

AUTISM CONNECT 2026

April 7th

Thank You!



TO ALL OF OUR PLATINUM SPONSORS!

Occupational Therapy Strategies for Neurodivergent Students with Mental Health Challenges

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OT AND OUR ROLE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES



1. Identify reasons why trauma impacts the neurodivergent community differently
2. Understand behavioral outcomes of the neurodivergent in regards to trauma and ACEs
3. List reasons why developing friendships is sometimes a challenge for the neurodivergent community
4. Identify how OT can play a role in addressing these challenges

INTRODUCTION

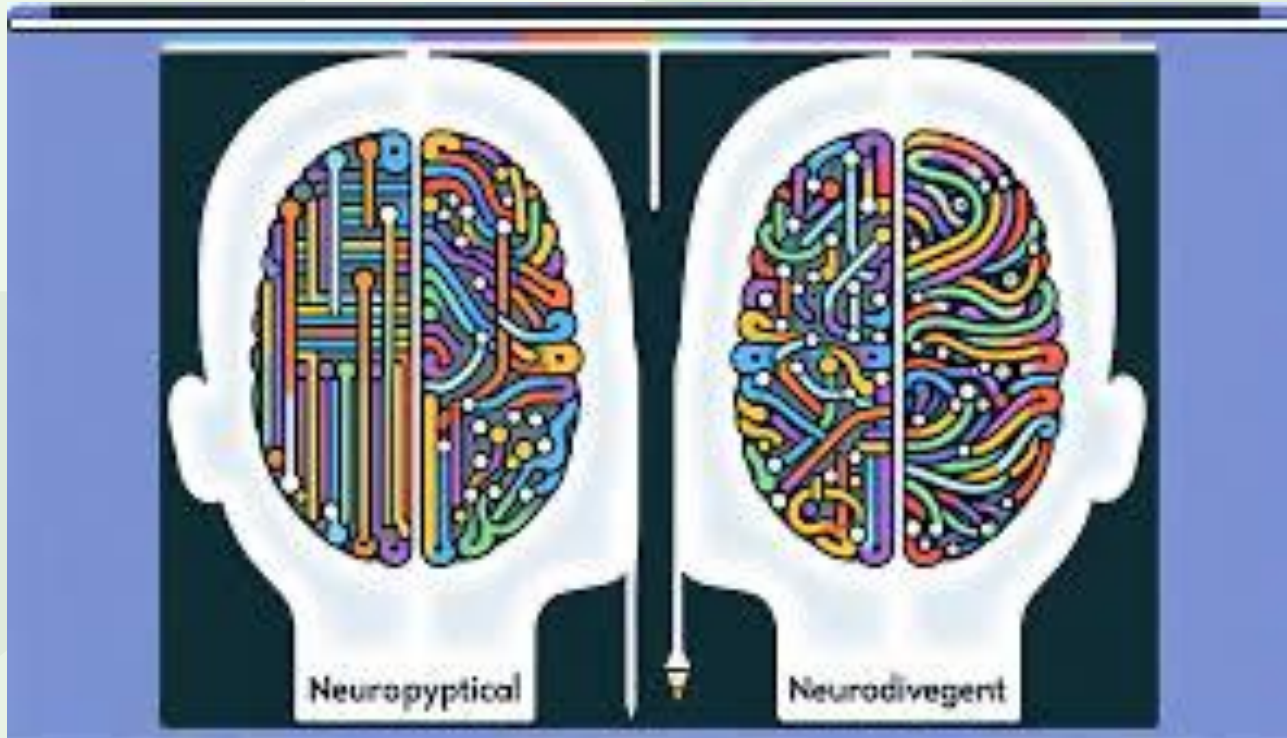
Did you know that our friends on the spectrum have emotional needs, too?

Matter of fact, the emotions they feel may be stronger than those of their neurotypical peers.



Trauma & Neurodivergence

Trauma and the Brain



(Bremner, 2006)

Child Protective Services and Trauma

- **8 million under the age of 18 (2019)**
- Greater internalizing and externalizing behaviors
- Emotional dysregulation
- Difficulty with social interaction
- Difficulty adapting to school
- Poorer daily functioning
- Sensory dysregulation
- Mental health (e.g. depression and anxiety)
- Developmental delays

(Chandler et al., 2021; Evangelist et al., 2023; Hébert et al., 2018)

Impact on the Neurodivergent Population

- Exaggerated symptoms
- Difficult social interactions
- Difficulty with trust/attachment



(Hall-Lande et al., 2015)

Why does this matter?

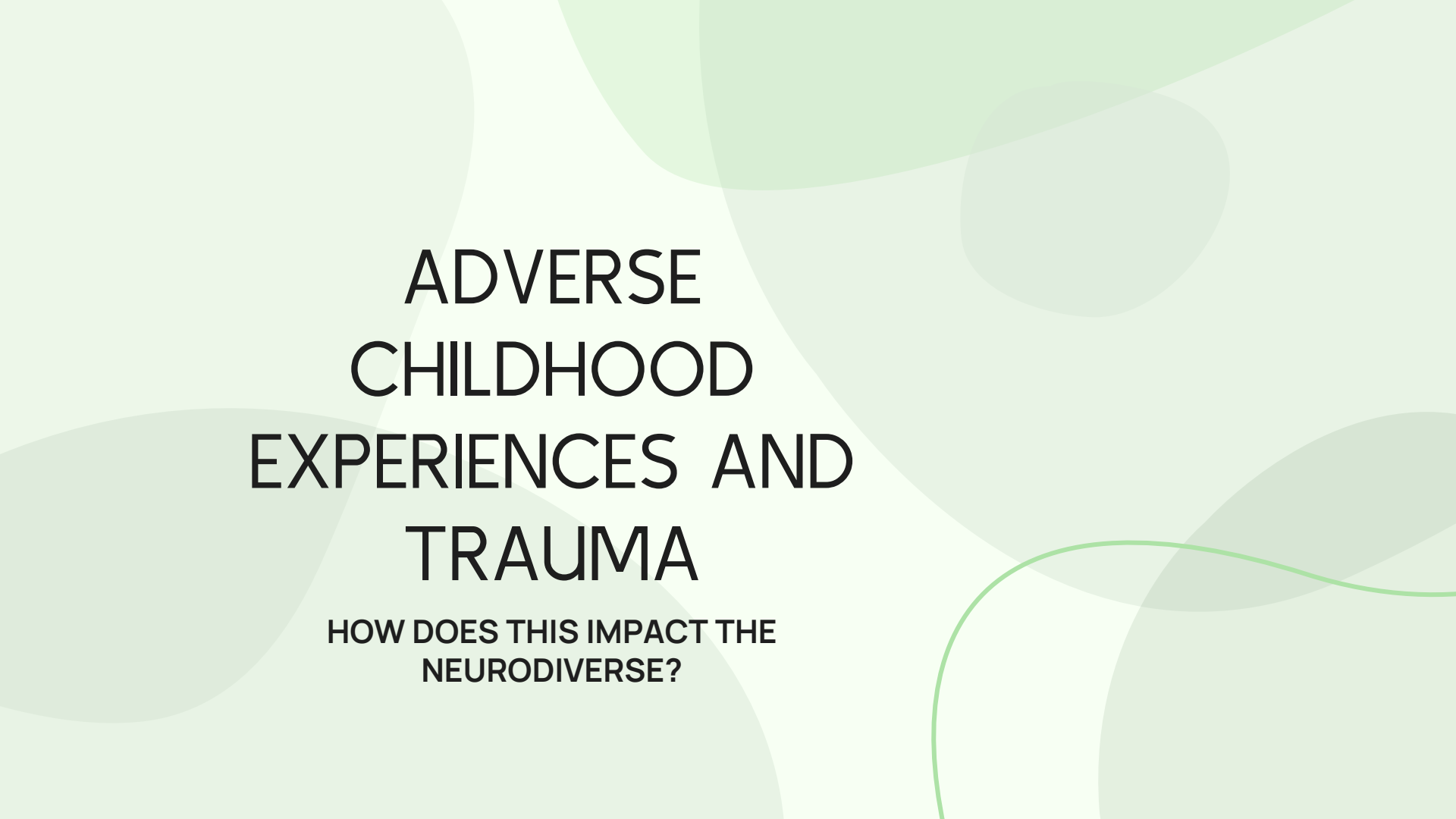
- Roughly 11% with disabilities
- 1.6-2.2x more likely maltreatment
- Higher rates of maltreatment
- Higher rates of displacement
- Inadequate case management training
- 35% to 50% of children eligible for early intervention
 - Only 10% to 26% receive early intervention services

(Shannon, 2021; Simmel et al., 2016)

What can I do?

- Give grace
- Advocate
- Educate
- Provide safe environments





ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND TRAUMA

HOW DOES THIS IMPACT THE
NEURODIVERSE?

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

THE 10 ORIGINAL

- **DIVORCE**
- **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST THE MOTHER**
- **SUBSTANCE ABUSE OF A FAMILY MEMBER**
- **MENTAL ILLNESS OF A HOUSEHOLD MEMBER**
- **INCARCERATION OF A HOUSEHOLD MEMBER**

(Mercera et al., 2024)

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES THE 10 ORIGINAL

- **PHYSICAL ABUSE**
- **EMOTIONAL ABUSE**
- **PHYSICAL NEGLECT**
- **EMOTIONAL NEGLECT**
- **PARENTAL SEPARATION**

EIGHT MORE BEING CONSIDERED

1&2

**PEER
VICTIMIZATION

BATTERING**

5&6

**CONTACT WITH
CHILD PROTECTIVE
SERVICES

FOSTER HOME
PLACEMENT**

3&4

**DISCRIMINATION

GAMBLING OF A
HOUSEHOLD
MEMBER**

7&8

**NEIGHBORHOOD
VIOLENCE

POVERTY**

TRAUMA

“Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions.” (p.21)

“ ...recalling an emotional event from the past causes us to actually reexperience the VISCERAL sensations felt during the original event.” (p. 97)

“Suppressing our inner cries for help does not stop out stress hormones from mobilizing the body.” (p. 99)

“ When something terrifying happens...we will retain an intense and largely accurate memory of the event for a long time.” (p. 178)

“...finding words to describe what has happened to you can be transformative, but it does not always abolish flashbacks or improve concentration...” (p.196)

(The Body Keeps the Score, 2014)

INTERNAL **BEHAVIORS** ASSOCIATED WITH DEPRESSIVE & ANXIETY D/O

FEAR

WITHDRAWAL

SOMATIC COMPLAINTS

ISOLATION

WORRYING

WHAT IS THE RESULT?

DIFFICULTY ENGAGING IN
OCCUPATION

(Hansen and Jordan, 2020)

EXTERNAL BEHAVIORS

AGGRESSION

IMPULSIVITY

DISRUPTIVE

COMMUNICATION OF:

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL &
RELATIONAL WOUNDS

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

WHAT'S WRONG W/YOU?

WHAT IS THE RESULT?

DIFFICULTY ENGAGING IN
OCCUPATION

TRAUMA INFORMED CARE (TIC)

WHAT IS WRONG
W/YOU?

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

PROMOTES RESILIENCE

CLIENT-CENTERED CARE

TRUST

COLLABORATION

FOCUSES ON STRENGTHS

(Chokshi, Pletcher, & Strait, 2021)



Neurodivergence & Friendships

Friendships in Adolescents

- Adolescents separate quality of life from physical health.
- Lower quality friendships worsen depression.
- The friendships of neurotypical girls have different expectations and nuances than those of neurotypical boys.

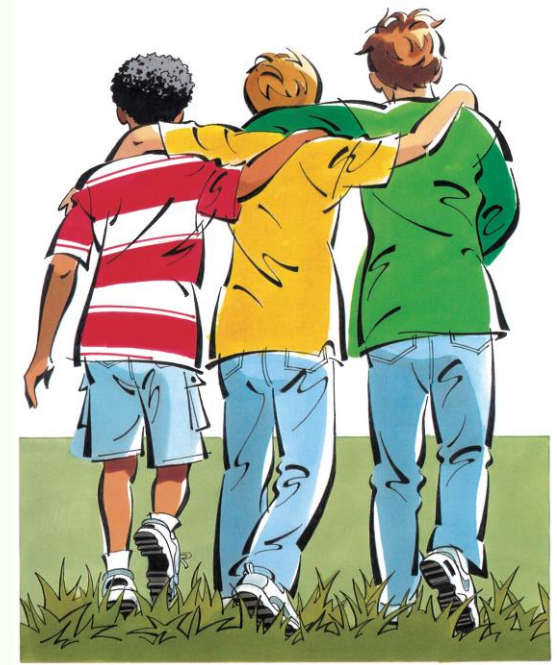
(Cridland et al., 2013; Helseth & Misvær, 2010; McVey et al., 2017; Sung-min & Byoung-jin, 2022)

Friendships in Neurodiverse Populations

- Children and adolescents with ID and ASD participate in fewer activities and have fewer, lower-quality friendships than their neurotypical peers.
- “‘All my life is like I didn’t fit in, like I had friends and they weren’t like my proper friends’” (Milner et al., 2019, p. 2392).

“Meet in the Middle” Approach

- Barriers to social participation include not only client factors, but environmental and social contexts.
- A better understanding of disabilities has been associated with more positive peer attitudes.





OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY'S ROLE

EVERY INTERACTION **IS** AN INTERVENTION



INTENTIONAL
RELATIONSHIP



THERAPEUTIC
USE OF SELF



TRAUMATIC
INFORMED
CARE

- components



TOTALITY OF
THE CHILD



OCCUPATIONA
L PROFILE



OCCUPATION
AND
ENGAGEMENT



THANKS!

Do you have any questions?

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Session Survey



Carolina B 9:30-10:30