Meltdowns and Tantrums:

Helping Parents Support Emotion Regulation in Toddlers who may have Autism

Sarah Edmunds, PhD
Assistant Professor of Psychology & Educational Studies
University of South Carolina

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Introductions

- Are you a parent, a professional working with children, or both?
- If you are a professional, what is your training background?
- If you are a professional, what is your job role?

Learning Objectives

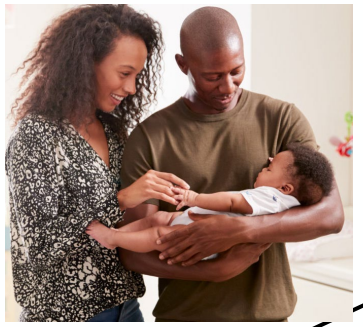
1. Understand behavioral and developmental perspectives as essential for high-quality, evidence-based emotion regulation intervention

2. Learn about Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs)

3. Learn about evidence-based parenting strategies to reduce emotion dysregulation and describe how they are uniquely helpful for toddlers with or at elevated likelihood for autism

4. Discuss examples of these strategies to use in practice or at home

In the first five years of life



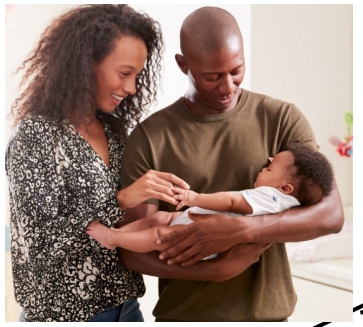
Growth

Birth 1 2 3 4 5

Years

…children develop rapidly in all domains

In the first five years of life



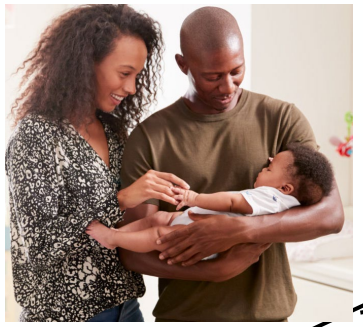
Growth

…many children have delayed development

Birth 1 2 3 4 5

Years

In the first five years of life



Growth

e.g., in social communication and/or in emotion regulation

Birth 1 2 3 4 5

Years

Social Communication:

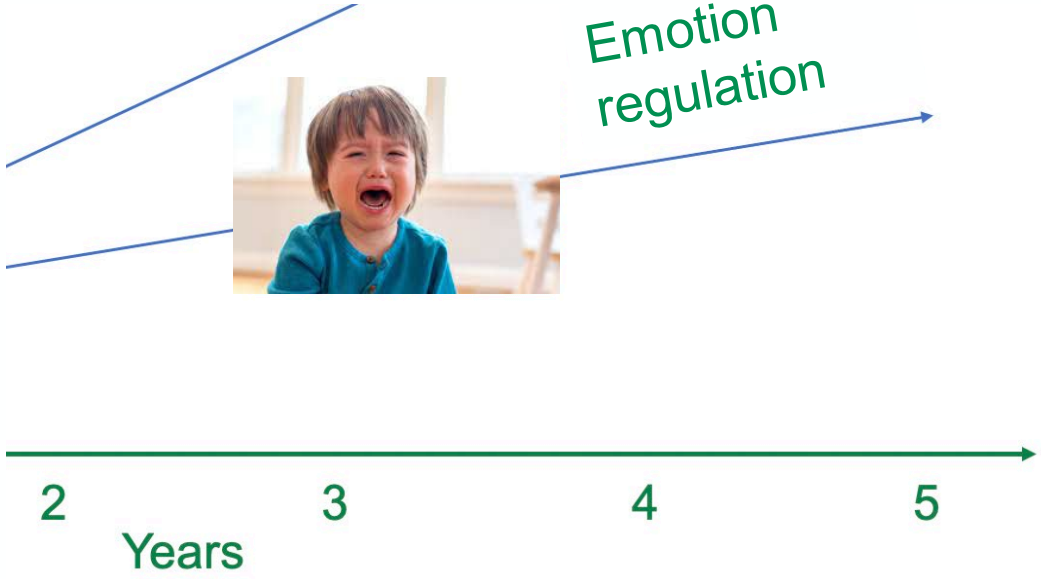
- Words, vocalizations, gestures, eye gaze, facial expressions, and play actions
- For the purpose of interacting with others
  - To share needs
  - To share interest
  - To learn from others
  - To feel close/form relationships

Social Communication:

- Words, vocalizations, gestures, eye gaze, facial expressions, and play actions
- For the purpose of interacting with others

Social communication challenges are a core feature of autism spectrum disorder (combined with other criteria)

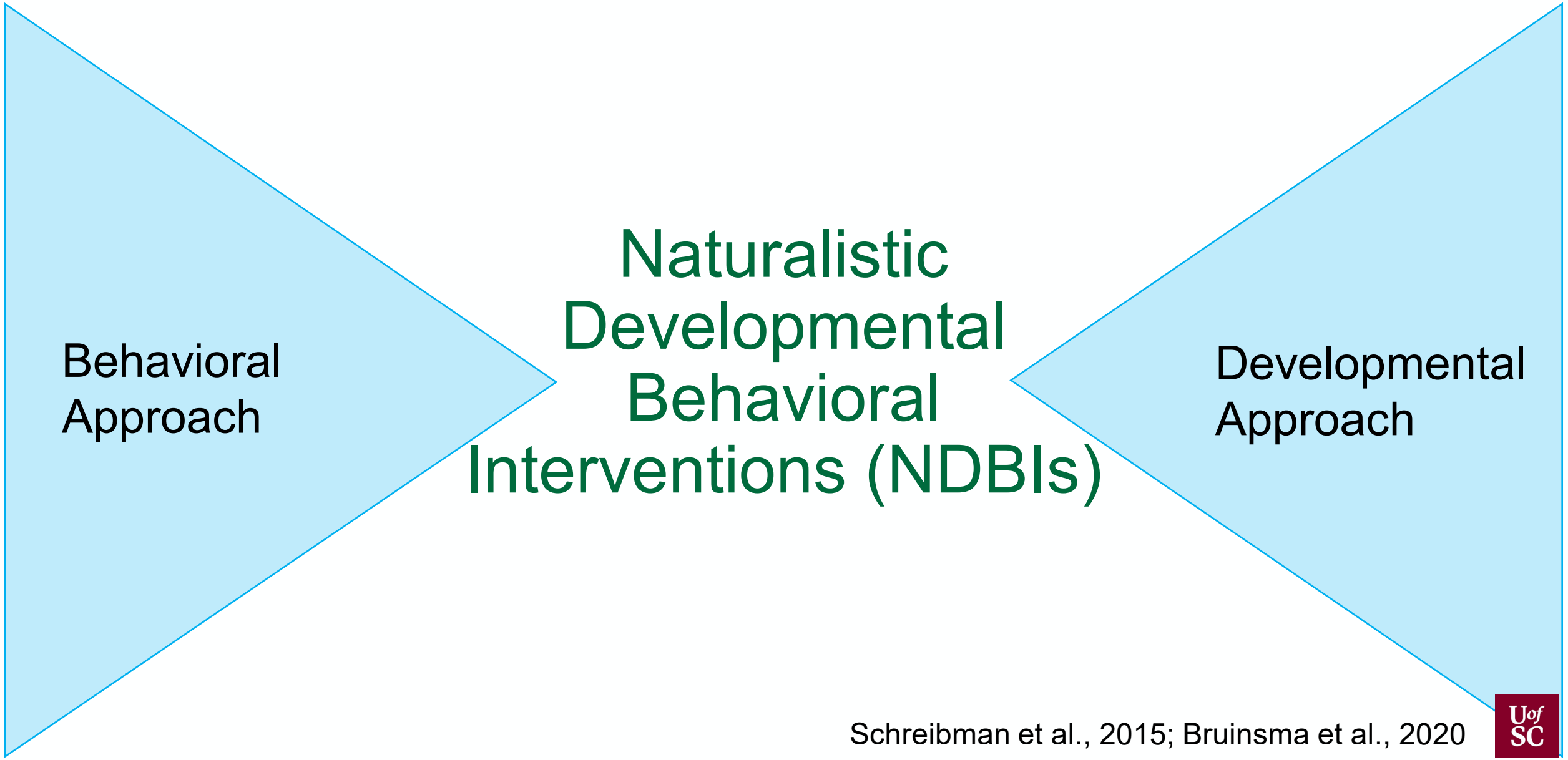
Emotion dysregulation in toddlerhood is normal…to an extent



Brief, mild, predictable tantrums are common in toddlerhood

Prolonged, dysregulated, pervasive tantrums are a risk factor for later mental health problems[1,2]

[1]Wakschlag et al., 2015; [2]Wiggins et al., 2018



Schreibman et al., 2015; Bruinsma et al., 2020

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…children learn through contingencies
(e.g., I do this, then this happens;
when this happens, I can do this)

Behavioral Approach

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs)

Developmental Approach

Schreibman et al., 2015; Bruinsma et al., 2020

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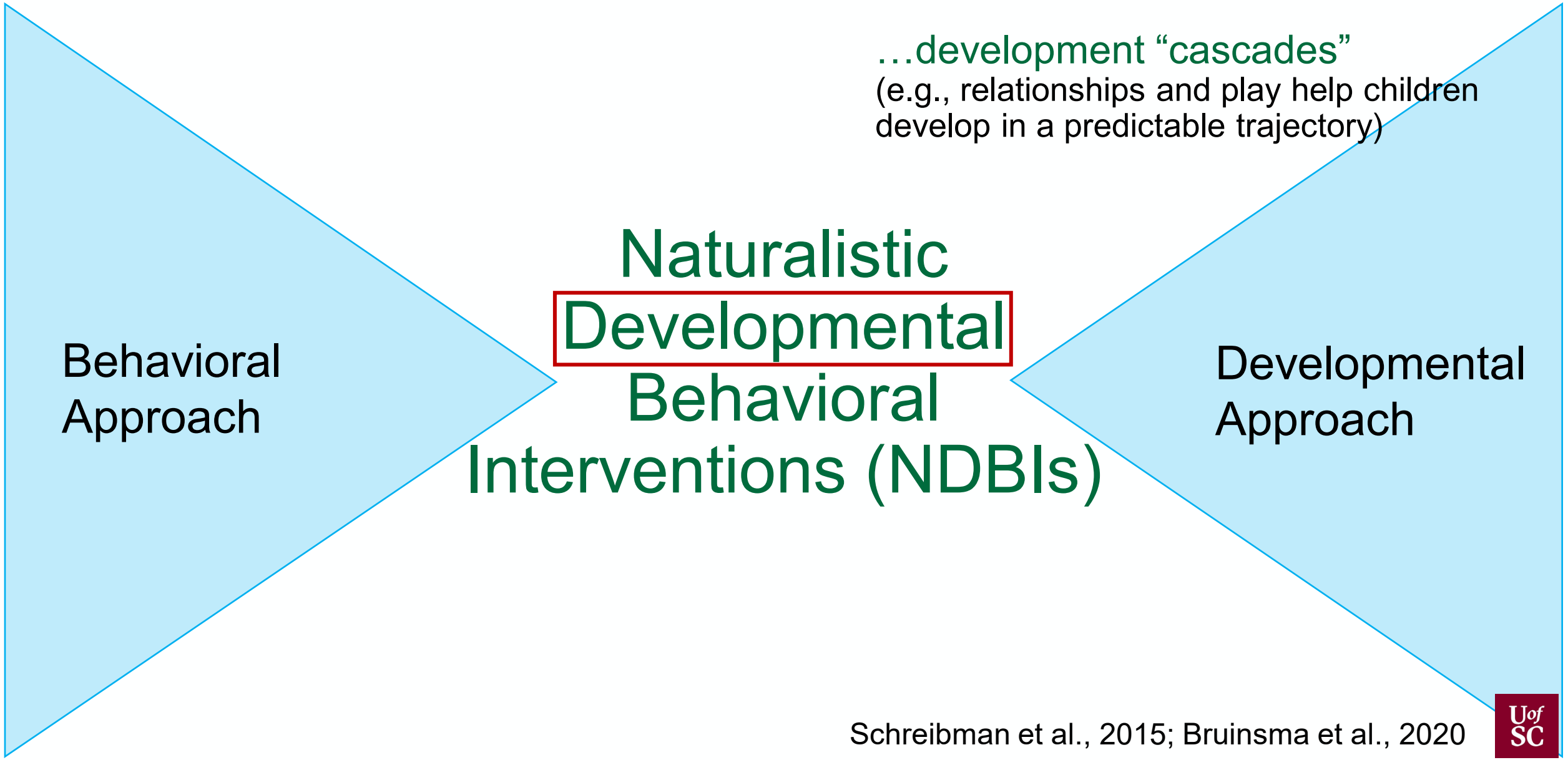

Schreibman et al., 2015; Bruinsma et al., 2020

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Behavioral Approach

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs)

Developmental Approach

In family, daycare, and preschool settings

Schreibman et al., 2015; Bruinsma et al., 2020

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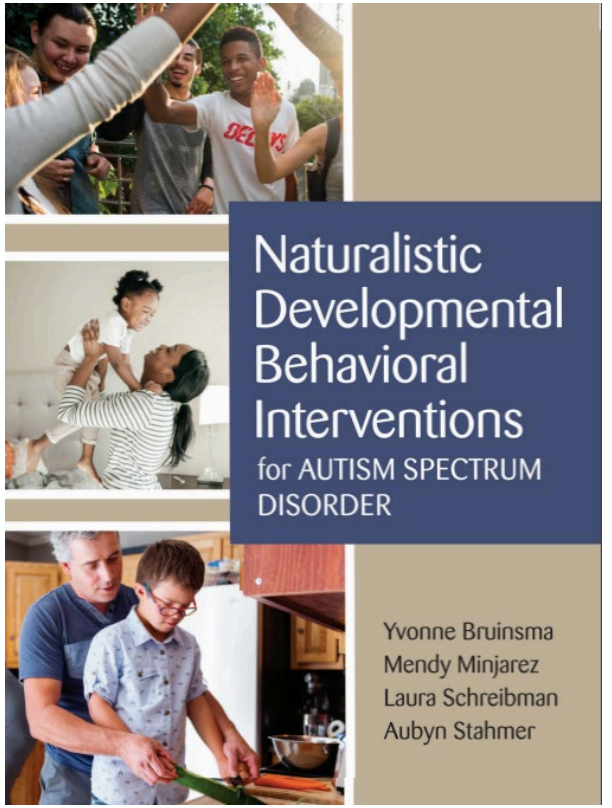
Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs)

- Effective at improving social communication and language for:
  - Children 3-6+ with autism
  - Children 14 months - 4 years <u>with social communication delays</u> and/or at high likelihood of autism



Sandbank et al., 2020; Hampton et al., 2021

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There are many different “name brand” intervention packages that qualify as NDBIs:

1. **PRT**: Pivotal Response Training
   - Koegel & Koegel, 2006
2. **ESDM**: Early Start Denver Model
   - Rogers & Dawson, 2010
3. **JASPER**: Joint Attention, Symbolic Play, Engagement, & Regulation
   - Kasari, Paparella, Freeman, & Jahromi, 2008
4. **ImPACT**: Improving Parents as Communication Teachers
   - Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2010
5. **EMT**: Enhanced Milieu Teaching
   - Kaiser & Hampton, 2017
6. **IT**: Incidental Teaching/Walden Toddler Program
   - McGee, Morrier, & Daly, 1999

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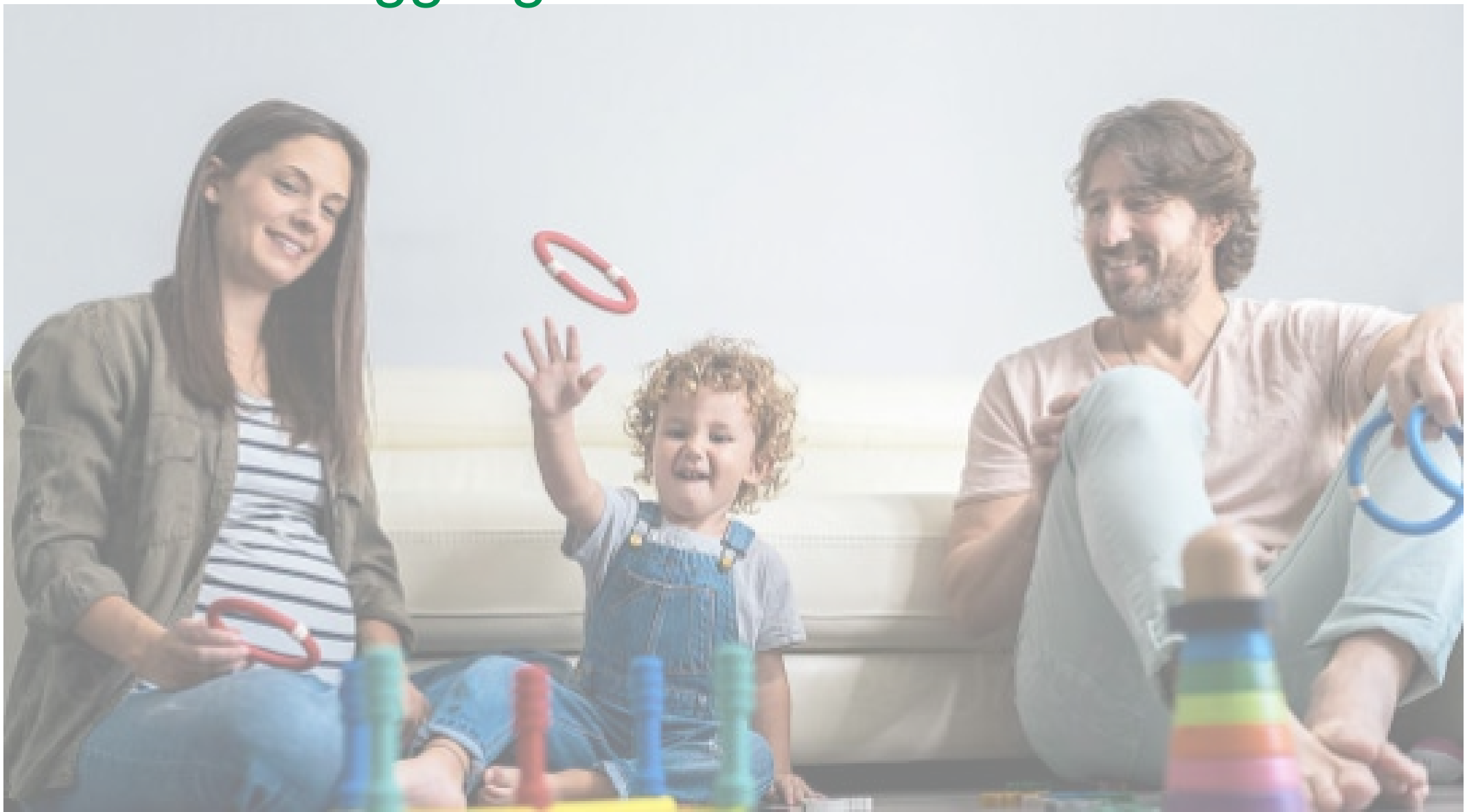
NDBI learning opportunities are embedded in play

But, how do we use NDBI strategies to play with children who are struggling with meltdowns and tantrums?



What do we mean by “tantrum” and “meltdown”?

- What is a tantrum?
- What are other behaviors that are challenging?

Tantrums are a type of communication

- What do tantrums communicate?
  - Wanting something
  - Not wanting something
  - Fatigue
  - What else?

First, we want to help parents:

1. Figure out *why* tantrums or challenging behavior is happening
   - What is the child communicating?

2. P*revent* the more intense tantrums or challenging behavior.
   - How can we meet children's needs ahead of time?

Part 1: Figure out the *why* ("function") of a toddler's tantrum

Questions to ask the parent:

1. What happened right before the behavior?
   - What happened right before similar behaviors in the past?
2. What happened right after the behavior?
   - What happened right after similar behaviors in the past?

Asking about before and after helps us figure out why a child is tantrum-ing because…

Behavior always occurs after something and before something else

…these things might help us understand why the challenging behavior is happening

Behavioral approach: the structure of how we learn

A	B	C
Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence/ Response

- There is structure in how we learn: “if I do this in this situation, then this happens”
- We understand children’s behavior as communicating a need- i.e., having a function
- Teaching children a skill to use to meet that need

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For example: Ruby

- Ruby's typical snack time was delayed because of the family's schedule for that day (early pick up for older brother). She began to yell and scream in the car. When she began to kick the seat in front of her, Ruby's father passed her a chocolate granola bar from his bag.

- What happened before the tantrum? After?

Common *why*'s (functions)

1. To try to get something they want
   - Access to physical item (toy, snack)
   - Access to attention from parent
2. To try to avoid or escape something
   - E.g., a task
3. Inability to communicate
4. Sensory stimulation
5. Fatigue

Common *why*'s (functions)

1. To try to get something they want
   - Access to physical item (toy, snack)
   - Access to attention from parent
2. To try to avoid or escape something
   - E.g., a task
3. **Inability to communicate**
4. **Sensory stimulation**
5. Fatigue or hunger

Part 2: How can we prevent the tantrum?

1. Try to meet the child's "why"
2. Increase predictability
3. Plan ahead for "likely" tantrum times

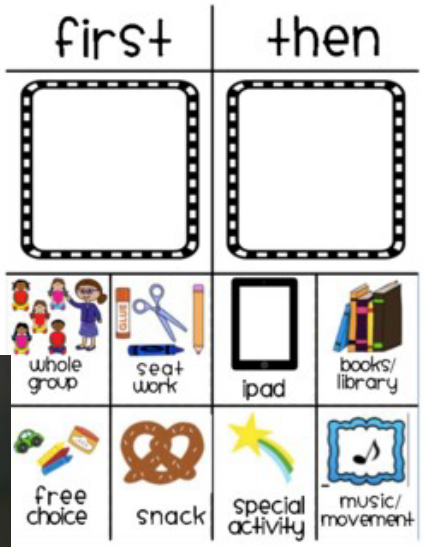
And then:

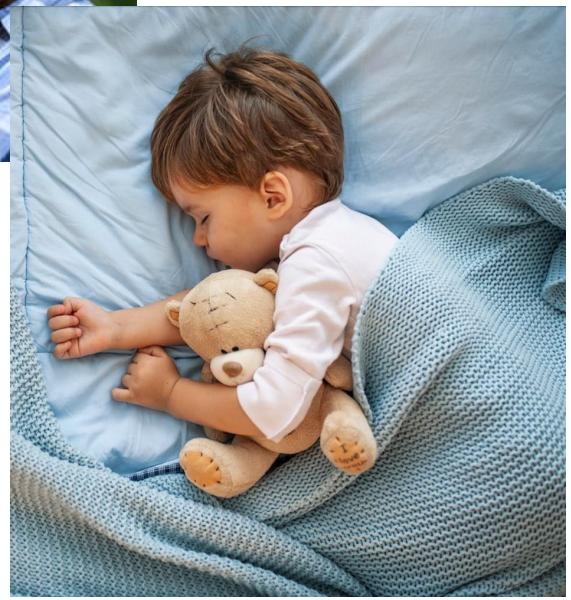
Give "special time" or positive attention outside of tantrums

i.e., play time using NDBI strategies!

Try to meet the child's "why"

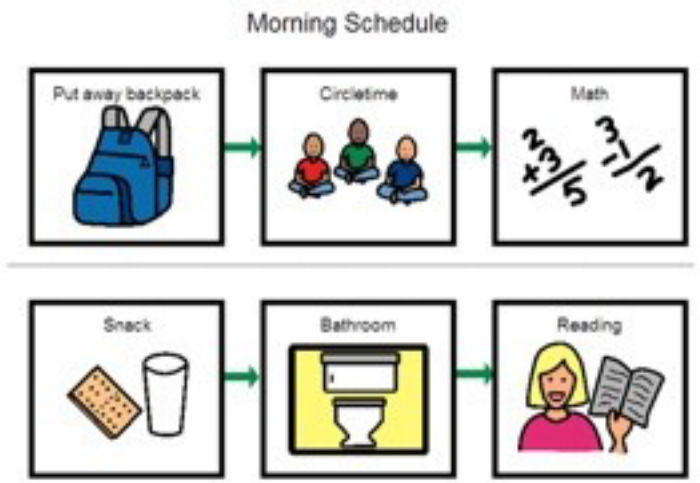
To try to get something they want	In advance, offer two acceptable choices
To try to avoid or escape something	Use a "first-then" in advance
Inability to communicate	Model the word or gesture, use visuals
Sensory overstimulation	Offer breaks after activities you know are overwhelming
Fatigue or hunger	Keep a regular nap and snack time

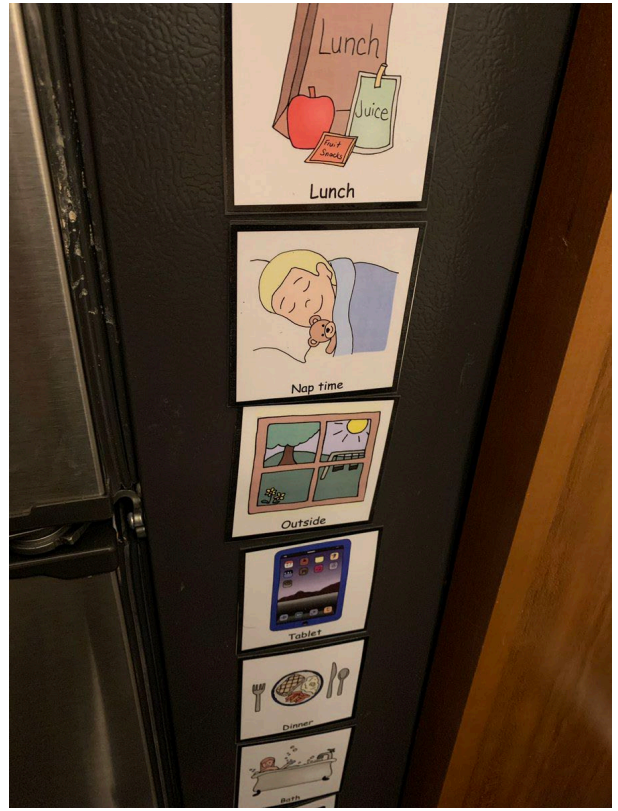




Increase the predictability around a child

- Of schedule
  - Transitions are difficult!
  - Visual schedules
- Of environment
- Of rules and boundaries





- When a change is needed, introduce it in advance (e.g., with a “first, then” visual)

Plan ahead for “likely” tantrum times

- What are your child’s “warning signs”?
- What are the hardest times of the day/situations?

Then, try:

- Distraction
- Control the environment
- Offer two acceptable (to you) choices
- Break things up into small chunks
- Model the right thing to say

Part 2: How can we prevent the tantrum?

1. Try to meet the child's "why"
2. Increase predictability
3. Plan ahead for "likely" tantrum times

And then:

Give "special time" or positive attention outside of tantrums

i.e., play time using NDBI strategies!

We can incorporate NDBI strategies into our existing play with young children who have social communication and emotion regulation challenges

NDBIs: Core Intervention Strategies

1. Face-to-face and on the child's level
2. Following the child's lead
3. Imitating the child
4. Displaying positive affect and animation
5. Modeling appropriate language
6. Responding to attempts to communicate
7. Using communicative temptations
8. Direct teaching opportunities:
   - Pacing and frequency
   - Clear and appropriate
   - Motivating and relevant
   - Prompts to ensure success
   - Contingent natural and social reinforcement

Frost et al., 2020

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1) Following the child's lead in play

2) Imitating the child

Imitation is a “pivotal skill”

Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Rogers & Pennington, 1991; Koegel et al., 1998

3) Face to face, on the child's level

- Think of the child's attention as a spotlight
- It may not be coming to you as often, so you position yourself within it!

Take-Aways

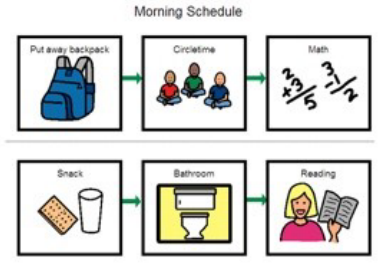
The most important steps to handling meltdowns and tantrums, especially for toddlers who may have autism, are:

Figure out the child's "why":

- What is the child communicating with their behavior?

Try these strategies:

- Try to meet the child's "why"
- Increase predictability
- Plan ahead for likely tantrum times



But most importantly:

- Increase positive attention outside tantrums through play, using NDBI strategies:
  - Following their lead
  - Imitating them
  - Getting on their eye level

Resources

- Sandbank et al., 2020: Meta-analysis of ASD interventions
- Hampton et al., 2021: Meta-analysis of preemptive interventions
- Steinbrenner et al., 2020: EBPs for ASD comprehensive report
- Interacting with Autism website: Video examples of interventions for ASD
  - http://www.interactingwithautism.com/section/treating
- Video-based training in the “ABCs” of behavior (antecedent-behavior-consequence) and *many* other NDBI strategies/areas from Vanderbilt for both providers and families, free when you create a login: https://vkc.vumc.org/vkc/triad/training/

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My Favorite Resource: Vanderbilt TRIAD Videos

- https://triad.vkclearning.org/en-us/

Vanderbilt TRIAD Videos

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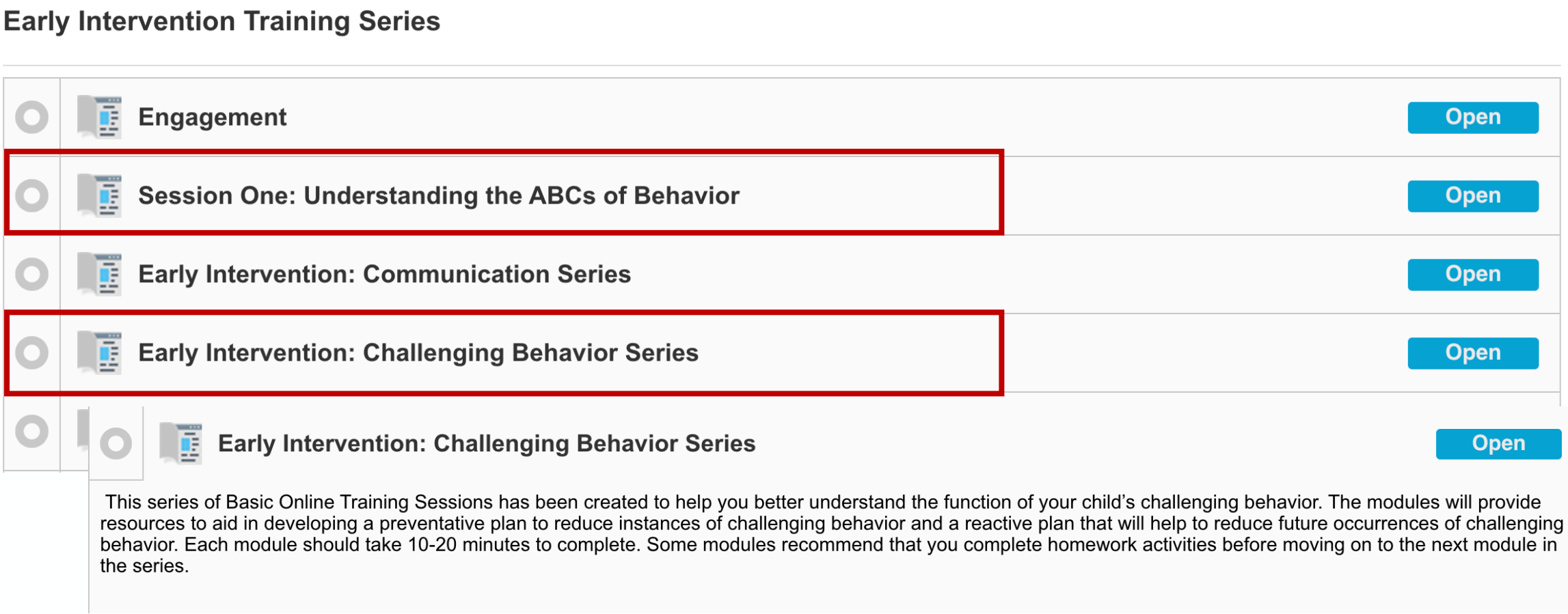
For Children Birth-To-Three:



How to Refer to the CAN Center:

Research studies on neurodevelopmental strengths and challenges for children, their families. AND their providers!

CAROLINA AUTISM & NEURODEVELOPMENT CENTER

- With the family's permission, send their contact information to elizabethdixon@sc.edu or call/text us at

  803-923-0060

- Scan QR code with family and enter information

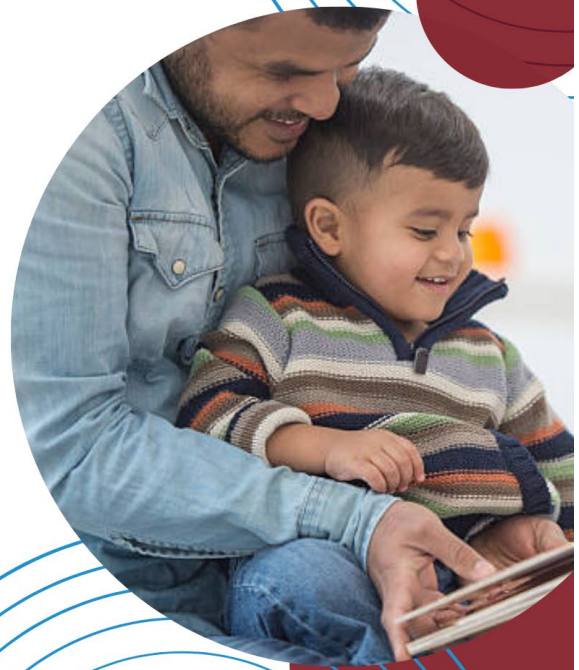
https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/artsandsciences/centers_and_institutes/uofscand/index.php

Help us understand how autistic toddlers regulate their emotions

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

We are seeking families with toddlers (ages 2-5) that meet **one** of the following criteria:

- have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis
- have some development concerns, but have no current diagnosis
- have no development concerns



What does participating in our study look like?

- You may receive a **free diagnostic evaluation** for your toddler!
- A pre-visit phone call, along with three short visits involving play-based activities
- $20 per visit

Interested in participating?

Email **COLAB@mailbox.sc.edu**
OR text/call **(803)386-1130**

Scan the QR code to learn more!

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Thank you! Questions?

Sarah Edmunds, PhD

Assistant Professor

Departments of Psychology & Educational Studies

University of South Carolina

sredmunds@sc.edu

Community-Oriented Lab for Autism Behavioral Interventions (COLAB)

www.uofsc-colab.com

My Favorite Resource: https://triad.vkclearning.org/en-us/