

Critical Care AND RECOVERY

For anxious, demand avoidant children

with Kristy Forbes

Relational Safety

REFLECTIVE / PRACTICAL EXERCISES



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A stylized illustration of a woman with dark hair in pigtails, wearing a white tank top and a pink ruffled skirt, brushing the hair of a man with a beard and brown hair, who is wearing a blue button-down shirt. The woman is holding a pink hairbrush. The man is looking down with his hand near his face. The background is white.

DAY ONE:

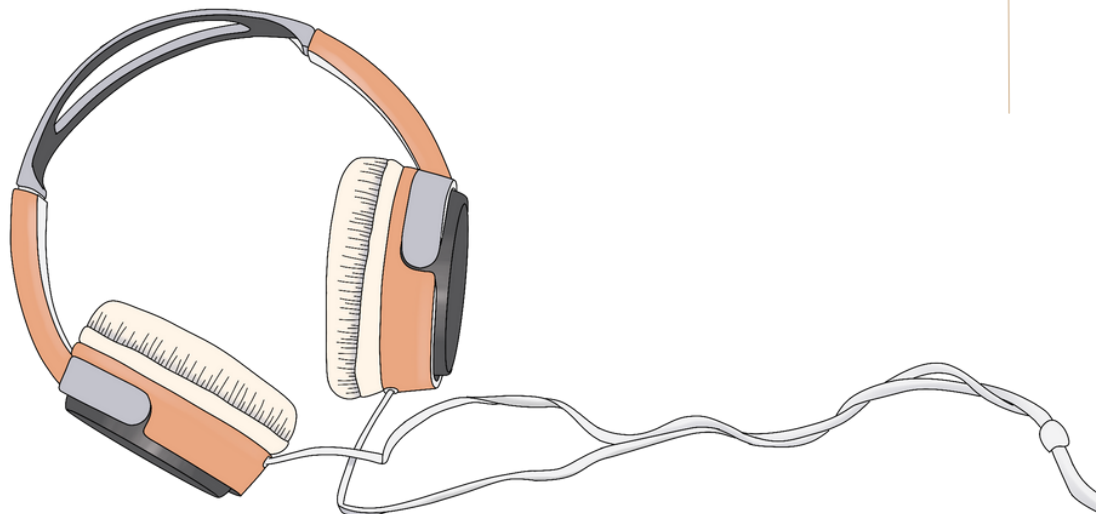
**I practise paying
attention to
my non-verbal
body language**

Something I caught onto earlier, that I knew had a huge impact on my relationship with my children was my non verbal body language. The sighs, the eye rolls, the grunts and groans, the folding my hands over my head, the gritting my teeth.

I didn't realise how much I was communicating to others in those small moments. In truth, I wanted everyone to know how angry, stressed, exhausted I truly was.

But I was communicating so much more than this. I was communicating that I wasn't a safe person to be struggling around.

I taught my children to mask around me, fawn, people please, take responsibility for things that weren't theirs to carry.



I learnt about these impacts when my husband, who had his own struggles, would rub his nose violently most times I would speak.

The rubbing of his nose was a sign of overwhelm for him, and whilst we are adults and I understand overwhelm; it left me feeling rejected. I felt unimportant, abandoned, and really silly. I felt I was 'too much' and over time, I became quieter and more resentful.

When I was able to become aware of this within myself, I began to better understand the impact my own stress and overwhelm signs were having on my children who are, by, nature, prone to extreme anxiety.



Obviously that stress and overwhelm is going to continue to pop up from time to time.

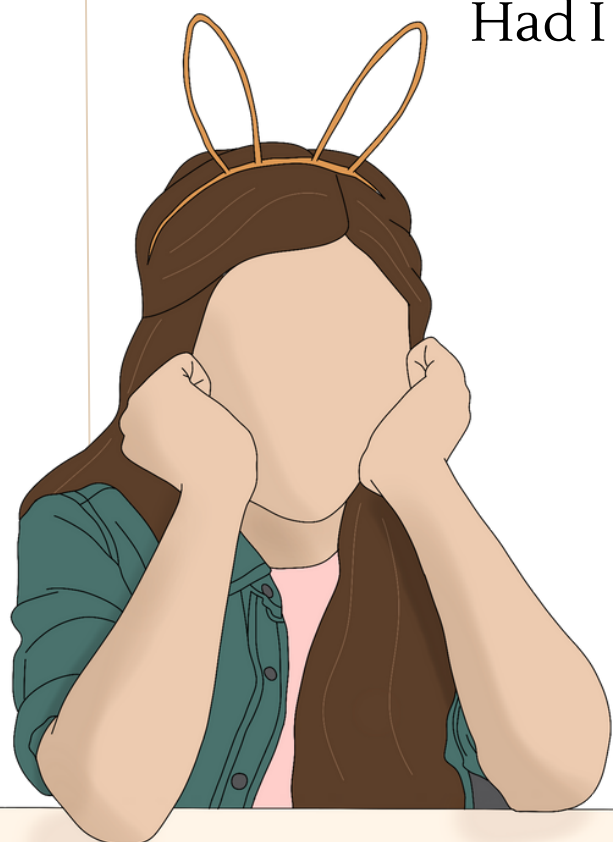
It's a human experience,
and we are
human.

Here's what I did in knowing that my stress signs were something I was also mostly unconscious of:

One

When I did notice myself sighing, rolling eyes, clenching my fists..I stopped and noted it. I paid attention to what was causing me to feel so stressed. Was it something within my control? Was I doing too much? Was I running behind with something?

Had I forgotten to eat?



Everything..EVERYTHING is harder to deal with, process and manage when my needs are not met, when I am pushing myself too hard and when I'm internalising smack talk to myself (speaking poorly toward myself).

Two



I wrote it down somewhere where I'd see it, ask Alexa or Siri to remind me to think about it later, set an alarm on my phone for a time I knew I could think without interruption (normally in bed) and I'd process this.

Do I really need to attend this meeting, therapy, session, clean the oven, get to the bottom of the washing pile, get up at 5am? Am I taking on too much responsibility for others (partner, children, extended family and friends, work)?

Is there anything I can change, adapt, shift, cancel, leave in order to **remove the pressure from myself?**



Three

I didn't promise no more meltdowns, sighs and eye rolls.

Instead, I talked about my experience and I owned it completely.



My conversations with my children included sentences such as these:

- "I have learned some unhealthy ways to respond to stress, anger and disappointment. I'm working really hard to find other ways to manage and process my feelings. Thank you for being patient with me."
- "If I roll my eyes, or sigh, or swear under my breath or out loud, it's because I'm feeling overwhelmed. And, this is my responsibility. This is not for you to fix or change. People get angry, feel stressed and tired and this is normal. If my stress makes you feel uncomfortable, you can share this with me, and I may take some time to rethink how I'm handling things."
- "I'm working really hard at not shouting, swearing, rolling my eyes and there is one really important way I can hopefully reduce this. I've noticed at about 3pm in the afternoon, my brain and body really struggle and I need a little quiet time to help stay calm. I'm going to put my headphones on for 30 minutes while you're on your iPad so I can reduce my overwhelm. I think this will help us both. I struggle to be kind and calm when I don't get a brain and body break."
- "You are being so patient and understanding with me and I appreciate this so much. I feel less overwhelmed when I'm allowed to take the time to understand what you need, and how I can become the parent you need."

With this reflection and exercise, what we're striving for is a combination of boundary setting, opening up a space for communicating our needs, and making ourselves vulnerable in order to provide a level of balance (in this case a little more power) to our child or loved one.

We don't need to know
everything right now



We may not know how to stop and process, or think about our body language and that's perfectly normal. I began with a journalling practice in the mornings with coffee, others like to journal at the end of the day and note what went well and what didn't. This is a practice, meaning it takes practise. We're opening up new channels we may not have ventured into before.

Things to note:

Our children may not be receptive. They may roll their eyes, sigh, say "Yeah, yeah, whatever" or worse.

Any kind of change or anything new will potentially activate the threat response. At their foundation, our children are autistic. Change is hard. It brings anxiety. It's the unknown.

Our children may have not been able to fully trust in our intentions previously, where we've had hidden agendas, used reward systems, taken comforts, so on and so forth.

I'm guilty of it as a parent.

Change in our relationships is a lifelong, ongoing practice.

It will not change overnight.

If your child responds to any communication for your needs to be met such as headphones on, you can try reducing the time you engage in the needs practice, or make sure your child has something to do in that time that they love..or don't do it at all if it's too much.

Things to note:

These conversations, or small communications are not to be had formally, sitting at the table or in a space or moment that is confrontational.

They're no-big-deal moments in the car, walking so we're not face to face, maybe directly following a challenging moment, ie "Thanks for letting me know you're angry, I'm working really hard to.."

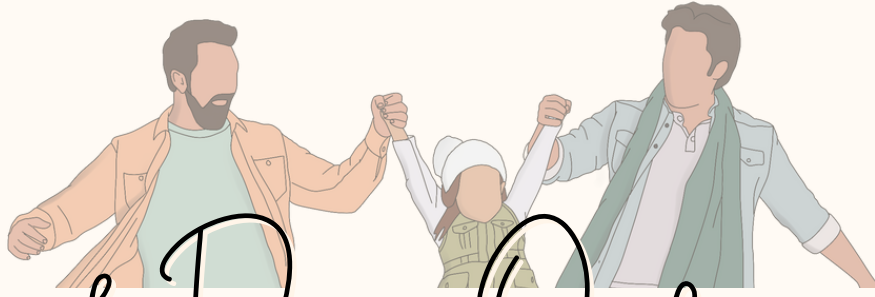
The point is not to be right, but to be transparent and vulnerable. No matter what their response is.

** If your relationship with a partner is strained or tense due to parenting PDAers, and your partner or family member struggles to 'get on board' with any learning, changing or growing in the way we are parenting, it isn't necessary to include them in this practise or to attempt to change them.

We focus on ourselves and allow them to have the experience they need to have with their children.

If we pressure them, and they are demand avoidant, their resistance will only grow.

Please also know that there is a line to be drawn, and you are always worthy of respect and being treated with care and consideration, as is your child.



Recap of Day One

1. We're going to pay attention to our non verbal body language and consider what may be causing us to convey non verbal communication caused by stress or overwhelm.
2. We're going to note whether we think there might be anything we can cancel, change, adapt, shift, etc in order to take pressure off ourselves.
3. 3. We're going to communicate to our PDA loved one that we are trying, and how we're doing this and what we need to be supported in doing so.

We're in this together.

If you need a script, if you need help, you can join us in the Facebook group, and ask for help.

Kristy xx

DAY TWO: I am a story teller



Video: I am a story teller

Focusing on using a form of communication that is declarative and non threatening allows us to take ownership of our stories and is a powerful tool I use with my children everyday.

Rather than nagging, or asking, or complaining, or expressing disappointment, or trying to explain where we're coming from with our children, I have found story telling a really effective way to communicate.

Watch the video below for to hear me talk about this for five minutes.

Captions are available and are probably best when around our PDA loved ones, as their knowledge of you learning about how to connect and engage with them may be triggering for them.

WATCH THE VIDEO
BY CLICKING ON
KRISTY'S FACE

(Go on...
you know
you want to)



Transcript
available
next page

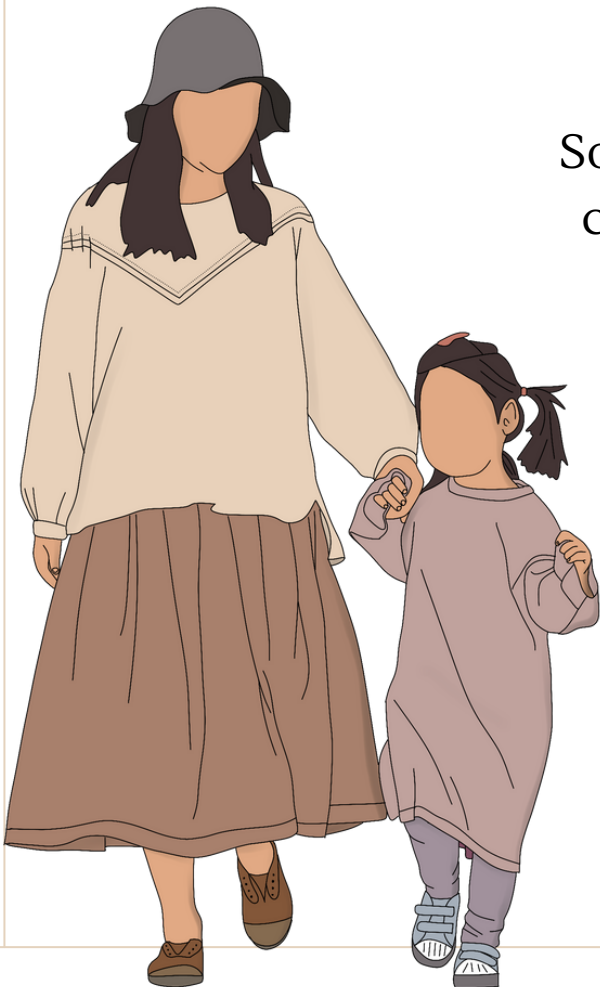
Video Transcript

Hello, today's reflective and practical exercise is a simple one. It's about storytelling. Now, I don't expect you to be able to do every single exercise that I send out. It may not work for you, and that's okay. Storytelling is a powerful tool we use in our family as the adults because it serves a number of purposes.

Firstly, it allows me to offer up information to help my children understand me better. It helps them get an insight into my history growing up. It helps them understand why I think the way I do. Why I do the things I do, it helps them understand my conditioning and I'm working hard to deconstruct and, um, unravel a lot of that conditioning.

So also in telling stories I offer up connection to my child.

I never do it in a way that is confrontational. So much like yesterday's exercise, we wouldn't say, "Hey, come out and sit here. I wanna tell you a story."



Video Transcript



It'll be something that I might just bring up while I'm doing something. So I might be chopping carrots or I might be folding washing, or we might be out on a walk or might be watching something on tv and I will say something like, "Gosh, I remember what it was like to be young and to watch all my friends have all these new toys that I would see on TV. But growing up in a single parent family, we never had things like that, and I felt alone, but also I was okay with it, but it's really interesting. I just remembered that watching this program."

And I think...that's just one example, but it offers up a small little insight into the fact that I grew up quite differently to my children. Another story might be something along the lines they might leave the cereal box out and this is a true story.. I might say, "Oh, the cereal box on the bench just reminded me of when I was young. Every time I would open a new margarine container, there was a peel off paper on the top, and I would peel it off and I would stick it on the laundry door and leave it there, and I would get in trouble every single time I did it. I'd get in so much trouble. And yet I could not stop myself from doing it. And it wasn't to be provocative. It wasn't something I thought about. It wasn't conscious.

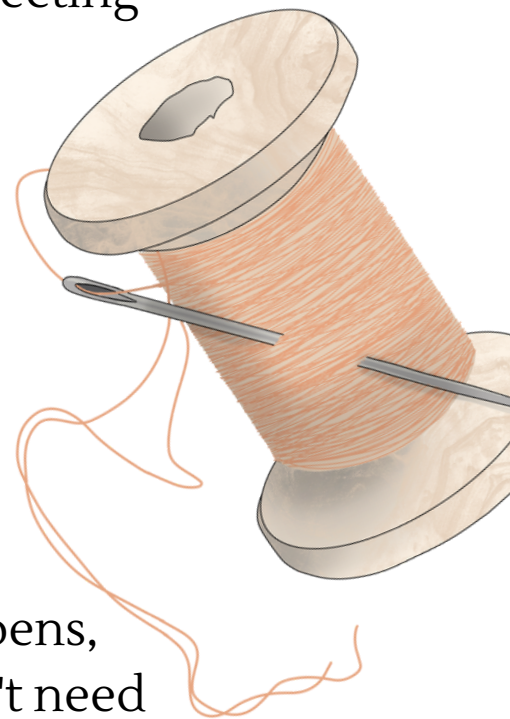
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Video Transcript

The point is in this personal story of mine, that I'm a PDA as well, and my brain was seeking balance. So I would get margarine thing knew, knowing I was gonna get in trouble, but could not stop myself from sticking it on the door so I would *foonk* on the laundry door every time.

I've gotta say, that story backfired on me about 10 years ago when my eldest went *foonk* on the laundry door and thought it would be funny. It wasn't funny, but I'd probably laugh now as a different person then. But telling stories around our struggles and sometimes the storytelling, connecting to the struggles that our children have can demonstrate our empathy, our compassion, and our understanding as well.

Now, making a note again that our children may not respond with compassion or empathy. They might even walk off while we're talking, or they might say, "Oh God, here we go", or, "Why are you telling me?" Because sometimes that's what they do, and if that happens, that's okay. We just stop. We just stop. We don't need to say, "That's really rude, you know? I deserve to be respected" because that's something that I'd want to say. We just stop. We go, "okay, no problem", and we leave it.



cont...

Video Transcript

Storytelling is so powerful. Again, it helps us connect, relate, offer empathy and compassion. It gives others an insight into our conditioning, conditioning, our history, our personal experience.

I hope I've been clear enough. If I haven't, you can reach out at any time on email or in the Facebook group and we can chat about this and help each other out with thinking of stories to tell. Anyway, it's a great way of also owning our own stories without telling somebody what we think they should know and it is declarative, so there isn't a demand inside owning our own stories and telling them.

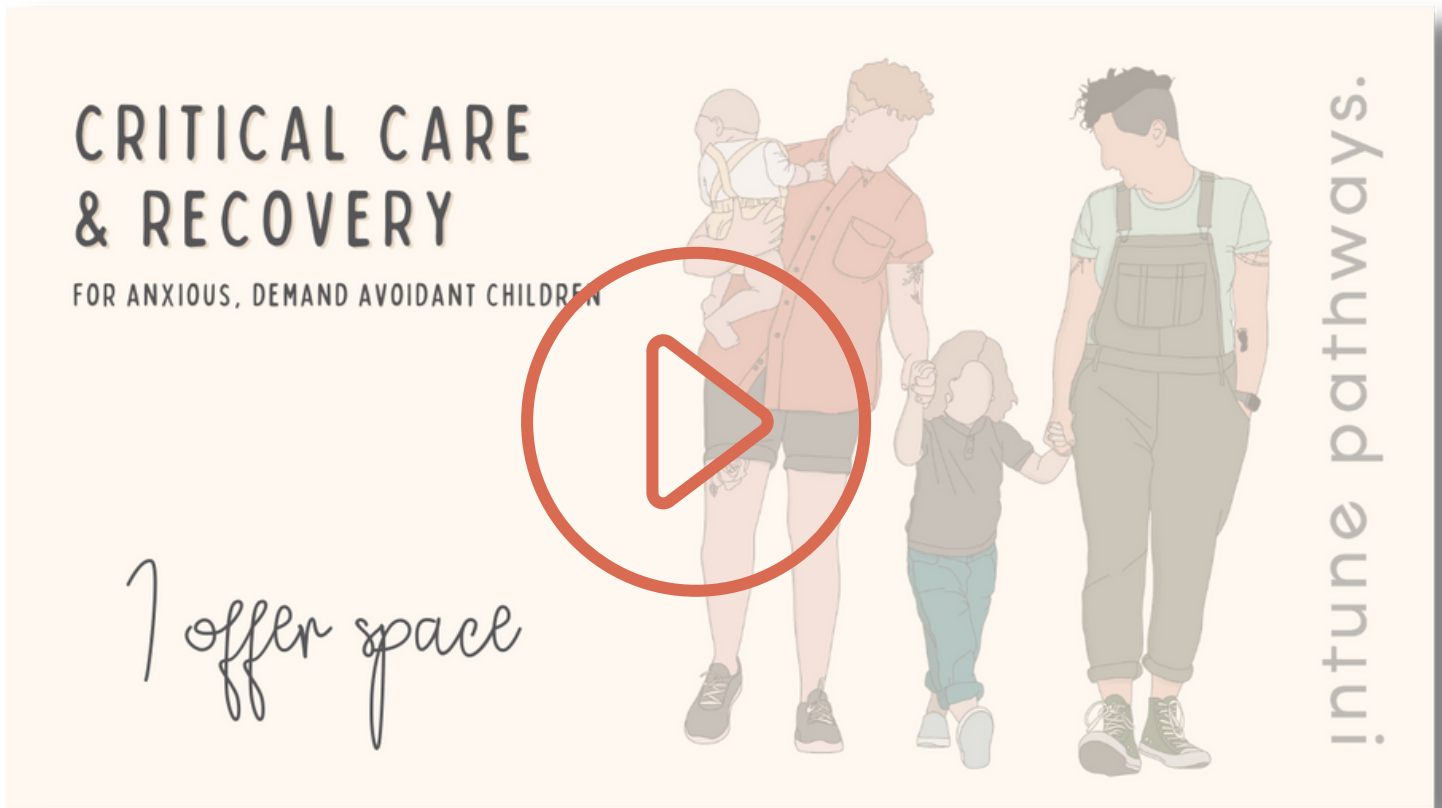
Anyway, I'm gonna stop right now and I look forward to seeing you all again soon.

Kristy x.

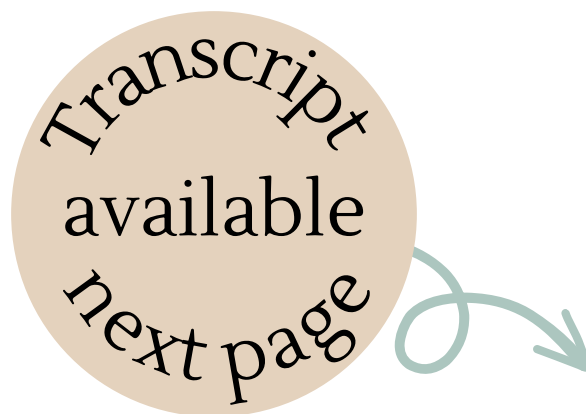




Video: I offer space



Captions are available and are probably best when around our PDA loved ones, as their knowledge of you learning about how to connect and engage with them may be triggering for them.



Video Transcript

There's always going to be a possibility that at least one parent to PDA children may share the same neurobiology, meaning they also may be PDA as themselves. Whether we recognise that or not is a whole other thing.

One of the questions though that comes in is, How do we manage as parents when we are supposed to have a united front when we are supposed to be on the same page in the way that we approach raising our children? My response to that is that it is not always necessary to have a united front or be on the same page. In fact, there's something that comes across as a little oppressive about that approach. When we are thinking about adopting radical changes and taking on a complete paradigm shift in the way that we are parenting our children, it's really important to extend this to as many areas of our lives as possible.



And this includes parenting. So often one parent will be asking about what's the best way to handle when the other parent is really resistant to changing their approach in parenting, or, what do I do when my partner really has strong feelings about the way

cont...

Video Transcript

that our children should behave? Or what do I do when my partner has a really hard time regulating their emotions and is really triggered by our child? These are really challenging aspects of family dynamics because considering that parents may be neurodivergent too, makes this about extending that same compassion to ourselves as adults. So many of the things that our children are struggling with, we are too, or our partners are as well.

This doesn't mean that we don't source supports and tools for ourselves because we're adults, but what it does mean is that there is this whole process going for the other parent, that only they can work out. And the more that we have conversations with them or bring up issues that we find with the way that they're engaging with the children, potentially, that's more pressure we're putting on them and it makes things harder. In turn, that makes things harder for us, so it's a bit of a vicious cycle.

Something I want to encourage as a practice, as a trial is allowing the other parent to have their own process, their own experience, and their own relationship with our children. I want to have us be curious about what it would look like to not feel that we have to correct the way that they approach parenting.

cont...

Video Transcript

I wonder if it would be possible for us to suspend judgment and to allow whatever needs to unfold to unfold for our partner and those children. Now, this may not necessarily be a partner. It could be extended family, it could be a friend.

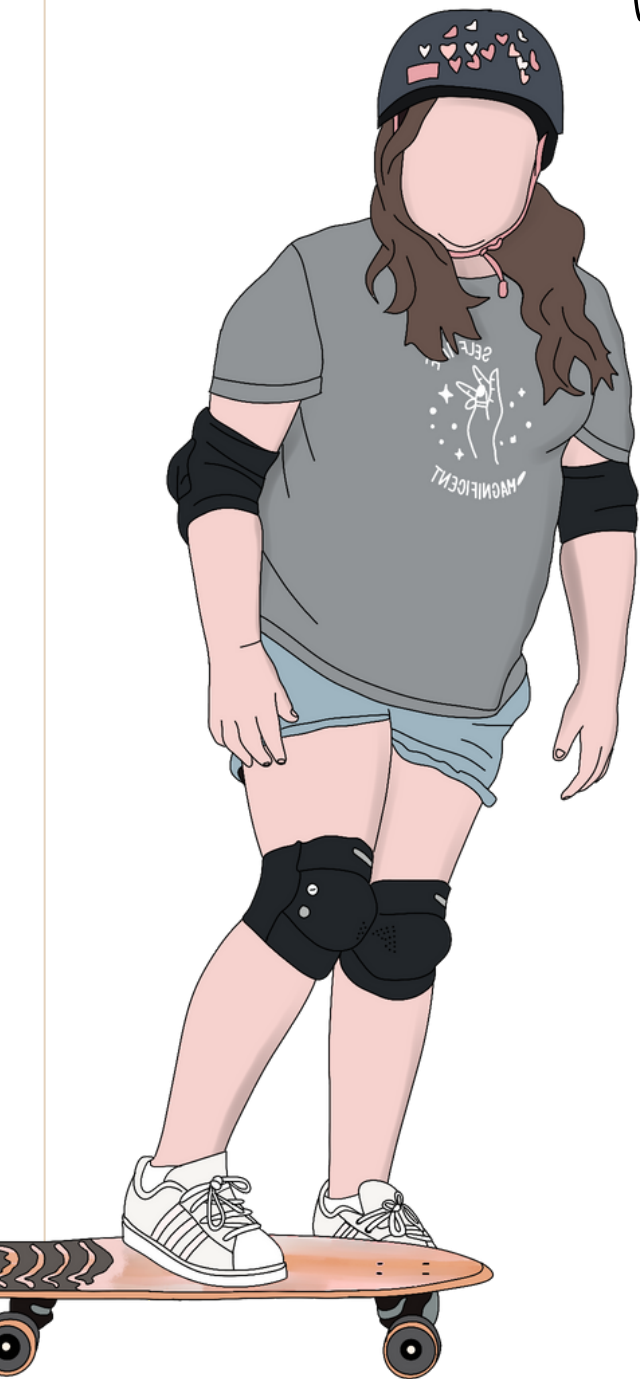
Now, of course, we're gonna draw a line here if the children are in harm's way or if our loved ones are in harm's way, then of course this isn't something we're going to engage in. I do find it interesting, however, when we step back, From sharing our challenges with our partner's parenting, how much pressure that relieves from them and allows them to move forward in trying new things and actually engaging in being intuitive around their children's needs.

It really does happen in a lot of families. That's not to say...if I am the parent that's stepping in and saying, "Hey, the way you handled that thing earlier this morning really upset me, and that's not appropriate." It's not to say that that's not a bad thing to do, and this is what I was talking about at the beginning.



cont...

Video Transcript



It's great to have honest conversations with our partners, but if we are having a situation roll out in the presence of our children and we are really unhappy with a way that the parent is approaching something with the child and the child comes to us in that moment and says, Mum or Dad.. My other parent just said this thing and it, it really upset me. Can you tell them not to do that again? PDAs will often do this. It's okay for us to say, maybe you need to talk to mom about that. Maybe that's a situation you can have a conversation with grandpa about. Now, that doesn't mean that we are leaving our children to their own devices, but we are returning the responsibility of this situation that's rolled out with that parent.

We're not picking up where they left off. We're giving them the opportunity to be in relationship with their children and to work through a problem collaboratively with their child, and we can leave the room.

cont...

Video Transcript

While that happens, we can go and get busy and do something else. We don't need to be in the same space because this creates something that is called exposure anxiety or exposure pressure, and this is a very real thing for PDAs. We might be really great at doing something, whether that be something practical or handling a situation a particular way, but if we feel eyes on us, if we feel we're being watched or judged, then it completely dismantles our ability to be able to engage with that thing that we can ordinarily.

So I would like to encourage families to experiment with relationship dynamics between adults and allow whatever happens to happen between another adult and our children without throwing in our 2 cents. Again, there has to be a line drawn there. If it is abusive or harmful, of course, we step in or we handle the situation in an appropriate way that creates safety. For the purpose of this reflection and exercise, we're going to practice getting on with things and allowing a situation to be held by the other adult and the children.

I'd love for you to let me know how you go with any of these exercises and provide some feedback.

Kristy x.



DAY FOUR:

A stylized illustration of a family of three practicing Tai Chi. In the center is a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and grey jeans, in a wide-legged stance with his arms extended forward. To his left is a woman with curly hair, wearing a pink cardigan over a grey top and blue jeans, also in a similar pose. To his right is a young boy with curly hair, wearing a light blue polo shirt and grey pants, standing with his arms slightly out. The background is plain white.

**I find rest
in connection**

Video: I find rest in connection



Captions are available and are probably best when around our PDA loved ones, as their knowledge of you learning about how to connect and engage with them may be triggering for them.



Video Transcript

Hello. It is Friday and it is my day off, and I am here on my day off because I want to share with you why this is so important for me. Every week I have at least one day where I give myself permission to do absolutely nothing. I give our children permission to do absolutely nothing. We just get up when we want to. We stay in our pyjamas all day if we want to. I don't rush around cleaning. I don't rush around stressing or worrying. I don't respond to emails. I don't work. I just do whatever I wanna do. In saying that, sometimes there are, on those days, moments where I will choose to work because that's what I want.

Today's exercise or activity, if you should choose to try it, is to allow yourself time when nothing is happening. So, this will be different for everyone, and I know I always say this, but if you're a person that needs the house or your space to be clean so you don't feel overwhelmed, then that's okay.

You can incorporate that into your time. What I like to do is I like to just get up, tune into how I feel. Do I wanna start my day, sitting in a chair, just drinking a coffee? Do I wanna sit and scroll social media? We're not vilifying any kind of behaviour or activities. We're doing whatever we wanna do.



Video Transcript

Whatever feels right in the moment, practicing letting go of guilt, the shoulds, and allowing ourselves to be human with our children. So on that day, if you choose that to be when you are with your children, which I do, my children are always with me on that day where I'm not doing all the things, I try and observe what they're doing and when it feels right, I go over and I just watch.

If they allow that, one of my children loves it when I take an interest in what they're doing. They love to play their music that they make on their iPad, or they love for me to just watch them playing a game. The way that our children play is neurodivergent, culturally different, and so what that means is their play profile may be that they prefer parallel play, which means we're next to them and doing our own thing while they're playing. It may be that they like to teach us or share their interests with us, but the point of this exercise is giving ourselves a break, stepping out of the parent role for just a moment, being human delving into our own interests, whether it be reading a book, whether it be drawing, watching something on tv, whatever it is, it doesn't matter.



Video Transcript

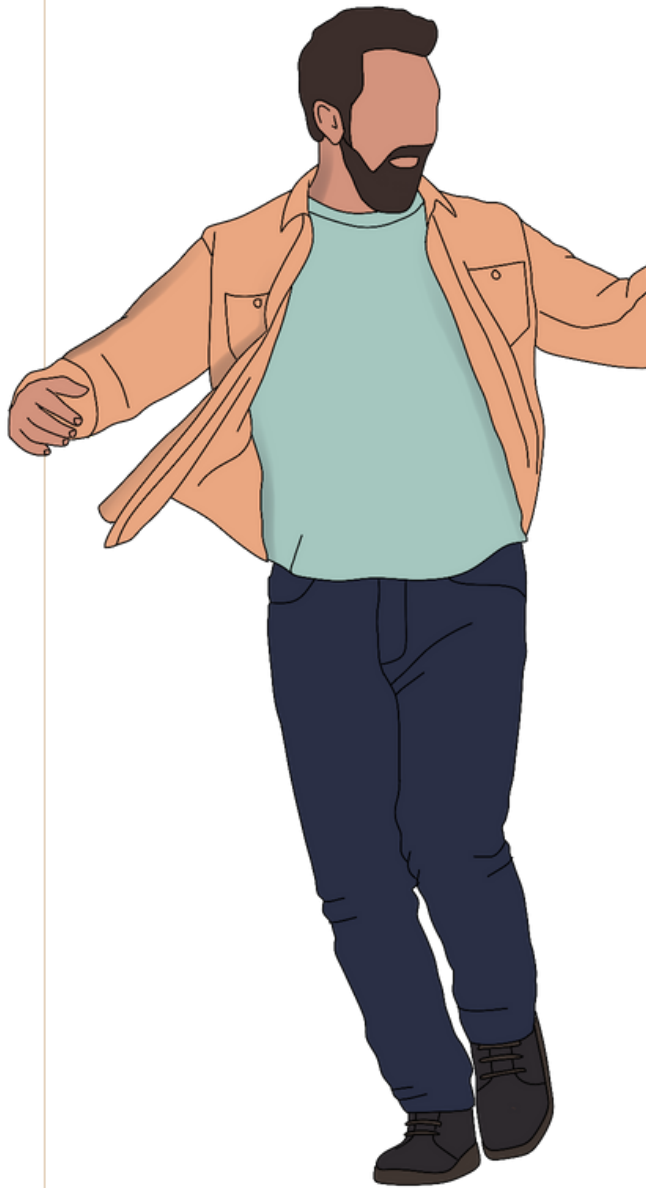
You get to choose and allowing our children to, to just be, it's going to be a completely low demand or no demand day. I don't usually use those terms, but so people understand where I'm coming from, that's what we're practicing.

Now I approach my children and I might just sit and go, "wow".. And even if I don't really mean it, I just pretend, look at their game and go, " Oh, that looks so fun. Wonder if I'd be good at that. Probably not, because you are, you're so good at that." So we are really building up the child's sense of self and their confidence, celebrating how great they are at something and paying real attention to what they're doing.

Sometimes I would do that for five minutes. But what happens after that is then my child approaches me at different times and says, "Mum, look at what I'm doing", or, "Mum, do you wanna see this new game? Come and sit with me and watch", and I'll sit and watch and watch TV. So we are building relationship.



Video Transcript



We're building relational safety, we're taking an interest. We're connecting, and in a very inadvertent way, we're taking the pressure off ourselves and creating space. And letting ourselves have a break. For a long time, I didn't have the luxury of being alone and having a lay down or having a rest.

So I've had to learn to incorporate downtime and rest into my life with my children. And so sometimes that means playing doctors and patients, and I'm the patient because I get to lay down.

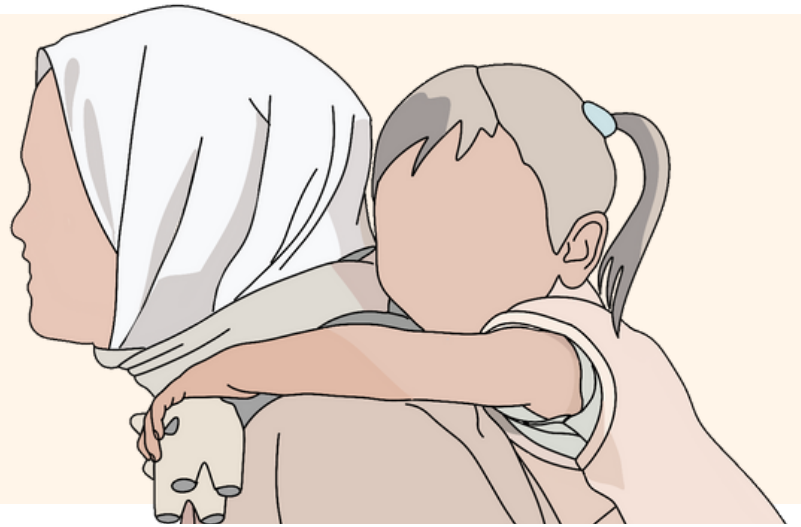
Sometimes it means playing hair salons and I'm the client because I get a head massage. Sometimes it might be that we are making videos in the backyard and I'm doing the filming.

It's finding ways that we get to sit and relax, and yes, there will be challenges around this. There will be that our children may be demanding, their anxiety may escalate, so we tune into the response and we adapt accordingly. If something's not working, then we pull back. All change can trigger a threat response.

cont...

Video Transcript

Being mindful of that, it doesn't, if it, if what you try doesn't work out with your children, it doesn't mean that you are doing the wrong thing. It means that we've tried this thing, it hasn't worked out the way we thought it might. So we pull back and we go back to the drawing board and that's okay.



So, just to recap, we're going to find moments for ourselves today, either by ourselves or with our children. Over time, what we are hoping to do is deescalate the threat response because our children need often undivided attention from us, uncompromised presence from us. When we dedicate that time to watch them playing, That's what they're looking for.

They're looking for unconditional connection. I'll even grab a blanket and sit on the couch and watch my child playing Minecraft. The most boring thing I think I've ever seen in the world that doesn't make sense to my brain, but I watch my child play Minecraft and I sit and I rest. All I have to do is look at a screen and I cuddle up with my child.

Video Transcript

It's taken a long time to get to that point where we can cuddle with blankets, and I say, "I am so impressed by the way your brain works. How do you know how to build things like that?" So I'm curious about how they're so skilled. Some of our children won't respond well to compliments, but if we frame them as a question or a statement like, "I just don't know how your brain knows how to do that, I can't do that", then we are communicating 'you're brilliant'. And when we say "I can't do that", we are doing is putting ourselves down here, so the child's here, and that deescalates that threat response and anxiety. It's a very, very fast way to get there.

So let me know how you go. If you need any help with any of the exercises, please email.

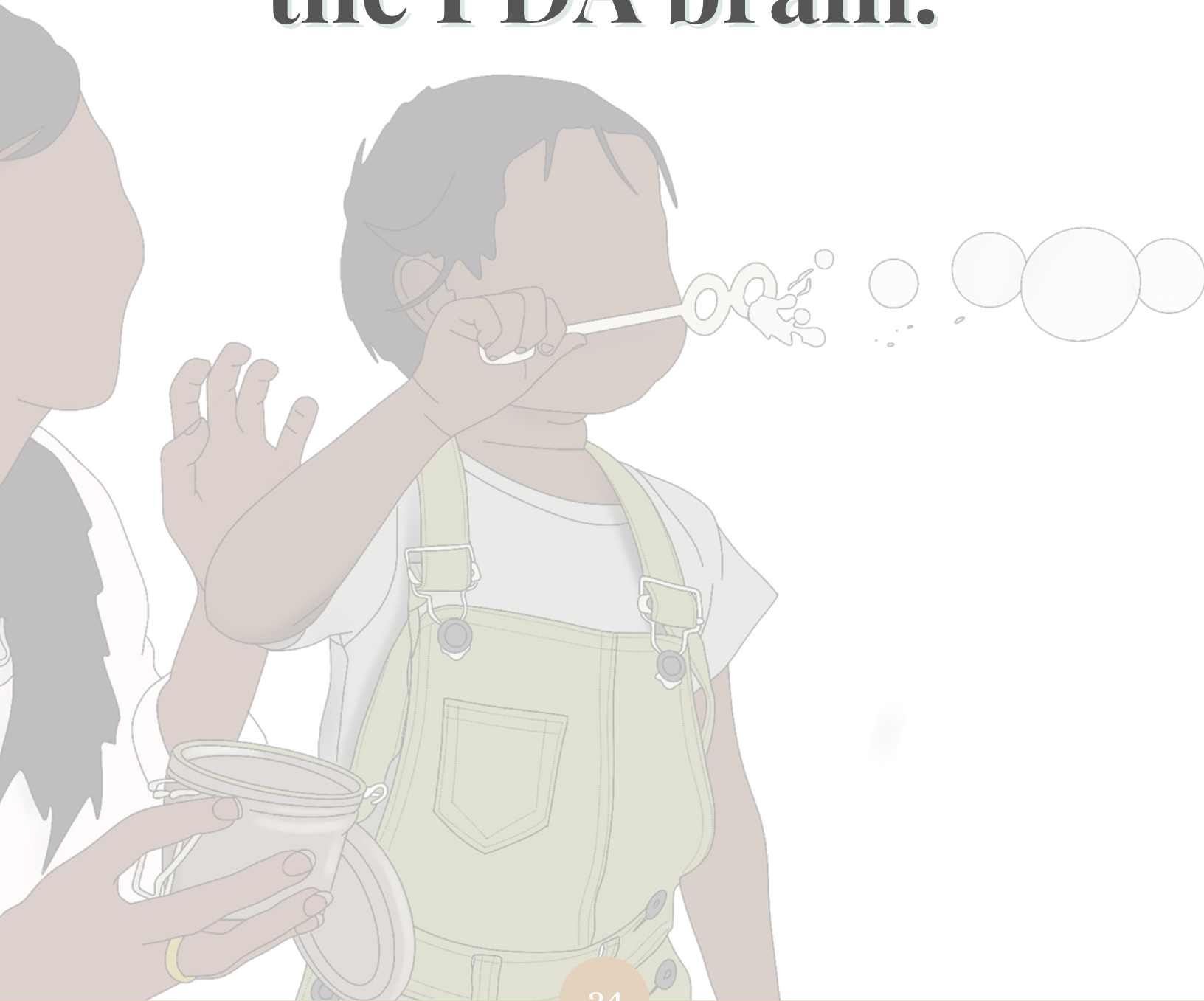
Please throw out a post in the Facebook group so that as a community we can discuss these together.

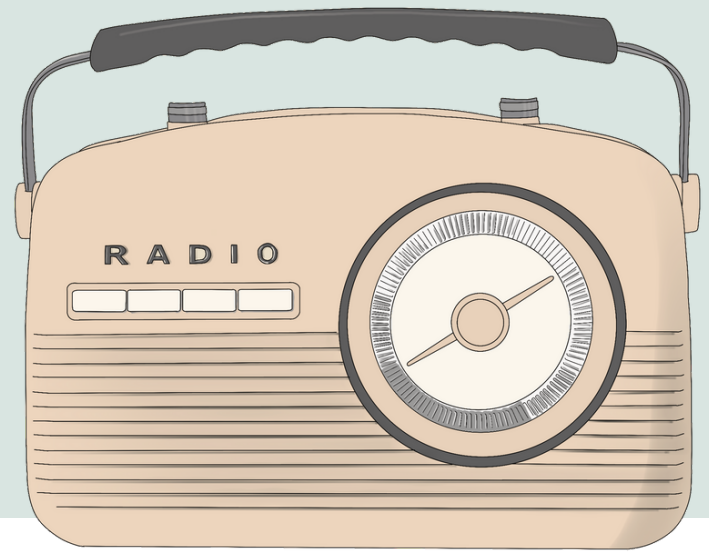


Kristy x.

Reflective / Practical exercise

Using sensory stimulus to communicate with the PDA brain.





Changing my physical environment regularly, prevents my demand avoidant brain from recognising patterns and sequences of events that are part of my routine; and shutting down my flow. This is why my background in videos changes often.

I move my desk and switch up sensory input - items on my desk, scents, a different rug under my feet or a different pair of shoes, a different window view, a new playlist, different colours on my PC desktop and email.

Keeping my surrounds fresh allows me to continue moving forward.

On a conscious level, I can continue doing what I love; whilst communicating safety on a subconscious level with my PDA brain through my sensory systems so it doesn't get stuck on "Ohh, not this again."

This allows me to 'throw a spanner in the works' so to speak. It prevents my PDA brain from recognising pattern and creating resistance to what it believes is a threat. This can be anything from walking into my office to work, going to school, eating dinner.

Here's just a few ways I keep things changing in ways that my brain isn't too alerted, yet allows for me to continue moving forward and to stay engaged in the things I love:

Using new and different olfactory input

- New spices in cooking, just subtle enough to enhance flavour so my brain doesn't reject safe foods
- Putting bubble bath and essential oil drops, body washes or soaps in the bath and shower for my children helps redirect their brain to the new sensory input rather than pattern recognition of "ohhh a shooweeeeerrrrr?!"
- Burning a candle or essential oil in the diffuser changes the smell of the entire house, which transfers from room to room and can last an entire day
- Dabbing some strong scents such as eucalyptus onto my sleeve or shirt used to help to remind me of the safety of home when I left the house and can be really great for those who are deep sensory seekers
- Lollies with eucalyptus do the trick too and are very grounding for me, so I keep a range of sweets at my desk (inside a drawer otherwise the dopamine dragon goes and goes until I'm unwell from sweets)



Visuals

- Using imagery such as new pictures, displaying the childrens' art work on the fridge and frequently changing it changes the look of the kitchen and creates safety around engaging with food, but also being in the kitchen around smells, etc
- Changing furniture and trinkets around, sometimes just introducing one small change can help.
- Putting something completely unexpected outside the front door on our way out to somewhere that may cause anxiety for our children is often helpful..I like to get silly and use things like masks that belong to the children, and hang it from the fence; or food on the door step, but you can simply move some plants around or introduce a new doorbell (doorbells are typically a no go for me and set off my threat response in an extreme way)



Tactile

- I keep a range of fidgets and sensory engaging items around me most of the time. Moisturiser for my hands in order to breathe it in and feel it on my skin, spikey rings to ground me and for deep pressure bring me back into the moment and release pressure in my brain.
- If you are someone that enjoys the clickety clack of an older style keyboard, you can pair that with the feeling against the tips of your fingers (this is popular among ND folks at the moment..but not I).
- Having a new blanket, a new cushion or some new socks to pop on during the times where we feel most anxious (generally during transitions) can be a welcome brain stopper to return our focus back to the snugglies instead of feeling threatened.



Kristy x.

Audio

- Music. New television programs. Having the tv on in the morning when we wouldn't normally.
- Playing the same song each time we eat dinner for a week and then changing it.
- Pairing any sound with routine, or transitions, or activities, and then changing it after a few days when the brain starts to begin to recognise the pattern.

It's really about being creative and noticing the moments during the day that present as the most challenging and pairing stimuli with those moments to throw out the PDA response.



I'd love to hear how you go with this one!

Kristy x.