

Part One

BW Welcome to SERU podcast session 1, developed and produced by the Special Education Resource Unit. My name is Bronnie Whitelaw, Senior Advisor Teaching and Learning at SERU and I'm your host for today.

Before we start, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands where we are recording today and pay respect to any Aboriginal people listening. We acknowledge and respect the Kurna people's spiritual relationship with this country and recognise that their cultural and heritage beliefs are still important to the living Kurna people today.

I'm thrilled to introduce you to today's guests Linda, author of the recently published book 'The Trick with Sticks' and her daughter Grace. They are here today to talk to us about how their journey as a mother and daughter managing the social complexities Grace and her brother Austin faced as young people diagnosed with Autism turned into a book, highly recommended by Autism SA, educators, psychologists and occupational therapists. The book has been beautifully written to provide autistic people and other people who struggle with social concepts and their families, strategies to navigate issues of friendship, using a simple visual concept that helps the reader to make meaningful connections to a variety of experiences. Linda, can you tell us about you and your family?

LC Yes, thank you for having us. We are a family of four. My daughter Grace who is now 14 and my son Austin who is 12, my husband Tom and myself. Grace is in year nine, Austin is in year seven. We have our own business and we started in 2015 in our garage, and we now have about 40 odd employees and still growing. So that's been keeping us busy as well as the children and all of their activities and the social difficulties that we have also had. We love camping as a family, we've actually found that that's been, my daughter's looking at me with sceptical eyes. They love camping, I like camping. So, we've done a lot of big trips, we've been to the Kimberley Ranges, we've been to Uluru, we've been to the Flinders Ranges quite a number of times. That's been just a way that the kids have had a great outlet and a break from everything. Sometimes we've been with other families

BW that's so lovely

LC yeah or sometimes it's just been us so yeah that's what we like to do.

BW Thank you. Linda at what age did your children get assessed and diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder?

LC I'll give you a little bit more background to that because Grace was two when I noticed that there was something that was not quite right. I was in a mother's group, and I was looking at all the other children and how they were interacting and then Grace was kind of there on her own, this happened week after week after week, it wasn't just a once off.

BW Right

LC So I remembered just being like there's something not quite right here but I didn't know what it was and when I would talk to other people they'd be like oh no, my child does that too sometimes,

and I'm like yeah I'm not talking about sometimes, I'm talking about all the time. So, there was this real like disconnect, that I just didn't feel like I could communicate or that I was being understood as to what the actual problem was. Then of course, then she started kindy and it was the same throughout kindy and then she started school and when she started school I kept saying to the teachers, what is this? There's something not quite right here. I don't know what it is, and they kept saying to me, oh no, she's fine, she's just shy, she'll mature. And they were the responses that I got and I'm like, am I crazy? I felt like I was the person that was always like trying to make a scene, or a fuss and I just felt like I kept getting brushed aside and it was only through my persistence that Grace would get some extra help at school with social interactions whereby a teacher would sit down in small group and they'd do some social activities, but that was about it. So then when Grace was seven, we actually took her to get, to have an assessment done and the assessment came back as inconclusive. My husband and I were like, well, what are we meant to do with that? What we do now? What does that mean? There was no direction or help because it was inconclusive and I think for a lot of girls, they fall through the cracks and Grace was highly functional but just struggled with the social side of things, so then we continued on and then I think it just became more and more apparent that Grace was really struggling with the social side of things and with friendships and so then we took her back to be reassessed when she was 10. So, from the time I noticed to the time Grace got diagnosed that was eight years.

BW Wow

LC So, eight years of just feeling completely helpless, completely like you're making a fuss or trying to cause a scene and there being no help available to you.

BW Yeah, the support's not in place for you.

LC No. She was diagnosed and also, we had Austin assessed at the same time and they were both diagnosed at the same time. Then I think once you have, even though you hate to put a label on something, when you do have that label on something all of a sudden people know what to do, it's the way the system is set up, unless there is that label, people don't know what to do and then it was like all the doors opened and then that was another problem because then I had to navigate everything. Try and find well what help does she need? I don't know. And then you have to figure that out for yourself and what your child needs and what is best for your child. So, it is a really, really tricky path that you have to weave your way through and it's yeah, you're doing it on your own, it's quite tricky.

BW A journey for you, as a family. It is. Grace, you wanted to add something.

GC In that time I think I had one teacher who picked up on something that Mum and Dad had been talking about the whole time, that was in year 3. Yes.

BW So that must have been tricky for you, manoeuvring your way through school?

GC I didn't really notice it because, I didn't notice it.

BW But I guess your friendship issues were there before you had the diagnosis?

GC Yeah, yep

BW as Mum was saying, so there were complexities that were already present.

LC Yes

GC yep

BW Well, well done for being the advocate for your children and continuing to do that in that process and we do know that families have the most information about our children that come into our education systems, and you are the first advocate for them.

LC Yes, absolutely.

BW Just grateful that you got there in the end with the supports that you were really looking for as a family. So Grace, can you talk to us about some of the challenges that lead you to the conversation about 'The Trick with Sticks?'

GC It was a lot of stuff. Austin and I, we each had our own things that we needed to work on. For example, I didn't look at people and I didn't smile when I met people, lots of stuff like that. And Austin, well he talked too much, he was the opposite, I was the one who didn't talk and he'd talk too much so. It was a bunch of stuff, I can't remember the exact trigger that it was that ended up with that conversation. But we were sitting by the fire and there happened to be this little box of matches sitting there and my dad tips out the box of matches on the table and says okay pretend each of these matches represents a bond or a friendship being made and he put them in piles for each of us and he said when you do this, that's going to be taken off, but if you do something like this the match is going to be put back on and it was a long conversation about lots of different things involving that.

BW I think what you've highlighted is that there are lots of things that occur and lots of complexities and you and your brother are both diagnosed with Autism but your issues around that friendship idea are different and so we have to be looking at various things that happen within social frameworks and friendship circles and yeah so I think what you've just done is given us a bit of an idea about that beautiful metaphor about the sticks and how they are representing components of friendships and the positives and the negatives and how that helps as a concrete example for you, so that it could show you exactly what was happening in your friendships.

LC Yeah, I think you were saying it was like a visualisation, that you would be able to visualise without anyone else seeing.

GC yeah, 'cause I'm a very visual person, like I figure things out visually, like if I can see something then I know how it works, I know what it's doing. It was the fact that I could have something in my head that I could see what was going on, like if I do that, then that stick is going to be taken off.

BW Sure

GC If I do that then it's going to be put back on and I'm good at picturing things in my mind.

BW And that helps with your decision making.

GC Yep.

BW Beautiful. It sounds like a really powerful tool that you can tap in to and to support you. Linda can you tell us a bit about how it evolved from the conversation to the idea of creating a book?

LC Well, it's not like I went, oh I'm going to write a book about this. It was just something that we were using as a tool as a family and it seemed to really strike a chord with both of our children and it also gave us a way to approach the situation of whatever had happened that day without actually asking them, what did you do today? Who did you play with? And you know asking all those questions that you just really don't want to ask and you are told not to ask.

BW And often get a shutdown response to.

LC Yes, and also just get good or not good or whatever, it's not really a descriptive answer. So it actually gave us an approach where we could ask both of them, did you put any sticks on your pile today?

BW Right

LC And then they would say yes or no and if they said no, we'd say, well what happened? So we're actually not asking them about their day as such but we are, in a very sneaky parent way.

BW A less challenging or threatening conversation.

LC Well that's right. because we weren't talking about what they actually did, but we were, we were saying, what did you do? We were asking them about the behaviour, what did you do to put sticks on the pile today? So then they would talk about what they did, what they thought they did to put sticks on their pile and it was actually a really, we found it led to a really open conversation.

BW And I imagine positively reinforcing those pro social behaviours.

LC Yes, so it actually worked really well. So I think the fact that it just worked so well, I'm not quite sure how the matches became sticks, but the matches evolved into sticks and then it's not all smooth sailing. This was just a way of approaching the situation in a different way where the conversation was a bit lighter, it wasn't that heavy, draining, exhausting conversation about you know, them doing something yet again that you have discussed however many times previously. I was just, I was just thinking, there has to be a different way of approaching this. So through this concept we were able to approach it differently. This book actually started off as a poem, so it just happened one night, I think I just had it all in my head and I just sat down and just wrote it. I pretty much wrote the whole book in a night,

BW right

LC but then I spent the next year tweaking it and adding to it or taking from it and then I guess because it helped the kids so well we went, well this could actually help other people as well and not just children who are on the Autism Spectrum, it can help all children who have difficulties with their friendships because at times all children do,

BW That's right

LC so it was just another way of being able to have that conversation and to also give the parents a tool to use.

BW That's very generous of you as a family to share your success and the tool that you created together that's been so supportive to you and offer it to other people.

GC yep

LC Yeah well, we feel really strongly about being able to help other parents and their children with their children's difficulties in social situations.

GC That's why I wanted to be part of the book because I've always just liked helping people, especially people who have similar struggles or problems that I have had and still have and I just like the idea of that, yeah.

BW That's a beautiful thing to offer to people so thank you Grace, that's lovely. So Grace can you tell us about what it was like to work as a mother and daughter team to create this book?

GC Oh so I've always loved drawing and one day I remember my mum came to me and she said, I've written this book, pretty much. And I was like, oh okay, and she's like, can you draw some pictures of like some kids in the situations on each page, I'm like okay.

LC I think I asked would you like to?

GC Yes, but like, it is general. I'm rounding everything off OK, but I have always loved drawing, but I've never drawn people because there's so much that goes on in a person's face, really complex, lots of hands and then I don't like looking at people so I wouldn't draw them anyways, but I've always loved animals. My room is covered in pictures of animals and everything.

BW So you chose the animals as your option to illustrate.

GC Yep, I did start by drawing a few people and I drew a couple but because I wasn't used to drawing them it took a long time to do them. Mum liked them but I didn't, I thought they were really bad.

BW But for you the animals still connected with the process of using that metaphor to help understand.

GC Yes. And then one day I was like, well I can't draw the people, but I can draw dogs and I came to a picture and re-done the first page which was a person as a dog and Mum was like it actually looked a lot better and it worked really well. But when you think about it, it actually fits better with the book because with people you see them in everyday situations like, ah yeah that makes sense you see that in everyday situations but with the animals you can't not love dogs unless you're a crazy person and they're cute and like people they can hide their emotions. They'll be like you're talking to someone, and they look happy but inside they're like, I hate you or something like that.

BW so you felt a dog was relatable.

GC Yes because if you look at a dog, if it's happy it wags its tail, if it's sad or scared it tucks its tail, it's simple. It's what it does.

BW That makes good sense.

GC And dogs can be more relatable than people in that sense.

BW Absolutely. Was there anything else that you'd like to add Linda about working together as a team on this project?

LC I loved it. It gave us a really creative space to work in and so Grace did all the concept drawings of all the seven different dogs that are in this book, and she also drew some of the illustrations completely so the front cover is Grace's drawing. But Grace hasn't learnt how to do digital art, so we then got a digital artist to copy her pictures and to copy her concept characters that she had drawn and she would email us the illustrations that she had done and then we would sit and I would be like oh Grace I've got some more of your illustrations and she'd come in and we'd sit down together and look through the illustrations and Grace would be highly critical and would say that's not right, that hasn't got that white patch on its back of that dog.

GC I had a picture in my mind of what everything was supposed to look like and it wasn't right, so it was like, no.

BW Well, that's your creative licence.

- LC* That's right so Grace would then get a piece of paper out and then she'd start scribbling it down or start drawing how she wanted it to look and then I'd scan it and then I'd send it back and go, oh, can you do it like that, please?
- BW* It needed to make sense, yeah absolutely. So Linda, what was your process around getting the book published?
- LC* So I have never published a book before and apparently it was a huge learning curve, the way it works apparently is you can send your manuscript to a publisher and it says on all of their websites you may or may not hear back within six months and if you haven't heard back by six months, presume it's a no. I just went, oh I don't know that I just want to sit around for six months waiting to maybe hear back from a publisher so I decided to go down the path of self-publishing, so to do that I found an author's group. It was a group run by this wonderful woman, her name is Cathy Dominie, and she took us through the step-by-step process of how to publish a book,
- BW* Wonderful
- LC* Which was great because she has published many books herself, so she knows where all the snags lie, so she was able to guide us through that minefield of snags so that we didn't get caught by anything. Just knowing what size to print the book, because in some countries they won't print a certain size, it's little things like that you just wouldn't know unless you had actually the experience in that.
- BW* So where can people access your book?
- LC* Yes, so my book is available on Amazon. Either type in my name or the name of the book 'The Trick with Sticks' and yep, you'll be able to buy it through Amazon.
- BW* Beautiful, and we do have two copies here at SERU that can be loaned out through our collection. Thank you very much to Linda and Grace for joining us today and sharing their journey of the book 'The Trick with Sticks' and telling us a story of them as a family and how they came to creating this beautiful metaphor that supports children and young people of all different needs around that complex idea of friendships.
- GC* yeah
- LC* Yep great, thank you.



Part Two

LC I have some suggestions on how you can use the book, *The Trick with Sticks*. You don't need to necessarily read the whole story in one go, in one sitting. You can obviously or you can just go to the pages that are relevant to you and your child.

If you are looking at positive and negative behaviours, you can go to **pages 18 to 31**. It describes the positive and negative behaviours and how they contribute to either building a friendship or damaging a friendship. The children actually have a visual with a stick so they can see what is happening. Also, what you could do is if you wanted to do a role-play you could actually go and collect some sticks and actually use sticks to do this as well, and what is happening to that stick. It gives the child something tangible that they can have in their hand and also it's a visual thing which will help cement that visualisation I think for them.

Pages 33 to 35 are about making good choices, so it also talks about if you don't feel good and you don't feel valued then it's okay to walk away, you don't have to be part of every stick pile, you can choose where your stick goes.

Pages 36 to 39 is about observing social situations and interactions. So sometimes you are not there, you're putting a stick on the pile, you're standing there and you are your child that is orbiting around that friendship group. So it's talking about how you've got your stick you're not putting it on the pile you're not having it taken off the pile either, but you're not there, so it's just to help differentiate with your child about where they are with their friendship and their bond building. Are they actually building any bonds, or not? And it's an okay place and it's a safe place to be if you want to observe what is going on and you can then see what other children are doing, it's okay to be there but just knowing that your child is there and your child knowing that.

Pages 40 to 45 is about persistence and resilience. So, things are going to get difficult, things may have been difficult already but it's an up-and-down road and it is about just keeping going on, keep trying, keep persisting, it is not going to be easy. Hopefully, eventually things will work out and you can navigate these social interactions, but it's a matter of you just wanting to keep trying, you want to point out to your child what they're doing wrong but in a way where it's going to be helpful and not so that they are going to want to keep trying as well so putting sticks on a pile is a good way of encouraging them to keep trying and you can always pick up a stick. Just because you lost one just before doesn't mean you can't pick up another one so keep going and keep trying.

Pages 46 onwards it talks about self-worth and how you are unique, you just want to be the best person that you can be. There are many different friendships and it's talking about how sticks come in all colours, all shapes and all sizes, so there is not a one stick fits all, it doesn't matter, you can create as many piles as you want, you can create your own pile, you can start your own pile, your own friendships, you can join another friendship but it's talking about how what the world needs are people who think differently and will do things differently and try things differently so go for it, have that confidence and that self-worth that you can do it and you are unique and you are a special person.

So, hopefully you can use it like that. You can break it down and just go directly to these pages if there is a certain situation that is relevant to you, or you can read the whole story I don't mind. So I really hope that this helps you and your children as much as it has helped us and our children.

