



Beyond Compliance: Building Neuroaffirming Autism Classes

Part 4 of 4

The classroom in practice

Part 4 index

The classroom in practice



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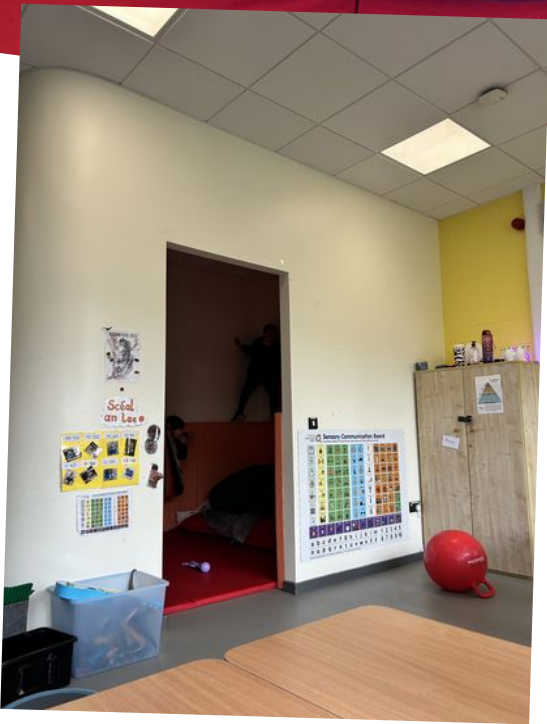
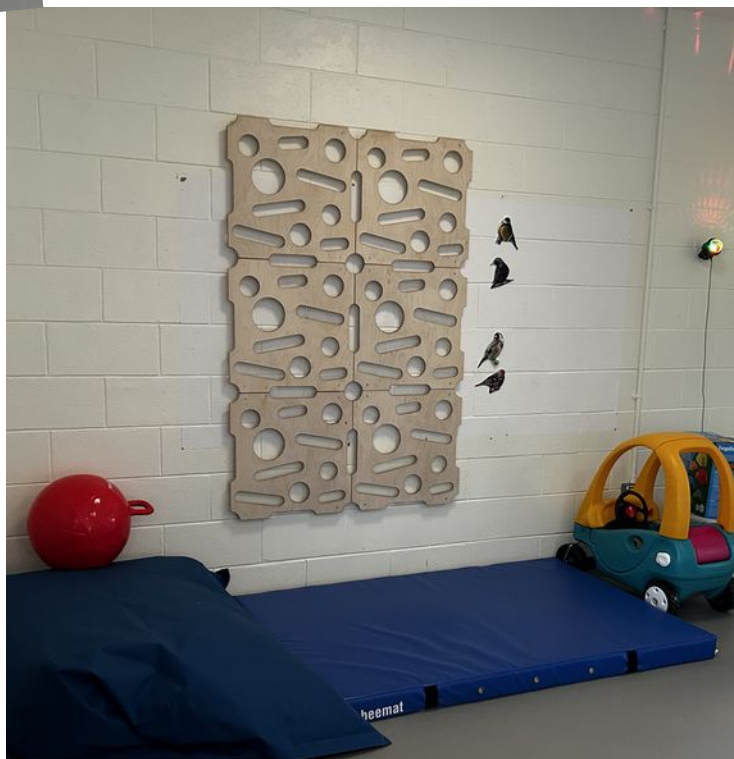
The Physical Classroom

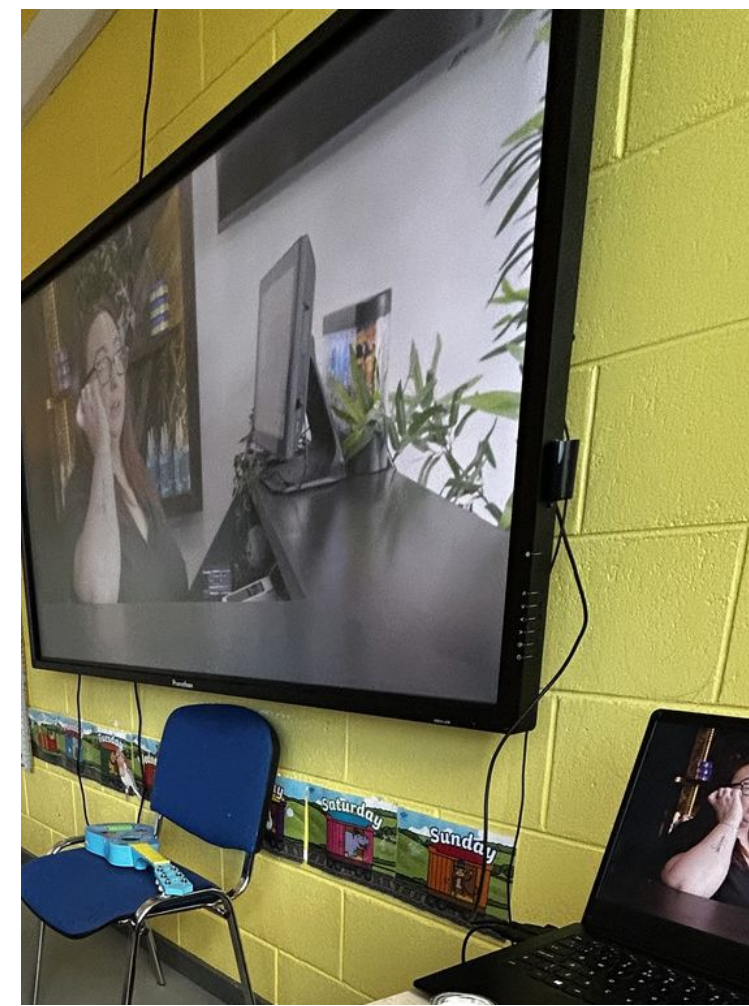


- ✓ Always available regulation activities
- ✓ No closing off zones
- ✓ No segregated work stations – this does not mean we don't facilitate a quiet space if a child seeks it!
- ✓ Build your classroom and routines around your kids.
- ✓ Do not lock high-interest toys away as a carrot/ reward.
- ✓ Facilitate snacking, access to lunchbox.
This might seem small but it's not!



Our Classrooms





A flexible space to regulate, work, play and rest.

Simple things to be aware of

- Lighting – lamps and dimmers are great
- Noise – clocks, electronic low level noise, can we reduce the intercom volume or turn it off?
- Reduce visual clutter on the walls
- Find permanent spaces for toys, activities and supplies – predictable and tidy.
- Ask the school population before you spend money on toys, beanbags etc.
- Lots of options for rest – not just one cosy corner.
- Flexible seating is the best – especially wobble stools, bean bags & peanut balls.



My recommendations for classroom equipment



Swing
Peanut ball
Mellow Elephant Beanbags
Climbing wall
Crash mat
Wobble board
Slide – outside
Balance bike – outside

Water / Sand trays
Mini Trampoline
Bubble Tube
Tent
Weighted Blanket
Cushions and Blankets
Aurora Borealis Projector Light
Cause and effect toys



Don't forget
we are all sensory beings, so
every room is a sensory room
...but it's how
effectively that room serves
the needs of it's occupants
is the key question.

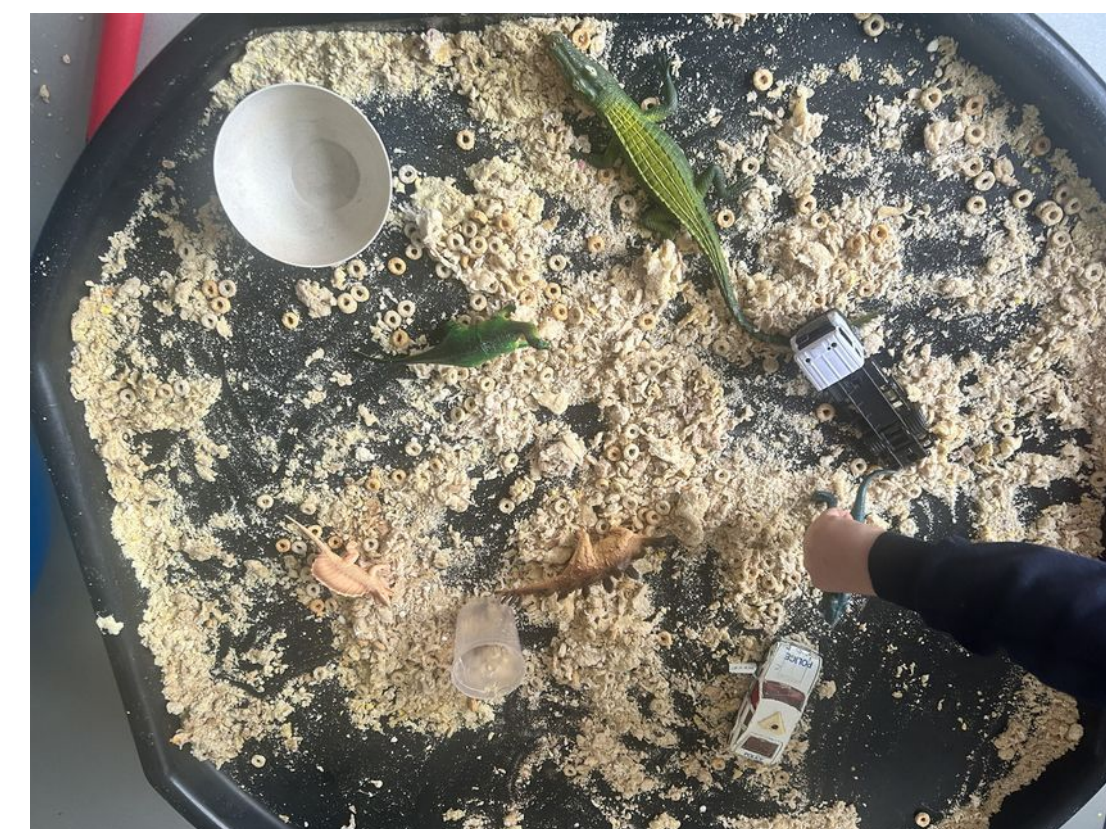
A word on safety

Many people look at my content on Instagram and send me messages saying that they love the set ups and activities but what about when kids eat non food items?

This was a huge concern for us in year one, I really do understand.

I would say, this may not last forever and also there's a lot of taste safe options for sensory play.

How did we manage? Truthfully it can feel impossible but you just figure out ways to make it work for your classroom.



Strewing

Originated with Sandra Dodd – This is the best and most successful way of offering interesting activities to kids in our class, particularly anyone who finds demands difficult on their nervous system (PDA).

Strewing is simply leaving activities set up, with zero expectation to complete them or even interact with them at all.

Try and take your agenda out of the equation – this is about engaging the child, not about us 'getting them to do this.'



- ✓ Strewing can mean you start an activity and children join if they like the look of it, but without any direction from you.
- ✓ Also a child observing from the fringes is still participating in their own way, even if they don't get their hands on the activity. In that case it could be good to try again the next day and see if they'll move closer.
- ✓ This can feel like a leap of faith. But it's wonderful and opens so many doors to learning.
- ✓ When strewing an activity, it's not a failure if no one shows an interest, it's just information...move on, keep trying!
- ✓ Try to be nonchalant about it and don't try and cajole or convince a child.



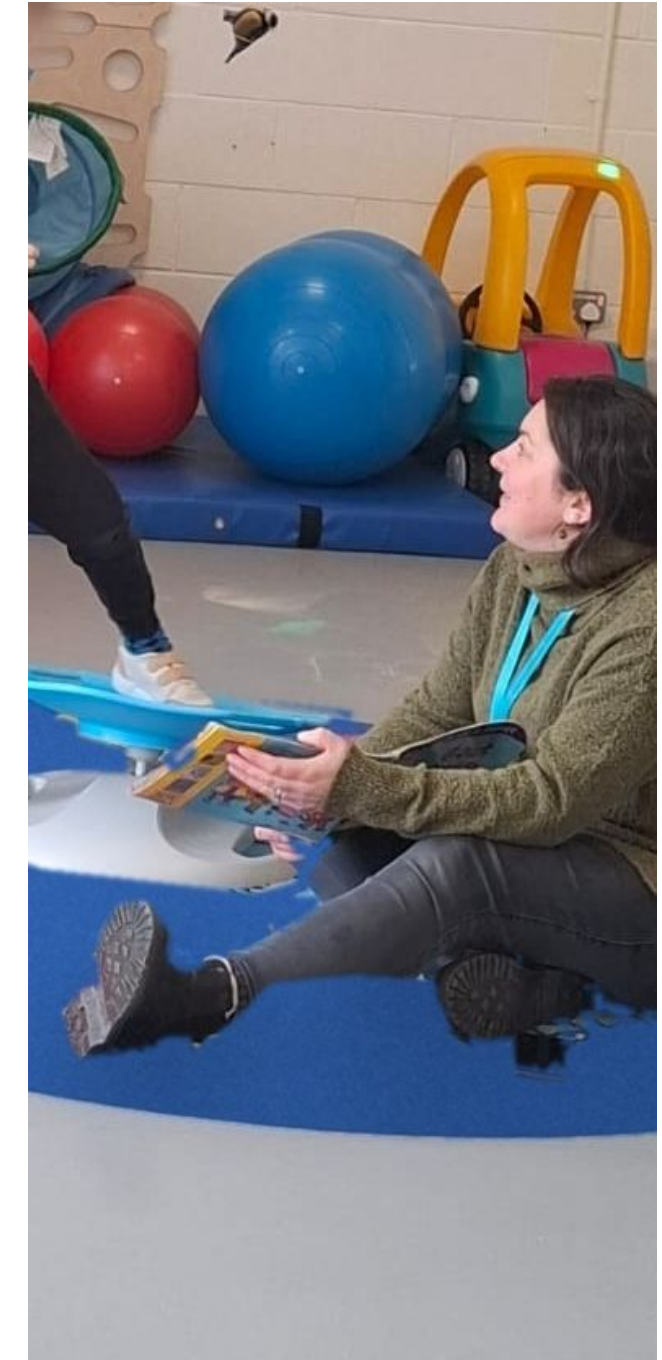
A classroom can be full of equipment...

But the greatest regulation of all comes from the human connection and attunement between the staff and the children.

I always say, the kids will tell me if I'm dysregulated, before I even realise it myself.

The communication, the joy, the attunement, it's the most beautiful part of the job. Working this way is so enjoyable.

Discovering what that child needs in order to feel safe will unlock all the future potential learning.

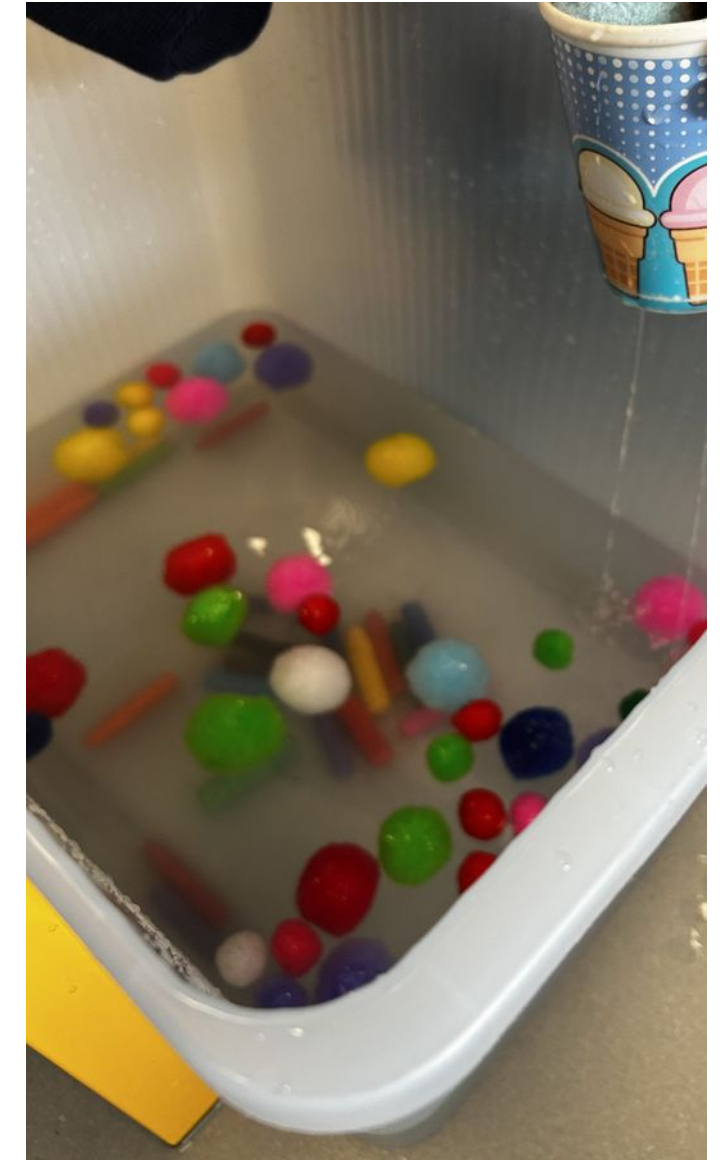


Seeking predictability

When we talk about autistic kids seeking predictability, we must mention two things
(I wish I had known):

- Cause and effect
- Gestalt Language Processing

To understand how and why these show up for the kids in our classrooms is to open the door to true co-regulation.



Cause and Effect

We might hear that a child might be throwing things, repeatedly switching on/off the lights, the laptop, switches, dropping things from a height to watch them fall.

These are all activities that produce a predictable result – the child is seeking predictability and this is regulating for them. They may also be exploring how objects move or fall, pattern recognition etc.

Providing the child with lots of cause and effect play is a great way to meet them where they are.



Cause and Effect Toys

This can also just be fun and there's some great toys that can provide cause and effect.



There's also lots of really cheap or free stuff too. Blowing bubbles, rolling objects down a ramp or slide, blowing up balloons and letting them fly away.



Gestalt Language Processing



When I think of cause and effect and seeking predictability, Gestalt Language Processing must be mentioned.

Gestalt language processing is a way some people learn language by first understanding and using whole phrases, chunks “Gestalts” of language instead of single words. It’s also how many children make sense of the world. These are can be incredibly meaningful.



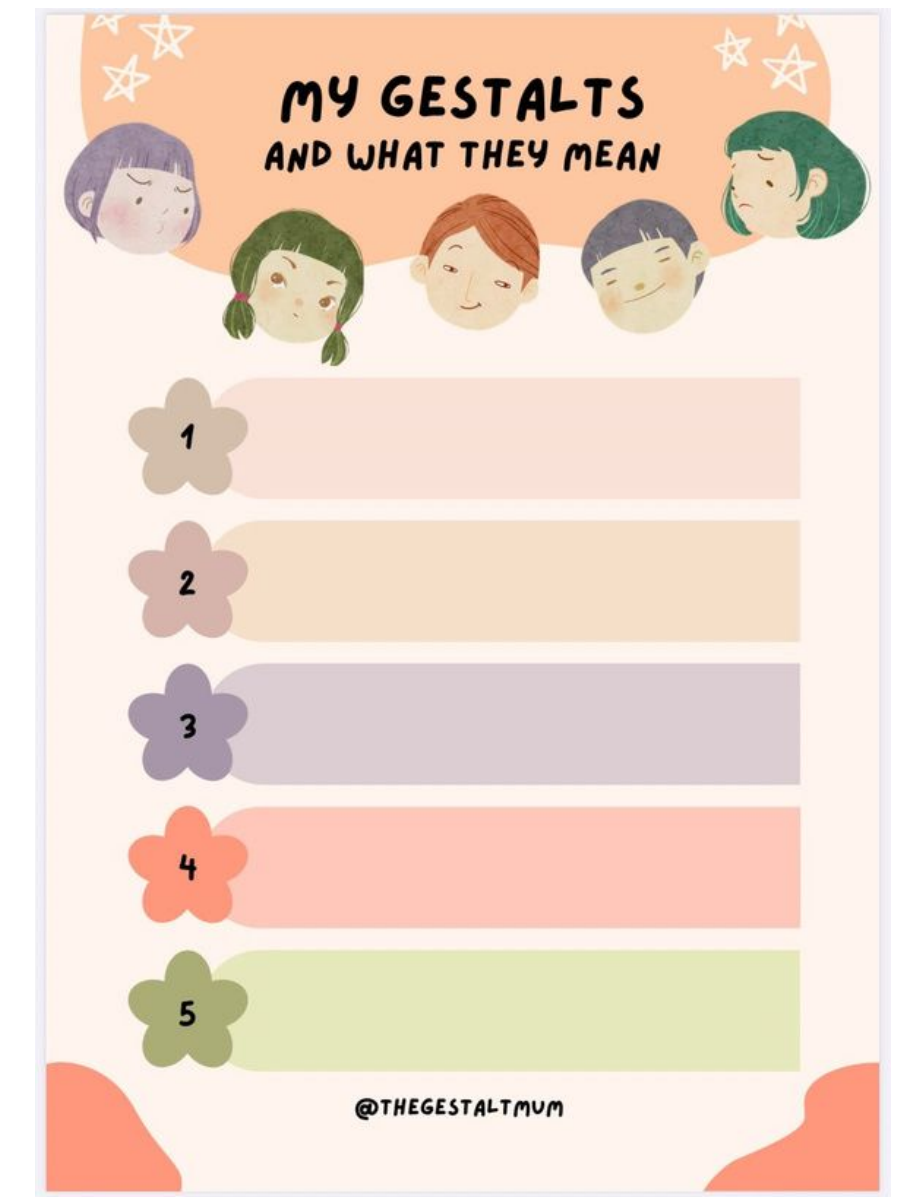
Gestalt Language Processing

Over time, these memorised phrases and even intonations may evolve and change.

Repeating gestalts back to children in the same tone and volume provides a massive source of connection and regulation. It can also provide predictability, reassurance and great mutual joy of connection.

You can ask parents to fill-in a simple Gestalt tracker, we found for certain children this was hugely beneficial.

Follow @sineadspeech and @neurodiversityireland for more on GLP and @thegestaltmum for a lived experience perspective.



Connection seeking



When we first opened our class, one of our little kids would climb up onto the window sill, all the time.

We, of course, worried about her falling and tried to figure out how to stop her from climbing.

We tried saying No and get down!

We tried to put visuals up to show it wasn't allowed!
Finally we tried ignoring it (and her) when she did it.

This is called 'planned ignoring' and it's a strategy I had learned along the way.



The reframe that changed everything

Of course it didn't work, she kept climbing up – we were at a loss and our efforts felt wrong.

It was around that time that I was doing my course with Ausome Training and one night I brought up this 'issue' with my tutor, Siobhán.

And in the gentlest of ways, she made me aware that this little kid wasn't attention seeking, but connection seeking.

We tried saying No and get down!

We tried to put visuals up to show it wasn't allowed!

Finally we tried ignoring it (and her) when she did it.

This is called planned ignoring and it's a behaviour management strategy I learned in college.



Reflecting and growing...

That evening I had tears in my eyes reflecting on the failed efforts of how our little person was simply trying to connect and we were pathologising her attempts.

That's a double empathy problem and that was on me. We misinterpreted her and we both lost out.

But we know better and do better and I went back in the next day and shared this revelation and every time that little kid climbed up, we connected, we swung her back down and it was beautiful. And she was joyful and so were we. And she rarely climbs up there anymore.



A different way to learn

In our class, teaching and learning looking different for each child.

Here's a little evolution of learning that started with a "Smyth's Book" in term 1 2024 and is still ongoing today.

What started with a love of toys now encompasses:

- Safety
- Connection
- Monotropism
- GLP
- Fine Motor skills / visual discrimination
- Literacy /typing and so much more.



Relationships with parents

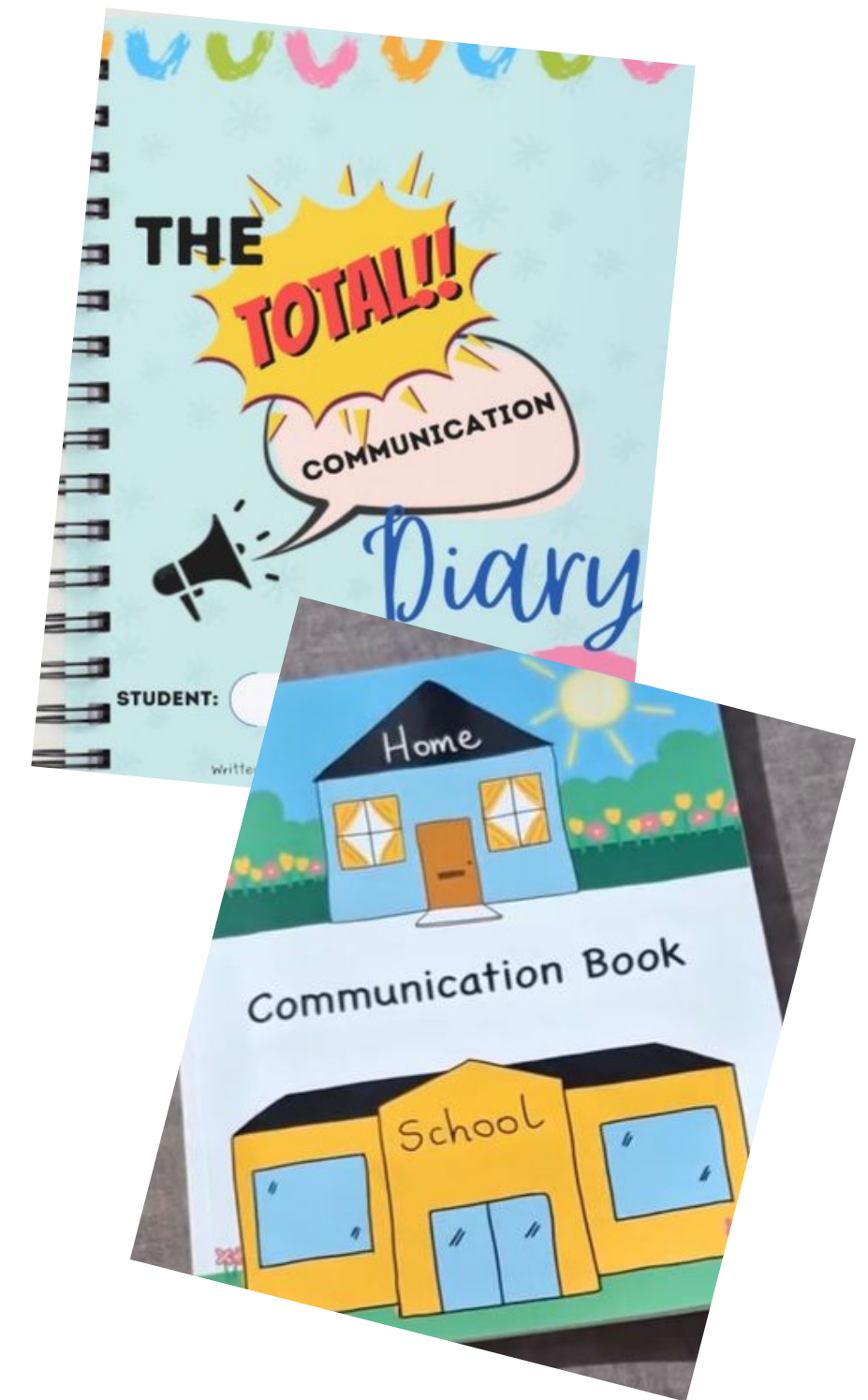
Unconditional positive regard extends to families.

Parents may have experienced trauma, loneliness, feeling othered.

May have had to advocate tirelessly for a class place or heard their child being pathologised again and again.

May be from marginalised backgrounds and have been discriminated against already

May find it hard to open up and trust us.



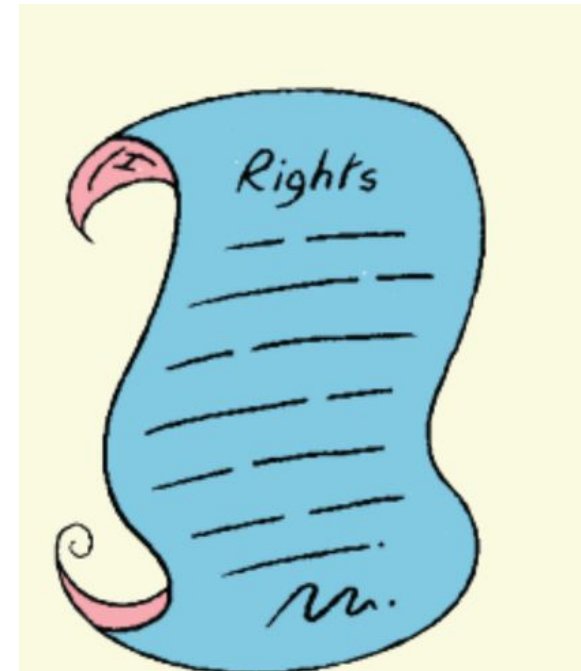
Management Responsibility



It is not up to the staff in the Autism class to educate the whole school about inclusion.

If you are opening an Autism class, please prioritise whole staff training in neuroaffirmative, inclusive practices that includes ALL staff.

The children in the autism class are just as much a part of the school community as any others –making your school accessible is crucial.



Please also make sure staff breaks and adequate supervision is agreed at the start. Staff should not have to advocate within their own school setting for their rights and the rights of the children.

For all staff



Please don't place neuronormative expectations on the children – this is stressful for the staff in the class, as well as for the families – but most of all, it's harmful for the children themselves.

If you're finding it difficult to understand these concepts presented here, get curious. Modelling this attitude for all staff is vitally important.

Opening an autism class should be seen as a positive initiative. All children are little human beings, who will thrive in the right environment.



Thank you all so much

- **Q&A**
- **Please follow @neurodiversityireland on instagram**
- **Go to www.neurodiversityireland.com for training and resources**

