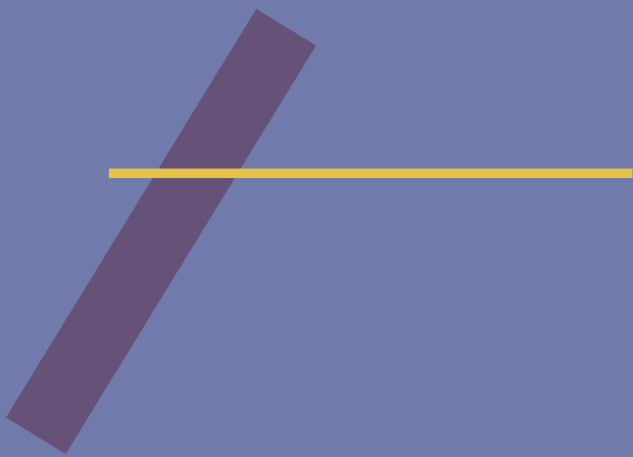
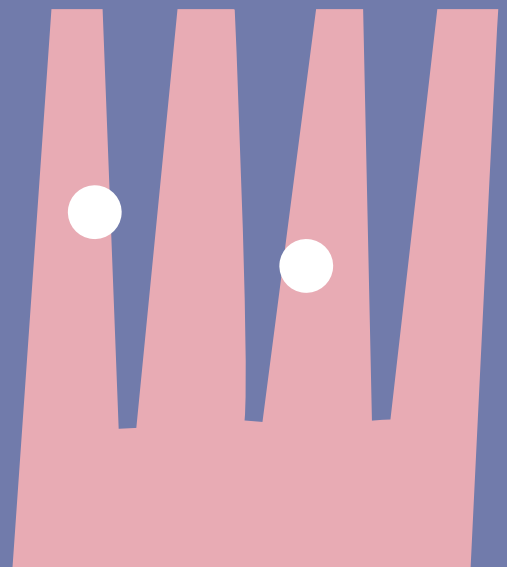


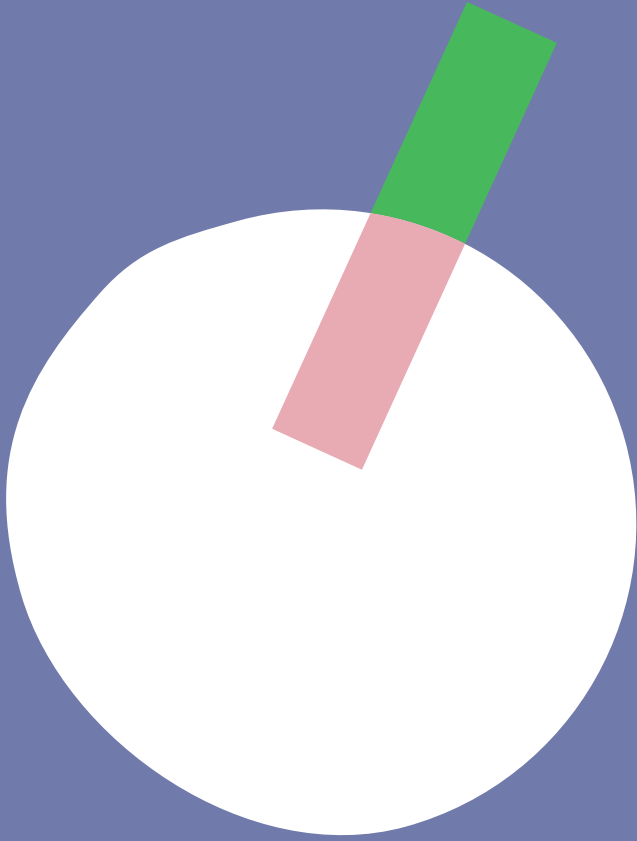
# Sensitive Storytimes

## Inclusive practices in Public Libraries



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***“Reading and  
Storytelling helps  
the brain promote  
language, literacy  
and brain  
development”***

[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

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# Storytimes- a great start in life

Storytimes are a staple program in our Libraries. We are often asked why we do them; is it to entertain? Is it to give children and parents something free to do? Is it just to entice them to come into our libraries, or do we do them because they help make a difference?

Storytimes are designed to encourage a love of reading, develop social interactions and stimulate imagination. Attending Storytimes allows children and their carers to experience stories and songs in a fun and interactive way while building the foundation for literacy.

The years from birth to five are critical for building emergent literacy skills that precede the ability to learn how to read and write:

- Print motivation – thinking that books and reading are fun
- Vocabulary – knowing the names of things
- Print awareness – recognizing print and understanding how books work
- Letter knowledge – understanding that each letter has its own name and sounds
- Narrative skills – being able to tell stories and describe things
- Phonological awareness – being able to recognize and play with the smaller sounds that make up words.

(MacLean, 2008)

Cognitive skills of young children are an important factor in explaining success later-on in life. Skill attainment at one stage of the life cycle raises skill attainment at later stages of the life cycle (Cunha et al., 2006). If a child starts school behind they stay behind, so we believe in the importance of exposing children to reading and language as early as possible.

Every childhood program that our libraries offer are based on developing early literacy and school readiness skills. Every activity/craft we include is based on developing various gross-motor and fine-motor skills to help children develop the neural pathways in their brains.

Storytimes have become so popular in some libraries that librarians are finding a huge demand for additional sessions. In fast growing municipalities, such as City of Whittlesea or City of Casey, Storytime attendance rates often reach 100+ people.

Librarians have adapted their spaces to accommodate growing numbers, such as creating areas for pram parking, conducting their Storytimes outside or in other rooms of the library, and some have introduced headset microphones/PA equipment for particularly crowded sessions.

While growing numbers are something to celebrate, increased crowds and noise can become a deterrent and actually inhibit some families and children from attending.

***“If you’ve met one person on the autism spectrum, you’ve met one person on the spectrum.”***

Professor Stephen Shore



# What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition which affects the brain's growth and development. It is a lifelong condition, with symptoms typically appearing in early childhood.

Approximately 1% of the population is on the autism spectrum – equalling 57,910 Victorians and 241,300 Australians (Richdale, 2011).

## **People with autism can have:**

- Challenges with communication and interacting with others
- Disinterest in socialising, or being “too social” with strangers
- Repetitive and different behaviours, moving their bodies in different ways
- Strong interest in one topic or subject
- Unusual reactions to what they see, hear, smell, touch or taste
- Preference for routines and dislike change

For many with ASD, sensory sensitivity has a greater impact on their daily lives than many of the other deficits. The most common is sounds, as well as tactile experiences, light intensity and specific aromas. Their sense of balance, movement and body orientation can be unusual (Atwood, 2006, p. 302).

The ways autism impacts people means they often need more time to process information and find some social situations and physical environments challenging, which results in them feeling overwhelmed and anxious and can lead to a meltdown. A meltdown is not deliberate or a ‘tantrum’ and can be worse for the child than it is to observe.

Research by Jones, Akram, Murphy, Myers and Vickers (2018) for Amaze found that 52% of autistic people report feeling socially isolated and 48% report being avoided or shunned.

# Understanding Autistic Children

Autistic children can find it challenging to relate to other people and interact in a social environment. While there is no physical marker for autism (individuals on the spectrum look no different to anyone else), they may behave awkwardly or 'act out' when over-stimulated. Storytime performers may notice children covering their ears, or even turning their backs. This isn't them being rude or disengaging, they may be trying their best to shut out other sensory input to focus on what's going on (Cottrell, 2016).

The benefits of Storytimes and early literacy is of particular importance to children on the Autism Spectrum for whom social skills and communication may be impaired. Autistic children need concentrated exposure to various forms of literacy, media and text in order to help develop their reading and language skills (Polachok-Cook, 2015).

For families with autistic children with ASD, attending events at the library can be difficult and overwhelming, especially when storytimes can attract such big crowds. Autism often isn't diagnosed in children until after the age of 5 years, so often children can present with symptoms with no formal diagnosis (Mandell, Novak, & Zubritsky, 2005).



# Mill Park Library Inclusive Storytime: Case study

**Mill Park Library** is located within one of Melbourne's fastest growing municipalities. Storytime attendance continues to grow annually, and to cope with increased demand they now run a minimum of 11 sessions per week. Crowds often exceed 100 people and they have had to split groups and perform in other parts of the library to manage.

From feedback received it was discovered the growing crowds at Mill Park were preventing some children from participating. Through conversations with affected parents and carers it was noticed these children had different learning needs or were experiencing anxiety.

Children at Storytimes did not appear to be coping with the environment, whether that be fidgeting/unable to sit still, finding it hard to focus, withdrawing or showing visible distress. This behaviour is often a symptom of them not coping with various aspects of the storytime – the noise, the variation in routine, etc.

***"The crowd just got so big that William couldn't cope and we stopped attending storytime, and this further compounded our isolation."*** Susan, Mill Park.

As a result of observations and feedback, it was decided to start a special storytime aimed specifically at children presenting with ASD symptoms, or were simply not coping with a large storytime session. After an initial trial (and trying several different names: Spectrum Storytime, Quiet Storytime, Sensory Storytime, Sensitive Storytime) **Inclusive Storytime** was chosen, and started as a regular, weekly session catering to no more than ten children.





Inclusive Storytimes run very similarly to traditional Storytimes but include sensory materials and picture exchange communication system cards (PECS).

These sensory-friendly Storytimes provide a controlled environment for autistic children and their families to participate and enjoy the session as much as a neurotypical child can enjoy a regular Storytime. They ensure social interaction for children and families, and provide a much needed networking opportunity for parents and carers experiencing similar journeys. These sessions allow libraries to become a “safe place” and can form an essential part of strengthening community awareness around autism.

Previous initiatives utilising the “sensory friendly” approach have demonstrated positive results including allocated sensory friendly areas in busy shopping centres, museums, and hosting Sensitive Santa events in our libraries at Christmas time.







It is important to acknowledge that Inclusive Storytime is not going to attract high numbers, and that low numbers are essential to the program's success. Mill Park Library have recently added a second weekly session to prevent the program from getting too crowded.

Before settling on the name, customers were confused as to what Inclusive Storytime was about. Some parents didn't want to bring their child to the session as they had not yet come to terms with their child's diagnosis or may not have even had their child diagnosed. Parents may choose not to disclose their child's diagnosis due to fears of exclusion, so it is important never to ask and to accept everyone who comes to the session.

**Watch our Sensitive Santa highlights video on YouTube:**  
<http://bit.ly/ssmp2015>

Sensitive Santa







Some children who attend Inclusive Storytime are not on the spectrum but just can't cope with the large crowds or noise. It is also a format that is welcoming to those with English as a second language or who need more support.

Parents reported feeling more comfortable to bring their neurotypical child to Inclusive Storytime than they did when it was named Spectrum/Sensitive/Sensory/ Quiet Storytime. They also told us "Quiet Storytime" was confusing and sounded like something that should be done at bedtime – and families with children who are anything but quiet told us they did not feel like the session was tailored for them. Ultimately, choose a name that works best for your community and suits their needs.

***"Inclusive library storytime has been a true surprise and blessing for our family. My twins have been able to participate fully in a group activity for the first time and even enjoy each other's company and the company of others. They feel secure as the structure stays exactly the same each time and they can move around and fidget as much as they like. It has definitely helped them start a lifelong relationship with libraries too!" - Lee, Mill Park.***

One of the best parts of the sessions are the genuine friendships which can occur within the group. While children are colouring in and exploring the play activities, parents and carers have the chance to bond and share stories with each other.

Play dates outside of the library have occurred.

Participants bring in resources they have developed over the years and share them with other mums, especially the newly diagnosed, forming a pseudo-support group and new friendship circles.

Some non-verbal children attend who need to use communication boards - this would not be possible at a typical Storytime. Children have said their first words at Inclusive Storytime or have willingly interacted with others for the first time.





***"It has made a huge difference to our family. Not just for my eldest with Autism, but for all of us. I too am able to enjoy this experience knowing that all involved understand my son, and I don't have to be so stressed he's going to say or do something he shouldn't and people get offended, because he can be himself, and that is the most important thing."***

***- Anne, Mill Park.***









Inclusive Storytimes can also help prepare children to participate in traditional Storytimes. Some children have adjusted to the routine and are able to participate confidently with crowds.

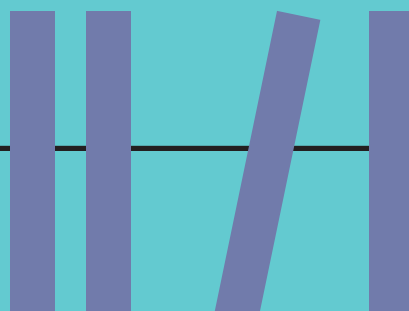
Since introducing Inclusive Storytime, library staff have a better understanding of autism and ASD symptoms, knowing the difference between tantrums and meltdowns and are more compassionate and sympathetic towards autistic children and their families.

### **The core objectives of Inclusive Storytime are to:**

- Expose children and their families to early literacy programs who would otherwise not be able to attend a story time in a public library
- Help isolated community members feel welcome in the library
- Provide an opportunity for families with autistic children to connect with each other
- Provide a positive experience in the library so the children will want to come visit the library at other times
- Create an awareness of autism within the community.

### **Outcomes:**

- Autistic children become comfortable coming to the library. They come to the library at other times, as well as Inclusive Storytime sessions.
- Families develop a relationship with library staff who understand their unique needs and are able to assist if children start to become overwhelmed and begin exhibiting signs of a meltdown.
- Staff and other patrons become more aware of autism and how it presents. A greater understanding and acceptance of special needs in the community will help families feel less judged and more supported by others.
- Helps fulfil Library Strategic Plans, Disability Action Plans, Council Health and Wellbeing Plans.



## Key points to remember:

It is important to keep sensory sensitivities in mind when conducting the story time. Avoid sudden noises, high pitched sounds or confusing complex sounds.

Participants may cover their ears or even turn their back on presenter. They are not being rude or not engaged in program but are actually trying their best to shut out other sensory input to focus on what's going on (Cottrell, 2016).

Flexibility is the key to a successful Sensitive/Inclusive Storytime. There could be a mix of children, some may be highly verbal while others may be completely nonverbal and have to rely on technology or supports (Grassi, as cited in Cottrell, 2016).

Children may become vocal or stim. Stimming is a way autistic children self-regulate when feeling overwhelmed, it may involve flapping, spinning or other repetitive behaviours.

Many autistic people sometimes have difficulty with communication, so language should be kept simple; avoid slang and idioms. Give instructions one step at a time (Klipper, p.12). Eye contact for some autistic people can be difficult; do not force eye contact.





**Shaping the future  
for Autism.**

## A resource for public library staff

At Amaze our purpose has three parts. We develop community capacity by working with others to help them value and support autistic people and their families. We build understanding, engagement and acceptance of autism. We want autistic people to have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in, and make a valued contribution to, our society.

Amaze was delighted to receive a grant from Newman's Own Foundation to fund the Sensitive Storytime project and continue working towards our purpose.

We worked with librarians at public libraries – a key community resource – to build their capacity to run Sensitive Storytime sessions for autistic children and their families. We also developed the **Sensitive Storytime for Librarians online resource**, launched at Bargoonga Nganjin, North Fitzroy Library in June 2018.

The Amaze team researched, wrote and filmed content for the resource including best practice from libraries in Australia and overseas.

This included Amaze staff observing story times at a number of Victorian libraries, including **Mill Park Library**. The draft resource was created using e-learning software prior to review by the Amaze team. The resource then underwent user testing with librarians. The feedback received during the review and user testing led to changes in the resource to clarify skills, for example, extra videos and changes to improve the main menu.

Librarians responded positively to the resource and particularly liked the how-to videos and the downloadable signs, checklists and visual schedule. To further develop the resource, Amaze partnered with **Brimbank Libraries**, **Yarra Libraries** and **Campaspe Libraries** to deliver additional pilot sessions throughout March-May 2018.

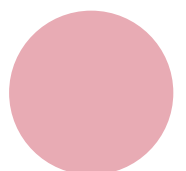
We ran an evaluation with parents/carers and librarians. 28 feedback surveys were completed by parents and carers of 46 children attending the sessions. The responses were overwhelmingly positive with many parents rating the session a 9 or 10 out of 10 for being safe and welcoming for their child and including their child.

Our partner libraries reported that 70 children attended the sessions with 59 parents or carers. The qualitative interviews revealed that librarians spent around 60 minutes preparing the Sensitive Story Time session, although some librarians commented that it took more time as it was the first time they'd run it. When asked how successful they thought their Sensitive Story Time session was, all librarians rated it as 8 or 9 out of 10. This shows a good confidence level, particularly as for most librarians this was the first time they'd run a Sensitive Storytime session.

Feedback from librarians about why they think Sensitive Storytime sessions are important for autistic children and their families:

***"To make them (families) feel included and able to come to a session and not feel like their autistic child might be interrupting. To get the message out that they're welcome."***

Amaze look forward to more Sensitive Storytime sessions for autistic children and their families as the **Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN)** promote the resource to their members.



# Yarra Libraries – spreading the word

Yarra Libraries have taken inclusive practices modelled by Yarra Plenty Regional Library to the next level, introducing visual schedules, sensory aids like tents, fidget toys, and ear muffs and visual timers into regular Storytime sessions. Yarra Libraries believes all Storytimes should be inclusive, and models these practises to the community. This can help families, and children without diagnosis of autism, feel included and able to participate. It also provides opportunity for discussion and increased awareness of autism in the community.

***“It was great to see Yarra Libraries introduce new things to their regular storytimes. I didn’t know about Autism and what those children need, and now I understand more. I loved the inclusion and noticed the regular children were actually calmer with the introduction of a timer and schedule. It helped me too!” - Barbara, Carlton.***

Both **Yarra Plenty Regional Library** & **Yarra Libraries** have worked closely with Amaze to support the development of their online training resource, helping public library staff develop and deliver inclusive, sensory-friendly Storytimes.

This paper acknowledges the support of our employers, managers and other stakeholders in forging such a strong partnership equally committed to supporting the needs of some very special members in our communities, and the families who we know appreciate the work we’ve done in this space.





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***My grandson really enjoyed the Sensitive Storytime format as it allowed him to fully participate in a way he hasn't be able to before"*** – Cheryl, Fitzroy.

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# Sensitive Storytime - A Free Resource for Libraries

**Amaze** have created an online training resource for public library staff to complete at their own pace. The resource will enable you to plan and structure a session, respond to children's behaviour, and provide you with tips on how to manage when children get upset or are having a hard time.

It was funded by **Newman's Own Foundation** and launched in June 2018.

This free, self-directed e-learning course includes:

- Information about autism
- Planning Sensitive Story Time
- Resources for running a sensitive session
- Creating a welcoming environment
- Troubleshooting strategies
- Videos of key skills



## Register:

1. Visit <https://amaze.litmos.com.au/self-signup/>
2. Provide some basic information to create an account
3. Enter the code **STORY** to start learning how to plan and run a Sensitive Story Time session at your library.



In consultation with **Amaze, Yarra Libraries** have developed a downloadable Social Story and Digital Social Story video.

**Yarra Libraries** Social Story (PDF) and video can be accessed online:  
<https://library.yarracity.vic.gov.au/using-the-library/for-kids>

These can be used as a guide for developing your own social stories.

## Suggested Books for Storytimes

Books used for regular Storytime can also be used for Sensitive Storytime. When selecting books, consider whether the story is based on real life experiences and will include common food, animals, colours, etc.

Books that feature repetition often help children on the spectrum feel at ease.

Be mindful of illustrations - look for realistic pictures that decode the text.

Also consider using props like puppets and felt boards to present a story. This can help create a more sensory-rich environment (Grassi, 2011).

### **Pete the cat and his four groovy buttons – Eric Litwin**

Maisy's moon landing – Lucy Cousins

### **Dog's colourful day – Emma Dodd**

Dance – Matthew Van Fleet

### **Maisy's band – Lucy Cousins**

Dear Zoo – Rod Campbell

### **We're going on a bear hunt – Michael Rosen**

Press here – Herve Tullet

### **I spy with my little eye – Edward Gibbs**

Rocket countdown – Nick Sharratt



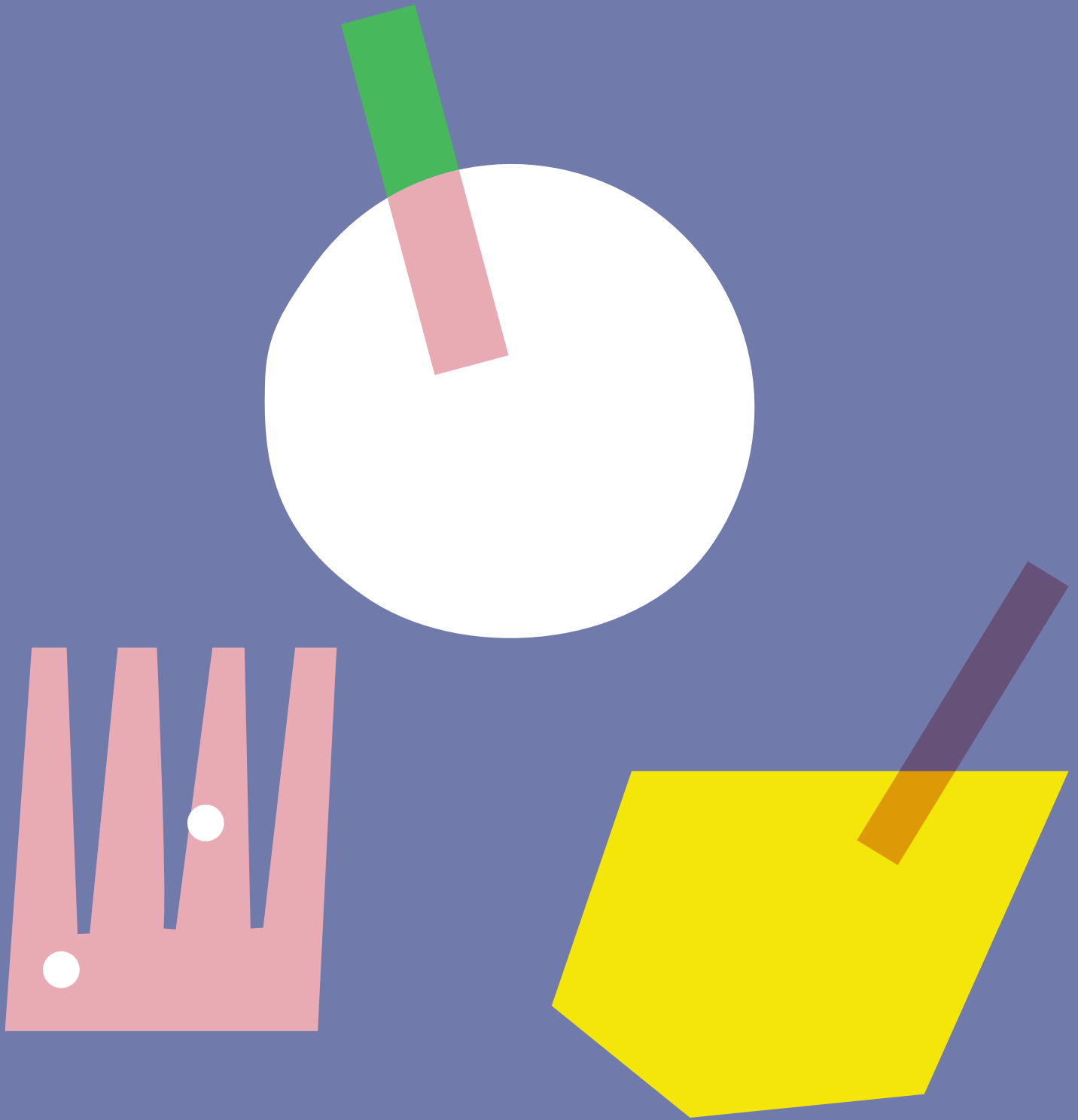
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