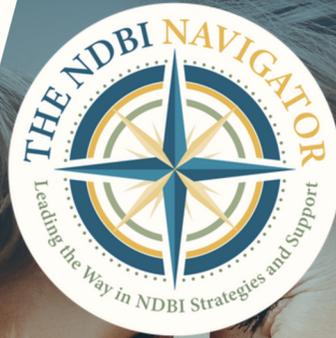


The NDBI Navigator

FEBRUARY 2026 | ISSUE 13

Notes



Monthly Newsletter

Leading the Way in
**NDBI
Strategies
& Support**

By The NDBI Navigator™

Online Courses

The NBDI Navigator Academy | courses.thendbinavigator.com



BA30: Implementing the ESDM to Enhance Social Engagement in Young Autistic Children

24 Lessons
1 CEU



ESDM Advanced Workshop Supplemental Modules

97 Lessons
8.5 CEUs



Behavior Technicians, RBTs, Paraprofessionals

T19: NBDI Essentials for Autism Providers

55 Lessons
4 PDUs



Behavior Technicians, RBTs, Paraprofessionals

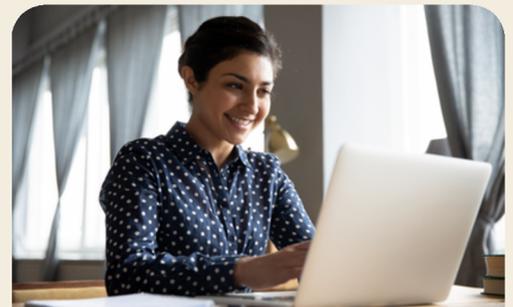
T18. Patterns in Play (Autism Providers)

23 Lessons
1 PDU



BA29: Patterns in Play: Using Play Schemas to Promote Engagement

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MC01: Writing ABA Session Notes Master Class

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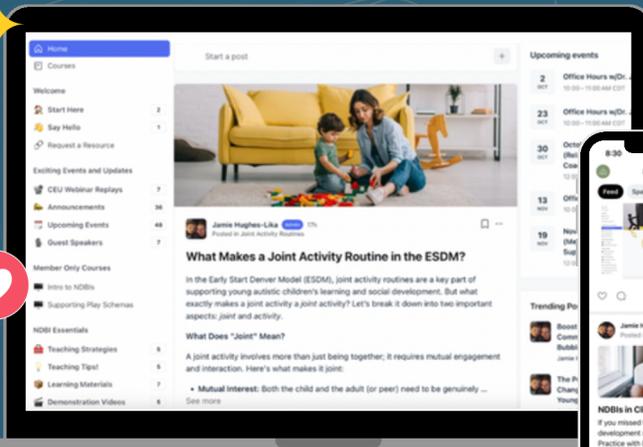
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NDBI Events

Letter from the Editors

Dear NDBI Community,

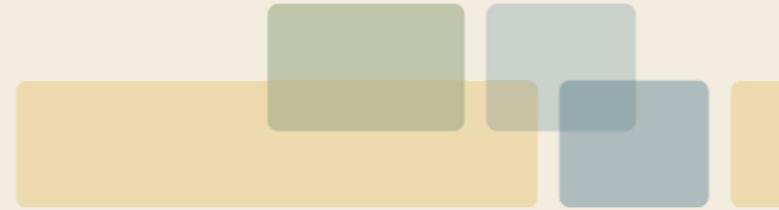
Welcome to the February 2026 issue of *The NDBI Navigator Notes*! As we settle into the rhythm of the new year, we're grateful to continue supporting you in the thoughtful, relationship-centered work you do every day—slowing down, following children's lead, and embedding meaningful learning within joyful, shared experiences.

Before we dive in, I'd also like to extend a warm welcome and share my excitement that Ania Petrova will be joining *The NDBI Navigator Notes* as our co-editor. Ania brings deep clinical expertise, a strong commitment to NDBI practice, and a thoughtful perspective on supporting children and families. I'm truly looking forward to collaborating with her and to the insight and care she will bring to future issues.

This month's Research Roundup features an important paper by D'Agostino et al. (2023), *Toward Deeper Understanding and Wide-Scale Implementation of Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions*. This article highlights both the strong evidence base behind NDBIs and the real-world challenges of implementing them with fidelity at scale. The authors emphasize the importance of practitioner training, coaching, and systems-level support—reinforcing what many of you experience daily: effective NDBI implementation depends not just on what we do, but how we support those doing the work.

In *Playful Possibilities*, we're spotlighting an unexpected (and wonderfully simple) material: cotton balls. Lightweight, versatile, and accessible, cotton balls can be used to support joint attention, imitation, turn-taking, breath control, regulation, and early communication. From blowing games to sorting, hiding, and sensory-social routines, this everyday item offers endless opportunities for playful, people-centered learning.

Our How-To Hub continues to focus on a foundational NDBI strategy: reciprocal imitation. Thoughtfully copying a child's actions, sounds, or movements—and inviting them to copy back—creates powerful social loops that support engagement, shared attention, and early communication. This month's content breaks down how to use imitation intentionally across routines, partners, and developmental levels while keeping interactions fun, flexible, and child-led.



In this month's Ask & Answer, we revisit a question many professionals and caregivers wrestle with: "A child I support gets easily distracted and rarely finishes an activity. What strategies can I use to help them sustain attention?" We'll explore developmentally appropriate, relationship-based strategies that emphasize motivation, shared control, and pacing—helping children stay engaged without pressure, over-prompting, or power struggles.

Thank you, as always, for being part of *The NDBI Navigator* community. Your commitment to reflective practice, collaboration, and honoring children's individuality continues to inspire us. We're grateful to learn alongside you and to support your work as you bring NDBI principles to life with children and families every day.

With appreciation,

Dr. Jamie and Ania

Jamie Hughes-Lika, PhD, BCBA-D, LBA, IBA
Ania Petrova, M.S., BCBA, LBA, LBS



Dr. Jamie



Ania



Research Roundup

Research Highlights for Real-World Impact

Toward deeper understanding and wide-scale implementation of naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions.



Key Takeaways

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs) are evidence-based approaches that improve social communication, engagement, language, and play skills in young autistic children, yet they remain underutilized in community practice due to gaps in training, knowledge, and support. Providers can benefit from understanding the core components shared across NDBIs, such as following the child's lead, modeling, using natural reinforcement, and grounding strategies in developmental and behavioral science to implement interventions consistently and effectively. Barriers to adoption often arise from conceptual and practical divides, including differences in theoretical orientation, misconceptions about NDBIs, and inconsistent terminology, particularly for clinicians trained primarily in traditional ABA methods. To enhance implementation, providers are encouraged to leverage available resources such as manuals, online modules, and collaborative coaching tools, integrate strategies into natural contexts, share control with families, and align intervention goals with stakeholders' values. Additionally, attention to socially valid practices and sensitivity to neurodiversity ensures that interventions respect family preferences and maximize relevance, engagement, and uptake in real-world early intervention settings. These findings are important because it gives providers evidence-based guidance, practical strategies, and a framework for implementing NDBIs effectively, sustainably, and in ways that respect families, which ultimately improves outcomes for children in everyday settings.

D'Agostino, S. R., Dueñas, A. D., Bravo, A., Tyson, K., Straiton, D., Salvatore, G. L., Pacia, C., & Pellecchia, M. (2023). Toward deeper understanding and wide-scale implementation of naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions. *Autism*, 27(1), 253–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221121427>

Reflection Questions

1. Training & Confidence

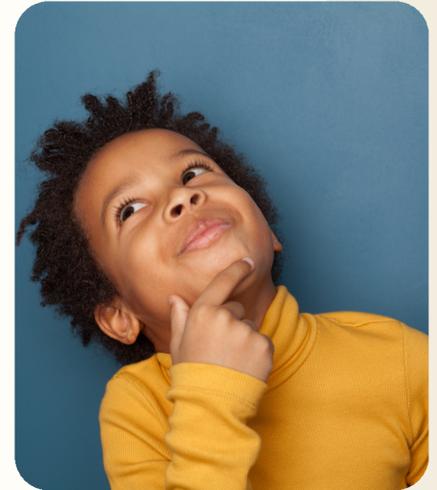
What specific training or areas of support do I need to increase my confidence and competence in implementing NBDI strategies within my current practice setting?

2. Integration with Current Practice

How can I integrate core NBDI components (e.g., child-led learning, natural contingencies) into my routine interactions with children and families to complement my current service structures?

3. Family & Context Sensitivity

In what ways can I involve caregivers and respect family goals and cultural values when planning NBDI-based interventions to ensure socially valid and meaningful outcomes?



Explore More NBDI Articles

Frost, K. M., Brian, J., Gengoux, G. W., Hardan, A., Rieth, S. R., Stahmer, A., & Ingersoll, B. (2020). Identifying and measuring the common elements of naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions for autism spectrum disorder: Development of the NBDI-Fi. *Autism, 24*(8), 2285–2297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320944011>

Boyd, B. A., Stahmer, A. C., Odom, S. L., Wallisch, A., & Matheis, M. (2021). It's time to close the research to practice gap in autism: The need for implementation science. *Autism, 26*(3), 569–574. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211064422>

Hampton, L. H., & Sandbank, M. P. (2021). Keeping up with the evidence base: Survey of behavior professionals about naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions. *Autism, 26*(4), 875–888. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211035233>

Playful Possibilities

Everyday Items, Endless Fun!

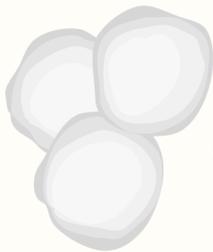
Welcome to "Playful Possibilities: Everyday Items, Endless Fun," where we explore how everyday items can foster social engagement, motivation, and communication in young autistic children

Everyday Items



Endless Fun

This month, we're diving into the soft and versatile world of cotton balls! From pretend play to sensory exploration, cotton balls offer countless opportunities for meaningful engagement. By incorporating Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI) strategies, you can turn these fluffy items into tools for learning, connection, and fun.



Creative Play with Cottonballs

1 *Snowy* Scoop Game

Description

Use a spoon or small scoop to transfer cotton balls from one container to another. Add a timer to create excitement or encourage your child to count as they scoop.

Learning Opportunities

This activity supports fine motor skills, turn-taking, and early math concepts like counting or sorting.

NDBI Strategies



Following Your Child's Lead: If your child enjoys the sensory feel of the cotton balls, let them explore with their hands before introducing the scoop.



Expanding Communication: Model phrases like “*scoop it up*” or “one, two, three!” to build vocabulary.



Celebrate Small Wins: Cheer when your child successfully transfers a cotton ball, saying, “*Great job scooping—look how many you moved!*”

2 Cotton Ball Snowstorm

Description

Toss cotton balls into the air and pretend it's snowing. Encourage your child to catch them or watch them fall.

Learning Opportunities

This activity promotes gross motor skills, joint attention, and pretend play.

NDBI Strategies

- ★ **Building Anticipation:** Say, “*Ready, set... snowstorm!*” and toss the cotton balls dramatically.
- ★ **Encouraging Communication:** Prompt simple phrases like “*falling snow*” or “*I got it!*” as your child catches the cotton balls.
- ★ **Celebrate Small Wins:** Acknowledge every attempt, saying, “*You caught the snow—fantastic!*” or “*Look at you watching it fall!*”

3 Cotton Ball Sensory Bin

Description

Fill a bin with cotton balls and hide small toys or objects inside for your child to find.

Learning Opportunities

This activity fosters sensory exploration, problem-solving, and communication.

NDBI Strategies

- ★ **Building Anticipation:** Say, *“What’s in the snow?”* before guiding your child to search.
- ★ **Encouraging Communication:** Label items as they find them, saying, *“It’s a car!”* or *“You found the red ball!”*
- ★ **Celebrate Small Wins:** Praise every discovery, saying, *“You found the treasure—yay!”*

Enhancing Attention

Use pauses and playful cues to build anticipation, like holding up a cotton ball and asking, “What’s next?” or “What will we do with this?” For the snowstorm activity, hold the cotton balls in your hands and say, “Here comes the snowstorm!” before tossing them into the air. Vary your speed—sometimes throwing quickly and other times pausing to keep the child’s attention. Use dramatic expressions like gasping or smiling to emphasize the moment. For the snow scoop activity, slow your scooping actions and say, “Ready... set... scoop!” to draw the child’s attention. Pause dramatically before transferring the cotton ball to the container, keeping the child focused on the movement. Encourage them to watch your motions and predict what will happen next.

Boosting Motivation

Introduce new variations or elements to keep interest high and tailor the activity to the child’s preferences. For the sensory bin, hide favorite small toys or brightly colored objects in the bin to make finding them more rewarding. Change the theme occasionally, such as a “treasure hunt” or “animal rescue,” to keep the activity fresh and engaging.

Supporting Social Engagement

Copy your child’s actions, share smiles, and use animated expressions to foster connection and mutual enjoyment. For the snowstorm activity, join the child in throwing cotton balls, matching their energy and adding sound effects like “Whoosh!” or “Splat!” to make it a shared activity. Engage in back-and-forth play by throwing the cotton balls to each other, saying, “Catch it!” or “Throw it to me!”

Final Thoughts

Cotton balls are more than just a craft supply—they’re a gateway to creative play, sensory exploration, and meaningful connections. By incorporating NDBI strategies like following your child’s lead, expanding communication, and celebrating small achievements, you can transform simple activities into impactful moments of learning and engagement. Stay tuned for next month’s “Playful Possibilities” feature, where we’ll share even more ways to turn everyday items into extraordinary opportunities for growth and bonding. Together, let’s celebrate the small steps that lead to big connections!

How-to-Hub

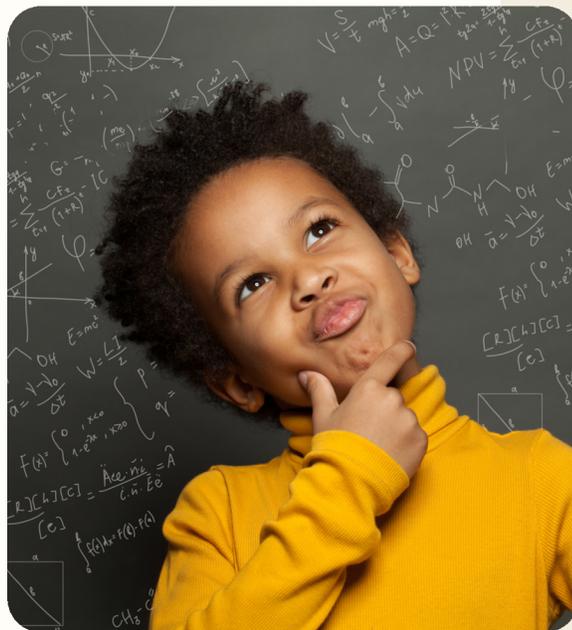
Reciprocal Imitation Training (RIT)



How-to-Hub

Welcome to the How-To Hub!

This month, we're highlighting an NDBI classic: Reciprocal Imitation (You copy me → I copy you). Not parroting—building a social loop. Reciprocal imitation means the adult first copies the child's actions, sounds, or play, then invites the child to copy back. When done intentionally, imitation becomes a powerful bridge to joint attention, turn-taking, and social engagement—without demands or pressure.



📌 What to do: Join the child where they are. Copy what the child does (a tap, a spin, a sound), show enjoyment, then pause and wait. When the child notices you and imitates—or even looks toward you—respond immediately by copying them again and celebrating the shared moment.

✨ Why it works: Imitation says, “I see you.” It creates a clear, rewarding social contingency: my action → your action → shared fun. This loop builds awareness of others, shared attention, and motivation to engage—often before language is reliable.

💡 Pro Tip: Start by copying exactly (same action, same rhythm). Keep the pace slow, affect warm, and pauses obvious. Reinforce any attempt to copy (a glance or partial match counts). Over time, introduce tiny variations and invite the child to copy you



Using Reciprocal Imitation

Reciprocal imitation training is a relationship-based strategy used to build early social engagement by following the child's lead and matching their actions, sounds, or play. Rather than directing or prompting, the adult first imitates the child, signaling interest, acceptance, and shared attention. This often increases the child's awareness of the social partner and creates natural opportunities for turn-taking and joint attention.



Five Everyday Ways to Use Reciprocal Imitation

1. Floor Play (Actions on Objects)

- ★ **What to do:** If the child bangs a block, you bang a block the same way. Pause. Then try a *small* change (two taps instead of one) and wait.
- 💡 **Why it works:** Object imitation anchors attention on both the object and the partner.
- ★ **Pro Tip:** Hold your object near your face to encourage gaze → action → gaze loops.



2. Sensory Play (Movement & Rhythm)

- ★ **What to do:** Copy the child's movement (spin, sway, bounce). Pause with a smile. Add a gentle cue like “my turn” and wait.
- 💡 **Why it works:** Shared rhythm builds synchrony and emotional connection—key for joint attention.
- ★ **Pro Tip:** Match the child's energy first; don't get too excited, too quickly.



3. Sound Play (Vocal Imitation)

- 🌟 **What to do:** Copy the child's sound ("mmm," "ah," "uh-oh"). Pause expectantly. When they look or vocalize again, copy back.
- 💡 **Why it works:** Vocal imitation lays the groundwork for speech and turn-taking.
- ★ **Pro Tip:** Keep language minimal; let the sounds do the talking.



4. Songs & Finger Plays

- 🌟 **What to do:** Imitate the child's movement during a song (clap, stomp). Pause the song and wait for the child to copy you before continuing.
- 💡 **Why it works:** Music creates natural turns and predictable pauses that invite imitation.
- ★ **Pro Tip:** Stop at the most exciting part to boost motivation.



5. Daily Routines (Care & Transitions)



-  **What to do:** If the child taps the table at snack time, tap back. Pause. Add a simple variation (tap-tap) and wait for a response.
-  **Why it works:** Imitation in routines generalizes social engagement beyond play.
-  **Pro Tip:** Use routines the child already tolerates well to keep regulation high.

Safeguards & Ethics

- Follow the child’s lead—copy before you expect copying.
- Keep pauses short and supportive; avoid waiting so long that it becomes frustrating.
- Use least-to-most prompts and fade quickly.

Bottom line: Thoughtful reciprocal imitation turns “*doing things alone*” into “*doing things together*.” By creating joyful back-and-forth loops, you build the foundations of joint attention, social engagement, and communication—one shared moment at a time.

Ask and Answer

Your Questions, Expert Insights



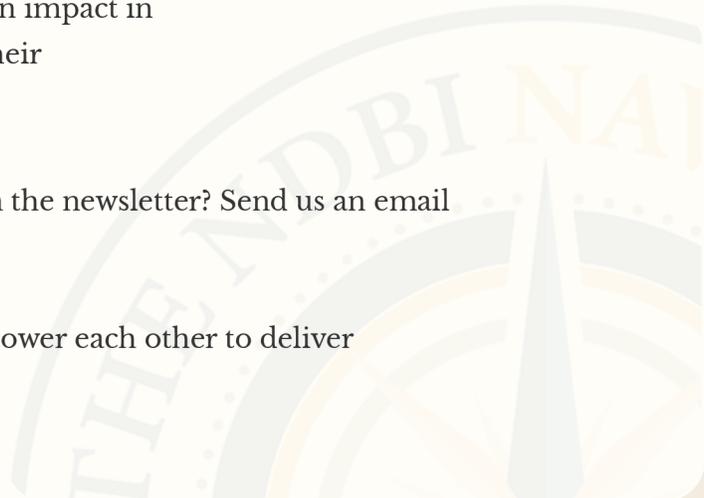
Ask & Answer

Welcome to the Ask and Answer section of the newsletter, where we address your most pressing questions about Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs). This is your space to explore the “how-to’s” of integrating NDBI strategies into your practice, gain insights on common challenges, and discover practical solutions from experts in the field.

Whether you’re curious about coaching caregivers, adapting NDBI for a specific setting, or fine-tuning your intervention strategies, we’ve got you covered. Each month, we select reader-submitted questions and provide thoughtful, actionable answers to help you make an impact in your work with autistic children and their families.

Have a question you’d like answered in the newsletter? Send us an email at support@thendbinavigator.com

Together, we can learn, grow, and empower each other to deliver meaningful, evidence-based support.





Reader Question

A child I support gets easily distracted and rarely finishes an activity. What strategies can I use to help them sustain attention?



Our Answer

That's a great question! When a child gets easily distracted and rarely finishes an activity, it's often a sign that the activity needs to be better matched to their interests, motivation, and current attention span. In NDBI, our goal isn't to make children "sit through" activities, but to design routines that are worth staying for by building on what already captures their attention, embedding shared joy, and gradually extending engagement in small, achievable steps.

From Question to Action in 5 Steps

1 Start with Highly Motivating Materials or Themes

Sustained attention begins with motivation. If the activity doesn't connect to what the child enjoys, their focus will naturally drift. Begin with materials, themes, or experiences that already draw the child in and use those as the anchor for the activity.

- ✓ Use favorite toys, textures, sounds, or movement activities
- ✓ Build new activities around existing interests rather than replacing them
- ✓ Incorporate familiar songs, characters, or routines
- ✓ Pair the activity with preferred sensory input (e.g., movement, spinning, water, or tactile play)



From Question to Action in 5 Steps

2 Keep the Steps Short and Interactive

Children with emerging attention skills do best with brief, back-and-forth exchanges rather than long, adult-led sequences. Design the activity so the child has frequent opportunities to act, respond, or take a turn.



- ✓ Break activities into small, achievable steps
- ✓ Alternate turns frequently so the child stays involved
- ✓ Model actions instead of explaining them
- ✓ Keep language simple and tied directly to the action

3 Embed Shared Control Opportunities

When children help shape what happens next, they're more likely to stay engaged. Build in natural pauses and decision points that invite participation and communication.



- ✓ Hold back materials and wait for the child to request (with a look, gesture, sound, or word)
- ✓ Offer simple choices: "This one or that one?"
- ✓ Use anticipation cues like "Ready...set...go!"
- ✓ Let the child choose the order of steps whenever possible

From Question to Action in 5 Steps

4

Add Playful Variations

Predictable routines create safety, but playful variation keeps attention alive. Small changes can make familiar activities feel new without overwhelming the child.



- ✓ Add sound effects or silly actions
- ✓ Change your voice or rhythm
- ✓ Play with speed (slow motion vs. fast)
- ✓ Introduce simple surprises, like hiding a piece or adding a “fun twist”

5

Gradually Expand Tolerance for Change

If a child currently stays for only a few seconds, that’s your starting point—not a failure. Build success first, then slowly stretch engagement over time.



- ✓ Reinforce even brief moments of participation
- ✓ Add just one more step before ending the activity
- ✓ Use a first–then structure to support completion
- ✓ Increase expectations gradually as tolerance grows

By designing activities that are motivating, interactive, and flexible, you help the child experience shared activities as enjoyable and successful. Over time, these small, positive moments add up—supporting longer engagement, stronger attention, and richer learning without pressure or frustration.

Webinar Events

Learn Today. Apply Tomorrow.



FEB
12

Dr. Thanos Vostanis

UKBA (Cert), BCBA-D, IBA, QTS

**Employing Precision Teaching
to Support Joint Attention**



MAR
26

Dr. Jamie Hughes-Lika, PhD, BCBA-D, IBA, &

Dr. Laurie Vismara, PhD, BCBA-D, RBA

**Coaching That Sticks: A Reflective
+ MI Framework for NDBI
Professionals**

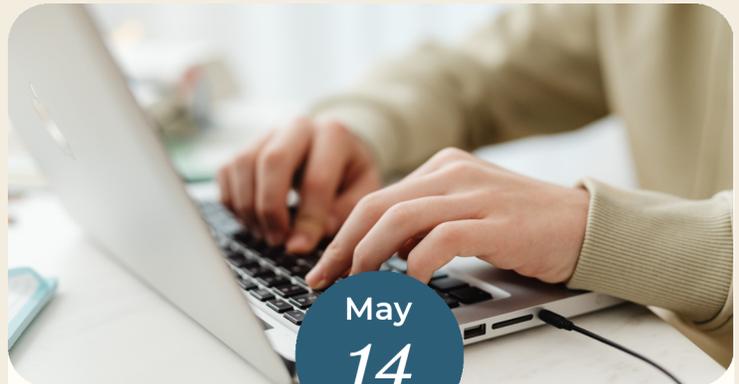


APR
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Dr. Pamela Rollins,

Ed.D., CCC-SLP

**Words Are Not Enough:
Social Development as the
Foundation for
Communication in Autism**



May
14

Dr. Jamie Hughes-Lika

PhD, BCBA-D, IBA

**Strengths First: Writing
ABA Intervention Goals
that Celebrate Strengths,
Not “Fix” Deficits**

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Ania Petrova

M.S., BCBA, LBA, LBS



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