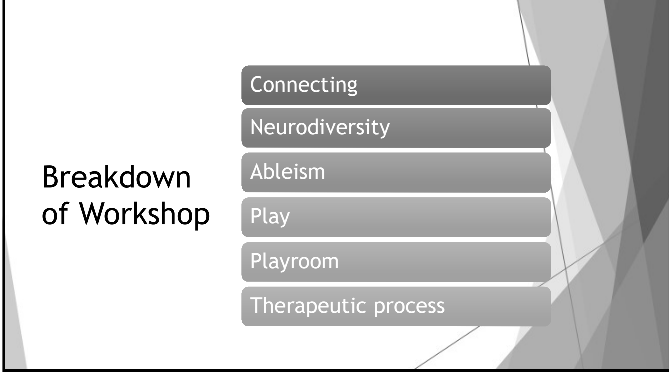
Empowering Neurodiversity: Dismantling Ableism in and out of the Playroom

(Fatima) Natascha Lawrence, MA, RCC, BCRPT
FASD Counselling/FASD Institute

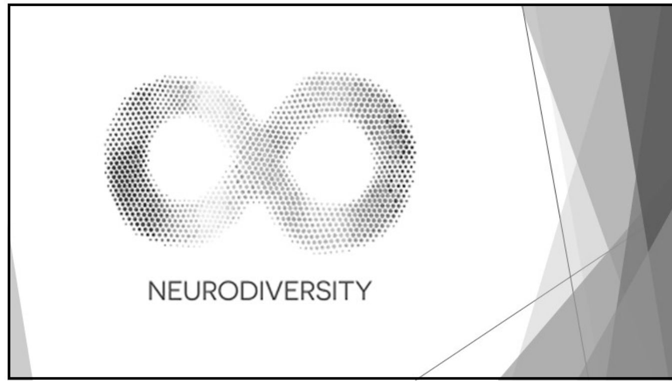
1

2

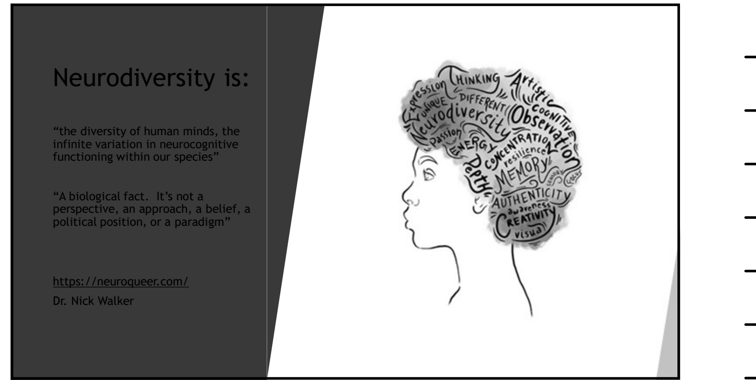
3



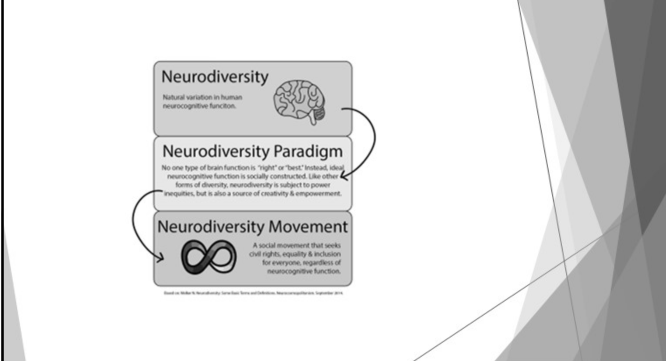
4



5



6



7

Terminology

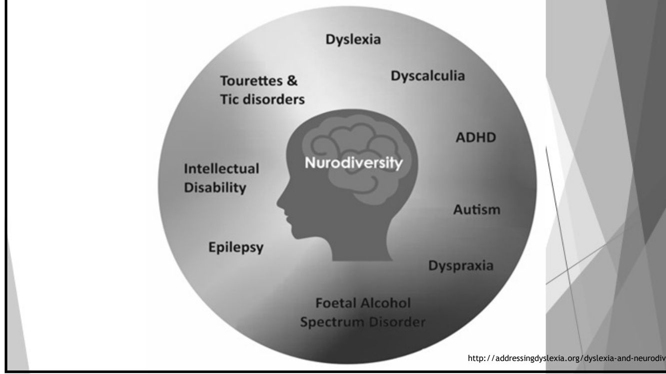
- **Neurodiversity** - Term coined Judy Singer (1998), highlighting human neurological functioning diversity. Neurodiversity refers to more than brain or neurocognitive functioning, but all neurological functioning. Neurodiversity is a biological fact.
- **Neurodivergent (ND)** *(noun or adj.)* Broad term coined by Kassiane Asasumasu (2000) describing someone whose neurology functions in ways that diverge significantly from dominant societal standards of normal. Neurodivergence, or the state of being neurodivergent, can be largely innate or acquired, or a combination of both. Not synonymous with Autistic. A person's neurological functioning that diverges in multiple ways can be **multiply neurodivergent.**
- **Neurodiversity Paradigm** - A social activist movement that promotes that there is no standard or ideal type of neurological functioning. The **Neurodiversity movement** focuses on dismantling ableism and oppression and seeks civil rights, equity, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent.
- **Neurodiversity movement** – Introduced by Autism activist Jim Sinclair at the 1993 International Conference on Autism in Toronto in his speech entitled "Don't mourn for Us". The movement has moved beyond the autism rights movement to one that seeks rights, inclusion, accommodations, and equity for all, regardless of neurotype

8

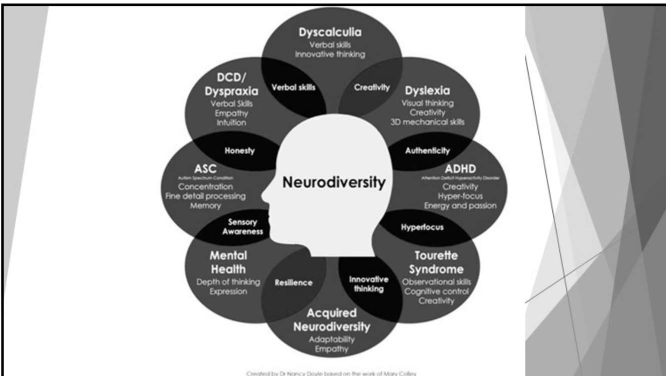
Terminology

- **Neurotype –** Refers to an individual's neurological or neurocognitive functioning, often analogous to a person's diagnosis or lack thereof. For example, "autistic" is a neurotype, and so is "neurotypical."
- **Neurotypical (NT))** *(noun or adj.)* – Having a style of neurological or neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards. Not synonymous with Allistic.
- **Neurominority** *(noun or adj.)* **–** A neurodivergent population who share a similar form of neurodivergence. Some neurominorities include Autism, ADHD, dyslexia, FASD, and TBI. It is also possible to be neurodivergent without being a member of a neurominority group.
- **Neurodiverse** - A group (not to describe individuals) where one or more members' neurotype differs from other members. The opposite is **neurohomogenous**.
- **Neuronormative - Focusing on, or privileging, the neurotypical over the neurodiverse**
- **Allistic** – a person who is not autistic/non-autistic

9

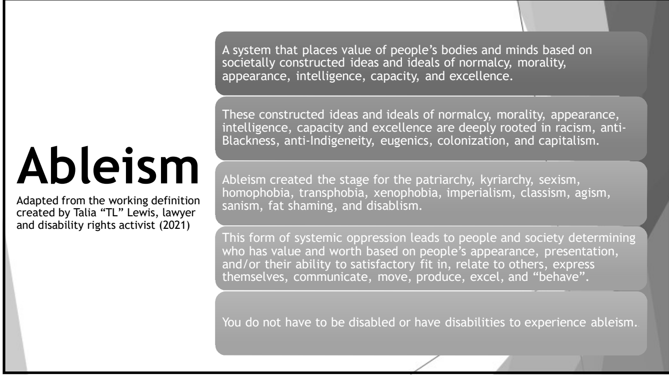


10

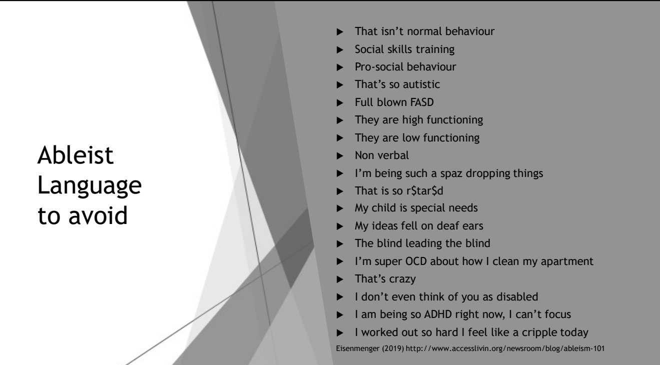


11

12



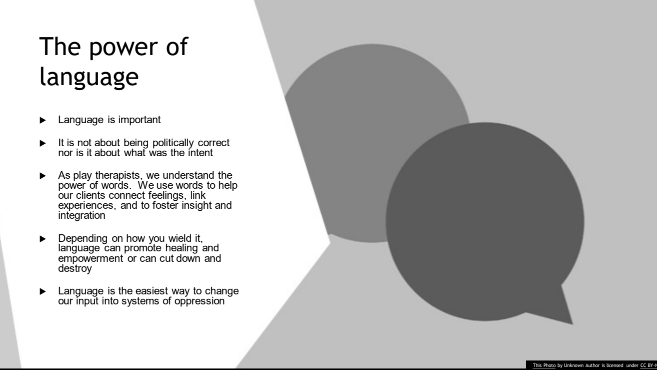
13



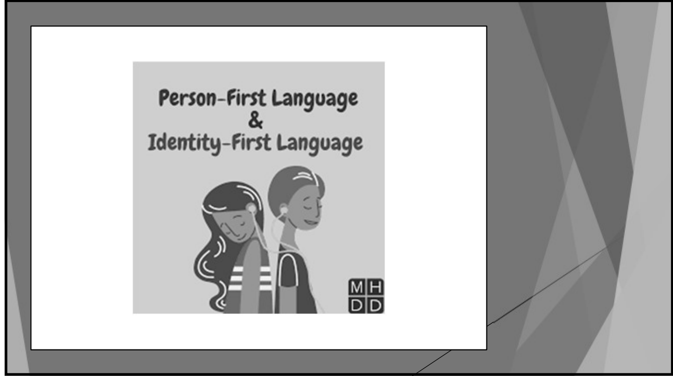
14

Medical Model of Disability	Social Model of Disability
▶ Disability is created by physical, neurological, or mental impairment ▶ The individual is considered impaired and is or has a problem that needs to be treated or fixed ▶ Diagnosis as labels, as a bad thing ▶ Focus is on cures, alleviating the symptoms or control ▶ No consultation, prescriptive treatments, Institution orientated ▶ Paternalism ▶ Charity, pity, or sympathy ▶ Celebrating "inspirational" stories, focusing on disability was overcome ▶ Disability understood through a white, wealth, and otherwise privileged lens	▶ Systemic oppression creates barriers and inaccessibility ▶ This includes to physical spaces, services, language, communication, education, employment, and community engagement ▶ Prejudice, stigma, stereotyping and discrimination as forms of oppression ▶ Social justice movement focused on inclusion, eliminating barriers, representation, and empowering strengths ▶ Disability and diagnosis can provide identity and community ▶ Disability status is complex and not assumed ▶ "Nothing about us, without us"

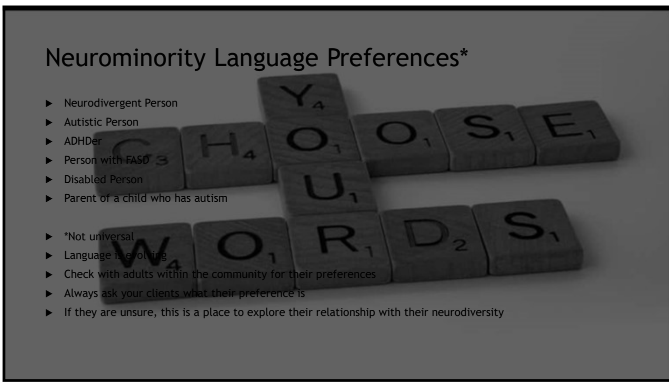
15



16

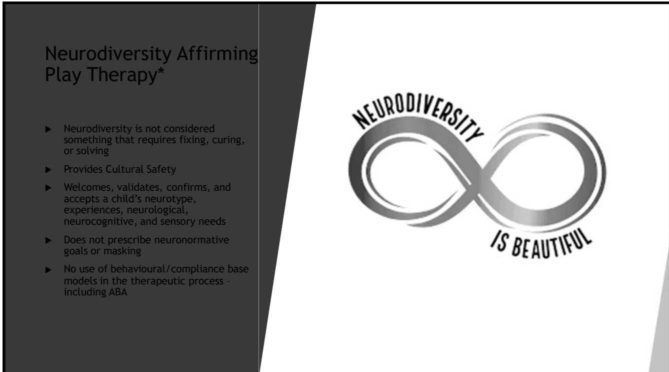


17



18

19



20

21

22

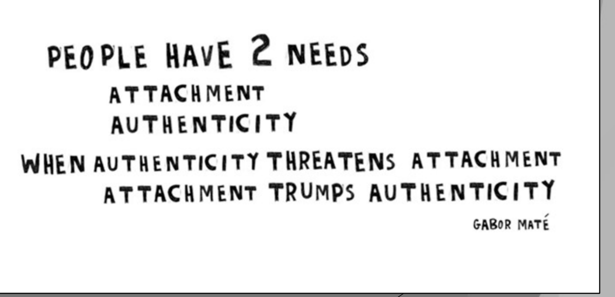
"Enter into children's play and you will find the place where their minds, hearts and souls meet"

VIRGINIA AXLINE

23

24

25



26

27

Identity Formation

- Identify is a human right

Al Tamimi Y. Human Rights and the Excess of Identity: A Legal and Theoretical Inquiry into the Notion of Identity in Strasbourg Case Law. *Social & Legal Studies*. 2018;27(3):283-298. doi:10.1177/0964663917722598

- Identify is developed through social interaction
- Oppression affects identity formation

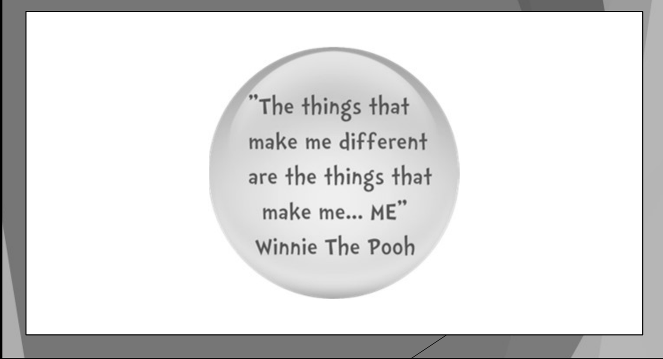
Hall, S (1990) Cultural identity and diaspora. In: Rutherford, J (ed) Identity: Community, Culture, Difference. London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 222–237

- Neurotype can be a part of one's identity
  - That is why many neurominorities prefer identity first language
- Within the social model of disability, disability as identity can be empowering
- Dismantling internalized ableism
  - Shifts worth from how well we fit in, comply, achieve, or mask (ableist neuronormative goals) to reflecting authentic neurodivergent strengths

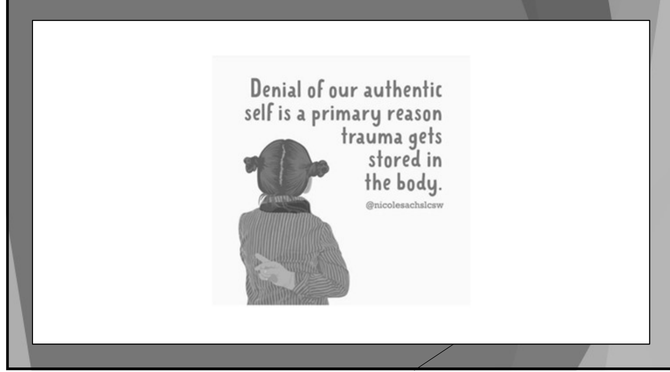
This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

28

29



30



31

Stigma Trauma

- Stigma is a form of trauma
- Stigma targets a person's belief about themselves
- Stigma undermines a person's humanity and overshadows the fullness of their identity
- Stigma can shift a person into a hyper-arousal state of defensive safety seeking or guarded withdrawal and self isolation
- Ableism and the assumption that neurodiversity requires "fixing" is at the root of neurodiversity stigma
- Neurodivergent children can experience shame, rejections, and devaluing of their authentic selves

Gates, G. (2019). *Trauma, stigma, and autism: Developing resilience and loosening the grip of shame.* Jessica Kinglsey.

32

Neurodiversity and unmasking

Masking

- Learned behavior that neurodivergent children employ to disguise their neurotype

Neurodivergent Overwhelm

- Navigating oppressive environments, frequent demands, and continuous sensory input can be physically, mentally, and spiritually fatiguing and can leave children with "no spoons"

Neurodivergent Meltdowns

- An emotional "explosion" caused by sensory and/or emotional overstimulation.
- Meltdowns can involve crying, screaming, arguing, yelling, aggressive and/or self-injurious behavior or can look and feel like panic attacks
- Meltdowns are the body's way of releasing and purging.

33

Neurodiversity and unmasking

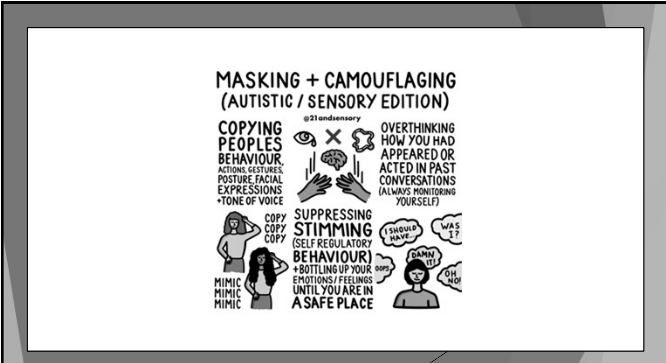
Neurodivergent Shutdown/Sensory Hangover

- An emotional "implosion" in an autistic person, caused by sensory and/or emotional overstimulation.
- Shutdowns can involve crying, being unable to speak ("going nonverbal"), becoming stiff and immobile, and trying to hide

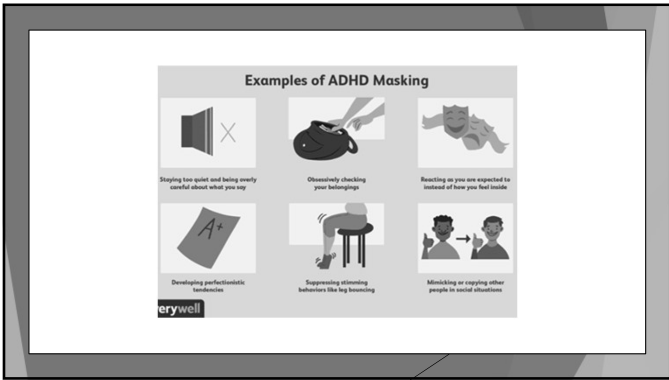
Neurodivergent Burnout

- A long-term state of executive dysfunction and sensory/emotional dysregulation
- Burnout can be caused when an environment doesn't meet a child's needs or due to long term masking
- Symptoms include lethargy, frequent nonverbal episodes, deteriorating personal hygiene, and demand avoidance

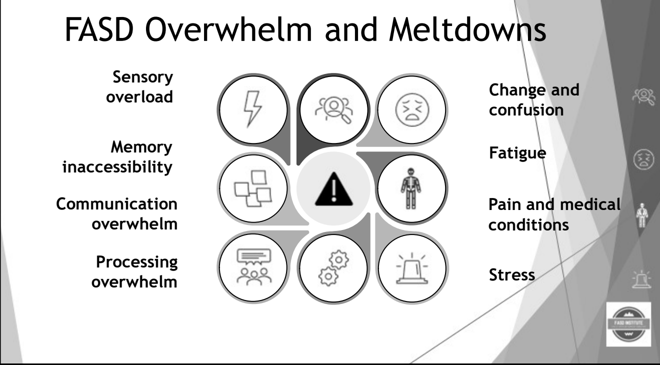
34



35



36



37

Dismantling Internalized Ableism

- What shoulds do you hold about being “professional”?
- What shoulds do you hold about being an expert?
- What shoulds do you hold about being a play therapist?
- What shoulds do you hold as a learner?
- What shoulds do you hold about “self care”?
- What shoulds do you hold about your neurotype?
- What shoulds do you hold about your mental health?

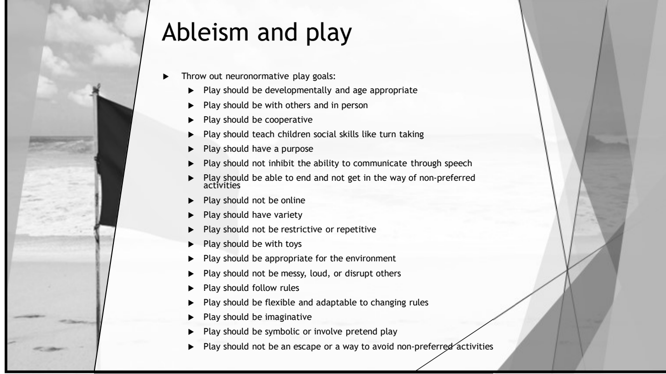
38

Neurodiversity and Play

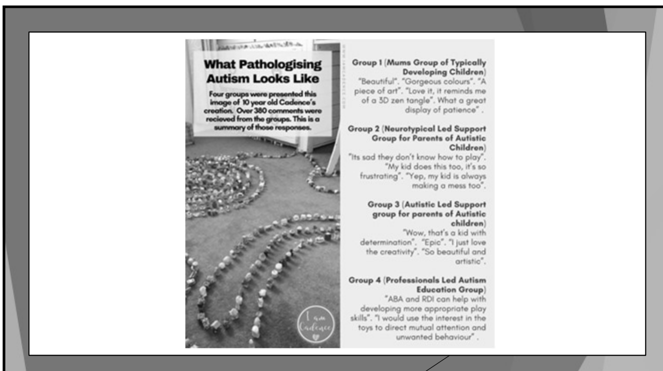
- There is no right way to play
- Play is play even if it does not look like play
- Children cannot fail at play
- Play belongs to the child and is informed by the child
- Play is not an intervention
- Play is not used to “fix” children
- Play should focus on how children learn, not just what they learn
- Consent is key in play
- Sensory play is therapeutic play

ALL PLAY IS BEAUTIFUL!

39



40



41

Neurodivergent play consideration

Echolalia

- May repeat others' words or sentences of familiar people (parents, teachers), their own phrases, or from things they have seen/heard

Special Interests

- Passionate interest in a certain topic or activity, something they are very invested in and knowledgeable about. These are much more intense than neurotypical people's interests.

Infodump

- When a neurodivergent person provides intricately detailed summaries of their topic of interest in single heaps. This can occur in conversation both online and offline. Also known as 'speaking in paragraphs'

Stimming

- Short for self-stimulatory behavior; repetitive motions, actions, or vocalizations that regulate sensory and emotional input.

Hyperfixation

- A topic or activity that a neurodivergent person is currently extremely focused on, often causing them to forget to do certain basic necessities like bathe and eat.

Hyper focus

- The state of being extremely focused on a hyperfixation. This is the time blind state (inability to sense the passing of time) that neurodivergent people enter when we become fixated on a thought, topic, interest, or activity.

Safe Food

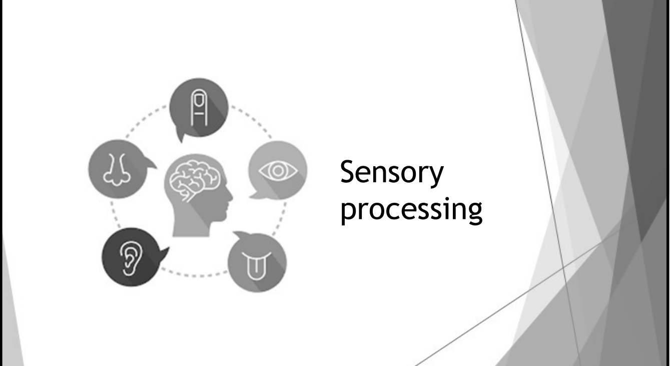
- A food that a ND person eats a lot and enjoys. It removes some anxiety from eating as well as removing preparation work. It may also help with switching tasks as the person knows what is coming next and can look forward to it.

42

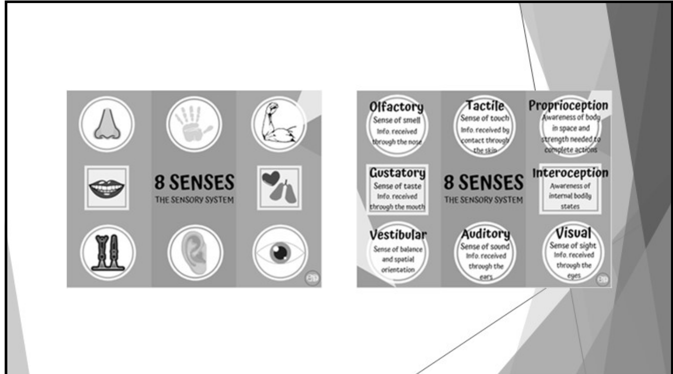
Neurodivergent play considerations

- **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)**
  - includes all forms of communication (other than oral speech) that are used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas.
- **Central Auditory Processing Disorder**
  - condition where the nervous system has difficulty processing the sounds it hears. This can result in difficulty in telling the difference among similar sounds in words and making sense of what is being said
- **Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria**
  - The extreme emotional sensitivity and pain triggered by the perception that a person has been rejected or criticized by important people in their life. It may also be triggered by a sense of falling short—failing to meet their own high standards or others' expectations.
- **Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)**
  - is a profile that describes those whose main characteristic is to avoid everyday demands and expectations to an extreme extent.

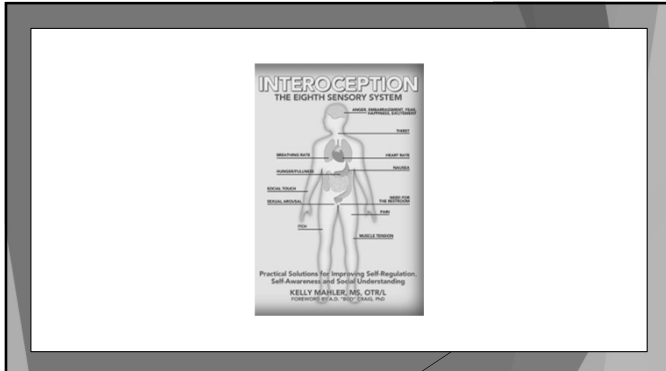
43



44



45



46

Sensory considerations in the playroom

Sensory Processing Disorder
- May have difficulty processing information from the senses and may have over or underactive responses to stimulation. (Hyposensitivity and/or Hypersensitivity)

Synesthesia
- One sense is simultaneous perceived as if by one or more additional sense or may also join objects such as letters, shapes, numbers or people's name with a sensory perception

Misophonia
- Certain sounds can trigger an emotional or physiological response that is heightened

Aphantasia
- Difficulty creating voluntary mental imagery

Hyperphantasia
- Ability to create vivid mental imagery

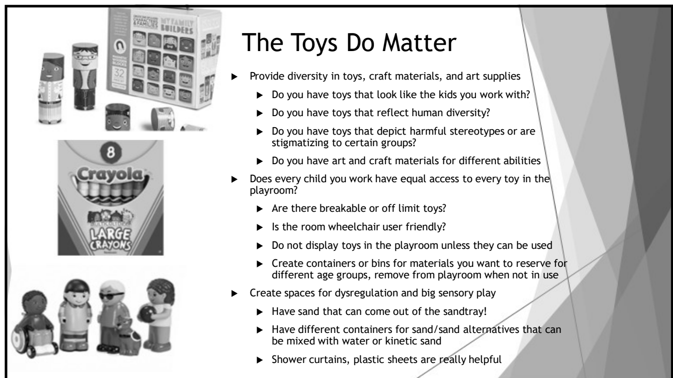
Apraxia/Dyspraxia
- Dyspraxia is the partial loss, whereas apraxia is the complete loss, of the ability to co-ordinate and perform a familiar skill. May refer to gross and fine motor skills or speech.

Prosopagnosia
- Difficulty with face perception

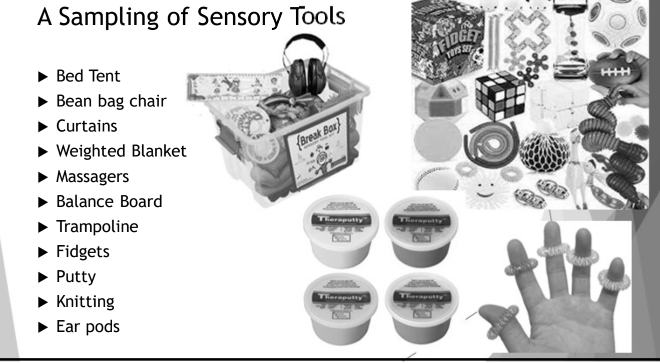
Alexithymia
- Difficulty identifying and describing emotions experienced by one's self and may may experience confusion around bodily sensations connected to emotions.

47

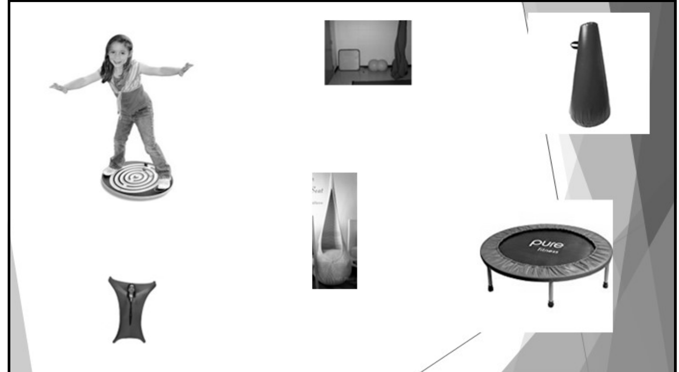
48



49



50



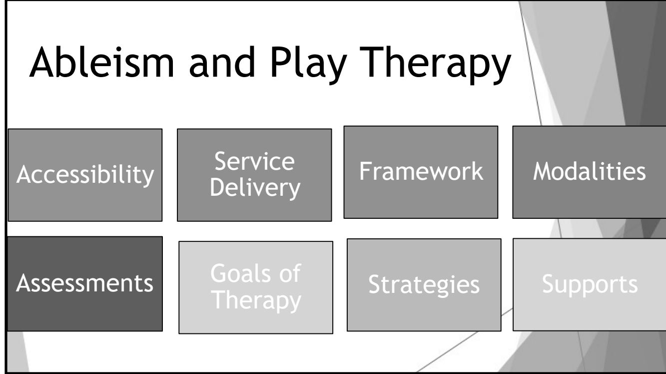
51

52

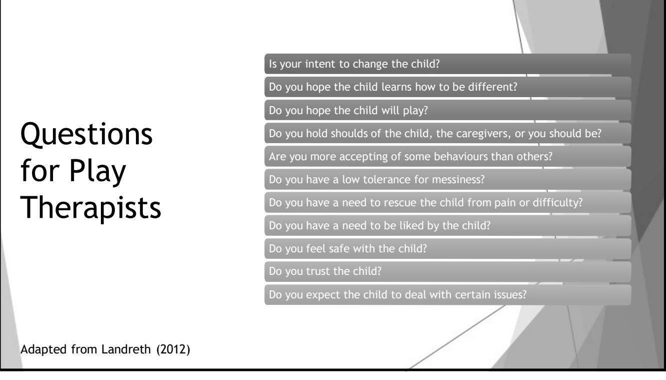
53

54

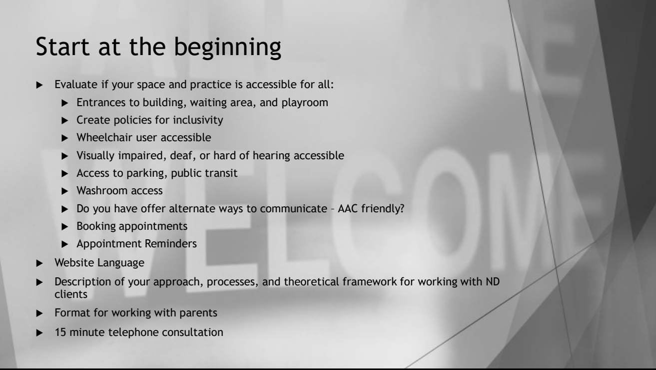
55



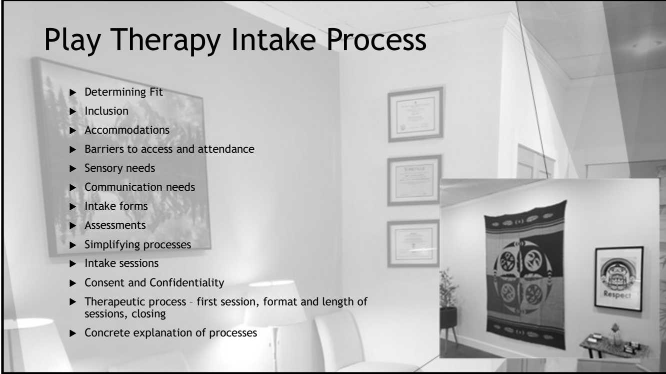
56



57

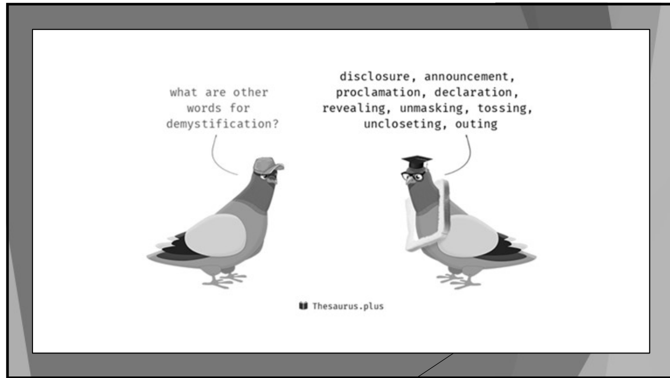


58

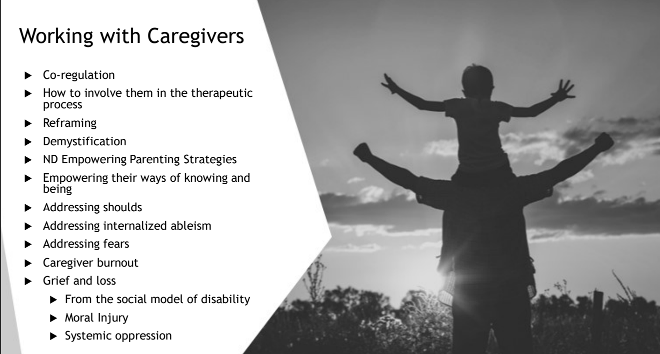


59

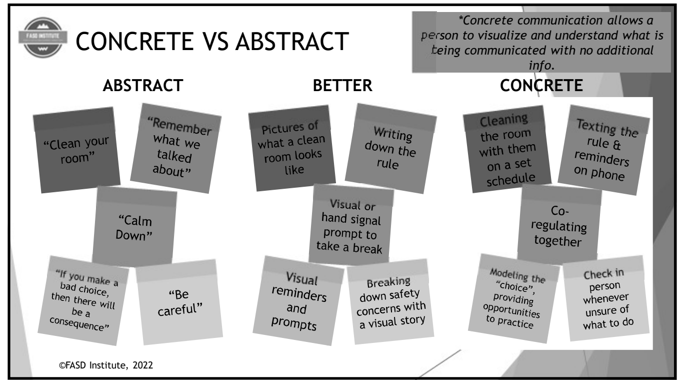
60



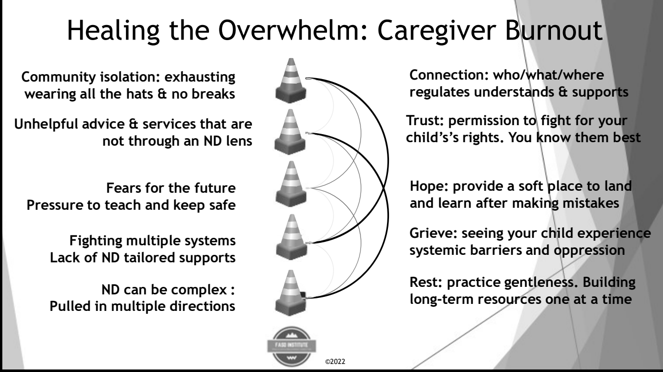
61



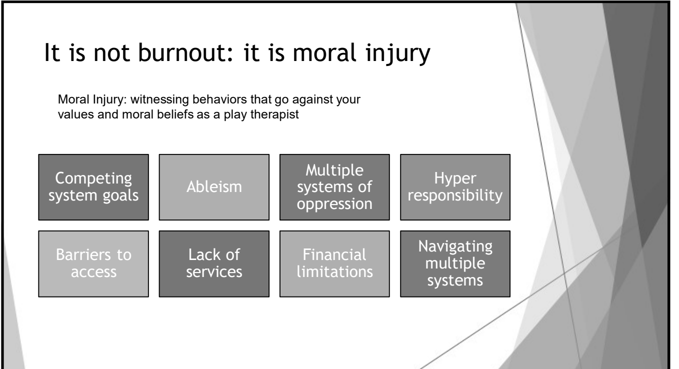
62



63

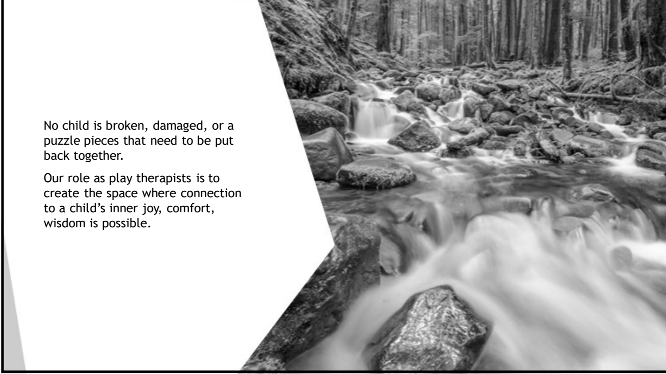


64



65

66



67

68