress periods
- Predictable routines with visual supports
- Clear, concrete language
- Offer choices (controlled, not open-ended)
- Build recovery time into the day
- Co-regulation before self-regulation

## Avoid

- Punishment-based approaches
- “They know better” assumptions
- Removing safe coping strategies (stimming)



## Uncomfortable Feelings



I feel.....

Annoyed	Puzzled
Angry	Sad
Ashamed	Sensitive
Anxious	Scared
Bored	Stressed
Confused	Tired
Depressed	Upset
Disappointed	Uncomfortable
Embarrassed	Unhappy
Frustrated	Worried
Guilty	
Heartbroken	
Irritated	
Jealous	
Lonely	
Nervous	



## Needs we all Share

When I know how I feel and what I need, I can begin to think about what to ask for.

Food	Honesty
Water	Harmony
Exercise	Learning
Air	Love
Shelter	Play
Rest	Respect
Acceptance	Safety
Appreciation	Sharing
Belonging	Support
Communication	Trust
Consideration	To be valued
Choices	To matter
Empathy	To be understood
Fun	
Freedom	

## Comfortable Feelings

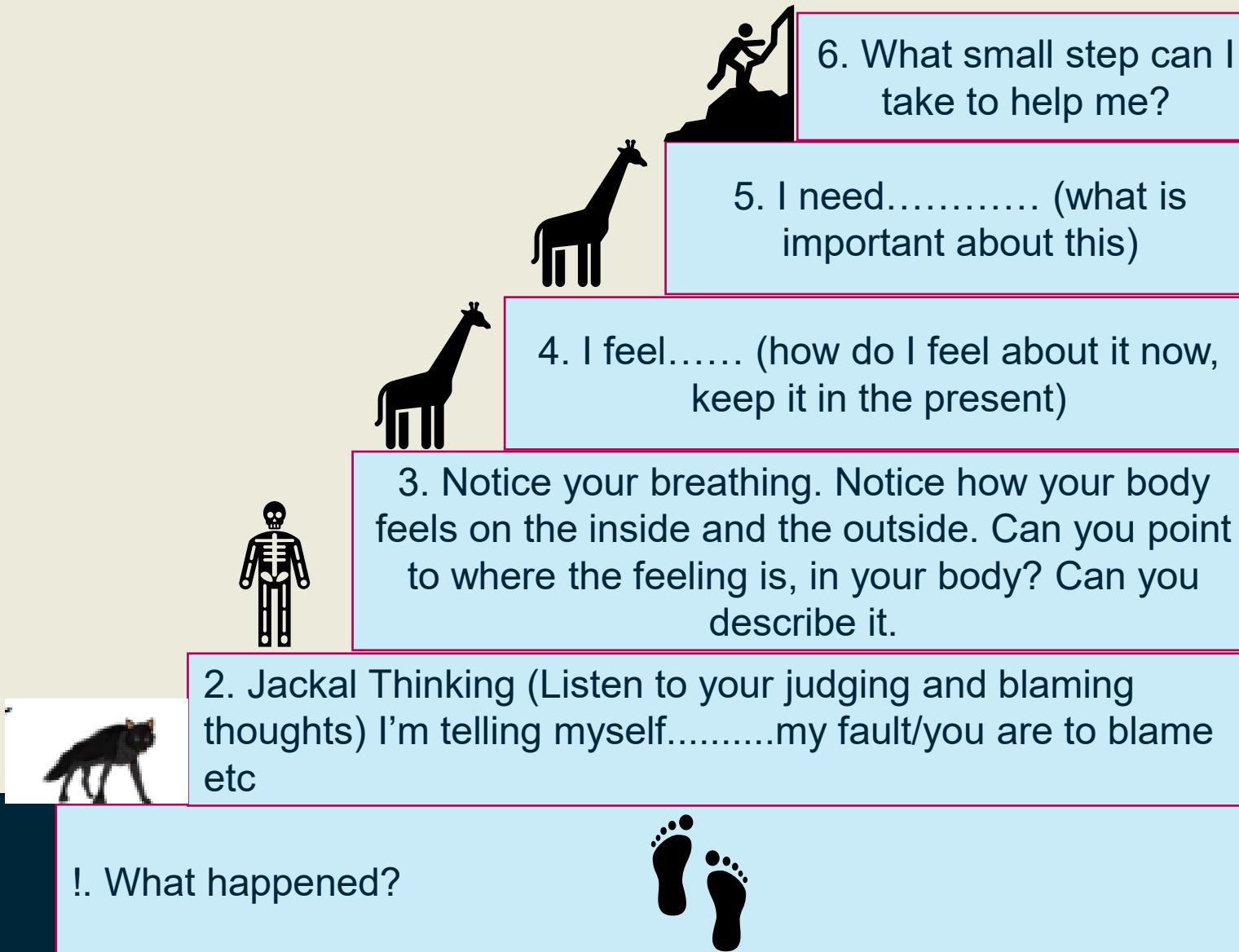


I feel.....

Appreciative	Involved
Comfortable	Proud
Cheerful	Pleased
Calm	Relaxed
Confident	Safe
Delighted	Surprised
Excited	Thankful
Enthusiastic	Touched
Empowered	Wonderful
Friendly	
Glad	
Happy	
Hopeful	
Inspired	



# Understanding the Jackal and Giraffe (NVC)



# Sensory Needs During Puberty

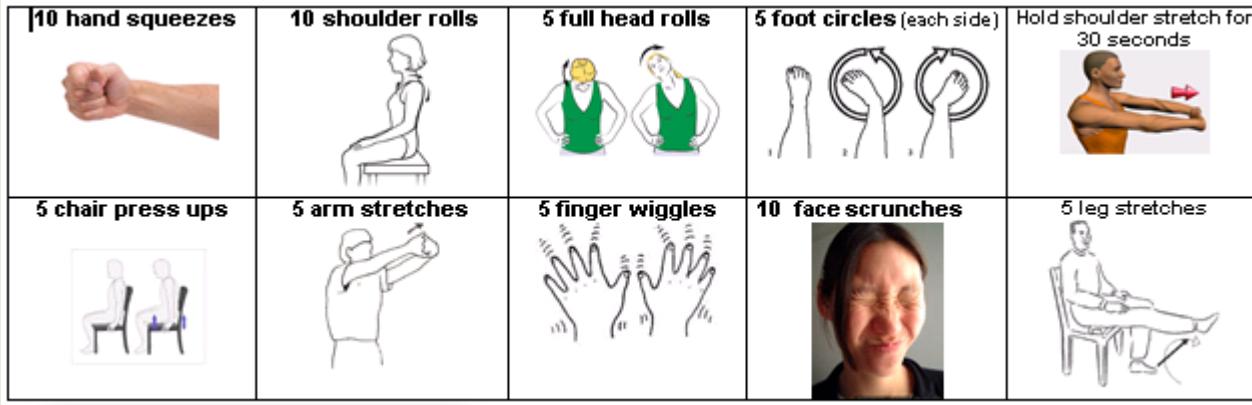
Puberty often changes sensory processing

## Common challenges

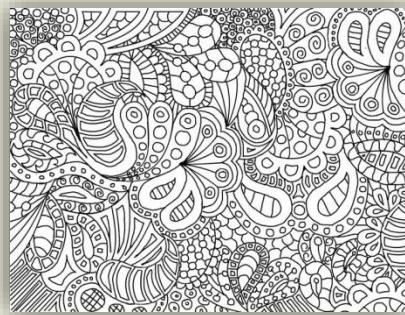
- Increased sensitivity to:
  - Touch (bras, underwear, pads)
  - Smell (body odour, deodorant)
  - Sound and light
- Pain sensitivity changes
- New discomfort with body awareness

## Support ideas

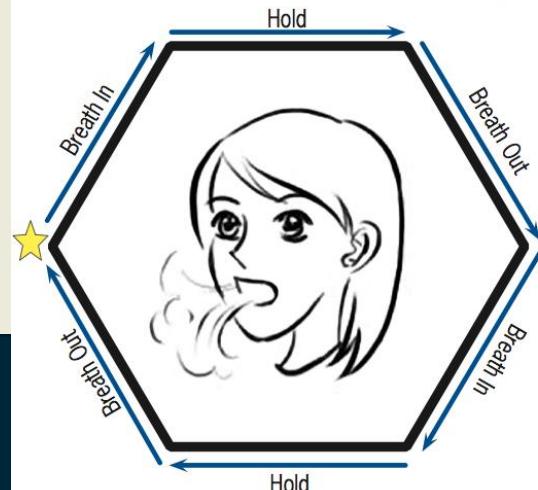
- Sensory-friendly clothing options
- Choice-based hygiene routines
- Trial-and-error approach (no “one right way”)
- Respect sensory refusal as communication



wiseGEEK



## The Six Sides of **Breathing**



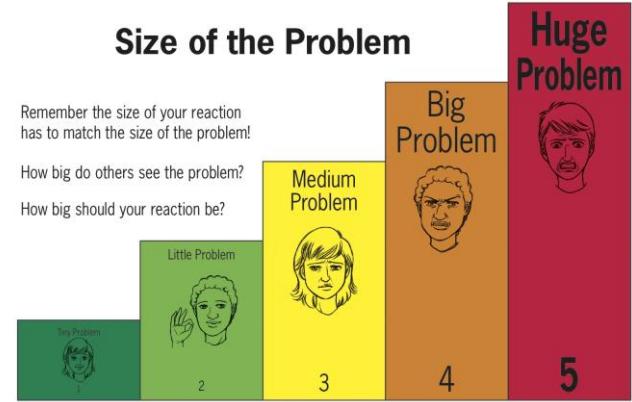
The ZONES of Regulation® Reproducible W

## Size of the Problem

Remember the size of your reaction has to match the size of the problem!

How big do others see the problem?

How big should your reaction be?



Visual adapted by Leah Kuyper, Donna Brittan and Jill Kuzma for The Zones of Regulation® from the original work of Wiener's Think Social! (2005), pages 44-45; www.socialthinking.com, and Buron and Curtis' The Incredible 5-Point Scale (2003), www.SportsScale.com

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# Calming and Alerting Sensory Activities

- Sucking yogurt through a straw
- Rocking in rocking chair
- Swinging
- Wrapping in heavy blanket
- Quiet space or tent play
- Rolling or kneading play dough
- Mixing in a bowl
- Listening to music on headphones
- Carrying books or other objects up and down stairs
- Washing windows, mirrors, or tables
- Eating healthy, crunchy foods like carrots
- Swimming, taking baths
- Bear hugging
- Painting with water
- Vibrating pillows/massagers
- Finding objects hidden in bucket full of uncooked beans or beads

- Jumping on trampoline
- Pushing or pulling heavy items
- Sitting on a “wiggle” seat pillow (one of many sensory integration products available)
- Squeezing squishy balls with hand
- Bouncing on therapy or other large ball
- Spinning in rotating chair or on swing
- Eating chewy foods
- Chewing bubble gum (only if age appropriate)
- Pillow squishing, making child into sandwich
- Taking a shower

# Hormones, Menstrual Cycles & Emotional Regulation

- Hormonal changes can significantly affect autistic adolescents.

## What parents may notice

- Increased masking → extreme fatigue
- Shutdowns or meltdowns linked to hormonal dips
- Emotional hypersensitivity or rejection sensitivity
- Reduced ability to regulate:
  - Attention
  - Sleep
  - Sensory input
- Increased anxiety or low mood at key cycle stages

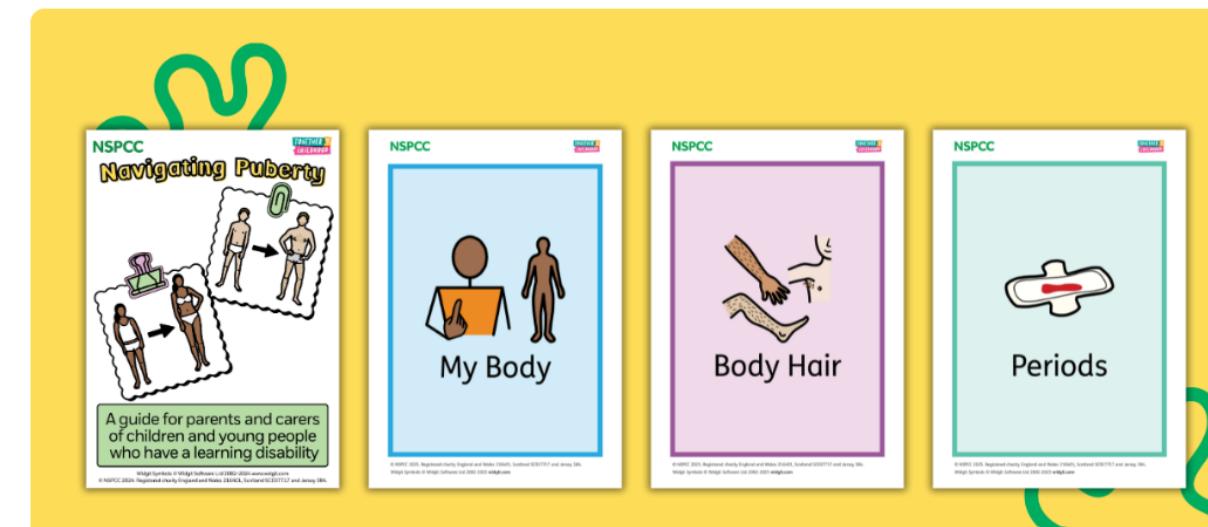
## Support strategies

- Track patterns (cycles + behaviour)
- Reduce expectations during vulnerable phases
- Increase rest and sensory support
- Normalise emotional changes (without dismissing them)
- Advocate for flexibility at school
- Increase understanding with social stories

# Social Stories and Information

## Navigating Puberty

NSPCC resources for parents and carers of children and young people who have learning disabilities



## Download

Navigating Puberty	PDF	Free
Body Hair	PDF	Free
Erections Social Story	PDF	Free
Masturbation Social Story	PDF	Free
My Body	PDF	Free
My Breasts	PDF	Free
Periods Social Story	PDF	Free
Private Parts	PDF	Free
Sweating and Body Odour	PDF	Free
Wet Dreams	PDF	Free



# Unmet Sexual Needs & Developmentally Appropriate Support

Sexual development is **normal**, but autistic young people often need **explicit teaching**.

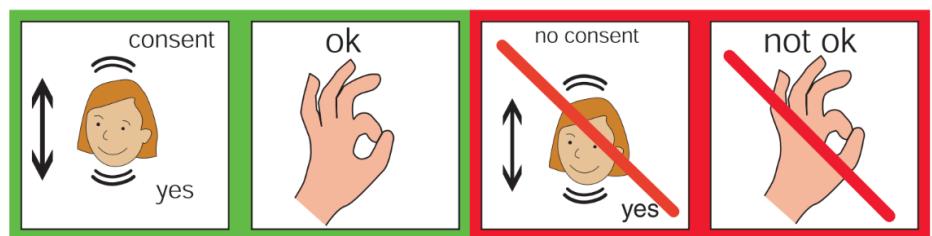
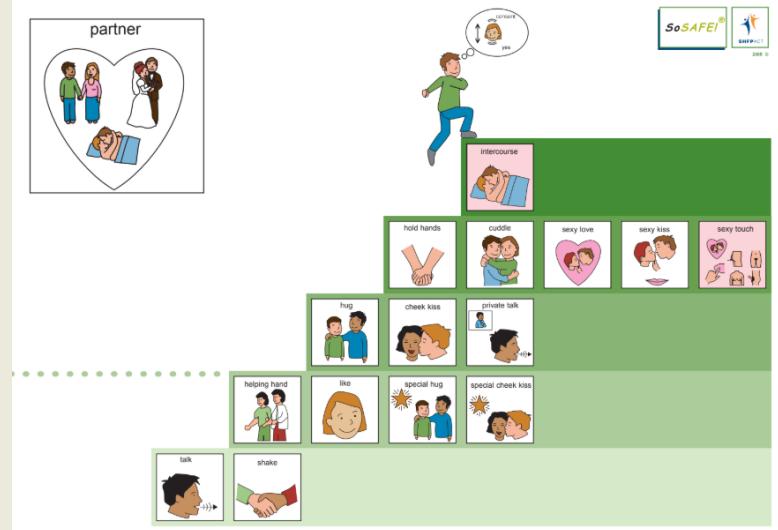
## Risks of unmet sexual needs

- Inappropriate behaviour due to lack of understanding
- Increased vulnerability to exploitation
- Shame or secrecy
- Reliance on unsafe online content

## What parents can do

- Use clear, concrete language (no metaphors)
- Teach:
  - Consent
  - Privacy vs public behaviour
  - Safe vs unsafe touch
  - Online safety
- Repeat information regularly
- Separate **sexual curiosity** from **sexual risk**

# So Safe Programme

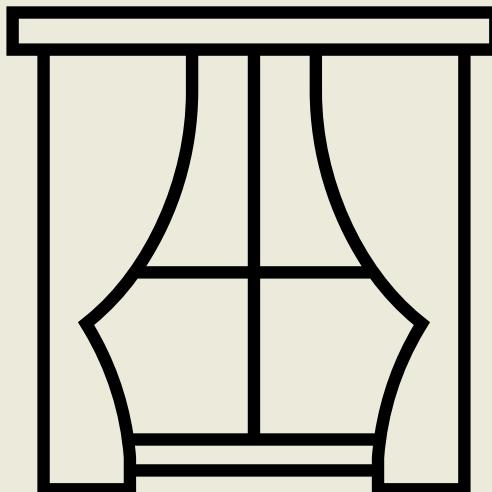


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# Safeguarding

Autistic adolescents are at **higher risk** of:

- Grooming
- Coercion
- Sexual exploitation
- Bullying framed as “friendship”



## Protective factors

- Trusted adults they can talk to
- Clear body autonomy rules
- Scripts for unsafe situations
- Explicit teaching about consent and power dynamics
- Monitoring without shaming

Safeguarding is about **empowerment**, not restriction.

# Shutdown Vs Meltdown

Meltdown	Shutdown
External	Internal
Loud, visible	Quiet, withdrawn
Fight/flight	Freeze
Needs space & safety	Needs time & low demand

# Plan for Change

- 1.What are the observable behaviours you see?
- 2.What do you think is underlying these behaviours?
- 3.What can we do to support?
- 4.Who? What? Where and When?



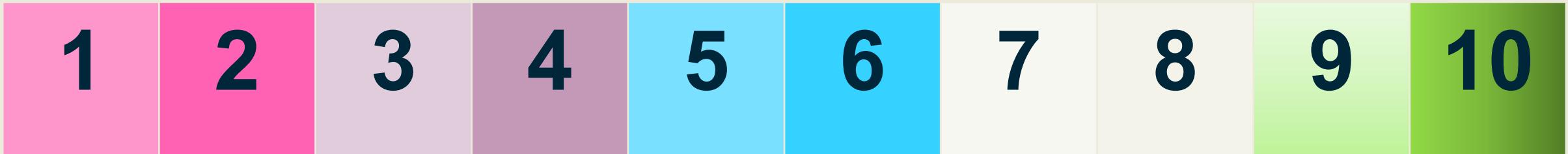
# Parent Wellbeing

Supporting an autistic adolescent is demanding

## Parents need

- Permission to rest
- Peer support
- Clear professional guidance
- Validation, not blame

Use the scale to assess and review



On a scale of 1-10 where are you?

On a scale of 1-10 where are you now?



# Questions Comments Concerns and Queries

