



Strengths-Based Practices in Action

Meg Ferrell, MS, OTR/L





Meg Ferrell, OTR/L

Hi, I'm Meg!

- Occupational therapist
- Founder of Learn Play Thrive, providing continuing education courses for OTs, SLPs, school psychologists, and mental health providers
- Host of Two Sides of the Spectrum Podcast
- Founder of Learn Play Thrive Parents

Your roadmap

- Part 1: Authentic Well-Being
- Part 2: Practices to Reconsider
- Part 3: Strengths-Based Practices



Part 1: Authentic Well Being

What does authentic well-being mean?

- Knowing yourself and what you need to thrive
- Having access the things that bring you joy
- Feeling truly accepted in your community as your authentic self
- What would you add to this list?

Knowing Your Neurotype

People around me didn't seem to struggle
in the same ways that I did,



- Lyric Holmans, Two Sides of the Spectrum, Episode 22

Knowing Your Neurotype

I've had a massive growth spurt
kind of personally, professionally



- Emily Lees, Two Sides of the Spectrum Podcast, Episode 11

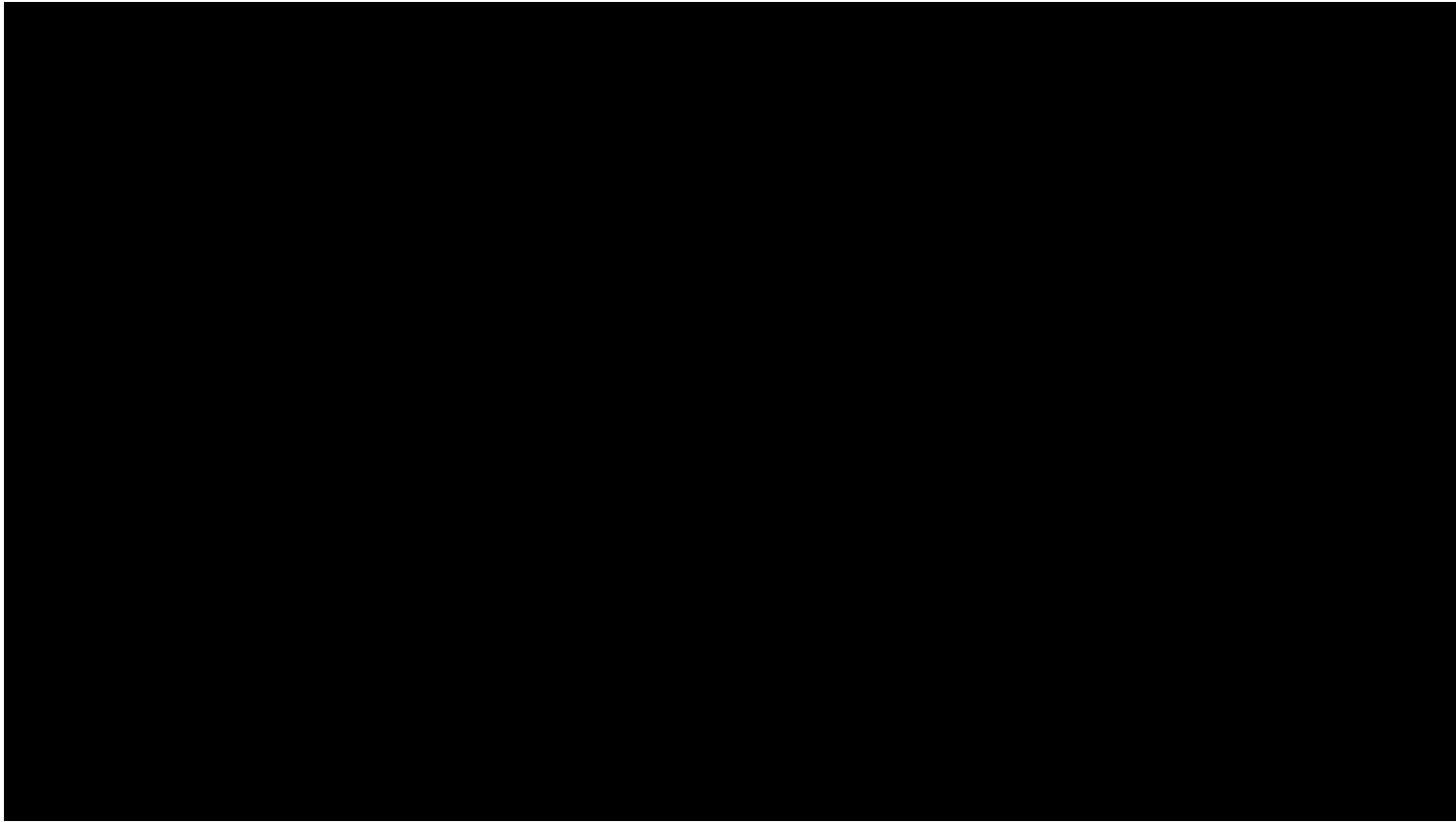


I often ask Autistic adults on the Two Sides of the Spectrum Podcast “What do you wish your providers or teachers had done differently when you were a kid”

The #1 answer: “More access to my passions.”



Accessing Your Passions



– Joy F Johnson, Two Sides of the Spectrum, Episode 6

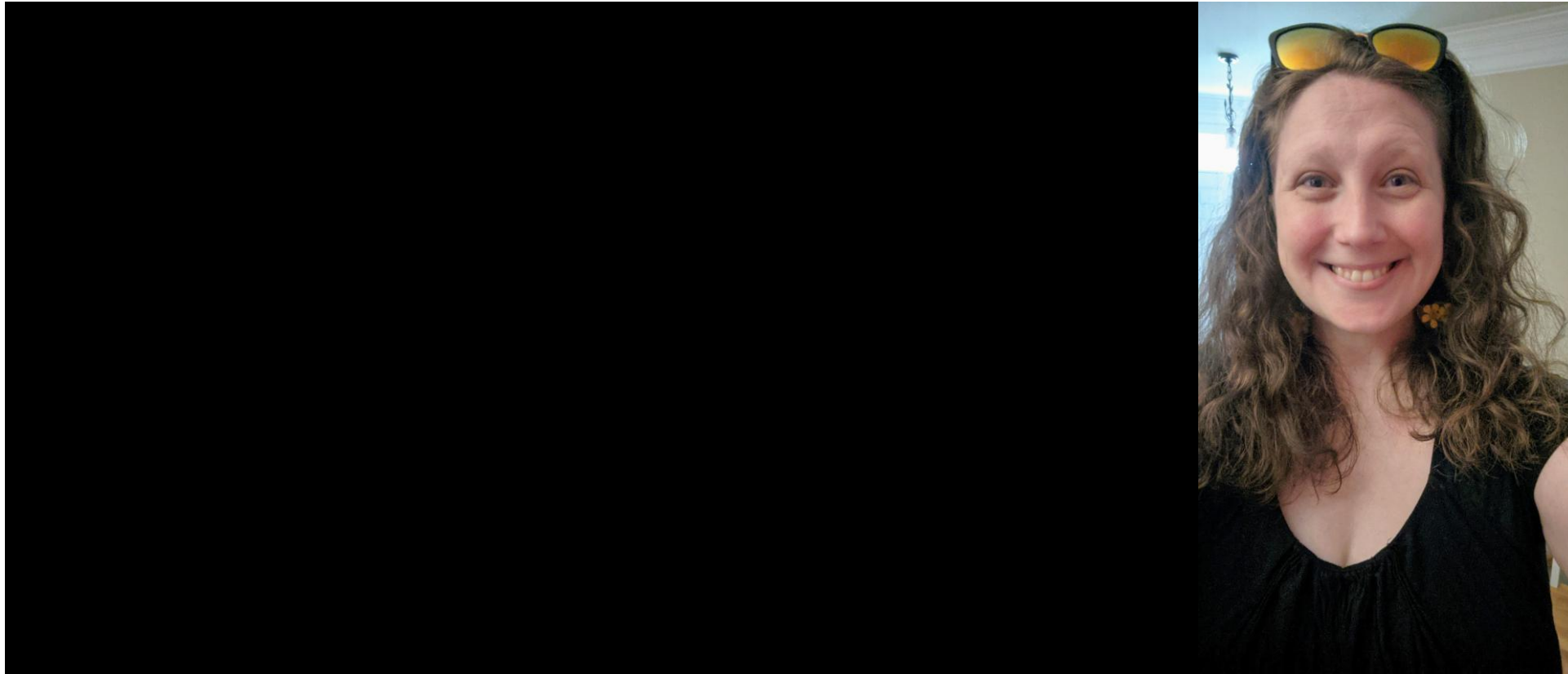
Accessing Your Passions

People try to
dictate to us what leisure activity is.



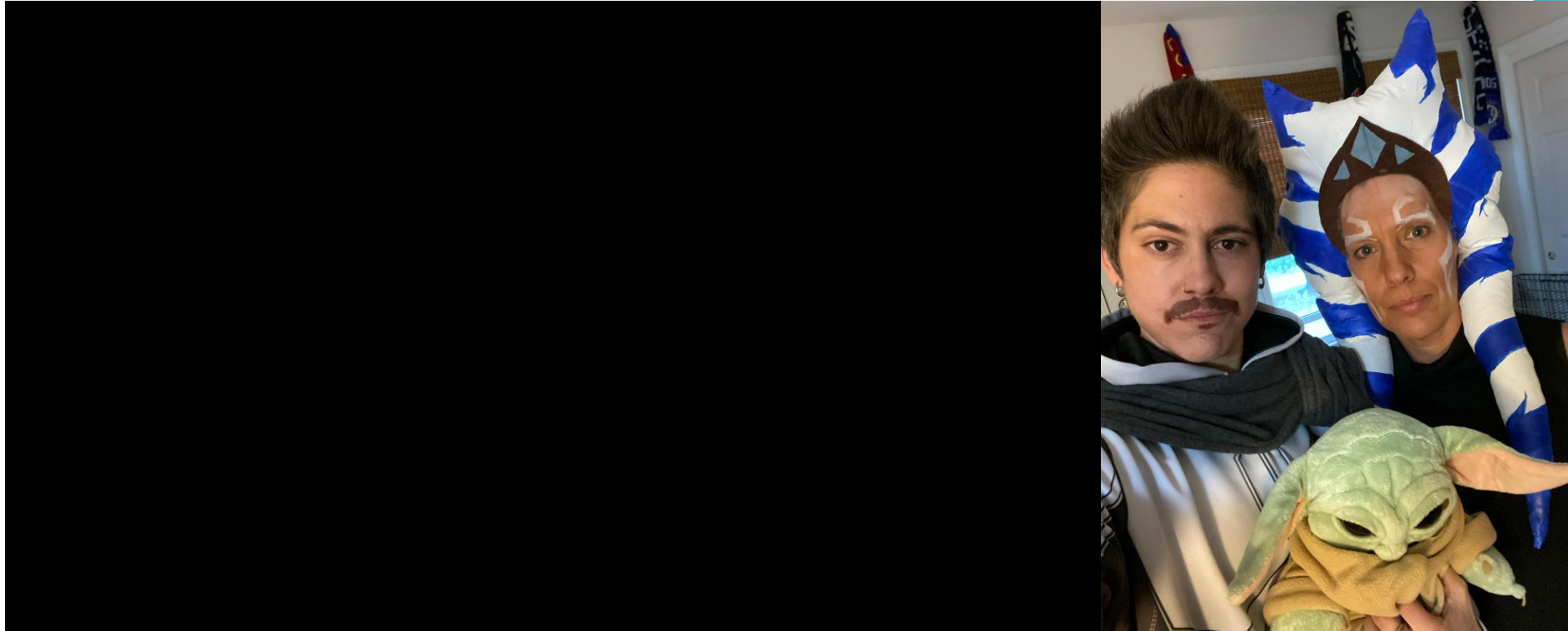
– Joy F Johnson, Two Sides of the Spectrum, Episode 6

Authentic Play



– Sarah Selvaggi Hernandez, Two Sides of the Spectrum, Episode 15

Authentic Play



– Jacquelyn Fede, Two Sides of the Spectrum, Episode 18

What outcomes are we studying?



– Dr. T.C. Waisman, Two Sides of the Spectrum, Episode 65



Part 2: Practices to Reconsider

Writing goals based on developmental “norms”

- Many “developmental norms” center cis white neuromajority European males
- Autistic people have a scattered or spiky profile
- We build our lives on our strengths, not on remediating our weaknesses
- Centering developmental norms can harm the parent / child relationship

Deficits-based vs strengths-based language

“Results indicate that parents [whose providers used strengths-based language] displayed improved affect, made more positive statements about their child, and also exhibited more physical affection toward their child during the strength-based approach.”

(Steiner, A. 2011)

Developmental norms

Instead of comparing kids to each other,
look at what your child / client is ready to
learn.

Teaching Masking

Teaching Autistic kids to hide their Autistic traits in order to appear less Autistic, including how they socialize, play, and move their bodies.

Linked to

- PTSD
- Depression
- Suicidality

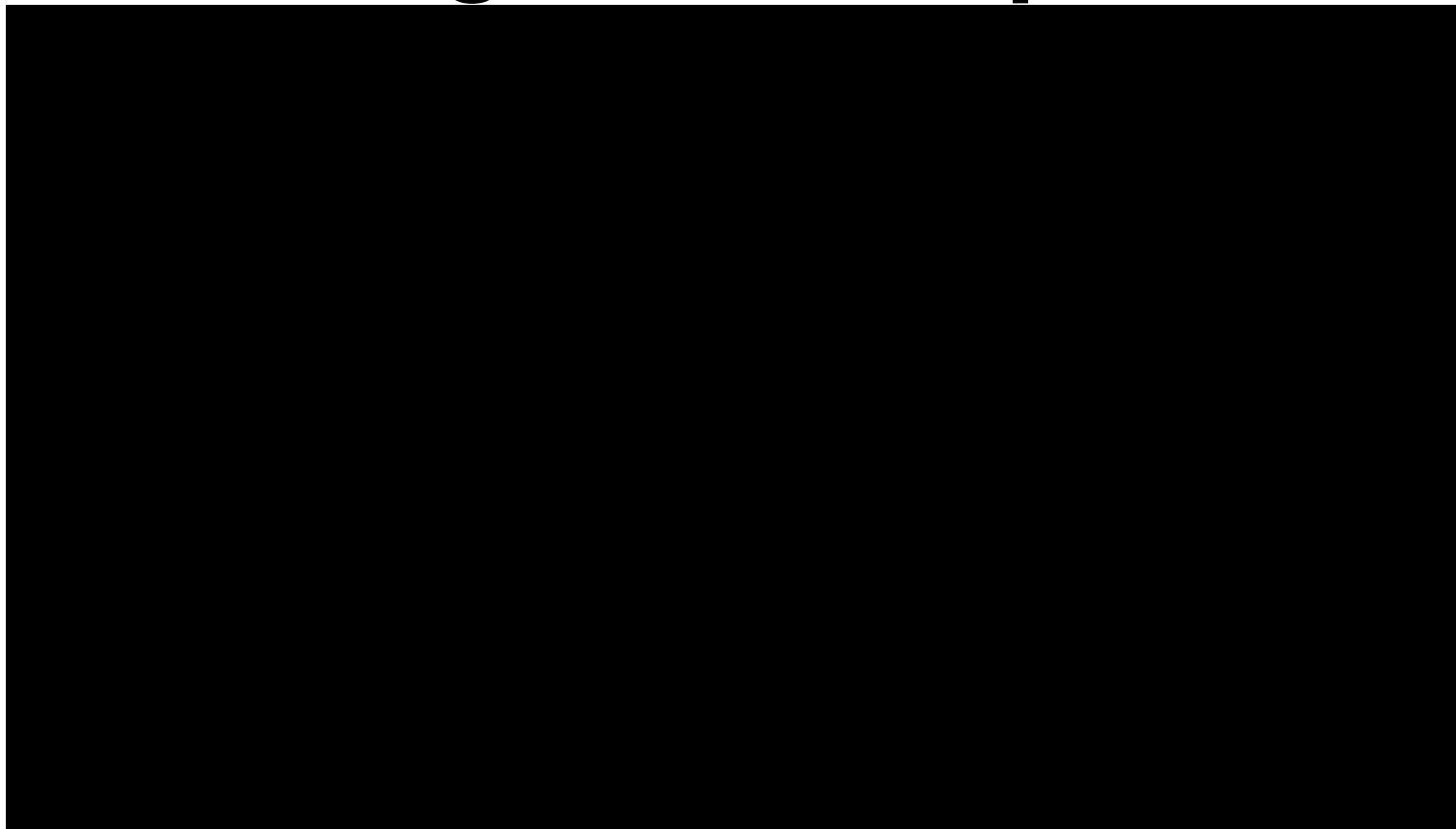


The Impact of Masking

“What I have learned is that neurotypical people don't rearrange the atoms of their being in order to exist in the world. They don't fundamentally change who they are to please other people. And if you are in the mental health profession and you're hearing this and thinking, ‘gosh this sounds a lot like trauma or the result of emotional abuse’, you are right, it is, because **being neurodivergent in a world designed for neurotypicality is traumatic.**”

– Caroline Gaddy, Autistic SLP

Masking and compliance



– Finn Gardiner, Two Sides of the Spectrum, Episode 72

Other practices to reconsider

- Hand-over-hand
- Withholding interests
- Rewards and reinforcers
- Planned ignoring

[Learnplaythrive.com/blog](https://learnplaythrive.com/blog)



Creating Strengths-Based Support Plans



The Double Empathy Problem

Autistic peer to peer information transfer is highly effective.

AUTHORS

Catherine Crompton, Sue Fletcher-Watson, Danielle Ropar

Strengths-Based Approach

- Start by asking “Why are we writing this goal? Is it to make the child be less Autistic?”
- Consider the child’s interests and self-determination
- Balance teaching new skills with accommodating for a child’s learning style / changing the context
- You can also teach others new skills, don’t ask the Autistic child to do all of the work

The Autistic Neurotype

Things to consider:

- Social preferences
- Communication needs
- Interests
- Routines
- Sensory processing needs
- Auditory processing
- Executive function



Executive functioning challenges

- Differences in time perception
- Trouble breaking things down into smaller steps
- Challenges with initiating
- Difficulty with the concept of finished
- Differences in identifying the main point versus the details
- Difficulty shifting attention



Examples of strengths-based practices

CASE STUDY: 3 year old does not want to stop playing to go brush teeth

Traditional approach: (audience participation)

Strengths-based approach

Child's strengths:

- Knows a lot about wombats
- Can focus on pretend play for long periods of time
- Kind to his baby sister
- Loves music
- Loves numbers
- Playful and silly

Strengths-based approach

Hypothesis: Wombats are his passion and it's hard for him to leave behind his pretend play. Brushing teeth is not interesting.

- Put wombats to bed
- Put on schedule: wombats-teeth-wombats
- Bring wombats to brush teeth
- Turn into wombats and brush your wombat teeth
- Count teeth while brushing to see if we are wombats or people
- Teach baby (wombat) sister how to brush her teeth
- Read wombat book while brushing teeth

CASE STUDY: Mark reports feeling lonely and excluded during school

Traditional approach: social skill training

Impact: (audience feedback)

Strengths-based approach

Child's strengths:

- Knows a lot about Minecraft
- Connects well with other neurodivergent kids, especially if they are quiet / introverted
- Likes learning and teaching others

Strengths-based approach

Hypothesis: Mark doesn't have access to social spaces where he feels included and accepted as his authentic self, or where his strengths are seen and appreciated by others.

Strengths-based ideas (audience feedback)

Want to learn more?

The LPT Continuing Education Hub
Learnplaythrive.com

Learn Play Thrive Parents
Parents.learnplaythrive.com