



Neurodiversity and the Incredible Years (IY) Programs: An Evidence-based, Relationship-Centered Approach To Supporting Children’s Diverse Development

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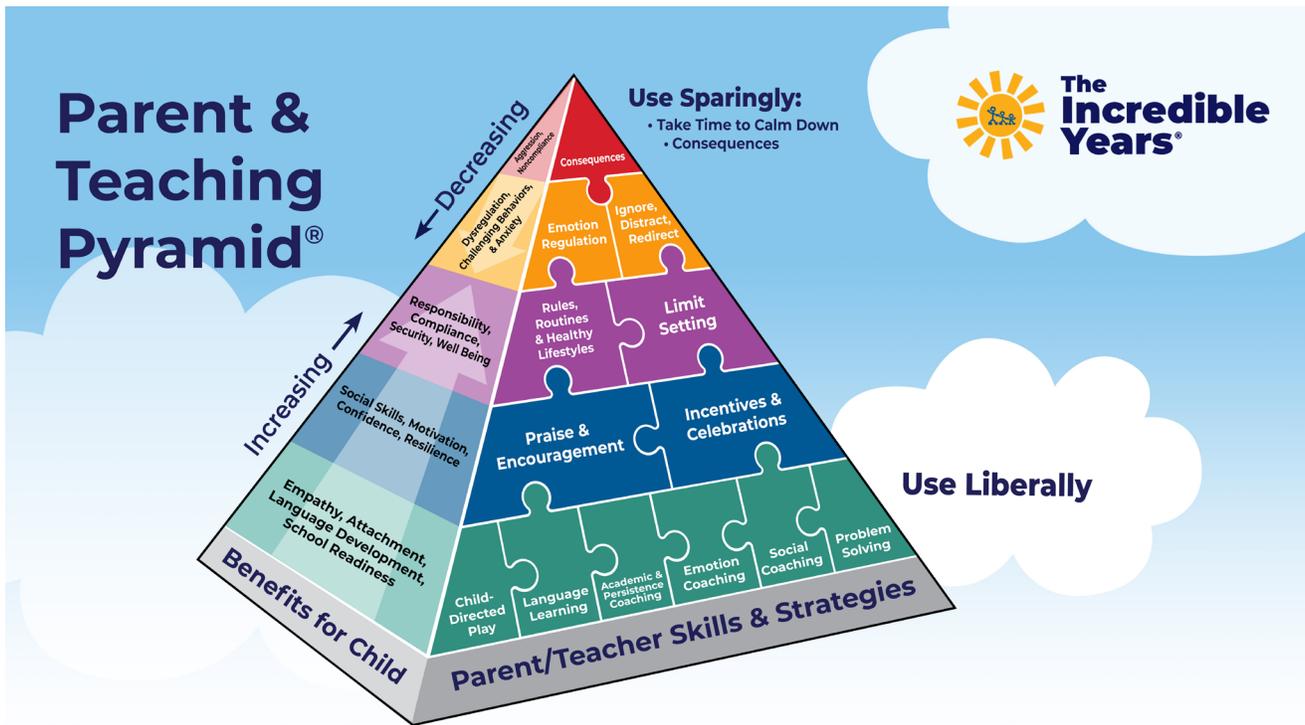
Reflections from four decades of research and program development.



In recent years I have increasingly been asked whether the Incredible Years programs are “neurodiversity-affirming.” The question is especially meaningful to me because when I began developing these programs more than forty years ago, the term neurodiversity did not yet exist—yet many of the ideas behind the programs grew from the same understanding that children develop in many different ways.

The core philosophy guiding this work is that **every child develops differently & uniquely**. From the beginning, my goal in regard to IY program development was to help parents and teachers recognize and understand each child’s developmental and sensory differences and to support their social, emotional, and academic development.

Rather than focusing first on children’s behavior problems—or what used to be called their “deficits”—we began by building nurturing, positive, and responsive parent-teacher-child relationships. This relationship foundation forms the base of the Incredible Years parenting and teaching pyramids and represents nearly half of each training curriculum. The emphasis on relationships reflects the fact that children vary in their learning styles, communication patterns, emotional regulation, sensory needs and developmental milestones.



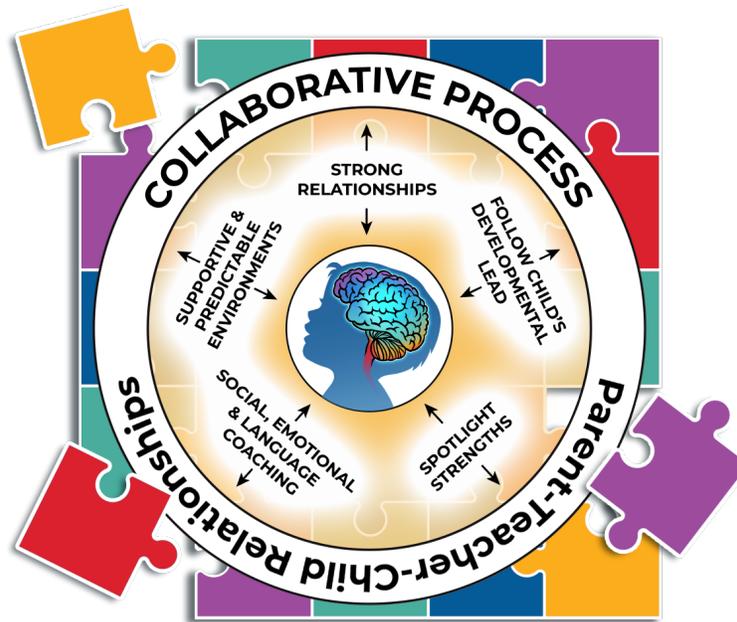
I wanted parents and teachers to **shine a spotlight—or even sunshine—on each child’s social, emotional, and cognitive strengths**, and particularly on the positive behaviors they wanted to strengthen. Research has consistently shown that when parents and teachers notice and encourage these strengths, young children develop confidence, emotional regulation, persistence, and social competence. In turn, these abilities are associated with reduced delinquency, lower school dropout rates, and fewer depressive symptoms in adolescence.

These principles have been evaluated in dozens of randomized control group trials of the Incredible Years programs conducted over the past four decades. A summary of research on the IY programs can be found here: [The Research Behind The Incredible Years® Early Intervention Programs](#)

At the same time, we recognized that every family is different, and every classroom, school, and community has its own culture, expectations, and resources. The Incredible Years programs were designed to be flexible so that parents and teachers can adapt evidence-based strategies to fit their goals, each child’s developmental needs, and the context in which children live and learn.

Although the term *neurodiversity* was not commonly used when the programs were first developed, the underlying philosophy has always been consistent with the idea that children grow along **many different developmental pathways**.

Different Developmental Pathways – Shared Support



What This Means in Practice When Delivering Incredible Years Programs

Over time, this collaborative philosophy—and the recognition that every child has unique patterns of language, social, and emotional development—has shaped the design of all the IY parent, teacher, and child programs in several practical ways.

For example, there are separate Incredible Years parent and teacher programs for **babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children**, reflecting the different developmental milestones and needs at each stage.

Following the Child's Developmental Lead

Parents and teachers are encouraged to carefully observe children's interests, play themes, communication styles, verbal and nonverbal language, sensory likes and dislikes and emotional and social responses.

Through child-directed play, four different coaching methods, attentive listening, and *serve-and-return* conversations, adults learn to better understand how each child experiences the world. This approach supports individual developmental differences rather than expecting conformity.

Spotlighting Strengths

Parents and teachers learn to give special attention to children's positive behaviors, efforts, creativity, curiosity, and problem-solving attempts. Encouragement, social and emotional coaching, persistence coaching, and labeled praise help build children's confidence, motivation, and resilience.

Coaching Children’s Language, Persistence, Social & Emotional Skills

Parents and teachers learn how to support each child’s development of emotional regulation, persistence, friendship skills, and problem solving through modeling, practice, imaginary and pretend play, and the use of visual supports. They also learn how to **tailor or individualize their responses** based on each child’s likes and dislikes, language and play levels.

Building Strong Relationships First

Positive parent-child and teacher-child relationships provide the foundation for learning and development. Parents and teachers learn how to collaborate with each other to develop shared goals and behavior plans for children at home and school.

Building Teacher and Parent Support Networks

All the IY programs are delivered in group formats, with supplemental individual coaching when needed. This group-based approach is intentional. Early randomized control studies found that group-based parent programs led to more sustained parent and child outcomes at one-year followup compared to individual approaches.

In addition, parents and teachers reported increased confidence and self-efficacy, reduced stress, and a stronger sense of support. Opportunities for shared learning and mutual encouragement help reduce isolation and allow adults to learn from one another’s experiences. These support networks are an important part of sustaining positive changes for both children and adults.

Collaborative Problem Solving

Parents and teachers are encouraged to understand the **function of the child’s behavior** and to develop behavior plans collaboratively, based on that understanding.

Adapting to Families, Schools, and Communities

Every child, family, classroom, and culture is different. Strategies are therefore designed to be flexible and responsive to the needs, values and goals of the families and communities involved.



Supporting Children with Developmental Differences

As the Incredible Years programs were evaluated in randomized control group trials over the first two decades, we received extensive feedback from group leaders, parents, teachers, and children, as well as independent observational assessments of their interactions in homes and schools. This pre and post intervention feedback allowed us to continually refine and update the programs. In fact, IY teacher and parent programs now include interviews with parents and teachers reflecting on how they tailored their interactions to each child’s temperament and developmental level.

Over the past 10–15 years, we have developed explicit neurodiverse aligned adaptations as well as new video vignettes of more families and teachers of children with diagnosed developmental differences, including **Autism, ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, language delays, and other neurodevelopmental variations**. It is recommended that group leaders have training and experience in supporting neurodiverse children and families.

The core Incredible Years principles—strength-based encouragement, relationship building, child-directed interaction, persistence, emotional and social coaching, use of visuals & sensory calm down methods and skilled scaffolding learning—remain central. Research has shown these principles to be particularly helpful for children with developmental differences and their families.



Supplemental Incredible Years Programs

Parent and Teacher Programs for Children with Autism or Communication Delays (Ages 2–5)

Parents and teachers learn strategies to support these children by:

- scaffolding and encouraging social engagement with peers
- supporting nonverbal, visual and verbal communication and strengthening language development
- enhancing emotional literacy and self-regulation methods (e.g., positive self talk, breathing, positive imagery, exercise & singing)
- identifying sensory likes and dislikes and sensory motivators to promote skills development
- supporting self-regulation with sensory breaks or favorite movement activities
- modeling and encouraging pretend and puppet play
- engaging in child-directed narrated play
- promoting school readiness skills with academic coaching

The group-based approach, central to Incredible Years program delivery, supports children's development while also reinforcing the parent and teacher support networks described earlier.

Children with Attention or Self-Regulation Differences (such as ADHD or ODD)

The programs help Parents and Teachers support these children by:

- providing predictable routines
- using visual reminders
- breaking tasks into smaller steps
- coaching emotional regulation and calm down strategies (e.g., positive self talk, breathing, positive imagery, visual cues, exercise & singing)
- promoting cognitive problem solving skills with puppets and visuals
- setting developmentally appropriate expectations for each child
- modeling and encouraging child-directed play and fantasy play with puppet interactions

These strategies help children develop **self-regulation, persistence, social and emotional competence**, while also building resilience in managing stress.



Neurodiversity-Aligned Teaching Strategies in the Child Dinosaur Programs

The Dinosaur small-group child program and classroom curriculum teach many skills that support children with a wide range of developmental styles and learning needs.

Using large child-size puppets, visual cues, stories and video vignettes, teachers and therapists prompt discussions and practices of individually targeted social, emotional and problem solving skills. This includes helping children to:

- recognize and name their feelings
- learn calming strategies and self-regulation skills
- develop and practice executive functioning skills such as persistence, waiting, turn-taking, and flexible thinking
- promoting empathy by practicing social and emotional skills such as sharing, helping, engaging in joint play, cooperating, forgiving, apologizing and perspective-taking

These neurodiverse aligned strategies focus on **building and supporting children’s development, confidence and ability to manage conflict.**



Language That Reflects This Philosophy

In Incredible Years programs we try to use language that supports children’s dignity and development.

For example, we often encourage adults to think in terms of:

Instead of saying

Fixing behavior problems

Defiant child

Disobedience

Punishing misbehavior

We encourage adults to think about

Focusing on child’s strengths

A child who may be struggling with emotional regulation or communication

Promoting cooperation and self-regulation

Coaching and guiding learning with environmental supports (with routines, visual cues)

These shifts support a view of behavior as **communication and an opportunity for teaching, learning and partnering with each other in the intervention.**



Summary

Today the term *neurodiversity* reminds us that children vary widely in how they think, learn, communicate, and regulate emotions.

From the beginning, the Incredible Years programs were designed to partner with parents and teachers to understand and value these differences, build strong relationships, and support children's social, emotional and cognitive development.

Our goal has always been to help adults **recognize each child's strengths, follow their developmental lead, and respond in ways that support their individual pathways of growth.**

Across decades of research, these relationship-based and strength-focused approaches have been associated with improvements in children's social competence, emotional regulation, and school readiness, as well as reductions in behavior problems and family stress.

In this way, the Incredible Years programs align closely with contemporary neurodiversity perspectives—by focusing on understanding, supporting, and teaching, rather than changing who children are.

A summary of research on the IY programs can be found here: [The Research Behind The Incredible Years® Early Intervention Programs](#)

Incredible Years Neurodiversity Statement

The Incredible Years programs recognize that children develop and learn in many different ways. Neurodiversity—including differences such as autism, ADHD, language delays, and other developmental and sensory variations—is a natural and valuable part of human diversity.

Our approach is grounded on building strong relationships, recognizing each child's strengths, and supporting the development of social, emotional, and communication skills. Parents and teachers are encouraged to follow each child's developmental lead and adapt strategies to support their individual learning styles and needs.

We are committed to helping every child develop confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging in their families, schools, and communities.