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## Creating Spaces for Cognitive Safety.

### *Feeling Safe in How We Think*

At GRANN, we know that true inclusion isn't just about being physically present or ticking boxes - it's about feeling safe to show up as your full, authentic self. Today, we're shining a light on something close to our hearts: *cognitive safety*.

But what does that really mean?

Cognitive safety is the deep, lived feeling of being free to think in your own way, at your own pace, using your natural language of thought - without fear of being continually corrected, rushed, or silenced.

It's not just a nice-to-have. It's essential.

## What Does *Unsafe* Thinking Feel Like?

For many of us, especially those in Autistic & Neurodivergent communities, unsafe thinking is a daily experience.

It looks like:

Being interrupted to share before you've even finished processing.

Hearing comments like "You're overthinking" or "That's not relevant."

Feeling pressure to filter your thoughts into something less "messy", less "intense", less "weird", less "chaotic"

, less "vulnerable" - to be more acceptable, more linear, more polished, more like everyone else.

The truth is, Autistic & Neurodivergent thinking doesn't always follow a straight line.

It loops. It leaps. It's image-rich, emotionally tuned, sometimes tangential, and always unique.

But in a world that idolises speed, sameness, and surface-level clarity, these beautiful thinking styles are too often misunderstood - even pathologised.

From a young age, we're given messages that our natural thinking is somehow wrong, that there's only one way to do things; one right way.

This chips away at our confidence and our sense of safety.  
Over time, those little cracks widen.  
We second-guess ourselves. We stay quiet even when we have ideas. We hide our  
brilliance because we fear being seen as "too much."  
All because we don't feel safe to think out loud - or even to think at all.



## **What Does *Cognitive Safety* Look Like?**

Cognitive safety is about creating environments - inside ourselves and around us  
- where our minds can stretch, explore, and just *be*.

It looks like:

Being given time to pause, process, and come back to your thoughts.

Hearing, "Take your time," or "I'm following you."

Feeling free to express yourself in the way that makes sense to you: with stories,  
metaphors, pictures, or movement.

Knowing that your ideas will be met with curiosity, not criticism.

Trusting that there is absolutely nothing wrong with the way your brain works.

When we feel safe to think, we feel safe to grow. Safe to create. Safe to connect.

It's in these safe spaces that Autistic & Neurodivergent minds truly thrive i  
where trust builds, creativity flows, and authentic community blooms.

## **A Message to Our Community**

*To all our GRANN family:*

If you've spent years feeling like you need to censor your thoughts or reshape  
your thinking just to fit in, know this - you are not alone.

Healing begins with allowing yourself to unmask, even in your own mind.  
Honour your unique thought patterns. Trust your instincts, even if they zig when  
the world expects a zag.

You don't have to think in straight lines. You don't have to make sense to anyone  
else before you make sense to yourself.  
You don't have to apologise for your loops, your tangents, your deep dives, or  
your pauses.  
You deserve more than just tolerance.  
You deserve freedom.  
Freedom to think as you are, not just as you're expected to be.  
***Cognitive safety is your right.***  
The right to take up space in your own mind, in your own voice, on your own  
terms.  
And here at GRANN, we're building a world where that's not too much to ask.

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## Understanding Distress Signals:

*When Words Come from Overwhelm, Not Intent.*



We've all had moments with our neurodivergent young ones where their words cut deeply - expressions like *"I hate you," "I want to disappear,"* or other phrases that feel like a punch to the heart. Some children may not even use words at all. Instead, you might hear shouting, crying, laughing at unexpected times, or repeated sounds and phrases that seem completely out of place. It can feel bewildering, even frightening, to witness. But there's something really important to understand: these aren't well-thought-out sentences. These are what we call *distress signals* - raw, unfiltered expressions coming straight from the emotional centre of the brain.

In these moments, your child isn't choosing to say hurtful things. Their brain has essentially flipped into survival mode, bypassing their logical thinking and

relying on fast, automatic reactions. These vocal outbursts and behaviours happen because they're overwhelmed - not because they're trying to hurt anyone.

### **What's Happening Beneath the Surface?**

When a child feels safe and settled, they can communicate calmly and clearly. But when their brain senses danger - whether from sensory overload, emotional upset, or internal anxiety - their nervous system kicks into gear faster than conscious thought.

This is thanks to something called *neuroception*: the brain's constant scanning of the environment to decide if we're safe. Even when there's no visible threat, the brain of a neurodivergent child might perceive otherwise harmless situations as overwhelming.

In these heightened states, children may show one of several natural stress responses:

Fight - Hyperaroused (Sympathetic): shouting, aggressive words, meltdowns.

Flight - Hyperaroused (Sympathetic): running away, avoiding.

Freeze or Shutdown - Dorsal Vagal: becoming non-verbal, withdrawn.

Safe & Connected - Ventral Vagal: calm, social, engaged.

Understanding that these are protective mechanisms - not choices - can shift how we respond. Instead of reacting with frustration or fear, we can lean into compassion and curiosity.

### **The Brain's Emotional Control Room**

Deep inside our brains is a powerful network of structures working to keep us safe, known as the limbic system. Think of it as the control room for our emotions. When things feel too much, this system fires up and starts sending out distress signals.

Some key players in this process:

Amygdala: Spots danger and triggers that fast emotional response.

Hypothalamus: Gets the body ready to respond (faster heartbeat, quicker breathing).

Hippocampus: Pulls up memories to figure out if the situation feels familiar or threatening.

Thalamus: Sorts incoming information and decides what to focus on.

In stressful moments, this system acts instantly, leaving no time for careful words or thoughtful actions. That's why a child's outburst might sound harsh—they're communicating from instinct, not intent.

*"Distress signals are your child's hidden language."*



### **Why Neurodivergent Families Need Gentle Understanding**

For neurodivergent children, the world often feels overwhelming. Everyday experiences - bright lights, loud sounds, complex social situations - can build up into sensory and emotional overload.

Added to this, many neurodivergent young people carry layers of past stress.

Experiences of misunderstanding, exclusion, or unmet needs can train their brains to expect threat more frequently. This ongoing tension can contribute to anxiety, burnout, and emotional exhaustion.

At GRANN, we recognise that families need support that sees the whole picture.

Neurodivergent kids aren't "difficult" - they're often doing their very best in a world that isn't always designed with their needs in mind. And parents and carers aren't failing when these moments arise. In fact, your care and curiosity are crucial.

*"Meltdowns are messages, not misbehaviour."*

### **How We Walk This Journey Together**

In our work supporting families, we focus on creating spaces of safety and trust.

Our approach is about building understanding first - helping families decode these distress signals, so they feel less confronting and more like a natural part of communication.

Together, we work to:

Understand each child's unique triggers and needs.

Build strategies that reduce overwhelm.

Support emotional recovery after meltdowns.

Empower parents with tools and confidence.

Recovery and resilience are possible, especially when families feel equipped to respond with calmness and compassion.

### **Final Thoughts: Meeting Distress with Compassion**

When your child expresses distress through alarming words or behaviours, remember: they're not rejecting you. They're reaching out the only way their brain can manage in that moment. With time, patience, and the right support, both you and your child can build a toolkit for these tough times.

At GRANN, we're here to walk alongside you - through the storms and the sunshine - helping you better understand your child's hidden language and celebrate their unique way of experiencing the world.

*"You're not failing as a parent—your care and curiosity are crucial."*

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## **Kindnes Reminders for Challenging Days.**

*Discover what feels right for you and your family, and remember — what works today might shift as life evolves.*



Breathe first, speak second.

Your calm breath is the anchor they need in a rough moment.

Step into their world.

Try to see through their eyes: is it too loud, too bright, too fast?

Keep your words short and soft.

Simple, soothing words work best when emotions are high.

Don't take it personally.  
Meltdowns aren't aimed at you - they're a release of built-up overwhelm.

Repair matters most.  
When the storm passes, reconnect with kindness. This builds trust and regulation.

*Remember:*

Stay close, but not too close. Give them space while letting them know you're near.

Watch for the quiet signals. Early signs of distress are your cue to soften the environment.

Choose comfort over correction. Safety first; lessons can wait for calmer times.

You're the calm in their chaos. Even when it feels stormy inside.

Every meltdown ends, and with your support, they'll rebuild stronger.

*You're not alone. Every small step counts.*

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## **A Gentle Reflection: Choosing What Works for Your Family**

Today, we'd like to share a reflection - one that might feel a little surprising, or even spark some quiet debate.

We know that well-meaning friends, family, or even professionals might see this as "giving in" or letting the children "run the show."

But before we lean into those old narratives, we invite you to pause and gently consider: why would we push a child into something that, deep down, their whole body and mind are telling them feels unsafe?

What we're sharing today is guidance we recently offered, rooted in genuine care, safety, and deep understanding.

We also know that making these kinds of choices is far from simple. They don't come easily or lightly.

They come after years of unlearning the old patterns, sitting with discomfort, and peeling back the layers of expectation that tell us families must always do everything together. That holidays should mean one family, one plan, one pace.

A perfect picture of unity.

But the reality? It's often much more complex.  
It's not always our reality, and it's not the reality for many of the families and  
children we support.

So this week, when a parent asked for guidance, here's what we shared:

Sometimes, it's okay if the whole family doesn't go on the same holiday.  
We're often told that holidays are about togetherness - everyone, all in, same  
place, same plans. But for some families, especially when neurodivergence is  
part of the picture, this expectation can bring more stress than joy.  
There may be times when part of the family heads off on an adventure, to a place  
that holds special memories or offers a sense of ease and exploration for them.  
And others in the family? They stay where they feel safe and settled. Not left  
behind. Not missing out. But exactly where they need to be.  
Because pushing everyone to take part, just for the sake of togetherness, can  
have the opposite effect.  
What could have been a joyful experience might instead feel overwhelming,  
dysregulating, and emotionally exhausting - for the individual and the whole  
family.  
It's okay to choose what works best for everyone. It's okay to honour different  
needs.  
And it's okay if that means rethinking the picture-perfect family holiday.



Now, we understand this might feel uncomfortable. If you feel that flicker of  
resistance, we gently encourage you to sit with it for a moment.  
Ask yourself: what feels hard about this? What expectations am I holding onto?  
Because here's the truth -  
When families like this one, and many others, choose a different path, especially  
in the context of neurodivergence, it can be easily misunderstood.  
People might say they're being manipulated. That they're making excuses.  
But they know their children. They know their family. They know what brings  
safety, peace, and genuine joy.

So, as we ease into school holidays, we invite you to consider what might work best for your family - even if it looks a little unconventional. Even if it breaks the script of what holidays *should* look like. Because sometimes, the most beautiful memories come not from following the crowd, but from following your child's needs - and your own.

We also want to acknowledge something very important here: *privilege*. We know not every family has the flexibility to make these kinds of choices. For solo parents, or families with tighter circumstances, this may feel out of reach. We share this story in hope that it offers a small reminder: it's okay to honour what your child needs. And what you need too.

With warmth and solidarity,  
*The Collaborators @ GRANN*

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**Speak Up**  
IN THE BUSH

Join us for a vibrant and inclusive conversation about self-advocacy initiatives happening right here in our local community. This is a great opportunity to come together, share experiences, and be part of creating positive change.

**This event is for:**

- 1 People with Intellectual Disability
- 2 People with Learning Difficulties
- 3 Families & friends
- 4 Carers & Supporters

**Wednesday 16th April**  
Session 1: 9:00-10:30am  
Session 2: 12:00-1:30pm

Philip street families and community precinct,  
Nutchee Building

**RSVP preferred**

Katrina.robson@p2pqld.org.au  
Brigitte@p2pqld.org.au  
0491 200 120

## Join the Conversation: Speak Up in the Bush!

Parent to Parent (P2P) invites community members, families, and supporters to a special event focused on developing self-advocacy skills and confidence for people with an intellectual or learning disability.



Come along for an open conversation about self-advocacy, empowerment, and inclusion in our community. Your voice matters, and we want to hear it!

## Philip Street Precinct (Nutchee Building)

 **Wednesday, April 16th**

 **Session 1: 9:00 AM – 10:30 AM**

 **Session 2: 12:00 PM – 1:30 PM**

This is a space for people with disabilities, families, and community members to come together, share experiences, and explore ways to support and strengthen self-advocacy.

For more information or to rsvp, contact:

[Katrina.robson@p2pqld.org.au](mailto:Katrina.robson@p2pqld.org.au)

[Brigette@p2pqld.org.au](mailto:Brigette@p2pqld.org.au)

**Join P2P in building a more inclusive future.**

*#SpeakUpInTheBush #SelfAdvocacy #DisabilityInclusion*

*#CommunityEmpowerment*



Free social connections groups.

 **autism**  
queensland

**Connections4Women**

Autism Queensland is facilitating **free** social groups for anyone who identifies as an autistic women (18+).

- ▶ **A supportive space:** Connect in a safe environment where you truly belong.
- ▶ **Build friendships and community:** Meet other women who understand and share your experiences.
- ▶ **Facilitated by autistic women:** A place where your voice is heard and valued.

 Starting February 2025.

 Brisbane, Toowoomba and Central Queensland.

 Online groups also available!

 Small groups (max. 8) enabling stronger connections.

 Groups run for up to two hours.

**Facilitated by autistic women for autistic women!**

**Register your interest by scanning this QR Code:** 

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

 Phone: (07) 3273 0000

 Email: [css@autismqld.com.au](mailto:css@autismqld.com.au)

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

Connections4Women Service Overview Flyer - V 1.0 Page 1 of 1

## Connections for Autistic Women

Limited Spaces Available!

Looking for a safe, welcoming space to connect with other Autistic women?  
[Autism Queensland](#) is currently offering limited places in their Connections for Women sessions!

These supportive groups are designed for women who identify as Autistic, offering a chance to build community, share your journey, and enjoy meaningful conversations in a safe, understanding environment.

🧩 Join online or in person:

💻 Online (Monday evenings):

5:30 pm – 6:30 pm

(Stay for as long as feels right for you.)



For in-person sessions and additional dates,  
check the flyer or contact Autism Queensland directly.

👉 Spaces are limited and registration is essential - don't miss out!  
This is a beautiful opportunity to feel seen, heard, and supported.

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## 🌟 GRANN Volunteer EOI Now Available! 🌟

Thank you for your interest in a  
GRANN Community Volunteer  
Role -EOI registration form



GRANN is growing, and we need *you* to help shape our future! 🐝  
We're thrilled to announce that our Expression of Interest (EOI) form is now live  
for volunteer positions in 2025.

As a 100% volunteer-run network, every contribution helps us build stronger  
connections and create meaningful change in our community.

We are currently seeking volunteers for the following roles:

**Social Media Posting & Monitoring** (Approx. 2.5 hrs/week)

**Website Building & Updates** (Approx. 2 hrs/week)  
**Online Peer Connection Program Facilitator** (Approx. 2 hrs/week)  
**Webinar Program Facilitator** (Approx. 2 hrs/week)  
**Fundraising / Donor Drive / Sponsorship / Philanthropy** (Approx. 1 hr/week)  
**Grants Writer** (Approx. 2 hrs/week)

Whether one of these roles catches your eye, or you'd like to offer your support in other ways, *we'd love to hear from you!*

You can also propose a new role or idea that you believe will benefit GRANN or the community.

*The full position descriptions for our volunteer roles are now available - explore them today and see how you can be part of GRANN's growing network of changemakers!*

**[View Position Descriptions Here.](#)**

👉 **Follow the link below to fill out the EOI form on Microsoft Forms, or scan the QR code to get started:**

**<https://forms.office.com/r/zL6NuXNwQn>**

*Let's strengthen our shared pathways for change, together.*

Thank you for being part of our living network!

- The Collaborators @ GRANN 🐝



***Should GRANN join  
Ko-fi?***

We're exploring new ways to keep our community thriving, and one idea on the table is joining **Ko-fi** - a platform where supporters can help fuel our work in our future endeavours. It could be a great way to fund future projects,



***Website Update:***

*Good Things Take Time!*

We're still hard at work behind the scenes building the GRANN website. We know you're eager to explore our new online

resources, and advocacy efforts while keeping GRANN independent and community-driven. What do you think? We'd love to hear your feedback before we take the plunge!

***We'd love to hear your thoughts?***

home, and we can't wait to share it with you!

Thank you for your patience as we make sure everything is just right. Hold tight - exciting things are on the way, and we promise it will be worth the wait!

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## ***Share Your Community News with GRANN!***

***We'd love your input!***

Do you have something to share with the GRANN community? We're always looking for contributions for our newsletter! Whether it's an upcoming event, a personal story, resources, or important updates, we'd love to include it.

Email GRANN your suggestions or anything you would like to share or hit us up on [Messenger](#) - we can't wait to hear from you!

***Let's keep our community informed and connected!***

**Gladstone Region Autistic & Neurodivergent Network  
Inc.**

[enquiries.grann@gmail.com](mailto:enquiries.grann@gmail.com)

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