

The NDBI Navigator

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N Notes

Monthly Newsletter

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

By The NDBI Navigator™

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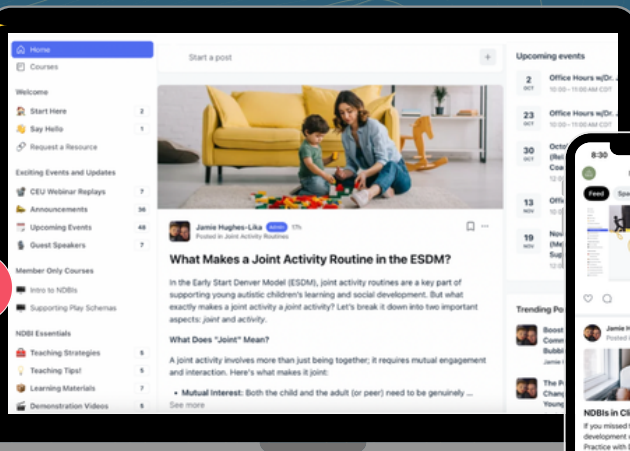
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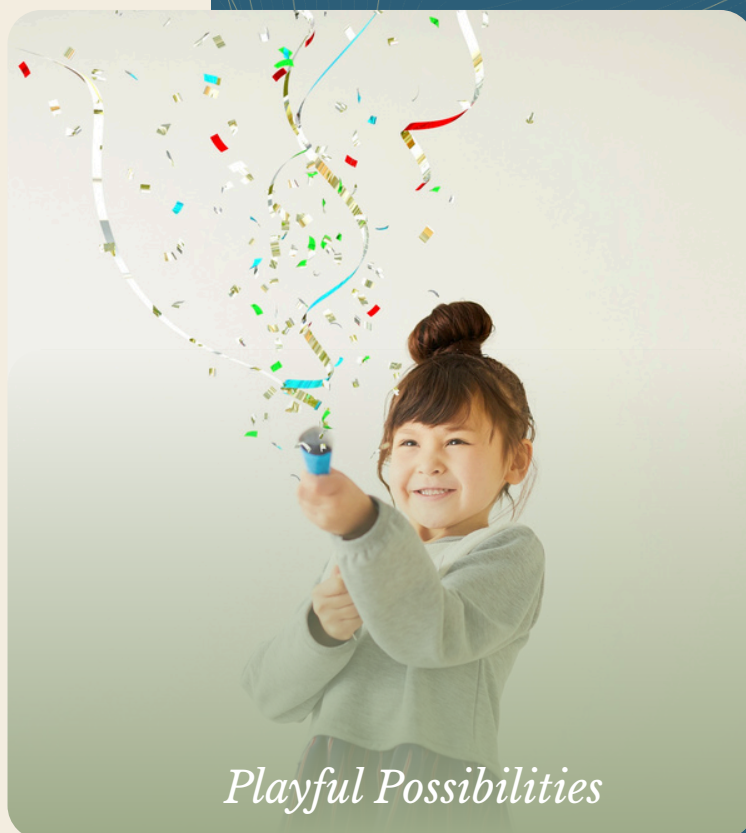
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Letter from the Editors

Dear NDBI Community,

Welcome to the September issue of The NDBI Navigator Notes! As the new school year begins, many of us are setting fresh goals for learning, collaboration, and growth. This month, we're focusing on ways to strengthen engagement—both through research insights and practical, play-based strategies.

Our Research Roundup highlights an important new position paper by Frost & Ingersoll (2025). The authors define compliance training and distinguish it from Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI) approaches, clarifying the differences that set NDBIs apart. Their work invites us to reflect on the ways we can build meaningful skills while supporting child autonomy.

In Playful Possibilities, we're exploring the creative potential of tissue paper. This colorful, textured material can be used in countless ways to spark curiosity, encourage joint attention, and promote social communication through playful interactions.

Our Ask & Answer section this month tackles a common challenge: helping children stay engaged in an activity routine when they tend to participate briefly before wandering off. We'll share strategies for increasing motivation, building routine predictability, and supporting sustained participation in ways that feel natural and rewarding.

As always, our goal is to offer both inspiration and practical tools that can be applied right away in your work. Thank you for continuing to be part of this growing community committed to evidence-based, relationship-focused care.

Dr. Jamie and Dr. Sienna

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



Dr. Jamie



Dr. Sienna



Research Roundup

Research Highlights for Real-World Impact

Differentiating Compliance Training From Naturalistic Teaching Approaches in NDBIs: A Response to Cullinane et al. (2024)



Key Takeaways

Compliance training is a practice that has drawn ethical concerns from the autistic community due to risks of reducing autonomy and increasing vulnerability to coercion. This position paper by Frost and Ingersoll (2025) examines the differences between compliance training and Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs). The authors posit that unlike approaches that prioritize generalized compliance, NDBIs aim to build functional, developmentally appropriate skills within everyday routines by emphasizing child choice, motivation, and natural consequences. Emphasizing both developmental and behavioral approaches, implementers of NDBIs are coached to follow the child's lead, scaffold learning, and embed teaching within mutually responsive interactions. In doing so, the authors maintain that NDBI approaches promote autonomy and independence while supporting learning across domains.

Frost, K. M., & Ingersoll, B. (2025). Differentiating Compliance Training From Naturalistic Teaching Approaches in NDBIs: A Response to Cullinane et al.(2024). Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 02711214251350163

Reflection Questions

1. Do you agree with the authors' distinction between traditional compliance training and practices used within NDBIs?
2. How might the takeaways from this paper influence the way you explain intervention approaches to families or other professionals?
3. How can practitioners ensure they are promoting meaningful skill development rather than inadvertently teaching compliance for its own sake?



Explore More NBDI Articles

Koegel, R. L., Koegel, L. K., & McNerney, E. K. (2001). Pivotal areas in intervention for autism. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 30(1), 19–32.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s15374424jccp3001_4

Lanovaz, M. J., Wheatley, T. L., & Richling, S. M. (2023). Compliance training. In J. L. Matson (Ed.), *Handbook of applied behavior analysis: Integrating research into practice* (pp. 931–945). Springer International Publishing.

Smith, T. (2001). Discrete trial training in the treatment of autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 16(2), 86–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/108835760101600204>

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. This month, we're diving into the surprisingly versatile world of tissue paper! From its bright colors to its crinkly texture, tissue paper offers countless opportunities for meaningful play and skill-building. By incorporating Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI) strategies, you can transform this everyday item into a tool for fostering engagement, communication, and connection.

Everyday Items



Endless Fun

Tissue paper might seem like nothing more than gift wrap filler, but it's actually a fantastic tool for playful connection and sensory-rich learning! Its bright colors, crinkly texture, and light, floaty movement naturally capture attention and invite exploration. Tissue paper can be used in so many creative ways to spark joy, build joint attention, and support imaginative play. Here are three playful ways to use tissue paper to encourage meaningful social engagement!



1 *Tissue* Tornado

Description

Gather colorful tissue paper and let the child tear it into pieces. Toss the pieces into the air to create a tissue “tornado,” encouraging the child to join in.

Learning Opportunities

This activity supports motor skills, turn-taking, and joint attention as the child participates in the playful chaos of tearing and tossing tissue paper.

NDBI Strategies



Following Your Child’s Lead: If the child starts to crumple or shred the tissue paper, join in their play. Mirror their actions to connect and maintain engagement. When engaging with tissue paper, your child might start crumpling, tearing, or even simply feeling the texture between their fingers. These actions, however small, provide a wonderful starting point for connection. By mirroring their actions—whether it’s crumpling the paper in your hands, mimicking their tearing motion, or even making exaggerated sounds to match their play (like “rip, rip!”)—you validate their interests and build trust. This strategy helps the child feel seen and understood, which lays the groundwork for deeper engagement.



Building Anticipation: Say, “Ready, set...” and pause, waiting for the child to look at you or signal “go” before tossing the paper. You can layer in additional elements of anticipation by **1) Varying your actions:** Use dramatic movements or exaggerated pauses before tossing the tissue, like slowly raising your hands and whispering, “Almost ready...” and **2) Using sound effects:** Add playful sounds like a whoosh or a drumroll to enhance the excitement of the moment.



Expanding Communication: Label actions like “tear,” “crinkle,” or “throw” to model language. Use phrases like “It’s flying!” or “Let’s make a big tornado!” Every interaction with tissue paper is a chance to model and expand language. By narrating your actions—“tear,” “crinkle,” “squeeze”—you introduce new vocabulary while the child observes and participates. Repetition is key here, so don’t shy away from using the same word multiple times in a variety of contexts. For example: **1) When crumpling the paper,** say, “Crumple, crumple, crumple—look, it’s a ball!” **2) While tossing it in the air,** exclaim, “Wow, it’s flying so high!” **3) If the child throws the paper,** respond excitedly with, “You threw it—great throw!”

A photograph of three young children playing peek-a-boo. They are all smiling and have their hands raised, holding pieces of tissue paper in front of their faces. Confetti is falling all around them, creating a festive atmosphere. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a window or a bright outdoor area.

2 Peek-a-Boo Tissue Game

Description

Hold a piece of tissue paper in front of your face and play peek-a-boo with the child. Alternatively, hide objects under tissue paper and encourage the child to find them.

Learning Opportunities

This game fosters joint attention, sustained engagement, and problem-solving as the child interacts with the tissue paper.

NDBI Strategies



Turn Taking: Alternate roles, letting the child “hide” their face or objects, and say, “*My turn!*” to promote reciprocity. When you take turns “*hiding*” or “*finding*,” you create opportunities for the child to engage in reciprocity. For instance, let the child hide their face behind the tissue and then dramatically say, “Where did [Child’s Name] go? I can’t see you!” When they pull the tissue away, respond with excitement, “There you are—it’s my turn now!”



Promoting Shared Attention: Use excited expressions and animated voices, such as “*Where’s [Child’s Name]? Peek-a-boo!*” Shared attention is critical for building social and communication skills, and peek-a-boo offers endless opportunities to foster this. When the child pulls down the tissue or peeks through it, use animated facial expressions, playful tones, and excited exclamations like “*Peek-a-boo!*” or “*There you are!*” This helps capture and sustain their focus on you. To enhance shared attention further: **1) Introduce playful surprises:** Hide your face behind the tissue, but peek out from different angles, such as over the top or side, saying, “*Am I over here? No? How about here?*” **2) Highlight their actions:** When the child hides their face, narrate what they’re doing: “*Oh no! Where did [Child’s Name] go? Let’s find you!*”

3 Tissue Trail Adventure

Description

Lay down a trail of tissue paper leading to a “treasure” (e.g., a favorite toy or item). Encourage the child to follow the trail, walking, crawling, or hopping along the way.

Learning Opportunities

This activity supports gross motor skills, attention, and problem-solving while incorporating playful exploration.

NDBI Strategies



Encouraging Communication: Prompt simple phrases like “go,” “look,” or “I found it!” as the child follows the trail. The Tissue Trail Adventure is a natural opportunity to encourage expressive language and social communication. Prompt and model simple phrases or words related to the activity: **1) Action-based phrases:** As the child moves along the trail, say, “Go!” or “Keep looking!” and encourage them to repeat after you. **2) Descriptive language:** Use words like “long,” “soft,” or “crinkly” to describe the tissue as they explore. **3) Discovery language:** When they reach the end of the trail, model celebratory phrases like, “I found it!” or “Look, it’s a teddy bear!”



Building Anticipation: Excitedly point to the trail and say, “What’s at the end? Let’s follow it!” Anticipation is a powerful tool to capture and maintain a child’s interest during activities like the Tissue Trail Adventure. Use excitement and enthusiasm to spark curiosity about what lies ahead. For example: **1) Excited pointing:** Point along the trail and say, “Look at the trail—where does it go?” **2) Verbal build-up:** Say phrases like, “Let’s follow it! Ready, set...” and pause, waiting for the child to look at you or signal “go!” **3) Engage their senses:** Add sound effects like a “whooshing” noise or “rustling” as you touch the tissue to heighten their excitement.



Conclusion

Tissue paper is more than just a craft supply—it's a powerful tool for creating meaningful moments of connection, engagement, and learning. By incorporating NDBI strategies like following the child's lead, embedding language goals, and celebrating small achievements, you can transform simple play into transformative experiences. 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

Model and Expand Language in Everyday Moments



How-to-Hub

Welcome to the How-To Hub!

This month, we're focusing on one of the most powerful communication-building strategies in Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs): Model and Expand Language. Children learn language best when it's connected to something they're already doing, feeling, or noticing. This strategy means listening closely to what a child says—or noticing what they communicate without words—and responding by adding just a little more.

What to Do:

When a child communicates—through words, gestures, signs, or even facial expressions—repeat their message back and add one small step. Keep it meaningful, connected to their focus, and within their developmental “next step” in language.

Pro Tip:

Stay just one step ahead. Avoid jumping too far in complexity—you want the child to feel successful and engaged, not lost.





Why it Works:

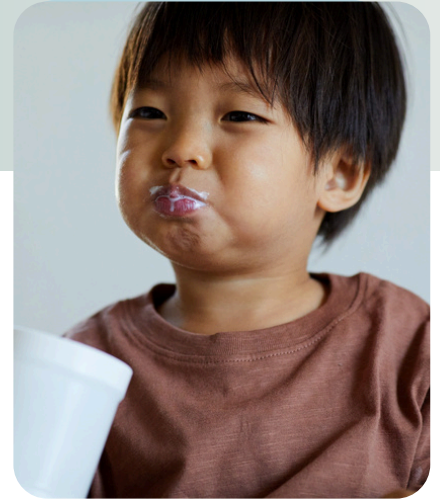
Expanding language in the moment helps children connect new words and structures to something that's already meaningful to them. It builds vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills without interrupting their play or routine.



Five Everyday Ways to Model and Expand Language

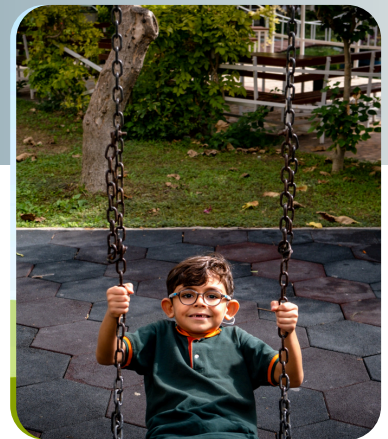
1. Snack Time

- ★ **What to do:** If the child says “cracker,” you say, “Want cracker” or “Eat cracker.”
- 💡 **Why it works:** You’re keeping the focus on their interest while showing how to build longer sentences.
- ★ **Pro Tip:** Use natural tone and timing so it feels like a conversation, not a quiz.



2. Outdoor Play

- ★ **What to do:** If the child points to a swing, you say, “Swing high!” or “Go swing!”
- 💡 **Why it works:** You’re pairing their nonverbal communication with functional language tied to the action.
- ★ **Pro Tip:** Exaggerate your facial expressions and gestures to keep it engaging.



Five Everyday Ways to Model and Expand Language

3. Book Reading



What to do: If the child says “dog,” expand with “Brown dog” or “Dog is running.”



Why it works: You’re adding descriptive language that enriches understanding.



Pro Tip: Match your expansions to the picture so the child sees the word in action.



4. Pretend Play



What to do: If the child says “tea,” you say, “Pour tea” or “Tea for bear.”



Why it works: You’re embedding language into a meaningful, imaginative context.



Pro Tip: Follow the child’s storyline to keep the language relevant.



5. Movement & Transitions



What to do: If the child says “shoes,” you say, “Put on shoes” or “Blue shoes.”



Why it works: You’re turning a functional routine into a language-learning opportunity.



Pro Tip: Keep the rhythm consistent—repeat your expansion each time you do that step in the routine.



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

How can I help a child stay engaged in an activity routine when they only participate for a few seconds before wandering off?



Our Answer

That's a great question! When a child drifts away quickly, it's often a sign we need to adjust the activity's pace, interest level, or level of support to better match their interests and motivation. In NDBI, our goal is to make activities worth staying for by connecting them to the child's interests, 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

Engagement begins with something that matters to the child. If the activity doesn't connect to their interests, attention will fade quickly. Start with a familiar or preferred object, character, song, or sensory experience, and use that as the anchor for the routine.

- ✓ Use the child's favorite toys, textures, or themes as part of the activity
- ✓ Rotate in new materials that build on their current interests
- ✓ Incorporate familiar songs, characters, or movement patterns
- ✓ Pair the activity with a sensory experience the child enjoys (e.g., spinning, bouncing, water play)



From Question to Action in 5 Steps

2 Keep the Steps Short and Interactive

Long stretches without shared interaction can lead to disengagement. Break the routine into small, back-and-forth moments where the child participates, then you participate.



- ✓ Plan for frequent turns so the child isn't waiting too long
- ✓ Use quick, achievable actions before moving to the next step
- ✓ Avoid overly long explanations—model actions instead
- ✓ Switch roles often to keep novelty and interest high.

3 Embed Shared Control Opportunities

When children have a role in deciding what happens next, they're more likely to stay engaged. Use shared control strategies to create natural pauses that invite participation.



- ✓ Hold back a piece of the activity and wait for the child to request it (verbally, with gestures, or with eye gaze)
- ✓ Offer clear but limited choices: "This one or that one?"
- ✓ Build anticipation with "Ready...Set...Go!" moments
- ✓ Let them choose the order of steps when possible

From Question to Action in 5 Steps

4 Add Playful Variations

Predictability helps children feel safe, but novelty keeps them curious. Introduce small variations to make familiar routines fresh and fun.



- ✓ Add a silly sound effect to each step
- ✓ Use different voices (robot, animal, whisper) while narrating
- ✓ Change the speed (super slow vs. super fast) for a playful twist
- ✓ Introduce a “surprise” element, like hiding the next piece under a cup

5 Gradually Expand Tolerance for Change

If a child currently participates for only a few seconds, start there—then stretch engagement slowly over time. Success builds motivation.



- ✓ Celebrate even brief participation to reinforce the experience as positive
- ✓ Add just one extra step before allowing them to move on
- ✓ Use a “first–then” structure: “First finish building the tower, then you can run!”
- ✓ Slowly lengthen the activity as the child’s tolerance grows

By designing routines that are short, interactive, and linked to what the child already loves, you can extend participation in a way that feels fun and natural—never forced.

Over time, these small moments build into longer stretches of shared engagement, stronger relationships, and richer learning opportunities.

Webinar Events

Learn Today. Apply Tomorrow.



SEPT
10

Laurie Vismara, PhD, BCBA-D, RBA
**Enhancing Coaching Practices:
A Fidelity Framework for
Supporting Adult Learners**



OCT
30

Anna Dvortcsak, MS, CCC-SLP
**Functions of Language:
Development and
Expansion Strategies.**



NOV
6

Katherine Pickard, PhD
**Staff Training in ABA
Clinical Settings**

NDBI *Connections* CONFERENCE



*Connecting Developmental and Behavioral Science to
Improve Interventions For Young Autistic Children*



Where

Live via BehaviorLive



When

October 23-25, 2025

<https://behaviorlive.com/conferences/ndbi2025/home>

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Dr. Sienna Windsor

PhD, BCBA-D, LBA



Individualized Intervention

Assessments, goal setting, and one-on-one teaching.



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Support using NDBI strategies with your child across daily routines to address challenges and achieve goals that are important to your family.



Consultation and Training

Resources and guidance for families, educators, and organizations on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood.