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# A Compassionate Approach to Problem Behavior in Young Children: Including Quick Tips to Implement Tomorrow!

**NEBRASKA**  
-- Young Child Institute --  
[www.earlychildinstitute.com](http://www.earlychildinstitute.com)

#NYCI2026

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## Objectives

- Describe the Values of a Compassionate Approach to Behavior
- Identify the 3 steps for creating a connected relationship
- Explain at least two strategies for adults to engage young learners in effective child-led play
- Describe sustainable methods to incorporate a compassionate approach to behavior in coaching sessions

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Empathy + Action  
=  
Compassion

“Concern for the learner in  
the moment, every  
moment.”



 **FTF** Behavioral  
CONSULTING

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## ASD Network Core Practices and Values

### These 4 Core Practices:

1. Listen
2. Create Joy
3. Empower
4. Teach Skills

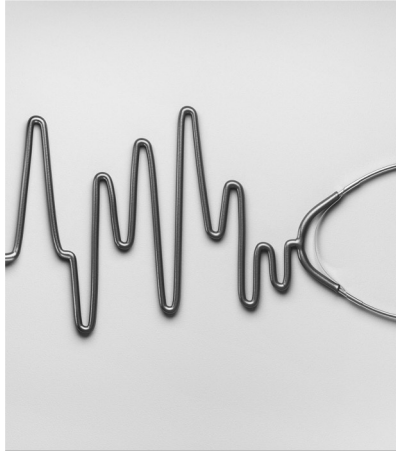


### Help Ensure These Values are in Place:

- Trust
- Rapport
- Safety
- Televisibility/Dignity

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## 1. Listening



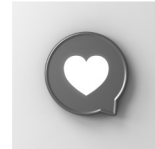
- Talk to people who know and love this child
- Ask questions & listen to answers
- Continue to ask, especially as you build rapport with parents, teachers, and therapists

“Teach the autistic person that you know them, you see them, you hear them, and you are there for them.”

-- Dr. Greg Hanley

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## Learn by Listening



Get to know the individual and learn what they love and hate

- Engage with them
- Observe what draws their attention
- Notice what brings a smile or brightened eyes
- Pay attention to things they are indifferent about or avoid
- What is their behavior communicating?
- Listen to the adults working with the individual

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## 2. Creating Joy

- Fill their environment with things that make them feel **safe and loved**
- **Include things** that have previously led to problem behaviors when removed
- **Don't restrict** their freedom when possible
- **Follow their lead**, but don't hover



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## 3. Empowering



- **Build trust** by showing respect and listening to the individual
- Individuals learn they don't need problem behavior to feel safe, happy, and engaged
- Trust grows when we **avoid forcing compliance**

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## 4. Teaching Skills

- Trust enables **skill instruction**
- Pacing guided by **learner feedback**
- Focus on **functional communication**
- Balance **adult-led and learner-led learning**
- Join the learner in **shared activities**
- Not just a free for all - we need to teach critical skills!**



*Sometimes we have to go slow to go fast in the beginning. However teaching skills is always a priority!*

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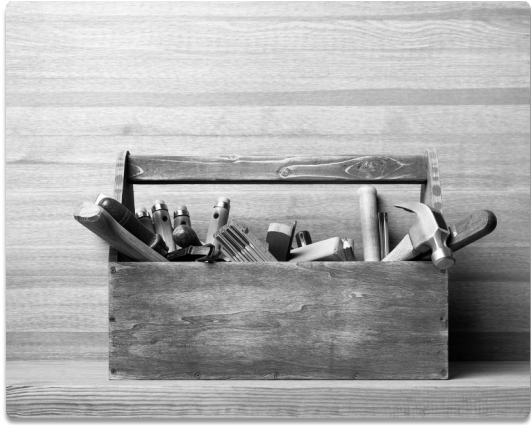
## Application Activity

Take a moment to reflect. (30 seconds)

Ask yourself:

*Which idea from these core practices am I interested in, want to do more of am or already doing?*

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Let's Talk about A  
Compassionate (and  
effective) Approach to  
Behavior:

What's in your  
toolbox?

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## Tool #1. Connection Over Compliance

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# Active Engagement: Connectedness

## 3 STEPS for Creating a Connected Relationship

Credit: Megan DeLeon, Presentation UCP Conference, Utica, NY, July 2024

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### 1. Observe and Join

- Observe the child for preferences and stressors in the environment.
- Join them in play without expectations (don't ask questions)
- Use clear, simple language

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## 2. Imitate and Expand

- Do not take over
- Follow the child's lead and do what they do

Video

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## 3. Wait, Watch and Respond

- Be patient
- Watch the child for communication cues
- Respond to their initiations

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## Active Engagement & Connectedness



### Connection Check

- Take 2 minutes to reflect on the relationships you have with children, families, staff...

Discuss with a shoulder partner:

- What is one interaction strategy you are currently doing well?
- What is one area you would like to strengthen or improve?

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## Tool #2.

### Get Good at Child-Led Play

Child-led play is when a child chooses what and how to play while an adult follows their lead. This may include choosing a toy, game, location, or whether to play inside or outside.

Spending just 5–10 minutes a day in this interaction builds emotional security and helps children see adults as safe, responsive, and trustworthy.

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## Components of Child-Led Play

- **Follow, Don't Direct:** Let the child choose the toys or activity. Join their play without taking over or changing the rules.
- **Reflect and Describe:** Comment on what the child is doing instead of asking questions
- **Limit Demands:** Keep playtime free from instructions or teaching moments. Focus on connection, not compliance.
- **Use Specific Praise:** Encourage creativity and effort with meaningful, enthusiastic feedback.
- **Shared Experiences:** Join the child versus supervising them

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## Classroom Example of Child-Led Play



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## Tool # 3. Functional Communication

OPPORTUNITIES TO  
COMMUNICATE  
THROUGHOUT THE DAILY  
ROUTINE

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## Tool # 4. Empathy Statements

Deny unreasonable requests  
with empathy.

This is a low-cost, low-effort,  
highly effective tool.

This is a different approach  
than ignoring signs that a  
child is becoming frustrated.



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## Empathy Statements

- That hurt
- It's hard to wait
- I hear you
- It is so hard to share
- Making gestures/expressions that show you understand
- Sit with the child



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## Tool # 5. Enrich the environment

1

Ensure multiple preferred activities are available

2

Rotate and vary activities

3

Facilitate shared experiences versus only supervised experiences

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## Quick and Easy Reinforcer Assessments

- What toys or items does the learner gravitate towards? What do their caregivers report?
  - Are there types of sensory input that the learner seems to enjoy?
    - Reinforcer Profile
    - Reinforcer Attributes List
    - RAISD Reinforcer Survey
  - What types of attention do they like?
    - Enthusiastic (and Goofy) Social Reinforcement
  - Is novelty important?
    - Observe what the learner appears to enjoy

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## Examples



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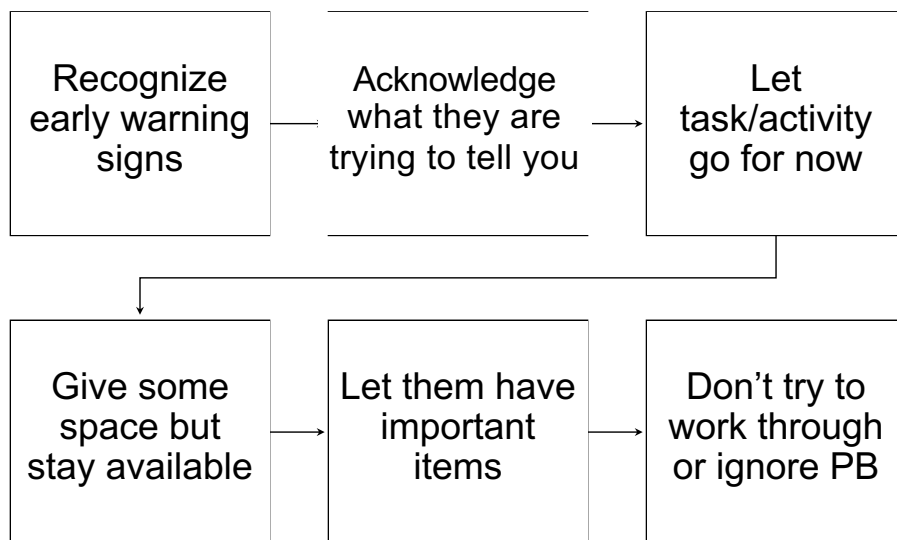
## Behavior Escalation (Intervene Early)

### Disclaimer

These are general recommendations for prevention of and how to respond to escalated behavior. However, each team should follow their individualized, established safety plans. We encourage teams to consider incorporating these compassionate components into their safety, crisis, and/or Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP) as appropriate.

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## Compassionate Strategies for Defusing Problem Behavior



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## Strategies To Implement Right Away

- Compassion over compliance
- Enrich the environment
- Be fully present
- Follow the student's lead (Child-led Play)
- Shared experiences over supervised experiences
- Identify low-level behaviors so you can "turn them off" before they escalate
- Turning behavior "off" for safety is ok (it's not giving in)
- The time to teach skills is not during a meltdown

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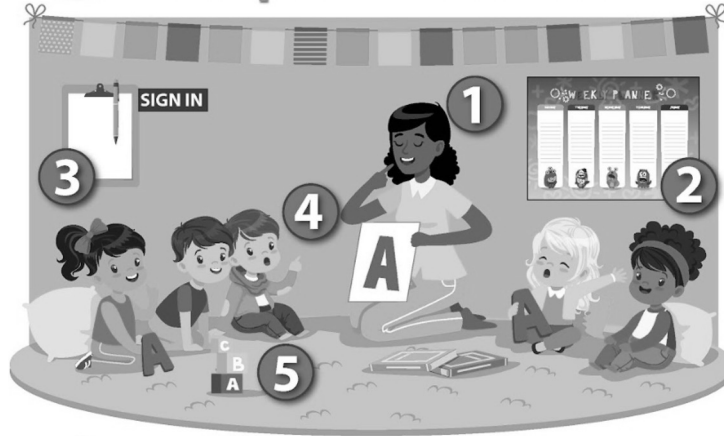
## Behavior Supports Application Activity:

How can you apply these strategies?

Share 1 specific strategy you want to utilize with your shoulder partner.

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## 5 Classroomwide Practices to Improve Behavior



### 1 Use a Five-One Ratio of Positive Attention

The 5:1 ratio of positive attention is based on research that has shown that children are better behaved in preschool settings when adults spend the majority of their time attending to positive behavior and not challenging behavior.

### 2 Use Predictable Schedules

Developing a daily schedule and directly teaching children what comes next is about maintaining a routine and keeping all of the children informed about the routine. This strategy maximizes children's ability to predict what comes next.

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## 5 Classroomwide Practices to Improve Behavior

### 3 Establish Routines within Routines

The predictability of a general schedule does not provide enough structure to prevent some children's challenging behaviors. It is often helpful to specify other levels of predictability with one's overall classroom schedule.

### 4 Directly Teach Behavioral Expectations

Make certain that all children know precisely what behavioral expectations you have for each routine. It is recommended that there be no more than three expectations for any one routine.

### 5 Directly Teach Peer-Related Social Skills

Actively teaching social skills involves careful planning around routines and activities, arranging the environment to support peer interaction, and implementing strategies such as peer-mediated interventions, adult cueing and prompting, and reinforcement.

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## Additional Behavior Support Programs and Information

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## Curricula and Manualized Programs

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## Preschool Life Skills

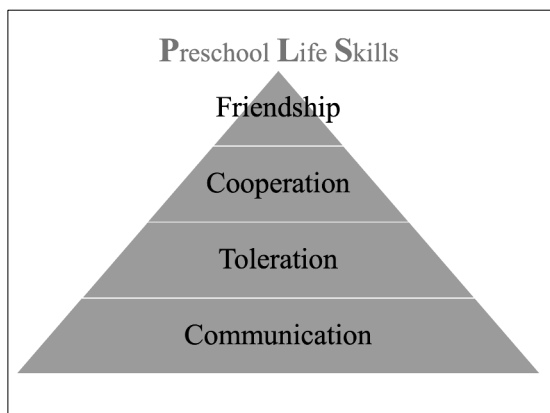
The Preschool Life Skills (PLS) program is an approach to teaching critical social skills to preschoolers. These particular social skills were selected because they are similar to the functional skills taught following the development of problem behavior, and because these are the same skills early elementary teachers have identified as being critical to early school success.

The program begins as a class-wide approach to teaching thirteen skills in sequence.

The program may then be individualized for learners of different abilities.

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## Preschool Life Skills




**These are  
essential skills  
that can be used  
universally  
across all ages**


Workbook

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## Preschool Life Skills Alignment with GOLD



**Preschool Life Skills Curriculum**  
(Created August 2016, Updated September 2022)



Teachers using the Life Skills Curriculum for preventing problem behavior developed by FTF Behavioral Consulting, often ask how it aligns with the Teaching Strategies GOLD Objectives for Development and Learning. The charts below illustrate alignment between the PLS Curriculum's 15 skills and 9 of the 38 objectives for development and learning as outlined in the Teaching Strategies GOLD Observational Assessment System.

Behavioral Skills Training for Teaching Preschool Life Skills (15 life skills to teach)	GOLD Objectives for Development and Learning (9 of the 38 GOLD skills align with PLS)
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Communication</b></p> <p>Life Skill 1: Requesting Materials or Area Life Skill 2: Gaining Attention plus Requesting Materials or Area Life Skill 3: Gains Attention plus Requesting Materials or Area WITH PEER Life Skill 4: Requesting Help</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Tolerance</b></p> <p>Life Skill 5: Tolerating Disappointment of a Delay with a Tolerance Skill (adult)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Tolerance plus Cooperation</b></p> <p>Life Skill 6: Tolerance Skill plus Waiting by Cooperating (adult) Life Skill 7: Tolerance Skill plus Waiting by Playing (adult) Life Skill 8: Tolerance Skill plus Waiting by Playing WITH PEER Life Skill 9: Responding to Name (adult &amp; peer) Life Skill 10: Responding to Name plus Cooperating with Instructions (adult)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Friendship</b></p> <p>Life Skill 11: Saying "Thank You" with Rationale Life Skill 12: Greeting &amp; Complimenting a Peer Life Skill 13: Offering Toys or Materials to Peer</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Social-Emotional</b></p> <p>1. Regulates own emotions and behaviors a. Manages feelings b. Follows limits and expectations c. Takes care of own needs appropriately</p> <p>2. Establishes and sustains positive relationships a. Forms relationships with adults b. Responds to emotional cues c. Interacts with peers d. Makes friends</p> <p>3. Participates cooperatively and constructively in group situations a. Balances needs and rights of self and others b. Solves social problems</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Language</b></p> <p>8. Listens to and understands increasingly complex language a. Comprehends language b. Follows directions</p> <p>9. Uses language to express thoughts and needs a. Uses an expanding expressive vocabulary b. Speaks clearly c. Uses conventional grammar d. Tells about another time or place</p> <p>10. Uses appropriate conversational and other communication skills a. Engages in conversations b. Uses social rules of language</p>

CLICK HERE

## The Balance Program

The Balance Program is a proactive approach to teaching young children important communication and coping skills before severe problem behavior has had a chance to become routine.

It is manualized in handbooks for professionals and for parents; it can be implemented by parents in the home with intermittent support from a trained professional.

## The Balance Program

### Process Overview:

- Step 1: Promote Play
- Step 2: Teach Child to Respond to His/Her Name
- Step 3: Teach Child to Use Words (Part 1)
- Step 4: Teach Child to Use Words (Part 2)
- Step 5: Teach Child to Accept Disappointment
- Step 6: Teach Child to Cooperate (A Little)
- Step 7: Teach Child to Cooperate More (Find the Balance)
- Step 8: Teach Child to Cooperate with Different Instructions
- Step 9: Teach Child to Cooperate without the Bins
- Step 10: Teach Child to Cooperate During Natural Routines

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### FtF Training

Comprehensive training on the Universal Protocol, Balance Program, and Preschool Life Skills is available through FTF

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## Project ImPACT

Developed by  
Brooke  
Ingersoll &  
Anna Dvortcsak

- Improving Parents as Communication Teachers
- Teaches parents strategies they can use to help their child develop social, communication, imitation, and play skills during daily routines and activities.
- Recognized as a Manualized Intervention Meeting Criteria by the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice (NCAEP)
- 2 Manuals: coach and parent

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## Early Start Denver Model for Young Children with Autism

Developed by Sally Rogers & Geraldine Dawson

Comprehensive, behavioral, early intervention approach for ages 12-60 months (1-5 years)

Developmental Assessment and Curriculum across domains

Relationship focused with well-validated teaching practices of ABA

Focus: shared engagement and joint activities, language and communication through PLAY

Taught within positive, affect-based relationships

Multidisciplinary approach delivered in varied settings

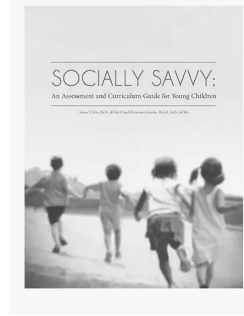
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## Socially Savvy

An Assessment and Curriculum Guide: The included checklist pinpoints a child's specific strengths and challenges, which helps to prioritize the skills most in need of intervention, develop strategies to address them, and track the effectiveness of those strategies.

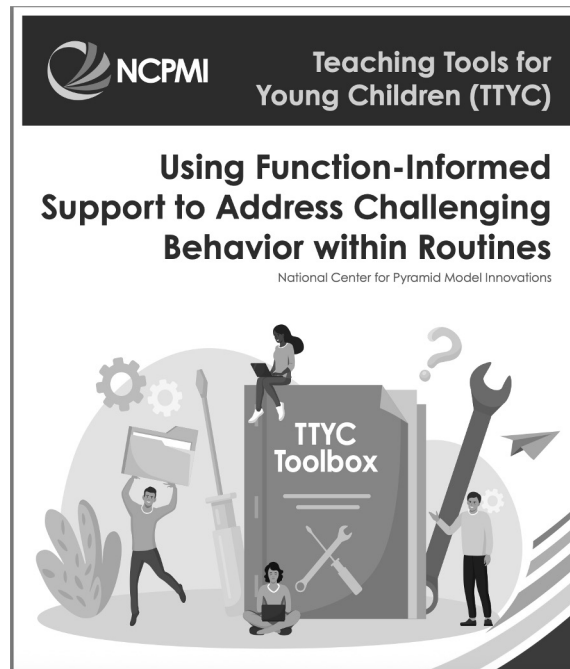
- Provides skill-specific sample IEP objectives
- Offers detailed step-by-step teaching plans
- Includes 50 specific games and activities for teaching targeted social skills
- Offers specific ideas on progress assessment and data collection
- Shares two case studies to illustrate the process from initial assessment to intervention and data collection

By James T. Ellis, PhD, BCBA-D, and Christine Almeida, MEd, EdS, BCBA



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## New Resource!



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# ASD Network Resources

On-Demand Training

Webinars

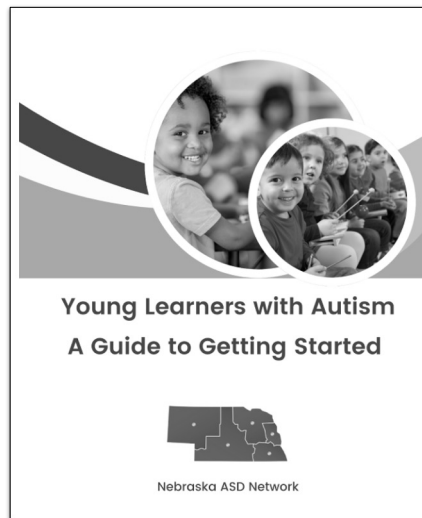
Training Modules

Virtual Strategies

## Additional Tools for Your Toolbox

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## A Guide to Getting Started with Young Learners with Autism



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## Behavior References

Publications showing the efficacy of a compassionate approach to behavior, including relevant publications related to Today's ABA

- Heal, N. A., Hanley, G. P., & Layer, S. A. (2009). An evaluation of the relative efficacy of and child preference for teaching strategies that differ in amount of teacher directedness. *JABA*, 42, 123-143.
- Falcomata, T. S., & Gained, S. (2014). An evaluation of noncontingent reinforcement for the treatment of challenging behavior with multiple functions. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 26, 317-324.
- Taylor, B. A., LeBlanc, L. A., & Nosik, M. R. (2019). Compassionate care in behavior analytic treatment: Can outcomes be enhanced by attending to relationships with caregivers? *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 12(3), 654-666.
- Friman, P. C. (2021). There is no such thing as a bad boy: The Circumstances View of problem behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 54(2), 636-653.
- Shillingsburg MA, Hansen B, Wright M. Rapport Building and Instructional Fading Prior to Discrete Trial Instruction: Moving From Child-Led Play to Intensive Teaching. *Behav Modif.* 2019 Mar;43(2):288-306.

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## References: Manualized Programs

- Ingersoll, B., & Dvortcsak, A. (2019). Teaching social communication to children with autism and other developmental delays (2-book set): The project impact guide to coaching parents and manual for parents (2nd ed.). Guilford Publications.
- Koegel, R. L., & Koegel, L. K. (2006). Pivotal response treatments for autism: Communication, social & academic development. Brookes Pub.
- Rogers, S. J., & Dawson, G. (2020). Early start Denver model for young children with autism: Promoting language, learning, and engagement. Guilford Publications.

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