

The NDBI Navigator

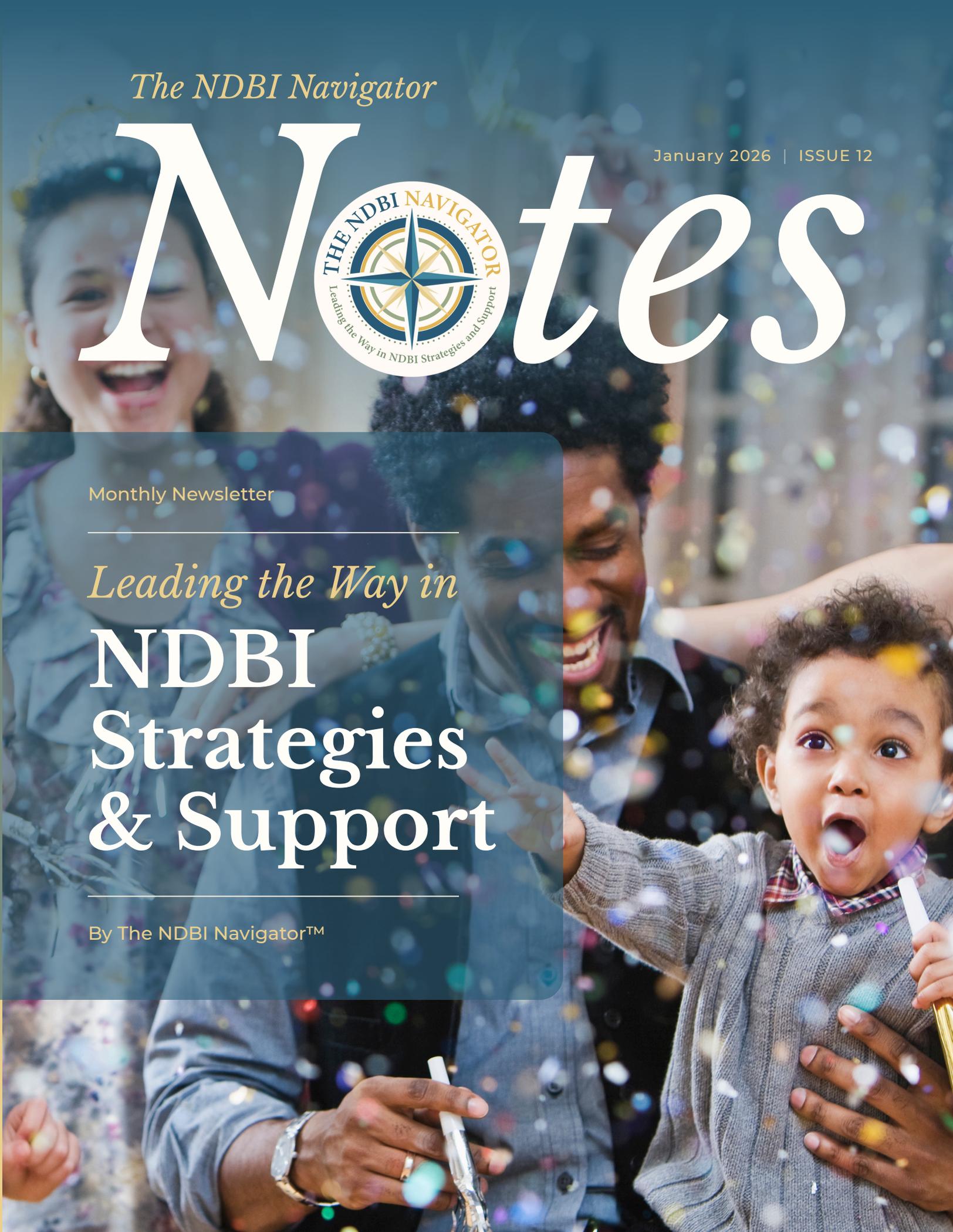
January 2026 | ISSUE 12

N Notes

Monthly Newsletter

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

By The NDBI Navigator™



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The NBDI Navigator Academy | courses.thendbinavigator.com



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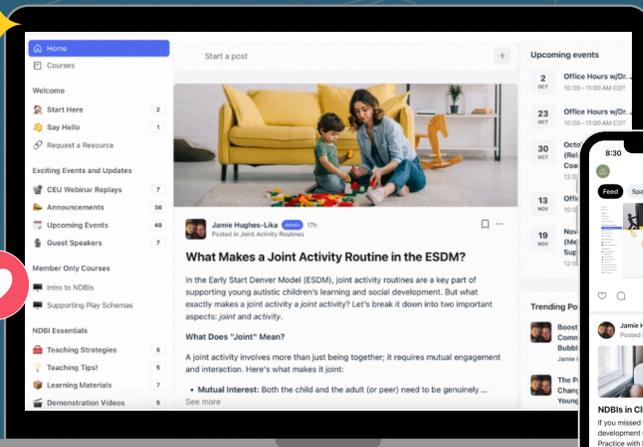
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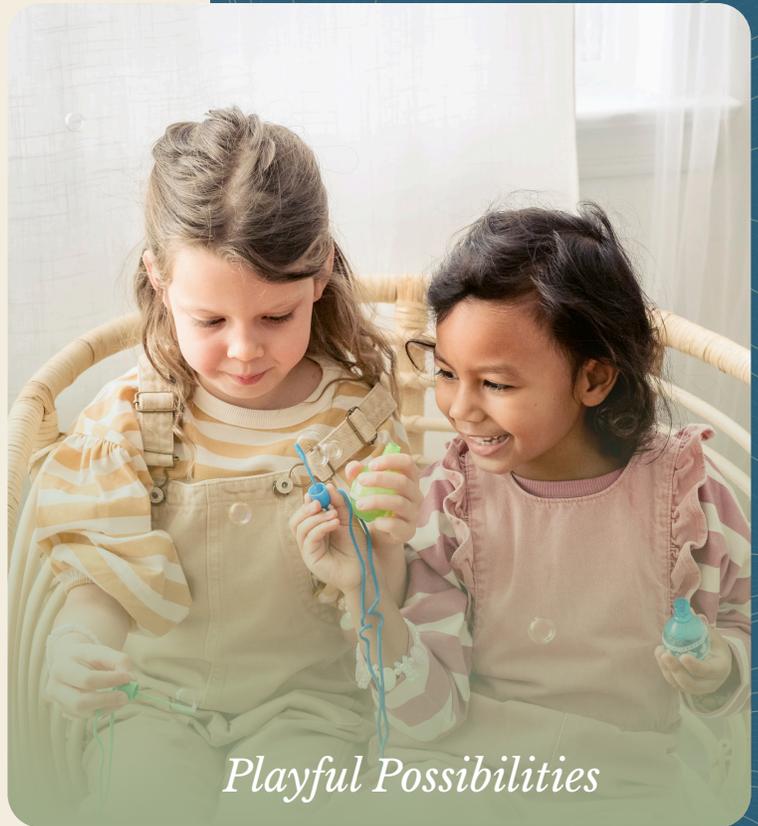
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Letter from the Editor

Dear NDBI Community,

Welcome to the January 2026 issue of The NDBI Navigator Notes! As we step into a new year, we're excited to continue supporting you in the meaningful, nuanced work you do every day—building relationships, fostering engagement, and bringing developmentally grounded, evidence-based practices into real-life routines with children and families.

This month's Research Roundup highlights a compelling study examining play interactions of autistic preschoolers with their mothers and fathers without toys. The findings show that toy-free, people-centered play is associated with higher-quality interactions, including greater emotional availability, responsiveness, and shared engagement. It's a powerful reminder that some of the most impactful moments of learning and connection happen not through materials, but through relationships—a core principle at the heart of NDBI.

In Playful Possibilities, we're shining a light on an everyday favorite: flashlights. Simple yet endlessly flexible, flashlights can be used to support joint attention, turn-taking, communication, anticipation, and sensory-social routines—making them a wonderful tool for both home and community settings.

Our How-To Hub focuses on an essential foundational strategy: Encouraging reciprocal imitation as a foundation for joint attention and social engagement. By thoughtfully copying a child's actions or sounds—and inviting them to copy back—we can create powerful social loops that support engagement, imitation, and early communication in a natural, joyful way.

This month's Ask & Answer tackles a question many professionals and caregivers encounter: "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 prioritize motivation, shared control, and small, achievable steps—helping children stay engaged without pressure or power struggles.

As we begin the year, we also want to take a moment to express our sincere gratitude to our co-editor, Sienna, for her time, thoughtfulness, and many contributions to previous issues of The NDBI Navigator Notes. We celebrate her exciting new endeavor and will truly miss her voice, insight, and collaboration.

Thank you, as always, for being part of this growing community. Your commitment to reflective practice, collaboration, and child-centered care continues to inspire us. We're grateful to walk alongside you in 2026 and beyond.

With appreciation,

Dr. Jamie

Jamie Hughes-Lika, PhD, BCBA-D, LBA, IBA



Dr. Jamie



Research Roundup

Research Highlights for Real-World Impact

Play interactions of autistic preschoolers with their mothers and fathers without toys yield more positive interactions than play with toys.



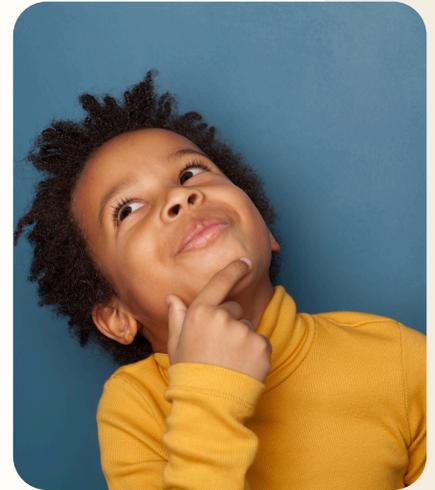
Key Takeaways

This research study investigates how play environments and parental roles influence the quality of interactions with autistic preschool-aged boys. By comparing activities with and without toys, the authors found that play without toys consistently resulted in higher emotional availability, likely because it reduces object-based distractions and encourages direct social connection. Additionally, the study reveals that mothers and fathers exhibit nearly identical levels of sensitivity and engagement during these sessions, regardless of the child's cognitive abilities. Despite fathers typically spending less time on daily caregiving, their interactions proved to be just as positive and attuned as those of mothers. These findings suggest that social games involving physical touch, singing, and movement are particularly effective for fostering responsiveness. Ultimately, the researchers recommend that clinicians and families incorporate toy-free play to optimize social development and emotional bonding.

Oppenheim, D., Mottes-Peleg, M., Dolev, S., & Yirmiya, N. (2025). Play interactions of autistic preschoolers with their mothers and fathers without toys yield more positive interactions than play with toys. *Autism*, 29(8), 1987–1997.

Reflection Questions

1. Since toys may distract autistic children and lead to less harmonious interactions, how should clinicians structure assessment or intervention sessions to intentionally reduce object focus and promote mutual engagement?
2. The study found play without toys provides optimal conditions for sensitive interactions. What "people games" or social activities do you find most effective in facilitating attuned play?



Explore More NBDI Articles

Akin-Bulbul, I., & Ozdemir, S. (2024). Evaluation of the Social Attention Hypothesis: Do Children with Autism Prefer to See Objects Rather than People? *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-024-06596-9>

Green, J., Charman, T., McConachie, H., Aldred, C., Slonims, V., Howlin, P., Le Couteur, A., Leadbitter, K., Hudry, K., Byford, S., Barrett, B., Temple, K., Macdonald, W., Pickles, A., & PACT Consortium. (2010). Parent-mediated communication-focused treatment in children with autism (PACT): A randomised controlled trial. *Lancet*, 375, 2152–2160.

Rogers, S. J., Estes, A., Lord, C., Vismara, L., Winter, J., Fitzpatrick, A., Guo, M., & Dawson, G. (2012). Effects of a brief Early Start Denver Model (ESDM)–based parent intervention on toddlers at risk for Autism Spectrum Disorders: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 51(10), 1052–1065.

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 shining a light on the versatility of flashlights! From creating shadow stories to engaging in sensory exploration, flashlights offer endless opportunities for meaningful play. By incorporating Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI) strategies, you can transform this simple household item into a powerful tool for fostering communication, engagement, and connection.



Creative Play with Flashlights

1 *Shadow* Explorers

Description

Use a flashlight to create shadows on the wall. Make animal shapes with your hands or shine light on objects to see how their shadows change.

Learning Opportunities

This activity supports joint attention, imitation, and creative play as the child explores the interaction between light and shadow.

NDBI Strategies

- ★ **Building Anticipation:** Say, “*What will we see?*” before turning on the flashlight to engage your child’s attention.
- ★ **Expanding Communication:** Label the shapes, like “*big shadow*” or “*tiny bunny*,” and encourage your child to name the shapes they see.
- ★ **Following the Child’s Lead:** If the child points to a specific shadow, engage with that shape and add a playful narrative, like, “*Look, the bunny is hopping!*”
- ★ **Celebrate Small Wins:** Cheer when your child engages with the light, mimics a shadow, or points to one they like, saying, “*You found the bunny—great spotting!*”

2 *Flashlight* Treasure Hunt

Description

Hide objects around the room and use a flashlight to search for them. Encourage your child to find and retrieve the treasures.

Learning Opportunities

Hide objects around the room and use a flashlight to search for them. Encourage your child to find and retrieve the treasures.

NDBI Strategies

- ★ **Building Anticipation:** Excitedly say, *“Let’s see what we can find!”* and shine the light around the room.
- ★ **Encouraging Communication:** Prompt your child to say, *“Found it!”* or *“Look!”* when they spot a hidden item.
- ★ **Promoting Shared Attention:** Point to the item together, saying, *“There it is!”* to support joint focus.
- ★ **Celebrate Small Wins:** Acknowledge each discovery with a big smile and praise, like, *“You found the car—great job exploring!”*

3 Dancing Lights

Description

Shine the flashlight on the floor or walls and move it around while your child tries to “catch” the light.

Learning Opportunities

This activity promotes gross motor development, visual tracking, and coordination as the child chases the light.

NDBI Strategies

- ★ **Following Your Child’s Lead:** If they prefer a slower or faster light, adjust the speed to match their interest.
- ★ **Expanding Communication:** Model phrases like “*catch it!*” or “*fast light!*” to build vocabulary.
- ★ **Reinforcing Success:** Celebrate when they “catch” the light by clapping or saying, “*You got it—amazing!*”
- ★ **Celebrate Small Wins:** Acknowledge every attempt, such as reaching for the light or following it with their eyes.

Enhancing Attention

Build anticipation by pausing before turning on the flashlight and saying, “What will we see?” Use playful expressions and exaggerated gestures to keep your child’s focus. Vary the pacing—sometimes moving the light quickly and other times pausing dramatically—to maintain their attention and add an element of surprise.

Boosting Motivation

Keep activities exciting by introducing new ways to use the flashlight, like creating light patterns or discovering glowing objects. Follow your child’s interests to maintain their enthusiasm. If your child shows a preference for a particular game, build on it to sustain their enthusiasm, such as repeatedly “finding” their favorite toy with the flashlight beam.

Supporting Social Engagement

Copy your child’s actions with the flashlight and share smiles and laughter. Narrate your actions with excitement, saying, “You’re shining the light so brightly—wow!” Use animated expressions and commentary to bring the activity to life, such as saying, “You’re lighting up the room!” or “Let’s see how far we can make the light go!” Encourage back-and-forth play by passing the flashlight between you, taking turns to “shine” or “find” things, and creating opportunities for your child to lead the interaction

Final Thoughts

Flashlights are more than just a tool—they’re a gateway to connection, learning, and play! By incorporating NDBI strategies like following your child’s lead, embedding language goals, and celebrating small achievements, you can create meaningful experiences that foster growth and bonding.

Stay tuned for next month’s “Playful Possibilities” feature, where we’ll share even more ways to turn everyday items into extraordinary opportunities for learning and connection. Together, let’s celebrate the small steps that lead to big connections!

How-to-Hub

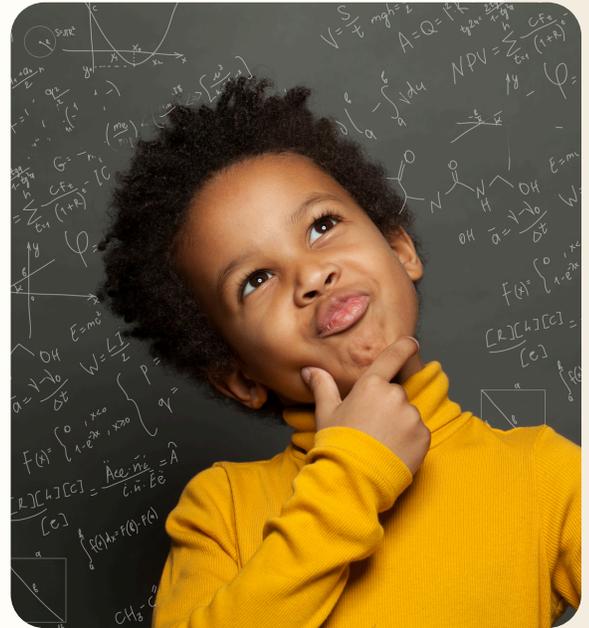
Reciprocal Imitation Training (RIT)



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 escalate 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 it becomes frustrating.
- Use least-to-most prompts and fade quickly.
- Respect sensory boundaries; if imitation escalates arousal, slow down or simplify.

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



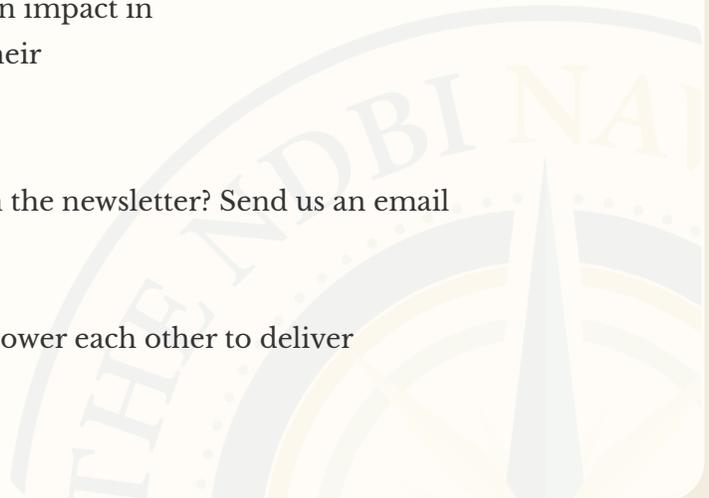
Ask & Answer

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.



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Nicole Skotz, M.S., BCBA

**ABA and Supporting
Children with ADHD**



FEB
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Dr. Thanos Vostanis

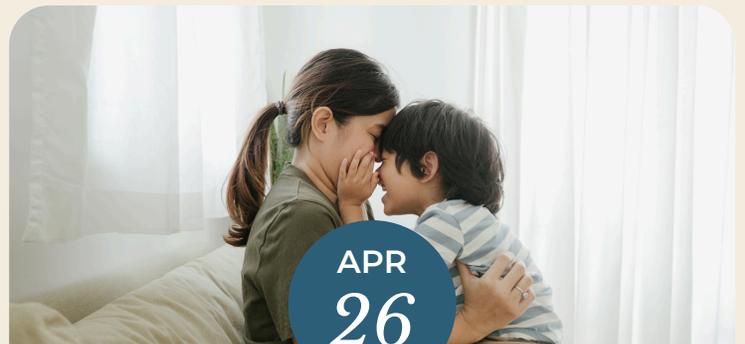
UKBA (Cert), BCBA-D, IBA, QTS
**Employing Precision Teaching
to Support Joint Attention**



MAR
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*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**

NDBI Connections CONFERENCE



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