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Dear GRANN Community,

We hope this message finds you gently this week. Yesterday marked Mother's Day, a day that can hold many different meanings across our Autistic and Neurodivergent community. For some, it is a moment of celebration and connection; for others, it brings complex feelings, reminders of loss, or experiences that don't fit the mainstream narrative.

At GRANN, we honour all experiences and acknowledge the strength it takes to show up as yourself in a world that often asks you to be someone else. This edition of the newsletter explores social connection, belonging, and the impact of masking through a neuro-affirming lens. We're sharing reflections, research, and resources that celebrate the value of authenticity while recognising the very real pressures many of us face to hide who we are just to belong.

Wherever you are on your journey - parent, advocate, educator, community member, or newly diagnosed - we thank you for being here.

In solidarity, The Collaborators @ [GRANN](#)

## ***Reclaiming Authenticity: Rethinking Support for Autistic & Neurodivergent People***



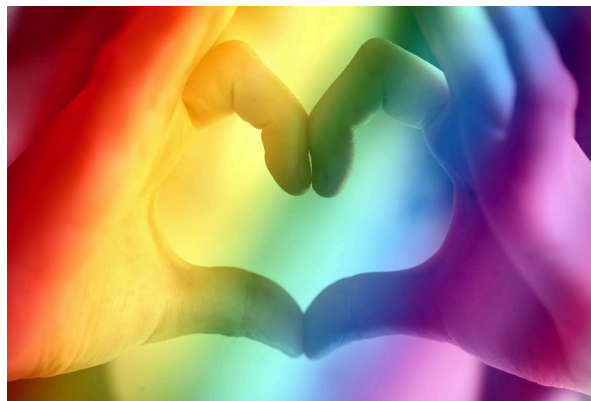
Too often, what's described as "support" for social and behavioural development in Autistic and Neurodivergent people is actually a reflection of societal discomfort with difference. Practices framed as "social-emotional learning," "functional behaviour," or behaviour-based interventions may unintentionally ask individuals to suppress their natural ways of being in order to fit into narrow expectations.

When support strategies focus on compliance rather than connection, or on making someone appear "typical" rather than embracing their identity, they can lead to deep and lasting harm. These approaches may unintentionally foster shame, disconnect, anxiety, and low self-worth - outcomes that are not accidental, but sadly common in systems that overlook the value of Autistic and Neurodivergent authenticity.

From a very young age, many Autistic and Neurodivergent individuals are given the message - directly or indirectly - that their natural communication, sensory experiences, and emotional expressions are "too much" or "not enough." These labels and judgments often come disguised as concern, guidance, or therapy, when in fact they signal a lack of acceptance for diversity in human experience.

Social expectations often reward sameness and penalize difference. As a result, Autistic and Neurodivergent people may be taught, often through well-meaning but misdirected interventions, that their safety and inclusion depend on hiding who they truly are. Over time, this constant effort to mask and perform for others' comfort can be profoundly exhausting and harmful. Therapies and supports should never come at the cost of a person's identity or mental health. If an intervention leaves someone feeling broken or ashamed, then it's time to reconsider the approach. Support should be empowering, affirming, and rooted in a deep respect for Autistic and Neurodivergent ways of *thinking, feeling, and being*.

As community members, caregivers, and professionals, we have a responsibility to ensure that Autistic and Neurodivergent people are met with curiosity, respect, and compassion - not correction. This means shifting our focus: From “fixing” to affirming. From managing behaviour to nurturing self-worth. From compliance to consent and collaboration. From isolation to connection with like-minded peers and mentors. We can begin by learning from Autistic and Neurodivergent voices and recognising the mental health impacts of long-term masking and invalidation. It’s time to challenge systems that mistake conformity for growth, and instead create spaces where Autistic and Neurodivergent people can thrive as their whole selves. Because true support doesn’t ask someone to become less, it helps them become more *themselves*.



## ***Shifting the Narrative: Social Strengths and the Power of Peer Connection***

For too long, the mainstream view has framed Autistic people as lacking social abilities, when in reality, that assumption is being turned on its head. Emerging research offers a much-needed reframing: Autistic individuals often build stronger, more enjoyable connections with one another than in mixed interactions with non-autistic people.

In a recent group study, participants were placed in various combinations - autistic-only groups, non-autistic-only groups, and mixed neurotype groups. The outcome was eye-opening. Autistic-only groups consistently reported the highest levels of social connection, ease, and enjoyment. Meanwhile, the lowest scores for mutual rapport were found in the mixed groups. So, what does this tell us? Rather than pointing to a lack of social skill, these findings highlight something more profound: when Autistic people are surrounded by others who share their *communication style* and *worldview*, *meaningful* connection flourishes.

This supports the Double Empathy Problem, a theory suggesting that social disconnects stem not from Autistic “deficits,” but from a mutual lack of understanding between people with differing neurotypes. In light of this, it's time to rethink what we call “social skills”. Traditional interventions have often

focused on training Autistic individuals to perform neuronormative social scripts, frequently at the cost of authenticity and mental health. But true belonging means creating space for many ways of being social - not just one.

*Here's how we can move forward:*

Create affirming spaces where Autistic people can interact freely, without pressure to adapt or mask.

Design social-emotional learning with flexibility - centred on understanding, shared language, and the diverse ways people express connection.

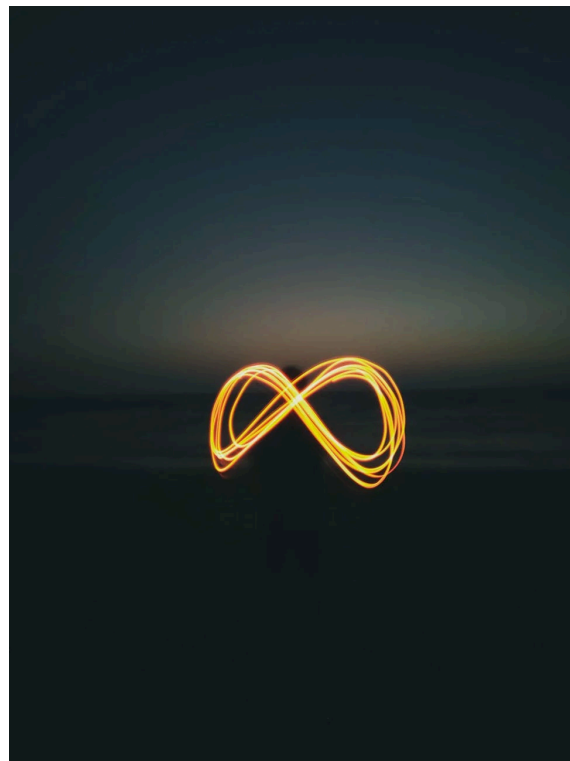
Reframe therapeutic goals away from “normalization” and toward celebrating the diversity of human communication.

Uplift Autistic peer connection, and empower Autistic-led groups and mentoring as key sources of social development.

When we stop asking Autistic people to bend themselves into someone else's mold, we make room for genuine *belonging*. The goal isn't to erase difference, it's to recognise that different isn't deficient. And the research agrees: "Autistic adults reported higher enjoyment and feelings of acceptance when interacting with other autistic adults than in mixed-group settings. These findings do not support the idea that Autistic people lack social skills, but rather, that connection thrives when shared ways of being are honoured.

Let's challenge the old myths and build futures rooted in understanding, not conformity.

(Foster, S. J., Ackerman, R. A., Wilks, C. E., Dodd, M., Calderon, R., Ropar, D., Fletcher-Watson, S., Crompton, C. J., & Sasson, N. J. (2025). Rapport in same and mixed neurotype groups of autistic and non-autistic adults. *Autism*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613251320444>)



***The Double Empathy Problem***



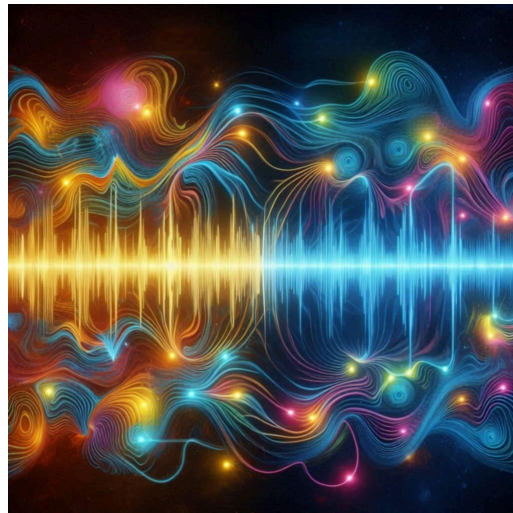
The Double Empathy Problem, first proposed by Autistic scholar Dr. Damian Milton, challenges the idea that Autistic people have a social communication deficit. The Double Empathy Problem highlights that social misunderstandings are mutual, they often occur because Autistic and non-Autistic people experience and express the world differently.

*Key Points:* It's not about a lack of empathy on either side, but a mismatch in communication styles, values, and perspectives. Autistic people often communicate very effectively with one another, but may struggle in neuronormative-dominated environments. DEP reframes "social difficulty" as a relational mismatch rather than an individual impairment. This shifts responsibility away from "fixing" the Autistic person toward mutual understanding, inclusive environments, and shared communication learning.

*Why it matters:* This theory supports neuro-affirming practice and helps explain why "social skills training" aimed solely at Autistic people can be harmful and one-sided.

Milton, Damian (2012) On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem'. *Disability & Society*, 27 (6). pp. 883-887.

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/62639/1/Double%20empathy%20problem.pdf>



## ***Masking: A Self-Reflective Exercise***

*“Understanding My Authentic Self. Am I Masking?”*

Use this worksheet to explore if, how, and why you may be masking parts of yourself.

### **What is Masking?**

Masking is a common and often unconscious strategy Autistic and Neurodivergent people use to hide traits, reduce stigma, or feel safer in social spaces.

*Masking includes things like:*

Hiding stims (e.g., hand flapping, rocking, fidgeting)

Forcing eye contact  
Copying facial expressions or tone (consciously or unconsciously)  
Suppressing meltdowns or shutdowns  
Pretending to understand when requiring further explanations or processing time  
Mimicking others' interests, speech, or emotions (consciously or unconsciously)

### **When Do I Mask?**

Think of times or places you feel the need to "act" or "perform."

Common settings I feel I must mask include:

☐ School or work ☐ Around friends ☐ With family ☐ Online ☐ With health professionals ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Why Do I Mask?**

Reflect on the "whys" - the reasons you might be masking:

☐ I fear being judged or bullied ☐ I want to avoid conflict ☐ I was taught it's "polite" or "normal" ☐ I feel unsafe being myself ☐ I want to make others comfortable ☐ People don't appear to like me when I don't mask ☐ I only fit in when I mask ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### **How Does Masking Affect Me?**

What does masking feel like - physically and/or emotionally?

☐ Tired or exhausted after social events ☐ Anxious or tense ☐ Disconnected from my identity ☐ I struggle to know what I enjoy or believe in ☐ Burnout or experiencing shutdowns ☐ Disengaged from social outings ☐ Nauseous or headachy ☐ Write or draw your experience: \_\_\_\_\_

### **What Helps Me Feel Safe to Unmask?**

Who are the people I feel I can be myself around?

What environments support me (e.g., quiet space, stim-friendly, no pressure/expectation to speak)?

What routines or tools help me reconnect with myself?

*Reminder:* Masking is a survival response, not a personal failure. You deserve environments that support your full, authentic self - not ones that demand performance to feel accepted.

*Unmasking can be powerful, but it's not always safe, and the ability to unmask without fear of judgement, exclusion or harm is a privilege not afforded to all.*



## ***A Call to Center Autistic & Neurodivergent Wisdom***

As we reflect on what it means to truly support Autistic & Neurodivergent people, one thing becomes clear: belonging isn't something we earn by suppressing who we are - it's something we all deserve, *exactly as we are*. As we explore how social challenges are often framed through a narrow, deficit-based lens, placing the burden of change solely on Autistic and Neurodivergent individuals, we've seen the real issue isn't a lack of social skill or motivation. It's a lack of mutual understanding, respectful curiosity, and systems designed for genuine inclusion.

It's time to flip the script. Instead of asking Autistic and Neurodivergent people to constantly adapt, we must ask: How can our environments, expectations, and supports adapt to us? Let's listen deeply. Let's center the lived experiences, insights, and leadership of Autistic and Neurodivergent people in shaping services, education, therapy, and policy.

*This means:*

Moving away from fixing and toward affirming.

Making room for stimming, silence, depth, and difference.

Trusting that when people feel safe to be themselves, growth, connection, and well-being naturally follow.

And it also means holding space for unlearning - gently but firmly challenging the practices, language, and systems that have caused harm, even when they were well-intentioned.

Because the goal isn't to make Autistic and Neurodivergent people "fit" into the world - it's to co-create a world that fits all of us.

So this is our reminder that's as radical as it is simple: *You are not broken. You are not too much. You are not a problem to solve.*

Your way of being, sensing, connecting, and understanding the world is not only  
valid - it is valuable.

Together, we can build communities where diversity isn't just tolerated, but  
deeply celebrated. Let's keep going - toward liberation, joy, and futures led by  
our own Autistic and Neurodivergent voices.

# ***Books by Autistic and Neurodivergent Authors***

## **Identity, Advocacy & Lived Experience**

“Unmasking Autism” - Dr. Devon Price

A compassionate guide on authenticity, masking, and reclaiming identity.

“Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking” - Edited by Julia Bascom

Essays from Autistic voices resisting oppression and reclaiming voice.

“Divergent Mind” - Jenara Nerenberg

Focuses on women and nonbinary people with ADHD, Autism, and sensory sensitivities.

“The Reason I Jump” - Naoki Higashida (translated by David Mitchell)

Insightful reflections from a non-speaking autistic teenager.

“All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism” - Autism in Color

A powerful collection centering BIPOC Autistic voices.

“What I Mean When I Say I’m Autistic” - Annie Kotowicz

Raw, validating exploration of Autistic experience through essays and poetry.

“The Autistic Trans Guide to Life” - Yenn Purkis & Wenn Lawson (Australia)

Insight and guidance from Autistic, trans authors on navigating life authentically.

## **Children’s & Youth Books**

“The Brain Forest” - Sandhya Menon & Aska (Australia)

A beautifully illustrated story that explains neurodiversity in a hopeful, child-friendly way.

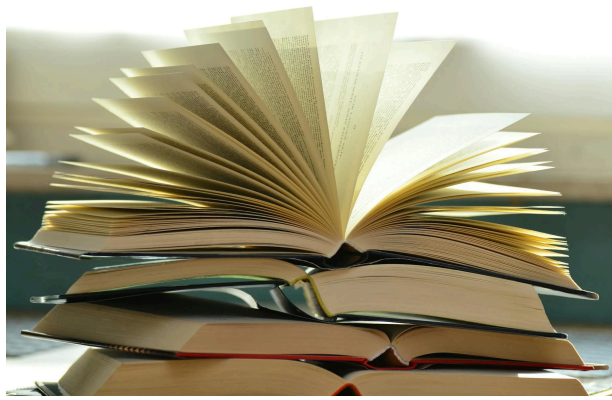
“I Am Autistic” - Chanelle Moriah

A visual guide for understanding and embracing autism from a self-identified perspective.

“Different, Not Less” - Chloe Hayden (Australia)

Part memoir, part guide - Chloe shares her journey as an Autistic and ADHD person in a vibrant and empowering way.





## ***Australian Autistic & Neurodivergent Resources: Organisations & Community***

ASAN-AU (Autistic Self Advocacy Network – Australia & New Zealand) Website:

[asan-aunz.org](http://asan-aunz.org)

Run by and for Autistic people, promoting rights, inclusion, and self-advocacy.

Reframing Autism

Website: [reframingautism.org.au](http://reframingautism.org.au)

Offers neuro-affirming education, training, and community resources. Founded and led by Autistic individuals.

Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

Website: [autismspectrum.org.au](http://autismspectrum.org.au)

Autistic Identity Project Features Autistic voices, especially those involved in research and lived experience work.

The I CAN Network

Website: [icannetwork.online](http://icannetwork.online)

A mentoring and advocacy program run by Autistic people for Autistic young people and schools.

Neurodiversity Media

Website: [neurodiversitymedia.com](http://neurodiversitymedia.com)

Career, advocacy, and lived experience resources—founded by Jac den Houting.

Yellow Ladybugs

Website: [yellowladybugs.com.au](http://yellowladybugs.com.au)

A peer-led organisation supporting Autistic girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals.

Autism Queensland (AQ)

Website: <https://autismqld.com.au>

Queensland's peak Autism body providing supports, therapy, and education.



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## **GRANN Inc. - Community Name Change Feedback**

Gladstone Region Autistic & Neurodivergent Network Inc. is evolving! We're exploring a name that better reflects our vision, values, and growing impact as an Autistic & Neurodivergent-led social enterprise.

We're committed to keeping the acronym "GRANN Inc." to honour our roots, but we'd love your views in helping shape what it stands for moving forward. Please take a few minutes to share your thoughts by filling out the form via the link below or via the QR code.

**<https://forms.office.com/r/8f59ac9RE9>**

Thank you for contributing to the future of GRANN Inc.  
Your views help ensure we stay community-led, inclusive, and affirming of Autistic and Neurodivergent identity.





## ***Community Connection Corner***

### **Online Low-Energy Hangout:**

We're planning to restart our no-pressure online body-doubling sessions soon - where cameras can be off, fidgeting is encouraged, and chat about your passions is welcome.

### **Stay tuned!**

Let's remind each other we're not alone.

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## ***Rockabilby & Neurokin Events- Supporting RAD Artists***

Are you a RAD (Regional Australian Disabled) Artist?

Did you know that RAD artists are the lowest paid people in the Australian creative industries?

Want to be part of a collective action to improve the payment and representation of and services for RAD artists?

Rockabilby & Neurokin Events are looking for Neurodivergent, D/deaf and Disabled artists from across regional and remote Australia to be part of our Tshirt Drive on October 23, National Giving Day to the Arts.

We won't let RAD artists die from exposure!

Featured artists will be paid \$10 per tshirt sold with their design on it.

Express your interest & submit a design (they don't have to relate to disability)

**<https://forms.gle/Wcd4enEdL9sMQTsXA>**

## *Are you a RAD (Regional Australian Disabled) Artist?*

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*Artists selected to be part of the drive will be paid  
\$10 for each tshirt sold with their artwork on it*

*Express your interest and/or submit a design  
[www.fb.me/rockabilby](http://www.fb.me/rockabilby)*

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## *Neurokin Arts Festival*

Showcasing diverse Neurodivergent creativity whilst fostering community,  
culture and leadership

Full schedule of both weekends available now, one online and one in person in  
Castlemaine central Victoria, with two ways to pay, from your own pocket or  
NDIS budget.

Get an invoice for NDIS: <https://forms.gle/27dDqctDeEjyHb2C8>

Find out more about the festival & buy tickets: [www.neurokin.org.au](http://www.neurokin.org.au)



## Gladstone Region Autistic & Neurodivergent Network Inc.

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