

# The NDBI Navigator/ *Notes*

May 2025

ISSUE 04



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

By The NDBI Navigator™



Monthly Newsletter



# ONLINE COURSES

## The NBDI Navigator Academy

<https://courses.thendbinavigator.com>

All Courses

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

23 Lessons

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All Courses

ESDM Advanced Workshop Supplemental Modules

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All Courses

T19: NBDI Essentials for Autism Providers

*Technicians*

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\$25.00



All Courses

T18: Patterns in Play (Autism Providers)

*Technicians*

23 Lessons

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All Courses

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

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All Courses

MC01: Writing ABA Session Notes Master Class

*Master Class*

3 hours

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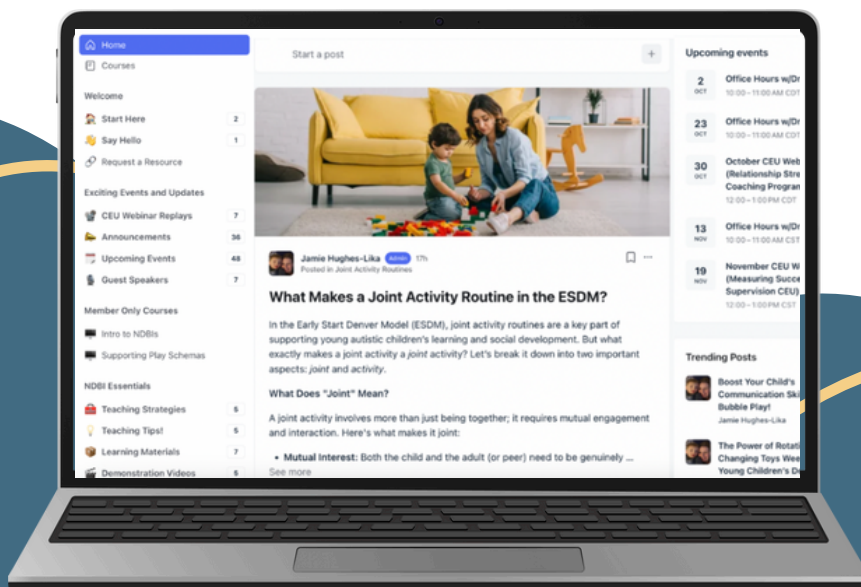
Biweekly Interactive Q/A Discussions W/ Dr. Jamie



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Contact Us

[support@thendbinavigator.com](mailto:support@thendbinavigator.com)

## NDBI Events





# Letter From the Editors

Dear NDBI Community,

Spring is in full swing, and with it comes fresh opportunities to reflect, explore, and grow in our work with young children and families. This month's issue of *NDBI Notes* brings together the heart of what makes Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions so powerful: interdisciplinary collaboration, playful possibilities, and intentional strategies that honor the child's lead while advancing meaningful learning.

In our Research Roundup, we spotlight a new publication focused on *Interdisciplinary Competencies for Implementing NDBIs With Young Children With Autism and Other Social Communication Challenges*. This important work outlines the shared skills and mindsets needed across disciplines to effectively deliver NDBIs—and to do so in ways that center equity, collaboration, and family partnership. Our Playfully Possible section gets cozy this month with ideas for turning everyday materials (like pillows!) into engaging play routines that support imitation, joint attention, and connection. Because sometimes the most effective therapy tools are already in your living room. In the Ask & Answer column, we tackle a familiar and important question: *"How do I balance following a child's lead while still embedding learning opportunities into play?"* You'll find a step-by-step strategy that includes scaffolding as a key technique for supporting development without disrupting the natural flow of play. And in How to Hub, we highlight a foundational but often overlooked strategy—adult imitation of child behavior—as a powerful way to increase engagement, foster reciprocity, and build stronger social communication skills.

Thank you for being part of this vibrant and committed community. We hope this issue inspires you to keep showing up with curiosity, intention, and a deep respect for the children and families you serve.

With appreciation,  
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

Interdisciplinary Competencies for Implementing NDBIs With Young Children With Autism and Other Social Communication Challenges

## Key Takeaways

In this article, the authors highlight that although Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs) are evidence-based and adaptable to various settings, many providers lack the formal training needed to implement them with fidelity. They propose a set of interdisciplinary competencies designed to enhance collaboration among professionals and support high-quality, family-centered care. These essential skills—for educators, speech-language pathologists, behavior analysts, and other providers—are organized into three key areas: working effectively with the child, with families, and with other providers. The authors also recommend changes to pre-service education, in-service training, and policy to promote the widespread and equitable adoption of NDBIs in community settings.

Ingersoll, B., Douglas, S. N., Brodhead, M. T., Barber, A., & Kaczmarek, L. A. (2024). Interdisciplinary competencies for implementing NDBIs with young children with autism and other social communication challenges. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 46(2), 138-154.



# Reflection Questions

1. Why is it important for multiple disciplines (e.g., educators, SLPs, BCBAs) to share a common set of competencies when implementing NDBIs, and how might this shared foundation improve outcomes for children and families?
2. Which of the three competency areas (if any), do you think is most often underemphasized in current training programs, and why?
3. How can cultural responsiveness and family-centered practices be meaningfully integrated into intervention planning, especially when working with families from diverse backgrounds?



## Explore More NBDI Articles

Aranbarri, A., Stahmer, A., Talbott, M., Miller, M., Drahota, A., Pellecchia, M., Barber, A., Griffith, E., Morgan, E., & Rogers, S. (2021). Examining US public early intervention for toddlers with autism: Characterizing services and readiness for evidence-based practice implementation. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, 786138.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.786138>

Bruder, M., Catalino, T., Chiarello, L., Mitchell, M., Deppe, J., Gundler, D., Kemp, P., LeMoine, S., Long, T., Mihlenhaupt, M., Prelock, P., Schefkind, A., & Stayton, V. (2019). Finding a common lens: Competencies across professional disciplines providing early childhood intervention. *Infants & Young Children*, 32(4), 280–293.

<https://doi.org/10.1097/IYC.0000000000000153>

Inbar-Furst, H., Douglas, S. N., & Meadan, H. (2020). Promoting caregiver coaching practices within early intervention: Reflection and feedback. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 48(1), 21–27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00980-2>



Creating Meaningful Connections and Fun with Plastic Containers

# Playful Possibilities



Welcome to our new series, "Playful Possibilities: Everyday Items, Endless Fun," where we explore creative ways to use everyday household items to foster learning and interaction for young autistic children. In this article, we'll dive into the surprising potential of pillows and how these items can be used to create fun, interactive play experiences. By incorporating Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI) strategies, we'll show you how to enhance attention, boost motivation, and support social engagement using this simple household item.

## Everyday Items

### Creative Play with Pillows

Pillows are often underrated as play items, yet they provide endless opportunities for open-ended, imaginative play. When paired with NDBI strategies, they become a valuable tool for developing foundational social and communication skills. Let's explore how this simple, everyday object can foster meaningful connections through interactive play.

## Endless Fun



# 1

# Toss and Catch

- **Description:** Use different sized soft pillows that you have around the house. Take turns catching and throwing the pillows with the child.
- **Learning Opportunities:** This activity helps support back and forth social interactions, as you take turns throwing and catching the pillows together, coordinating eye gaze and orienting towards one another. It's also a great way to support gross motor skills (e.g., jumping, throwing, hopping, running, etc.)
- **NDBI Strategies:** Try working as a team by setting a goal to catch the pillow a certain number of times in a row. Celebrate each successful throw and catch together to strengthen cooperation. Encourage the child to orient their body towards you before each throw by saying something like, "Ready, Set, Throw! This strengthens social connections and helps with nonverbal communication. Describe your actions and the child's as you play. For example, "I'm throwing the pillow to you—ready, catch!" or "Wow, you caught it!" This helps build joint attention and supports language development. Use silly sound effects, make silly noises, or animate your facial expressions to dial up the fun!



## 2

# Pillow Pathway

- **Description:** Place the pillows on the floor to create a pathway to walk on for the ‘Floor is Lava’ game. You can follow the child as they lead the way on the path, or encourage them to follow you as you navigate to ‘safety.’
- **Learning Opportunities:** This activity helps support imitation, gestures, and receptive communication skills.
- **NDBI Strategies:** Exaggerate your actions as you walk on the pillows. Extend your arms out to the side to balance and encourage the child to do the same (imitation). You can pause and look expectantly at the child before hopping from one pillow to the next. You can have the child direct you where to go, by following their point. Take turns jumping from pillow to pillow. Ask the child which pillow they want to go to next, then wait for their response or gesture; this encourages communication and social reciprocity. Introduce teamwork by suggesting both of you cross the “lava” together or by holding hands while jumping between pillows; this fosters connection and cooperation. Encourage brief moments of eye contact by making playful faces or giving cues like, “Phew! We made it!” to strengthen social interactions.





# 3 Pillow Fight

- **Description:** Some children enjoy rough-and-tumble play, which provides an excellent opportunity to promote social interaction, coordinate eye contact, and support communication. You can use soft pillows to gently bump the child or toss them in a dodgeball-style game to keep the play fun and engaging.
- **Learning Opportunities:** This game enhances anticipation and focus as the child prepares for the next pillow throw or gentle hit. A pillow fight not only builds excitement but also promotes social engagement as the child learns to take turns, follow cues, and react to the playful challenge. Coordinating eye contact before each throw or hit encourages joint attention, while narrating actions like, "Here comes the pillow!" adds to communication and shared enjoyment.
- **NDBI Strategies:** Provide verbal hints or gestures that the pillow is coming their way. You can say, "Uh oh" or "Oh, no" to see if they will look in your direction before you gently throw the pillow to get them. Exaggerate your actions. When they hit you with the pillow or throw it at you, fall down to the ground, make silly sounds, or laugh. You can model short phrases "Got you!" "Fall down" or "Oopsie!" that the child can imitate. You can take turns running around the room, encouraging the child to watch and follow your movements before trying to catch you. This helps build attention and coordination, making the game both fun and interactive.



**Enhancing Attention** - While throwing the pillows at each other (pillow fight), you can make silly anticipatory sounds each time before the child throws the pillow. This is a great way to build anticipation, and sustain engagement with the child. You can move the pillow in an exaggerated and playful manner, making a big show of getting ready to throw it slowly. This gives the child more time to watch you, share laughs, and build excitement as they anticipate the big moment.

**Boosting Motivation** - For some children, the big event for the activity can be highly motivating (e.g., they make it safely to the end of the pillow path, catch the pillow, hit you with the pillow etc.). For other children, they might need you to try other strategies to help maintain social motivation during the activity. If they enjoy throwing items up in the air and watching them fall, you can have them lay down on the floor, stand above them, and throw the pillow up so it falls gently down on top of them. If the child enjoys being chased, you can try to catch them as they walk along the pillow path. Pretend they're too fast, and act as though you're just about to grab their shirt or arm. Many children will find this incredibly funny and will frequently look back to see how close you're getting, encouraging social engagement and playful interaction.

**Supporting Social Engagement** - During the toss and catch game, you can enhance social engagement by pretending to almost drop the pillow after you catch it, jump up to catch it so you don't miss it, or create other silly ways to help the child orient towards our actions. During the pillow pathway game, hold hands with the child and navigate the path together so that you don't fall into the 'lava.' Take turn hopping, stomping, or skipping pillows to get across the path. Watch the child and follow their lead, copy their actions, and encourage them to copy your ideas. During the pillow fight activity, gently hold onto the pillow and pretend that it's stuck, inviting the child to help you pull it free. Share excited glances, make silly sounds, and continually create opportunities for the child to engage with you throughout the activity.

## Conclusion

The charm of using pillows (and other everyday household items) lies in their low-cost, accessible nature, making them effective tools for igniting creativity and social engagement in young autistic children. By integrating NDBI strategies, such as providing choices, matching your energy to the child's, and expressing excitement during play, these simple items transform into powerful catalysts for learning and interaction. Keep an eye out for more inventive ways to promote fun and learning in our "Playful Possibilities" series! Whether it's pillows, laundry baskets, or other household items, the possibilities for play and connection are truly limitless.





## Imitating Child Behavior

# How-to-Hub

Welcome to the How-To Hub! This month, we're diving into imitating the child's behavior. Imitating a child's actions is one of the simplest—and most powerful—strategies in the NDBI toolbox. Rooted in developmental science and well-supported by research, this strategy builds the foundation for shared engagement, reciprocal interaction, and the emergence of social communication.

### Why It Works

From infancy, children learn about the world—and about relationships—through imitation. When an adult mirrors a child's actions, it sends a strong social signal: I see you. I'm interested in what you're doing. For young autistic children or those with social communication challenges, adult imitation can bridge gaps in attention, create predictability in interaction, and increase the likelihood that the child will look, smile, or take a turn.

## What It Looks Like in Practice

If a child is banging two blocks together, the adult picks up another set and gently does the same. If the child starts spinning a lid on the floor, the adult gets their own lid and spins it too. There's no demand placed on the child—just a shared rhythm, a mutual experience, and an open door for social engagement.

## Developmental and Behavioral Benefits

- **Increased Attention:** Children are more likely to look toward adults who are copying their behavior than those who are simply giving instructions.
- **Dyadic Engagement:** Mirroring a child's actions can lead to longer back-and-forth interactions, forming the basis for turn-taking and imitation.
- **Expanded Play:** Once engagement is established, the adult can begin to introduce small variations or new play ideas within the child's theme.
- **Communication Opportunities:** Imitation often leads to shared smiles, gestures, or vocalizations—creating natural openings for social communication.

## Tips For Success

- Use matching objects whenever possible.
- Let the child notice the imitation naturally—avoid prompting or over-commenting at first.
- Keep your imitation gentle and rhythmical rather than overly animated.
- Watch for small signs of acknowledgment from the child—a glance, a pause, or a smile—and respond immediately to reinforce the interaction.





## Your Questions, Expert Insights

# Ask and 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](mailto:support@thendbinavigator.com)

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



# Reader Question

"How do I balance following a child's lead while still embedding learning opportunities into play?"

## Our Answer

That's a great question! One of the most powerful aspects of Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs) is the balance between respecting the child's autonomy and embedding developmentally meaningful learning opportunities. The goal is to enter the child's world, follow their lead, and then build from there – not shift their focus, but scaffold new learning onto what's already engaging for them

### Step 1: Observe and Join the Child's Lead

Before embedding learning, take time to understand what the child is already communicating through their play.

Ask yourself:

- ✓ What objects or actions are they drawn to?
- ✓ Are there patterns or routines they repeat?
- ✓ How do they respond to your presence – do they look toward you, hand you items, imitate your actions?

Start by simply joining the activity without changing it. Mirroring their actions or narrating their play shows that you value their ideas and sets the stage for shared engagement.

### Step 2: Identify Opportunities for Embedded Learning

Once you're in the play with the child, look for natural openings to layer in learning goals without interrupting their engagement.

Try embedding:

- ✓ Communication Goals: Wait for the child to reach, vocalize, or gesture before giving them the item. Model a simple sign or word (e.g., "more," "up," "go!").
- ✓ Imitation Goals: Add a new action into their routine (e.g., if they're banging blocks, you tap yours together and say "tap tap!").
- ✓ Cognitive or Motor Goals: Expand the activity just slightly (e.g., if they're rolling a car, build a ramp and say "Let's go up!").

These embedded targets feel like part of the play, not external tasks – and are more likely to be accepted by the child when they are motivated and regulated.



### Step 3: Use a Scaffolding Approach

Scaffolding helps you support participation and growth without overpowering the child's lead. This is where we gently stretch the child's skills while staying within their zone of proximal development.

#### ✓ Offer Choices to Empower the Child

Instead of directing, provide meaningful options:

“Do you want the red ball or the blue one?”

“Should we roll it fast or slow?”

This builds language, decision-making, and shared control — all within the child-led play.

#### ✓ Model, Pause, and Wait

If you're introducing something new (a word, a new way to play), demonstrate it and then pause — giving the child space to respond, copy, or react.

#### ✓ Use Visual or Verbal Cues to Guide Participation

If a child is unsure how to continue, gently narrate what's happening (“You put it in! My turn?”) or use familiar phrases to keep the flow going (“Ready... set... GO!”).

#### ✓ Reinforce Even Small Approximations

Celebrate all attempts — even looking at you, imitating part of a word, or copying an action. A simple “You did it!” or excited tone builds momentum.

### Step 4: Expand Learning Gradually

Once the child is engaged and responding, you can begin to stretch the play in small, meaningful ways.

- ◆ Add one step to the routine (e.g., from rolling the ball to building a simple ramp first).
- ◆ Introduce new actions or roles (e.g., you drive a second car, create a pretend scenario).
- ◆ Generalize to new materials or settings, once the skill is established in the original routine.
- ◆ Acknowledge the child's flexibility and participation: “You let me try your game — that was so cool!”





# NDBI Webinar Events



May NDBI Essentials Webinar (May 14, 2025)

Understanding/Addressing Barriers to Individualized Care  
Dr. Giacomo Vivanti, PhD



Project ImPACT Free Informational Webinar - Susan Marden

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/project-impact-information-webinar-tickets-1263578410039?aff=ebdssbdestsearch>



June NDBI Essentials Webinar (June 26, 2025)

NDBI Caregiver Coaching - Natalia Santamaria, M.Sc.



July NDBI Essentials Webinar (July 10, 2025)

AAC and Supporting Communication - Janet Harder, R-SLP







## **NDBI Events at the 51st Annual ABAI Conference Washington, DC May 22-26, 2025**

Implementing the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) to Enhance Social Engagement and Play Skills for Young Autistic Children (5/22/25)

NDBI SIG Annual Business Meeting (5/23/25)

Supporting Parents to Implement Effective Interventions (5/24/25)

Gestalt Language Processing and the Natural Language Acquisition Protocol: Considerations for Autism Intervention \*If Not the Natural Language Acquisition Protocol, Then What? Best Practices for Language Intervention (5/26/25)

Examining Naturalistic Development Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs) Through a Behavior-Analytic Lens: A Systematic Review of Interventions for Linguistically Diverse Learners With Developmental Disabilities (5/26/25)

Implementation of Classroom Pivotal Response Teaching (CPRT) for Autistic Students in India (5/24/25)

**<https://www.abainternational.org/events/annual-2025.aspx>**

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**SAVE THE DATE**

# 2nd Annual NDBI Connections Conference



**When**

October 23-25, 2025



**Where**

Live and On-Demand via BehaviorLive

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Friday-Saturday Event

Pre-Conference Workshop

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RBT-Student Track





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Dr. Sienna

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**Individualized Intervention**

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



**Coaching and Family Education**

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