



Mini

Parent/Caregiver/Educator
workshop

Introduction



Welcome to Mighty Willows Mini! We look forward to sharing this information with you and supporting you on your parenting journey. Mighty Willows Mini was developed by Sharyn Gousmett.

Sharyn is an Educational Psychologist and owner of Willow Corner. Sharyn is neurotypical but an ally to the neurodivergent community.

The information shared during Mighty Willows is aimed at spreading awareness of neurodiversity affirming supports - helping neurodivergent children and young people to thrive. Sharyn developed Mighty Willows to help parents and teachers to add to their kete of knowledge about how to support their small humans.

Mighty Willows Mini provides a “taster” of some of the information presented in our 2-day workshop. For information on upcoming 2-day workshops, check out www.willowcorner.co.nz.

Why Mighty Willows?

Neurodiversity is being increasingly understood and identified. We know a lot more about how many individuals experience the world!

But....society generally still focuses on the 'deficit' and 'disorder' model, and aims to treat 'behaviour problems'. This means that parents and teachers are given conflicting suggestions on how to support children (whether neurotypical or neurodivergent).

Kids are also presenting with higher levels of anxiety
(there are many reasons for this!!).

We know that what we have been doing isn't working very well...
a change in direction is vital!



Every adult can be part of this change by exploring the latest information about how nervous systems work, how this impacts on our responses, and how we can work alongside children to solve problems.

Mighty Willows presents a paradigm shift - moving away from adult enforced plans, into learning how our children experience the world. We can use this knowledge to co-regulate with children, and work alongside children to solve problems that are affecting them.

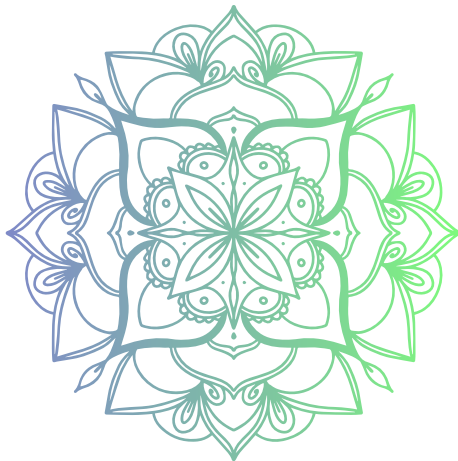
The information in Mighty Willows has been drawn from various practitioners including:

Dr Ross Greene
Dr Mona Delahooke
Neurodivergent Ally
Kelly Mahler
Dan Siegel
Neurowild
Sonny Jane Wise



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(Feel free to take notes, or doodle!)



Overview of Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity



Neurodivergent:

Some people have brains and nervous systems which make it harder to conform to the expectations of society. This group of people tend to develop in a way which diverges from typical expectations.

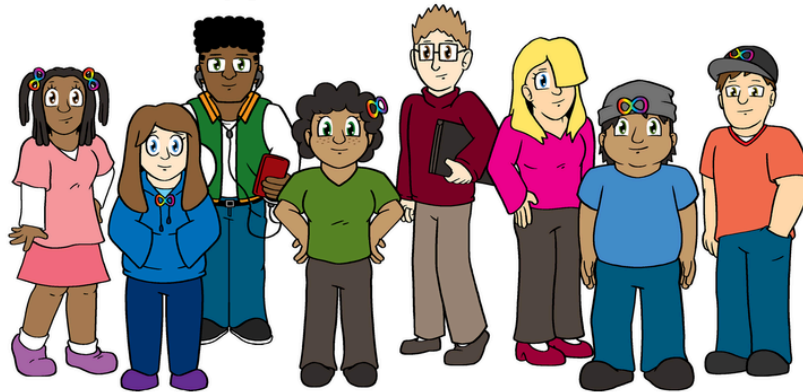


Neurotypical:

Some people have brains and nervous systems which make it easier to conform to the expectations of society, without too much difficulty. This group of people tend to develop along similar pathways throughout their lives.



A Neurodiverse Group



A group of individuals with diverse neurotypes is collectively referred to as **neurodiverse**. This group is made up of some people who are neurotypical, and some who are neurodivergent.

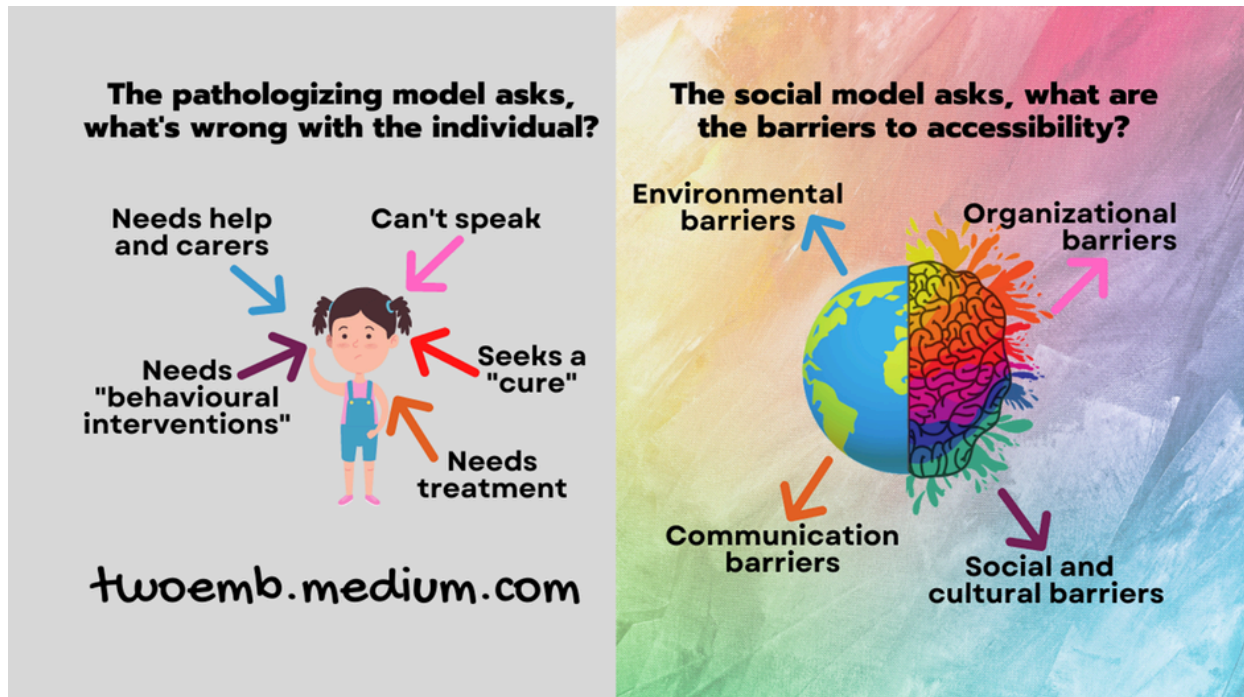
Image by Gabby Parkin

The concept of neurodiversity is part of the social justice movement - it emphasises that there are infinite versions of being a person. It provides a recognition that differences exist. There is no single “normal” way for a nervous system to function but instead there are diverse ways in which individuals experience and interact with the world.

Fun Fact!!!

“*Neuro*” does not mean “brain”! “*Neuro*” refers to nerves and the nervous system (which includes the brain!), but is not a standalone word for the brain!

Models of Disability



There are two key opposing models when understanding disability (Note that disability is not a 'dirty' or bad word but is a term that is being reclaimed by individuals and groups as a helpful way to identify their challenges as related to the environment or their individual needs)

We have been gradually moving from a medical, deficit, based model of understanding, into a social model of understanding. This occurs more commonly in education than in health / mental health settings which still largely place the individual at the centre of the issues – this is changing, but not fast enough.

Psychology 101

(A Very Brief Introduction to Behavioural Psychology)

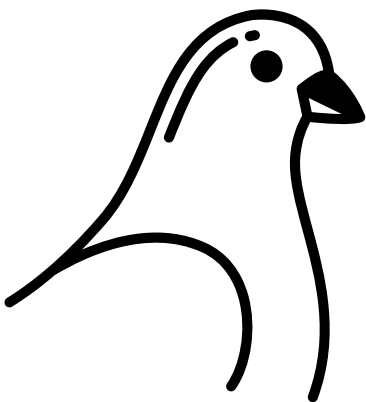
For nearly 100 years, adults have been trying to change children's behaviour by using "behaviour" strategies. But where did this all begin?

Behaviour supports have been based on the best information that people had. Behavioural psychology (or behaviourism) emerged in the 20th century, and asserted that all behaviours are learned through interactions with the environment.

Behaviourism was largely founded by John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner in the 1930s. They (and others) focused on exploring how behaviour could be shaped and modelled through systems of rewards and consequences.

You might have heard of Pavlov's dogs...
He showed that dogs could be trained to salivate
simply after hearing a bell....

This was one of the earliest pieces of research
showing that behaviour can be shaped by an
external stimuli



BF Skinner used special boxes where pigeons were
trained to peck at a target to receive food as a
reward. Some pigeons received an electric shock
instead of food. His work with pigeons was
foundational for showing the power of
reinforcement and consequences in shaping
behaviour.

Psychology 101

(A Very Brief Introduction to Behavioural Psychology)

Behaviourism emphasised observable behaviours and the external stimuli that shape them.

It's core assumptions include:

- That the only scientifically valid information is that which can be seen and measured.
- Thoughts, feelings and physiological states are largely irrelevant
- That learning principles apply equally to all individuals (often based on animal studies)

Is Behaviourism
helpful in
understanding people?

Sure, in some contexts.
Understanding behaviourist principles can sometimes help us to make sense of what is happening. In some situations, behaviour based therapies (such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) can be useful.

So, what's the problem
with behaviourism?

It misses a lot.
Focusing on behaviourist strategies puts the focus solely on fixing the behaviour in front of us.
It doesn't allow time for reflection and consideration of other things impacting the child.



Sure, the pigeon learned to
peck the right lever...
but at what cost to them?

Psychology in the 21st Century

(Where we're at now!)

It wasn't until the 1990s (the Decade of the Brain) that we began to understand what was actually happening in the brain and how this impacted on behavioural outcomes.

Since this time there has been explosive growth in research and knowledge about how the brain works. This has more recently moved into understanding the whole nervous system, as well as the connections between the nervous system and the brain; and the gut and the brain.

The early behaviourists didn't have the benefit of this knowledge. Now we have much greater understanding of the wider causes of behavioural challenges, and the latest frameworks to support kids with their challenges have been able to take this into account.



We now know that behaviour cannot be fully understood without considering the brain and nervous system's conscious and unconscious processing of internal body and environmental cues.

We also know that many internal processes that influence behaviour are not directly observable but can be measured through physiological markers.

We also know that individuals respond differently to similar environments, depending on their physiological state, internal processing, individual characteristics, and life experiences.



**“We’re not thinking creatures that feel,
we’re feeling creatures that think”
- Dr Jill Bolte Taylor**

Our Options

We always have a choice in the way that we respond to a challenging behaviour.

Option 1:

This kid is giving me a hard time

Option 2:

This kid is having a hard time

If we choose option 1, we are likely to respond to them using behaviourist type strategies:



If we choose option 2, we are more likely to respond to them using nervous system type strategies:



Is this a
behaviour
problem?

Or a
nervous
system
problem?

Supporting kids from the nervous system

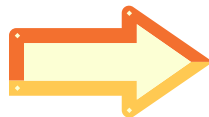
The nervous system plays an important role in how we respond to stressors - different branches of the nervous system help us to manage the fight or flight response (sympathetic nervous system), and also promotes a sense of calm or relaxation (parasympathetic nervous system).

When the sympathetic nervous system is activated, we can often see externalising behaviours
(these are the ones that often lead to kids getting into trouble).

When we enforce societal expectations, we are enforcing an expectation that everyone's nervous system is responding to input in the same way. But everyone has a unique nervous system and responds differently to different input. Our unique makeup has a massive influence on how we then respond to the world around us.

In order to best support children, we need to explore what factors are triggering their nervous system to respond.

For more info watch
“The Nervous System”
by Crash Course





The Window Of Tolerance



Developed by Dan Siegel, The Window of Tolerance describes the zone of emotional and nervous system arousal in which a person can function effectively.

When someone is within their window, they are able to think clearly, manage emotions, learn, and respond to challenges in a flexible way.

When stress pushes the nervous system outside this window, people may move into hyperarousal (such as anxiety, overwhelm, anger, or panic) or hypoarousal (such as shutdown, numbness, or disconnection).

The size of a person's window can vary based on factors like stress, trauma, sensory load, sleep, and support.

We can explore what is impacting on kid's nervous systems, and where their Window of Tolerance lies.

Tip: A formal assessment and diagnosis isn't needed!

YOU are the detective!



For more info watch
"Window of Tolerance"



There are infinite possible nervous system stressors...



These are just some examples!
But we are all unique - we need to get curious to understand exactly what things might lead a child outside their Window of Tolerance.

This is important because it can change how we respond to the child! We often make assumptions that a behaviour is deliberate, but what if it is actually a stress response brought on by a *perception* of threat towards their safety?

The brain, body and mind are intricately linked in feedback loops - we can understand individual behaviour by exploring a combination of how the individual is experiencing the world, what is happening in their environment, and where they are in their unique developmental pathway.

Spoon Theory



Spoon Theory was coined by Christine Miserandino and has been adopted by many disability networks as an easy way to explain the challenges that they experience on a daily basis.

This is a helpful analogy for investigating nervous system stressors.
For example:

Charlie may have used spoons for getting dressed (they have physical challenges dressing and sensory challenges with school uniform), transition from home to school, there is a relieving teacher on arrival at school, a change in temperature in classroom, and they have to manage the transition between temperature outside to inside.

How easily can they then complete what they are being asked to do?

Understanding the stressors that use up spoons helps to work out what they need to remain in their window of tolerance

Hyper-Aroused =
Feeling all the feels. Too much
energy to match the demands of
the task
(probably out of spoons!)

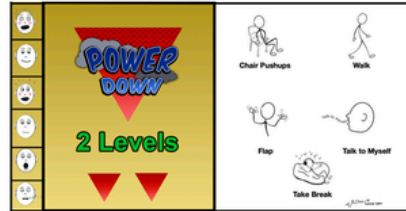
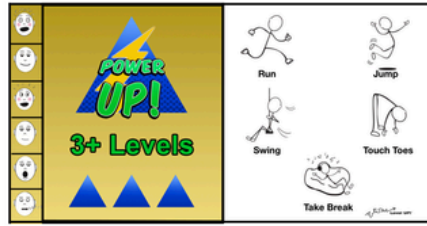
Optimal Zone =
Energy matches the demands of
the task
(we have enough spoons to do
what we need or want!)

Hypo - Aroused =
Heading towards (or in) shut-down
Energy is too low to match
the demands of the task
(probably out of spoons)

Helpful Resources

Autism Level Up

www.autismlevelup.com



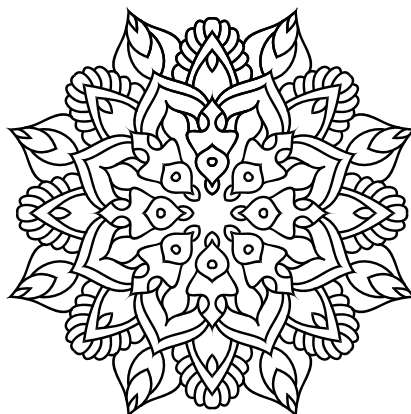
Spoon Thieves Cards

www.neurodivergently.com



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Co-Regulation

Co-Regulation provides a way for adults to meet children's emotional energy, and regulate alongside them.

Co-Regulation also helps children learn how to move through emotional waves - it gives them a chance to find out what helps their unique nervous system to regulate.

Co-Regulation provides adults with an alternative pathway to support a child in distress.

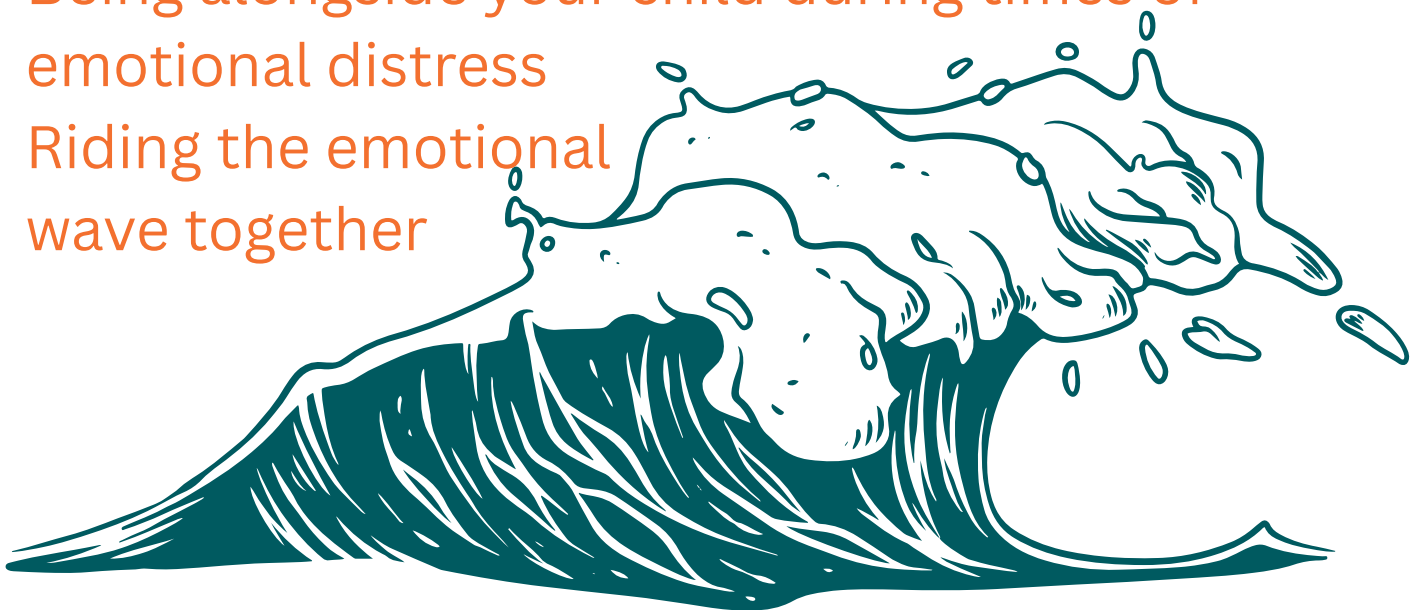
Co-regulation is a collaborative process between individuals to help a child regulate their emotions and responses, especially during times of high stress.

It focuses on providing a supportive environment, paying close attention to the changing emotion and physiological cues of the child.

Co-Regulation is:

Being alongside your child during times of emotional distress

Riding the emotional wave together



Both people finding the calm together
Focused on settling the nervous system

Important Point!

Co-Regulation is often misunderstood and interpreted as being “soft”, or letting kids get away with things.

That is not what is happening!

The focus of co-regulation is on supporting the child’s nervous system to settle down. This leaves them in a better space to be able to work through a situation, and to develop new skills.

Co-Regulation =
Connecting two
nervous systems



Co-Regulation is not:
Focused on behaviour
Remaining 100% calm
A quick fix!

Understanding the stressors can help adults to co-regulate with children, and may help to reduce the likelihood of problems arising, however they will not solve any problems!

WHY?

Because we haven't yet involved the child in these discussions. We are using our knowledge of the child to firstly review our own responses, and to reduce some of the stress that they face. But we are just making best guesses - we haven't yet asked the kids directly about what is impacting on them, and we haven't worked to problem solve directly with them.

Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS), developed by Dr Ross Greene is an “Ask the Kids” model we can use to directly problem solve with kids.

For more info,
Check out
[Lives in the Balance](#)

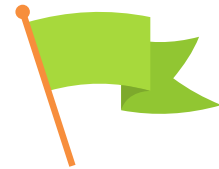
Introducing..... Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS)

Dr Ross Greene's CPS model aims to change our own lens away from focusing on behaviour, into asking the kids so we can identify and solve problems collaboratively.

CPS helps us to:



Stop
Managing
Behaviours



Start
Managing
Expectations

"Kids do well
if they can"-
Dr Ross Greene

Why Collaborative and Proactive Solutions?

This is a model that can be used with anyone! Although it was designed primarily to support children, you can use CPS with:

Kids of all ages

Parents

Partners

Co-Workers

Boss

Anyone who is experiencing a difficulty meeting an expectation imposed on them by another person, or by themselves

CPS helps us to further explore our own expectations, and work alongside our child to find ways to meet these expectations.

CPS is focused on expectation management – not behaviour management.

This means that our expectations may not be met in the way that we initially intended – the outcome might be the same, but the process to get there could be different.

CPS helps us with both parts of an expectation:



What



How

The CPS plans

This is the one
we often use

Plan A	Solve the problem unilaterally: the adult decides the solution and imposes it on the child
Plan B	Solve the problem collaboratively
Plan C	Put the expectation on hold for now

This is the one
that helps stabilise
behaviour

This is the one
that helps us achieve
long-lasting change



Want to learn more?

To learn more about [Collaborative and Proactive Solutions](#) read any of Dr

Greene's books:

The Explosive Child

Raising Human Beings

Lost at School

Lost and Found

Or register for his 2-day training workshops through Lives in the Balance

For in-person support:

Come along to a 2-day Mighty Willows workshop to learn more!

Sharyn is available for individual coaching to get underway with Collaborative and Proactive Solutions. This involves an individual session to complete an ASUP and develop some Unsolved Problems, and a parent/child session to practice using Plan B.

Key Points

Behaviour is a Nervous System
Response

We can be our own detectives into
kids' needs

We can use our knowledge to co-
regulate their nervous system

Collaboration solves problems

YOU
got
THIS