

# Supporting Neurodivergent Youth Through Self-Directed Education

# WORKBOOK



# Introduction



## Reframing Fears, Honoring Needs, and Embracing Trust

Many of us arrive at Self-Directed Education because something isn't working. Especially for neurodivergent kids, the conventional school system often leads to burnout, disconnection, and deep wounds. The signals are clear: "This system isn't made for me."

In the session, we explored how SDE offers something different: an approach that adapts to the young person, honors their needs, and trusts in their natural drive to learn. In this workbook we'll further unpack the fears many adults carry around structure, academics, socialization, and motivation, and explore what shifts when we move from control to trust. This isn't just about changing how learning looks. It's about shifting how we relate to each other. Neurodivergent youth often call us to slow down, reflect, and do the inner work needed to support true autonomy and connection.

As you move through this workbook, we invite you to stay curious, compassionate, and open. There's no one "right" way to support SDE, only a commitment to trust, listen, and grow alongside the young people in our lives.

Welcome. We're glad you're here.

# The School System vs. Self-Directed Learning



## Why the Conventional School System Doesn't Work for Many Neurodivergent Kids

The conventional school system was never designed with neurodivergent kids in mind. Built to standardize behavior and performance, it demands conformity and compliance, often at the cost of wellbeing and authentic learning. Instead of adapting to the unique ways kids think, feel, and grow, the system requires kids to adapt to it.

### **What this means in practice:**

- Kids learn to mask their differences in order to avoid punishment or exclusion.
- Needs like sensory regulation, autonomy, or movement are ignored or pathologized.
- There is more focus on controlling behavior than understanding the young person.
- The result is often shame, anxiety, burnout, and disconnection from self.

*This environment doesn't support growth. It stunts it.*

### **Reflection Prompt:**

How does it feel to imagine an environment that fully adapts to your kid's needs, rather than the other way around? What would have to change to support that to happen?



# The Mismatch Between ND Kids & Conventional Schooling

There's a fundamental mismatch between what schools ask of children and what many neurodivergent kids actually need in order to thrive.

School Expects	ND Kids Need
Sitting still, listening quietly	Movement, expression, and sensory input
Standardized curriculum	Personal interests and self-paced learning
Linear academic progression	Space to spiral, revisit, pause, or leap
External motivation (rewards/punishments)	Intrinsic motivation and curiosity
Compliance and performance	Autonomy, authenticity, and safety

## Reflection Prompts:

Where do you notice this mismatch showing up in your own life or parenting/facilitation? Which expectations are hardest for you to let go of, and why?

In what moments have you seen your kid push back against school-based expectations? What were they trying to communicate?



# What Self-Directed Learning (SDE) Brings Instead

SDE flips the script. Instead of asking kids to fit into systems, it adapts the environment to fit them.

## Core Principles of SDE:

- Learning is natural and doesn't require coercion.
- Motivation emerges from within when safety, trust, and freedom are present.
- Real learning is holistic and includes life skills, relationships, emotions, play, and rest.

When kids are trusted, they become curious again. When they're given agency, they engage deeply. When they're supported instead of steered, they thrive.

## Reflection Prompts:

Think of a moment when your kid was completely absorbed in something they love. What was happening in that moment that made it so engaging for them?

What helps you personally learn best? How does that compare to what was expected of you in school?

How might it shift your perspective to trust that learning is happening even when you can't see the outcome?



## Reframing the Narrative: The Power of Passion-Driven Learning

We've been conditioned to believe that learning only "counts" when it looks academic. But when we step back, we see that children are always learning.

Take Pokémon. It's not just a game. It's a full curriculum:

- Categorization and memory
- Complex strategy
- Storytelling and math
- Social interaction, trade negotiation, and emotional regulation

This is deep, integrated learning. Kids dive into it because they want to. That's motivation we could never manufacture.

### **Action Step:**

Observe your child this week. Choose one interest they're currently immersed in, and map out all the different types of learning it involves: social, emotional, intellectual, physical, or creative.

### **Reflective Prompts:**



Think of a current interest your kid has. What would change if you viewed it as a valid path to deep learning?

What gets in the way of celebrating "non-academic" learning in your environment?



# Shifting from Control to Trust

This may be the hardest shift of all – and the most transformational.

We've been taught to take charge: plan, teach, schedule, correct. But when we move from control to trust, everything changes.

- We stop managing outcomes and start building relationships.
- We stop pushing, and start listening.
- We stop trying to "fix" kids and begin honoring who they already are.

## Reflection Prompts:

What fears come up for you when you consider stepping back from control? What would it take for you to lean into trust instead?

When do you feel most tempted to step in or take control?

What underlying fear might be present in those moments?

How do you define "success" in learning, and what would it mean to redefine it?

# Common Fears & Reframes

These are the questions we hear most often. Let's unpack them together.



## Fear #1: "What About Structure?"

**Reframing:** Structure can be self-directed, not imposed.

- Some kids create highly organized routines; others prefer fluid days. Both are valid.
- Structure isn't the enemy: it's about *who* decides and *why*.

### Try This:

Ask your young person: "What kind of rhythm feels good for you right now?"

Support them in experimenting with a routine, without needing to make it stick.

### Reflection Prompts:

What have you noticed about how kids naturally organize their time or day when free from outside pressure?

When in your own life have you created structure that worked uniquely for you? How might this inform how you support your young person?

What are some ways your kid already shows you what rhythm or routine they prefer?





## Fear #2: “What About Academics?”

**Reframing:** Learning happens when it’s meaningful to the learner.

- Kids learn math through games, recipes, planning projects.
- Literacy develops through stories, texting, researching, and play.
- Timelines are made-up. Kids learn when they’re ready.

### Action Step:

Take one academic subject you’re worried about. Now, notice where it already shows up in your kid’s life – even subtly.

### Reflection Prompts:



What learning have you witnessed lately that doesn’t look academic but is rich with skills and insight?

How would your young person’s learning journey look different if you fully trusted their timeline?

What skills has your kid developed in their free time that surprised you?



## **Fear #3: “What About Socialization?”**

**Reframing:** Real connection comes through choice, not forced proximity.

- SDE invites consensual relationships based on shared interests.
- Socializing can happen through gaming, groups, solo play, or even online.
- ND kids often need space before they connect. That’s okay.

### **Try This:**

Instead of nudging your young person toward social settings, ask: “What kinds of people or conversations do you enjoy most?”

### **Reflection Prompts:**



What are some unconventional but valid ways you’ve seen kids connect with others?

Think of a time your kid made a meaningful connection on their own terms. What supported that?

What social expectations do you carry that might not match your young person’s needs?



## **Fear #4: “What About Motivation?”**

**Reframing:** Motivation isn’t missing – it’s often buried under demands.

- ND kids may appear “unmotivated,” but they’re often protecting themselves.
- When given freedom and safety, their inner drive resurfaces.
- Trust and time are key ingredients.

### **Action Step:**

This week, watch for small sparks: what pulls your kid in without you having to direct them?

### **Reflection Prompts:**



Have you witnessed a moment when motivation reappeared once external pressure was removed?

What happens when you remove pressure or expectations...

How does your kid respond over time?

How do you recognize signs of internal motivation in your young person, even if they look different from what others expect?

# Final Reflection

We've been taught to look for signs of learning. But what if we shifted our gaze?

Instead of watching for outcomes, what if we focused on connection?

Instead of measuring progress, what if we trusted the process?

Instead of managing our kids, what if we stood beside them?

## **Journaling Prompt:**

What does it look like, for you, to move from control to trust?

What's one commitment you can make this week to support your young person's autonomy?

How does your kid's resistance invite you into deeper reflection about your own conditioning?

What does it look like to build a learning relationship based on mutual trust and respect?



We're Sari González and Becka Koritz, the founders of Radical Learning™. With over 35 years of combined experience, we're dedicated to supporting kids, parents, educators, and educational projects.

## What We Do

At Radical Learning™, we humanize education by empowering parents and educators to:

- Support learning, autonomy, and agency through connection, communication, and consent.
- Challenge outdated beliefs that disempower young people.
- Embrace tools and practices that foster freedom and trust.

We offer in-person trainings, coaching programs, online courses, and consulting. Don't miss our bi-weekly podcast **Radical Learning Talks** – it's full of support for both parents and educators. And... **Get our free e-book *Raising Autonomous Kids*** by signing up for our newsletters here!

**You can find all of our offerings here.**

## Why It Matters

The world is changing, and so must we. By questioning limiting beliefs and practices, we open up opportunities to build authentic relationships rooted in dignity, equity, and social justice.

## Our Vision

Self-directed education and parenting are part of collective liberation. This work goes beyond youth rights—it's about human rights and creating a society where trust, connection, and empowerment thrive.



The background of the entire image is a close-up, slightly out-of-focus photograph of green oak leaves. The leaves are vibrant green with visible veins and serrated edges. They are arranged in a way that frames the central text, with some leaves in the foreground being sharper than others in the background.

## **Small group connection prompts**

**What is one way that you have seen your neurodivergent kid stifled/wounded by conventional school?**

**What skills or insights is your kid developing - even if it doesn't look like "school learning"?**

**How do they approach challenges or new information?**

**What would it feel like to fully trust that this kind of learning is enough?**