Supporting an Autistic Teen: Key Concepts and Strategies

Understanding the Autistic Brain and Nervous System

Interest-Based Nervous Systems

Autism and ADHD are characterized by "interest-based nervous systems" - attention, focus, and energy are directed primarily based on interest rather than external expectations or demands.

Attention and Tropism

Like plants growing toward light (tropism), autistic attention functions differently:

- **Monotropism**: Intense focus on single interests (70-90% of time for autistic individuals)
- **Varotropism**: Variable, shifting attention
- **Polytropism**: Divided attention across multiple interests

Autistic Inertia

Once focused on something, it's difficult to shift away; conversely, once disengaged, it's challenging to initiate engagement. This is not stubbornness but a neurological difference in how attention and focus operate.

Bottom-Up vs. Top-Down Processing

- 80% of neural information flows upward from the body to the brain
- Only 20% flows downward from cognitive centers
- During stress or dysregulation, physiological responses override cognitive functions
- Attempting to use reasoning during dysregulation has diminishing returns

Practical Strategies for Parents

The Three-Part Communication Sequence

1. **Self-admission**: "I know this is frustrating for me too..."
2. **Empathy**: "I understand this feels overwhelming..."
3. **Ambition**: "What might we try differently next time?"

Sensory Regulation Approaches

- **Sensory soothing**: Reducing inputs (dimming lights, using white noise)
- **Sensory engagement**: Strategic stimulation (ice cube in hand, walking)

- **Cross-midline activities**: Walking or movement that engages both sides of the body

Collaborative Problem-Solving

- Hold meetings to discuss strategies when everyone is regulated
- Make plans together rather than imposing solutions
- Focus on "arresting the fall sooner" rather than stopping dysregulation once it's happening
- Use non-verbal communication during dysregulation (written numbers, music)

Transition Support

- Recognize that transitions (school to homework) are particularly challenging
- Create space for regulation before demanding performance
- Understand that "holding it together" at school often leads to release at home

Parental Modeling

- Children learn regulation by witnessing their parents regulate themselves
- Verbalize your own regulation process rather than just directing the child
- Demonstrate collaborative problem-solving

Core Principles and Philosophy

Working With Neurology, Not Against It

- Understand behaviors as neurological differences rather than willful defiance
- Adapt environments and expectations rather than trying to fundamentally change the person

Systems Perspective

- Recognize that educational systems often create unreasonable demands
- Acknowledge that homework after a full school day may exceed reasonable executive function capacity

Developmental Appropriateness

- Regulation skills develop over time with maturity
- Adolescence is already challenging for executive function
- Self-advocacy skills build gradually

Bidirectional Advocacy

- Self-advocacy is a collaborative process requiring engagement from both parties
- Create environments where advocacy is welcomed and supported

Balance Between Support and Autonomy

- Help develop independence while providing necessary scaffolding
- Respect autonomy needs while offering co-regulation support

Final Thoughts

The most effective approach combines understanding the neurological differences at play while creating practical strategies that work within—not against—the autistic nervous system. Focus less on "fixing" dysregulation after it happens and more on building skills and environments that support regulation and gradually developing self-advocacy skills.