

Understanding Your Neurodiverse Child

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MassGeneral Hospital
for Children®



- Understanding your neurodiverse child
- Supports for neurodiverse children

Program of MGH and MGH for Children

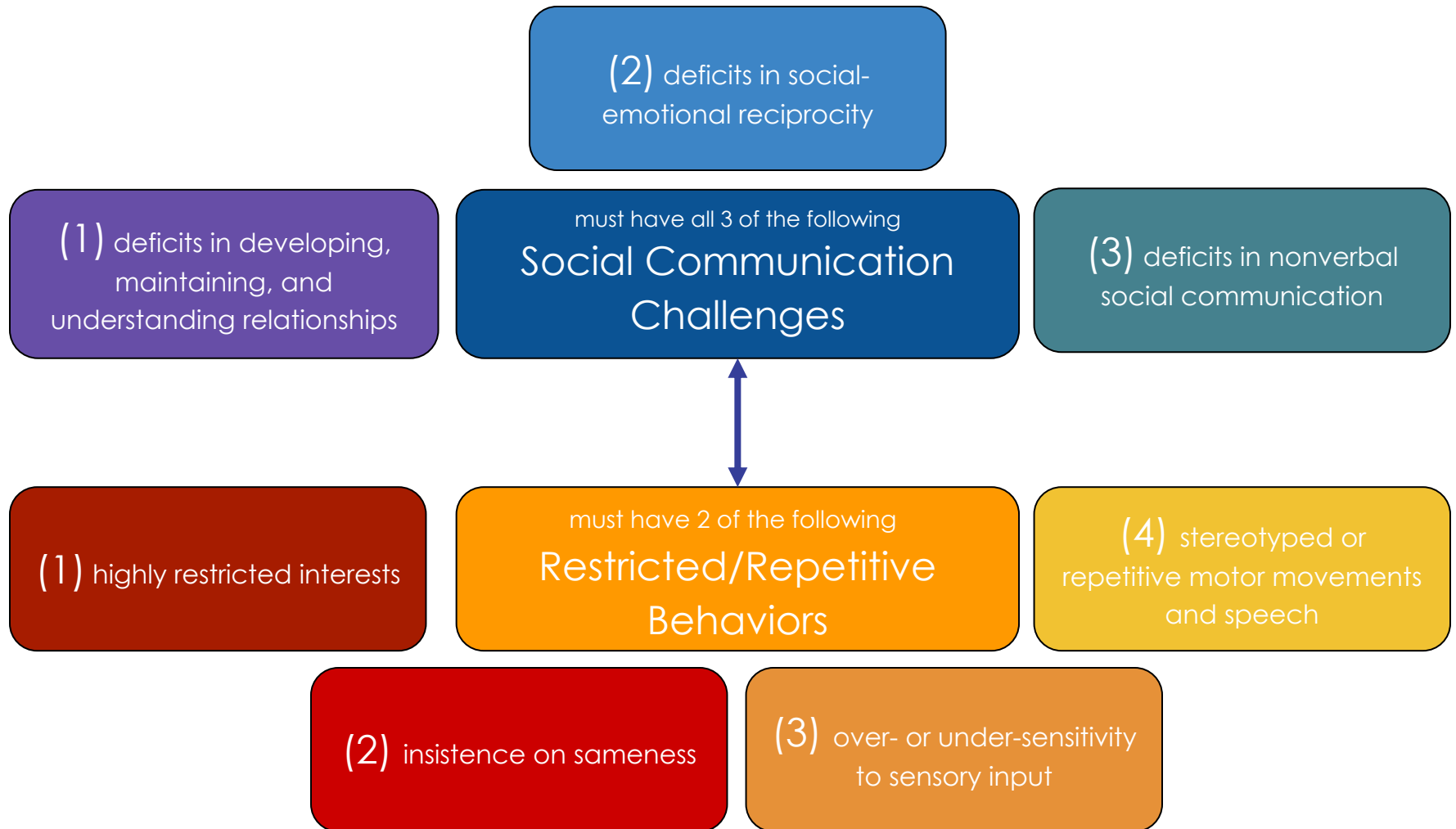
Dedicated to providing children, adolescents and adults with high cognitive autism or a related profile with the knowledge and skills necessary to make social connections and lead fulfilling lives.

- Individuals on the autism spectrum need ongoing growth in the areas of self-awareness, social competency, and stress management
- Programs in Charlestown, Newton, Lexington, Westwood, and over 50 employer sites throughout MA, NH and RI

“If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism.”

--Dr. Stephen Shore

Autism Spectrum Disorder



Perspective Taking



- **Perspective taking:** awareness that other individuals have perspectives different from one's own given their race, gender, ethnicity, histories, knowledge, desires, intentions, etc.
- Perspective taking allows us to perceive the minds of others

Contextual Awareness



- **Contextual awareness:** awareness that the shared social situation impacts norms that guide our behavior
- Contextual awareness allows us to behave socially in a wide variety of situations

Sensory/Perceptual Differences



- ASD symptoms: under or over sensitivity to sensory input
- Senses:
 - Vision
 - Smell
 - Taste
 - Hearing
 - Touch
 - Balance
 - Body awareness

Comorbid psychiatric conditions:

- Major Depression: 70-77% (Lugnegård et al. 2011; Joshi et al. 2013)
- ADHD: 68% (Joshi et al. 2013)
- Anxiety Disorders: 53-59% (Joshi et al. 2013; Buck et al. 2014)
- Most common anxiety disorders (Joshi et al. 2013):
 - Social phobia (59%)
 - Agoraphobia (35%)
 - Generalized anxiety disorder (34%)
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder: 53% (Joshi et al. 2013)
- Bipolar I: 25% (Joshi et al. 2013)

- Disability is defined as a person with:
 - 1) a physical or mental impairment that **substantially limits** one or more major life activities;
 - 2) a history or record of such an impairment;
 - 3) or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.
- Autism spectrum disorders, ADHD and dyslexia are generally recognized as “hidden” disabilities.

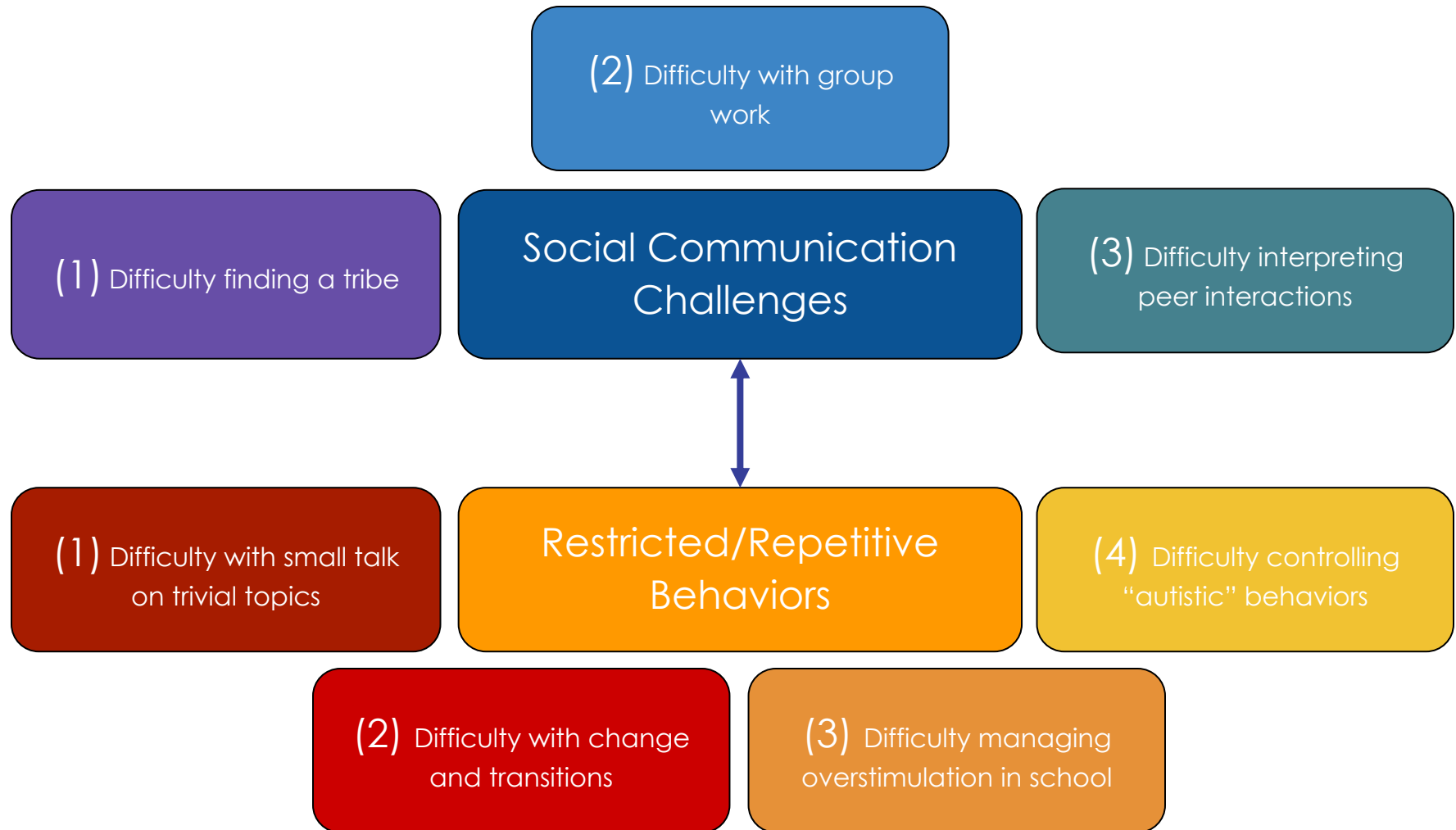
Challenges as Strengths



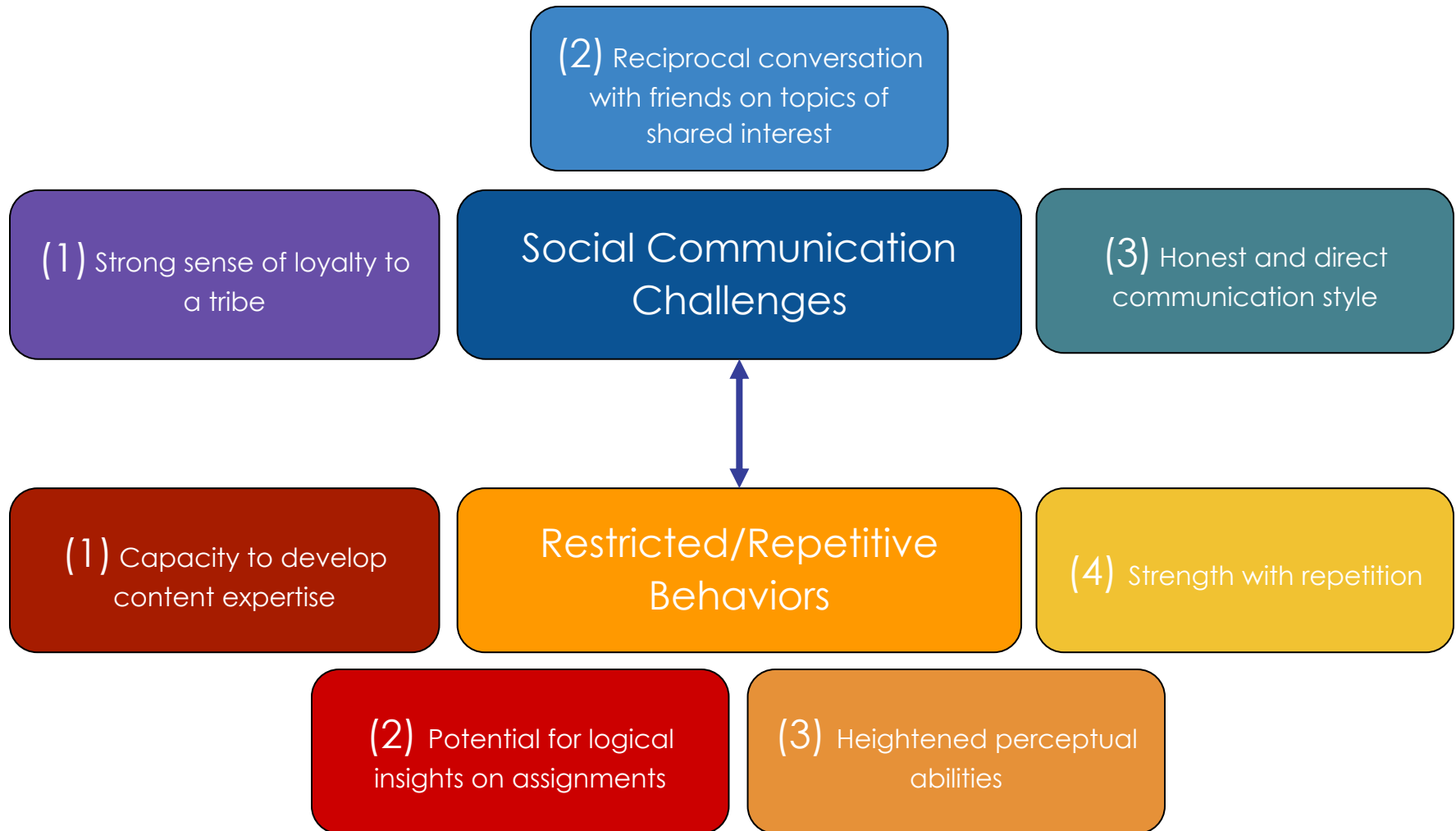
A word cloud centered on the slide. The words are of various sizes and colors (green, brown, blue, yellow). The largest words are 'autism spectrum', 'perspectives', 'challenges', 'talent', 'environments', and 'aspergers'. Other words include 'maximizing strengths', 'subcultures', 'minimizing', 'productivity', 'ADHD', 'dyslexia', 'anxiety', and 'depression'.

maximizing strengths
autism spectrum
subcultures
perspectives
talent
challenges
environments
aspergers
productivity
ADHD
dyslexia
anxiety
depression
minimizing

Academic Challenges Maximized



Academic Strengths Maximized



When you can: preview, preview, preview!

- Give an visual overview of upcoming activities and agenda.
- Allow time for questions about what is expected and components that might be indeterminate (e.g., weather).
- Be as specific as possible, but also accurate. If a plan may change or look differently, note that.
- Teach flexibility to expect the unexpected, at times.

Support curiosity about the social world

- Review the social behaviors of others in a situation and possible “rules” (e.g., expected/unexpected behaviors, norms, workplace culture).
- Encourage curiosity and questions about what people typically do in a shared situation (e.g., restaurant).
- For example, “What do you notice others doing when we are on the T?” or “I notice many people reading, looking at their phones or listening with earbuds on the train.”

Engage the unique interests of your child

- Tapping into these areas can increase participation and enthusiasm, facilitate social connections, and be sources of insight with your children.
- Elicit connections with additional areas of interest and skill acquisition (e.g., Why would I want to do a volunteer job when I'm not getting paid?).
- Increase self awareness about a strength with being able to delve deep into a subject area.

Be mindful of sensory stimuli

- Difficulty with loud noises, bright lights, intense smells, and other sensory issues can be common for neurodiverse children.
- Do sensory check-ins: For example, what is your preference—lights on or off?
- If possible, try to simply sensory stimuli during an activity and collaboratively brainstorm strategies to help the child manage sensory concerns.

Transitions can be challenging

- Allow for a few minutes to transition from one activity to the next.
- Give a reminder and verbal supports: “We have five more minutes of this activity before we transition to _____.”
- Express empathy “It can be hard to stop this activity you love doing.”

Break down explanations and activities

- Break these down into manageable segments
- Be as specific and concrete as possible
- Ask specific questions to help assess for understanding and follow up with clarifying information.

Visual supports are a must

- Create a supplemental support of a visual aid to assist in explaining a concept or activity.

Be specific and concrete

- When exploring an abstract idea, apply concrete examples or a specific insight to best explain the concept.

Be mindful of a need for movement

- Consider structuring periods of movement into an activity to help keep your child engaged and grounded.
- Normalize the need for some children to utilize movement for self-regulation.

Incorporate breaks

- Short breaks can alleviate stress or anxiety and improve attention.
- This can be integrated into a schedule and beneficial for the neurotypical and neurodiverse children.
- Designated time for transitions can help children shift between activities.

Aspire employer collaborators



- Ages 4 through 45
- Consultation and trainings for workplaces and school systems
- Academic year groups (i.e., fall and spring)
- Summer programs for children, teenagers and adults
- Parent coaching
- Career coaching
- Special events

Visit: <https://www.massgeneral.org/aspire/>

Suggested Reading List



Grandin, T. (2006). Thinking in Pictures, Expanded Edition: My Life with Autism. Vintage Books.

Haddon, M. (2003). The Curious Incident of the Dog the Nighttime. Random House.

Panek, P. & Grandin, T. (2013). The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Robinson, J.E.. (2007). Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's. Three Rivers Press.

Silberman, S. (2015). NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity. Avery Books.

Questions?

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