

Brain Club®: The Podcast - Experiences of Neurodivergent Parents

S1E15 Experiences of Neurodivergent Parents

Mel Houser: [00:00:00] Hello! Welcome to Brain Club: The Podcast, a space for learning, unlearning, and reimagining new ways of being together in neuro inclusive community. I'm Dr. Mel Houser, Executive Director of All Brains Belong Vermont. Welcome to our brand new podcast.

Brain Club is All Brains Belong's weekly community education program where we demonstrate our approach to neuro inclusive culture through community panels, guest speakers, and book chats. It's a place where we shift broader community awareness about the issues of concern and importance to neurodivergent people in our community and promote new ways of thinking and being in community together.

It's a place where we transform culture by modeling what's possible, with the idea that then you go out into the rest of your lives and carry it forward.

You can already access all the recordings from our website, allbrainsbelong.org, but our community asked us to turn it into a podcast. So here we are. These conversations are not medical advice and they're not support groups.

They're an invitation to [00:01:00] think differently about health, connection and how we build systems that include everyone. Each episode features community panelists, sharing perspectives and lived experiences. We hope you'll listen with curiosity and reflect on what it brings up for your own life.

In this episode, we hear from neurodivergent parents who discovered their own neurodivergence through parenting, often after their children received diagnoses. First, you'll hear about sensory sensitivity, executive functioning, difficulty meeting one's own access needs, and navigating conflicting access needs.

Thank you to our panelists, Nadine Budbill, Travis Skadberg, Charlie Hohn and Kat B.. Our panelists share what it's like to unlearn old messages about what parenting is supposed to look like. While trying to meet their own access needs and the access needs of their children, this is a conversation about how hard it can be to find support when the systems around you don't fit anyone in your family, and how connection, reflection can open up new possibilities.

Parenting is hard, whether you're neurodivergent or not. [00:02:00] Parenting is hard for, most people. For many neurodivergent parents. There are some specific additional challenges, and often that we are not prepared for that we're not expecting. No one's talked about this. Maybe we don't even know that we're neurodivergent.

And a lot of people find themselves in chaos. That's a picture of me with my then one month old. , I think maybe that was like the one picture we took of that time of our lives because everyone else was just, everybody was screaming most of that time. 'cause it was just so hard in unexpected ways.

And the thing is, there's a lot of parents whose access needs are not being met too. Some of the specific challenges, of parenting for neurodivergent [00:03:00] people relate to sensory sensitivity, and this is an example of, anything I'm gonna go through. Many people have no idea that these things are playing a role for

them. They just know that they are in chaos, they are dysregulated. These are some of the factors. So, sensory sensitivity. if for example, you have the kind of brain that is really sensitive to loud noises, and all of a sudden you have a screaming baby. or if you have some, tactile aversions and now you're not having space and you, just all of that.

there are, maybe someone has, established some routines, some protective routines, keep people regulated. Now all of a sudden you're not having access to those. Executive functioning, if you, it's hard at baseline to meet your own needs and get through the day, and then layer on the additional executive functioning [00:04:00] challenges of managing life for multiple people, not just yourself.

And when we think about, how hard it is for so many people to meet their access needs, then you layer on conflicting access needs. if there's a child who has the an access need to discharge, energy by screaming, and a parent has an access need for complete silence in order to think well conflicting access needs.

Then you layer on social interactions, challenges of emotional regulation, challenges of having access to your skills for emotional regulation, which are by and large Forex skills. If you're dysregulated, you may not have access to those things. I am going to, think that's my last slide.

Anyway, there's a lot of things that don't help.

when we think about how ableist [00:05:00] this society is, the messages that are, send, there's one right way to be a person. There's one right way to be a parent. All the parenting books and all the things that people say that like don't apply to a lot of, a lot of people and that embedded in a lot of those messages are that it is superior to be able to do the thing.

Not surprisingly, for, for growing up in ableist society, many people internalized that narrative and the self-judgment and shame that come from those internalized messages. And then not only is it difficult to ask for help when one is struggling, and of course, we can, what we're gonna talk about for brain club next month, all month, we're gonna talk about barriers to healthcare.

then what happens is, even if you can access professional support, often the advice that is given around parenting [00:06:00] doesn't apply to the situations that many people find themselves in. So tonight we will be, joined by our panelists, Travis, Charlie, Kat, and Nadine, and we will hear from their experiences.

When I was pregnant, I had this brain rule of like, I'm gonna become a calm person because I need this. It was anyway, so like I did yoga and I had. Yeah. Counseling, and I like walked and I was in nature and I like really was actually regulated and doing really well. Mm-hmm. and then I became a parent and I had no idea about my sensory processing.

I had no idea about my PDA, I had no idea that like, I, I had just no idea. And so, right. Again, it's the narrative of like, there's something wrong with you. That you are so in chaos again, when this is like all that you've ever wanted.

Sara Wilkins: What are some challenges that you face as a [00:07:00] neurodivergent parent?

Nadine Budbill: I think the main challenge for me that I, and I've really come to understand this better in the past year or so, is how much downtime and rest I need for my brain, and I can't get it

Travis Skadberg: I learned really quick when Jacob was first born, that like. Oh wow. I've sort of hidden my whole life by taking care of other people's needs, so I didn't have to do the hard work of taking care of my needs, which is much more complicated.

But Jacob, especially, when he wasn't sleeping, he take, that took so much energy, like you're like, oh, I need help. I, I do need help accessing, or, meeting my needs so I can even remotely meet his. And so that was a huge learning curve, not just for me. 'cause I was like, oh, I've never really done this.

and then everyone around me was like, oh, he's suddenly becoming very demanding. Like, [00:08:00] yeah.

Nadine Budbill: Just coming to understand that it's exhausting in here, like the level of. Information and processing and analyzing and everything is just. A lot and exhausting. And ideally I would have not just downtime and, and rest, but solitude, to be able to just like decompress and process stuff and, like reinvigorate myself.

But it's, it's really hard to get that being a working parent. Homeschooling slash unschooling parent also. So that's the thing that I, when I look at my life, it's like, oh, I really could use a lot more rest.

Mel Houser: What's it, what's it like to be a neurodivergent person parenting like,

Charlie Hohn: Hmm.

Mel Houser: What's that been like?

You can still talk about Elsa and Anna again and like, yes. Then we can go from there.

Charlie Hohn: Oh my God. Yeah. Yeah, [00:09:00] absolutely. just, I was just saying that, Everyone knows Elsa is autistic, but not everyone knows Anna has ADHD, but then Mel's saying, well, maybe not everyone knows Elsa is autistic. I was like, wow, she's autistic.

Mel Houser: Mind blown. Yes.

Charlie Hohn: It's a thing.

Mel Houser: Yes.

Charlie Hohn: That's why she can't be queen too. Right? She doesn't wanna deal with that kind of social posturing. Anna's perfect for it. It worked out.

Mel Houser: It, did work. It worked out in that, Elsa achieved niche construction by going out to live in the woods.

Sara Wilkins: what are some challenges that you have faced as a neurodivergent parent?

Kat B: I'm still struggling with the concept of production. we've talked about it during All Brains Belong, that whole concept of raising. Productive kids of being productive every minute of every day and being productive myself every minute of every day. what does that really mean?

Travis Skadberg: But now to me, [00:10:00] the beginning of like the weeding out process that I think any neurodivergent parent needs to go through, in terms of, creating a safer bubble.

Sara Wilkins: Mm-hmm.

Travis Skadberg: And so then it was years later when we, when we first got a diagnosis about Jacob. And then months later, before I start, you know, oh, what really triggered it or triggered it for me is I had this, a picture of me as a little kid about Jacob's age, about four years old, and I just, it fell out of a box somewhere and I stuck it on the fridge and it sat there for a couple months.

And one day I noticed that in the picture, I'm scratching my arm like this. And Jacob does this exact same scratch to my exact, to my arm, but it's exactly the same little movement. And I, and I asked my mom and dad, I'm like, did I do that as a kid? And my, my, my dad didn't know. My mom's like, well, not [00:11:00] that much.

You know, she was getting defensive already. And so that started the rabbit hole of like, huh, we might look pretty similar. Um, and then once we were getting a, a comfy blanket from Costco and they have like two types, types of super soft blankets. And for some reason one of 'em was really comfortable to me and the other one was really comfortable to him.

And so we're having this fight over how do we cuddle on the couch with the blanket? It is, it was kind of like our first access needs and I'm getting frustrated with him for not accepting my blanket. And eventually it dawned on me that we were both just as. Like we were the same, but it, but it's very real.

Like my soft blanket is prickly to him. His words, you know, and his soft blanket. I can say, yeah, it's soft, but it doesn't make me feel good.

Charlie Hohn: It's stim clash.

Mel Houser: Stim clash. [00:12:00] So like, how does that play out for you? Because like, I imagine that a lot your, your access needs, um, may conflict from time to time with other members of your household.

Charlie Hohn: Right. Well, and before I knew I was autistic, which was just a few years ago, I, I would just be struggling almost all the time, like, because. I am actually a mix of sensory seeking and sensory avoidant and it's really hard to parse out. Like when it comes to sounds of, you know, screaming kids or kids jumping on me, I can get overwhelmed.

But when it comes to, um, but you know, like this is the reason I'm wearing like three or four layers isn't just 'cause I don't wanna turn up the thermostat. This is like my self-soothing always a hat, always a, you know, and so. I'm this mix of seeking and avoidant and, it's been really, you know, knowing that has been so [00:13:00] important and little things like that just start adding up and then you start to realize that like, oh, you're not just raging a neurodivergent kid, but you have a neurodivergent family.

Travis Skadberg: And then you're, you know, and this is years suddenly access needs start to come in. Mm-hmm. And like, oh, I thought I had to just. Negotiate my own needs. Now I have to negotiate my own access needs too. and that one is largely sound. He's very loud and I'm not, and, or it, it's very triggering to me.

And, and I've tried earful, earplugs, but a lot of the ones you put in your ear, they make internal sounds louder. Like you can hear yourself chewing more. And, and that kind of bugs me.

Charlie Hohn: And I actually, I don't even have to do it that much anymore, but. one of the most important things to me was just having these and, they're big and not only is that nice 'cause I like the pressure, it's nice 'cause the kids can see them.

So if they see me putting them on, they're like, oh, [00:14:00] he's overwhelmed, Wow. That's, I don't have to see. Powerful. Yeah. And it isn't. And they know I can still hear them with them on, so like, I'm not ignoring them. But it, it just really is, it's kinda like certain animals that can puff up parts of them when they're distressed.

It's just like, whoop,

Mel Houser: that is amazing. And when you're modeling for them, me as a human, I am meeting my own access needs. This is how I'm gonna regulate,

Charlie Hohn: right. And I'm still figuring out how to ask, ask for my needs. But sometimes it's easier with kids because they really start out with a blank slate,

Sara Wilkins: how do you, are you able or are you able to meet your own access needs as a parent?

Kat B: We definitely have some conflicting access needs. Yeah. yeah, I, yes, I think in one area I could think of an [00:15:00] example. With sleep. I need my sleep. And I mean, it's, it's sacred even for my kids. We have health issues that pop up if we are not sleeping.

So that was a big one that we had to address. talking about how can we find a way to meet. Of first we have to figure out what they are, but then how can we together figure out a way to meet all of our needs.

Sara Wilkins: Mm-hmm.

Travis Skadberg: Otherwise, a lot of access needs are just like, like, it's like microdosing, with access needs,

So like in my ideal world, I would have like a man cave with a super big stereo system so I could feel music. Hmm. Headphones don't, don't do it. like I used to run a nightclub like, oh, you did feel like, like, wow, your, your glass of water rattles [00:16:00] off the table, Wow. Because it's so, wow. So, so like, if I get a chance to go to the grocery store by myself, I remind myself to listen to loud music in the car with the good stereo, I love that. awesome. So it's, it's like, stealing your access needs.

Mel Houser: That to me, Elsa was, was aware of her access needs. She's like, that's enough Anna and then Anna Exactly. On the gas, like, like that's enough. And there was like third strike.

It's like meltdown.

Charlie Hohn: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. And that is, that is actually a good segue to thinking about my, my parenting because I have a 7-year-old and a three and a half year old and they have very different, 7-year-old is much more, sensory seeking than a three and a half year old. And that kind of stuff does, he can't shoot fire or ice or anything, but yeah, almost not yet.

Kat B: No. I think there was a study. Something that came out, that, that the families that eat together around the [00:17:00] dinner table without screens, without tea, anything. Have a conversation, those are the families that make it, that stick together. And I'm like, maybe yeah.

Sara Wilkins: Where is that study?

I dunno. But maybe that's good for a lot of people. But that Right. Good for us, it was so stressed out.

Nadine Budbill: It has definitely been just like such a continual process of unlearning, letting go. Surrendering. Yeah. this is not at all what I thought it would look like. Be like, and, and, and there was like quite a lot to go through to.

Mel Houser: So, I mean, I think it's, it's, it's like, it's like unlearning, like, whatever you thought parenting was supposed to look like.

Charlie Hohn: Yes, yes. Like we put, when I moved in here, put little tags, name tags on every shelf and stuff. 'cause I think I am autistic, but I've got the kind of, I've got ADHD traits mixed in too, like most of us do.

And like. I never took off the labels. Now I don't really use 'em anymore and maybe [00:18:00] someday I'll take 'em off. But it helps the kids with reading too, to be able to see 'em. So they started labeling stuff and now it says, daddy on my, on my door. And like I think the Hulk 7-year-old got really excited that she could make the Hulk say Hulk on him in case.

Mel Houser: That's amazing.

Nadine Budbill: One of the biggest, most important things for me has been coming to see. Both my child's brain and my brain through, a strength-based lens. Yeah. Like, like really focusing on the amazing strengths and benefits of having a neurodivergent brain, and utilizing those and building those and honoring those. And celebrating those rather than, than focusing on what's wrong.

Mel Houser: So do you talk about access needs, sensory needs, et cetera? Like do you talk about that explicitly with your kids?

Charlie Hohn: I try to. I'm still [00:19:00] learning how to do that. Yeah. But yes, I, I do, I talk about, well if they want the lights on, maybe we'll turn 'em on.

But usually they're fine with it, and, and sound like. I'll just, I, I just try to find the right way to say, if it, it's okay to be loud. 'cause sometimes I'm loud too. I can't really regulate my voice volume, but it needs to be like, more farther apart for me. Sure. Because it's hurting me.

Mel Houser: Yes. Because it, it actually hurts, if you're screaming. I'm not talking like screaming in fear or pain or something. I'm just like, kids just like to scream, Right. Sure, sure. Great. I mean, you're, you're really, you're teaching them about conflicting access needs. I think if all humans understood conflicting access needs, we would have a lot less chaos in the world.

Nadine Budbill: He is getting old enough where I can say stuff like it, it's really hard on my brain when you yell. . So we're just getting to the point where we can do stuff like that. yeah, I think the biggest thing that has helped around being [00:20:00] able to meet not just my access needs, but the needs of my whole family is having just very open, transparent dialogue about, now I need a break, or, I can't do that right now.

I need a little time like that. for a lot it's like. The transitions or whatnot are frazzling for me, and so having a demand. Right after the transition of need for engagement or whatever, like often I'm just like, and so being able to just say like, my brain needs a little time, like that was really overwhelming for my brain.

has been so helpful. And then having that so we all can say. Talk about what's happening in our brains and then we all get it and understand. So it's, it's like having that common understanding and language that has been so helpful in advocating, at least for getting those needs met.

Kat B: And I think that leads more to being in [00:21:00] interdependent too, because I've been thinking about interdependence versus independence and interdependence feels to me.

other than that too, I guess I've been challenged. I've been struggling with I think we've, grown a lot in the past few years in our home, but how much can we take that outside of the home? my community hasn't always felt super safe.

Mel Houser: I was gonna ask you like, I mean, it was, it's, it's such a neuronormative question that I included in my email to you Yeah. Of like, and, like, what do you wish you knew? Everything. I wish I knew everything about my brain.

Charlie Hohn: Yeah. I wish I knew that my experiences were real all along when I said something hurt or, and this is something a lot of people say, but when something didn't feel good.[00:22:00]

And, as my own childhood, my parents did a great job with what they had, which wasn't really a lot in terms of understanding Neurodivergence, but the school system just ground me to bits, And so like, it wasn't supposed to be uncomfortable to me in the classroom, therefore it wasn't.

And like that gets translated down to parenting too. I shouldn't be uncomfortable with this. I'm supposed to like. Kids doing this and that I'm supposed to be okay with this. And always they come first. But, I can't actually be the parent I want to be if I'm in on, in burnout or on the edge of meltdowns and shutdowns and,

Mel Houser: Amen.

Kat B: I think back when, when my first child was born, I didn't take off from work. I am self-employed. And I thought as someone who's self-employed, that if I took off my work would suffer, I would lose business. People wouldn't understand [00:23:00] and it's horrible. And then when I finally did take off, it's like people understood the world didn't end.

it wasn't noble to push through so hard.

Mel Houser: That makes me think about, one of the things that I've been starting to talk about with my 6-year-old is around interdependence versus independence and like normalizing interdependence. Yes. 'cause like the narrative of like, Ooh, you did the thing by yourself. Like, I just, it's so overly glorified.

Charlie Hohn: Right.

Do you talk about that with your kids? I haven't. That's a good, that's a really good point. you're right. It's also. They need to have some independence, but they don't, we don't wanna like instill this colonial over emphasis on everyone doing everything on their own, which is like not healthy.

Mel Houser: It's not healthy at all. And like it's okay to, it, it's preferable to belong to community and

Charlie Hohn: Right.

Mel Houser: Rely on and be connected to people.

[00:24:00] Right. And the people who are pushing the independence narrative often rely on others a lot more than they realize, Mm-hmm.

Charlie Hohn: And so I am having to navigate social situations that I've avoided for decades, again, as my kid makes friends with people.

Mel Houser: Yeah.

Charlie Hohn: Like birthday parties. I hate birthday parties. I hate birthday parties. there's a video of me on my own fifth birthday, hiding like. And then my parents said they had a big birthday party 'cause they didn't know I wouldn't like it and they never did it again. And they felt bad. I was said, well you didn't know, but like that's what I wanna do as an adult too, and kid, birthday parties are big.

And then I'm like, yeah, it's one of those things that like, it brings me back to being in college or high school where I'm in a social group, but I'm drifting to the side because I don't know how to be a part of it.

Mel Houser: But may, maybe this is an opportunity to reimagine again of like, maybe there's no right way to be at a birthday [00:25:00] party.

Charlie Hohn: Well, that's true.

Mel Houser: You just named the thing of like, yeah, if this is a birthday party, some people play side by side. Some people, yeah. or like, can, Is there some, like what would you rather than think about it as like gravitating toward the sidelines, avoiding the main activity, right?

Like could you have an activity that you actually enjoy? It's just not being in the big crowd of the people.

Charlie Hohn: Well, sometimes I try to find a job like, oh yes, in my case there was a fire in the she nor old shelter fire thing. I just took care of that. Or,

Mel Houser: nope, the people who were supposed to feel familiar never did.

And then that's what that contrast is what made me feel inadequate and like there's something wrong with me that I'm uncomfortable around you, even though like really it's 'cause you're an unsafe bucket person. Yeah. But I didn't have language to describe that. Mm-hmm. I was just like, oh, what's wrong with me?

I can't get along with the people. I feel so uncomfortable. I don't know what to say.

Charlie Hohn: There's younger, older kids who are bored, I'll go hang out with them because there's only a [00:26:00] couple of them. It's like, if I consciously think about it, it makes it easier. And then I don't get upset with myself for why did I do that?

Mel Houser: Right. Because I'm like, I'm, I'm such a loser who like can't do the birthday party thing. Yeah. Because it's like that's the old narrative. That's like the narrative.

Charlie Hohn: Yeah, exactly.

Mel Houser: Of an unrecognized narrative urgent person that's like what we tell ourselves all the time. I could actually go to, like a cocktail party and if no one knew anyone, I was fine.

Matt Mulligan: Yeah.

Mel Houser: Everything else not fine. So Not fine.

Too cliquey. too cliquey. Right. and it's interesting because I see that pattern playing out already as a kindergartner.

Matt Mulligan: Mm-hmm.

Mel Houser: When she sees that the other kids are familiar and she doesn't

Matt Mulligan: mm-hmm.

Mel Houser: Like, she doesn't feel like she is on the ingroup.

Matt Mulligan: And so, yeah. Yeah. That, that idea, that whole scaffolding piece, the, gap. She can't navigate.

Mel Houser: She can't navigate the gap. Right. Yeah. But if there's like a, if there's like an [00:27:00] adult who is facilitating, being a, like a central figure who's facilitating a game where everyone has a role and the expectations are clear, and it's like there's some structure to it, like that's fine.

She'll play those games. Yeah.

Charlie Hohn: And like my kid wants to go to this whatever birthday party and then I end up doing what I always do anyway 'cause I'm autistic, which is go like, sit by a fire or sit outside or something like alone. And then it's like, well then it seems like I'm. Not part of the, or that, I don't want that to rub off towards my kid.

It is like, well, he doesn't seem to wanna interrupt. Maybe his kid doesn't, what I mean?

Mel Houser: It's like all the things that people like make up that like aren't, aren't real, but, but are common. Like they're not real, but they are commonly like held. Yeah. Myths.

It's like going back to like, you, you're, you're in this life where you're like showing up as your authentic self in the world, but like in these other instances, you're having to put your mask back on.

Matt Mulligan: So, well, and this is, your, your experience as a parent. How does, how does [00:28:00] your lived experience when you see your child, faced with that gap that, that.

That they can't navigate. What, what are your, what wisdom, do you bring to those moments? for yourself or for them?

Mel Houser: In the thick of it, I don't, mm-hmm. I don't have this, it's like two minutes. It's maybe it's like 60 seconds later before I can zoom out and then it's 60 seconds too late. It's the matching of my experience as a child.

Matt Mulligan: Mm-hmm.

Mel Houser: That makes me want to. Fix it and change it.

Nadine Budbill: Mm-hmm. and certainly I, I don't mean sweeping the challenges under the rug at all because I think there's also been a lot of real, power in sharing with my child around our different challenges and our shared challenges. And I think that that's been so important.

I can see with my child, like how much the, the more that we just like do up the [00:29:00] strengths and honor those strengths and make space for the strengths, the better that they do. and so I'm working on applying that to myself too.

Travis Skadberg: Especially for us that came from generations where you just, you really weren't allowed to be yourself, no matter who you were, like nobody was.

And so. I don't, I don't know how else we were discover ourselves after, like wearing, wearing a mask for that long, but having a neurodivergent kid certainly makes it possible. 'cause you can, you can see who you might've, you maybe once were, and then you're like, oh, I could do that. I, I could be that again.

there's no manual for this. Most of us are just figuring it out in real time. Not just parenting our kids, but re-parenting ourselves. The weight of conflicting access needs systemic barriers and invisible labor is [00:30:00] heavy, but there's also space here to name what's hard, and that can be the first step toward designing something that works better for all of us.

Thank you again to Nadine, Charlie, Travis, and Kat, for sharing your experiences and helping so many of us feel less alone.

If you wanna keep exploring with us, you can join our Live Brain Club events most Tuesdays at 6:00 PM Eastern. You can also dig into our free digital resource library with all the recordings from the past four years at allbrainsbelong.org.

You're not alone, and we're glad you're here. See you next time.