

# Autism Navigator Early Social Interaction Model: Coaching Families of Young Children in their Everyday Activities

## Presentation at the 2024 Speech & Hearing Association of Alabama Convention

NOTE: A more detailed handout will be provided to participants who attend this session.

Autism Navigator Early Social Interaction Model:  
Coaching Families of Young Children in their Everyday Activities

Virtual Presentation at the 2024 SHAA Convention  
10:20am to 12:20pm CST February 9, 2024

**Dr. Amy M. Wetherby**, Distinguished Research Professor • Director, FSU AI  
**Patricia Armstrong**, Autism Navigator Master Coach & Global Trainer  
**Joy Moore**, Autism Navigator Master Coach & Global Trainer  
**Renee Daly Holland**, Assistant Director, FSU AI • Autism Navigator Master Coach & Global Trainer

1

Autism Navigator Early Social Interaction Model:  
Coaching Families of Young Children in their Everyday Activities

### Agenda

1. Overview of the Early Social Interaction (ESI) Project
2. Lens of Active Engagement & Layer Cake of Strategies & Supports
3. Strategies to Coach Caregivers Across Everyday Activities
4. Everything Grows Out of Productive Roles in Everyday Activities
5. Sharing Ideas on How Autism Navigator Resources Can Help

2

Autism Navigator Early Social Interaction Model:  
Coaching Families of Young Children in their Everyday Activities

### Learner Outcomes

1. Identify the 8 components of the lens of active engagement for meaningful outcomes of young children with ASD.
2. List 13 evidence-based intervention strategies and supports for parents organized into three layers to promote active engagement in natural environments for young children with ASD.
3. Describe strategies used in the ESI collaborative coaching model to promote caregiver independence and shared decision making with families.

3

Changing Developmental Trajectories of Toddlers With Autism Spectrum Disorder: Strategies for Bridging Research to Community Practice

[https://pubs.asha.org/doi/full/10.1044/2018\\_JSLHR-L-18-0028](https://pubs.asha.org/doi/full/10.1044/2018_JSLHR-L-18-0028)

4

### Everyday Activities of Toddlers & their Families to Promote Learning in the Natural Environment

Play with People	Meals and Snacks	Play with Toys	Books, Letters, and Numbers
Play with Props	Caregiving	Chores	Transitions

- 3 to 5 activities in different categories each home visit
- At least 3 activity exemplars in each category over 6 months

ESI Early Social Interaction Project Copyright © 2024. The Florida State University. All rights reserved.

5

### Meaningful Child Goals in the ESI Model: The Lens of Active Engagement

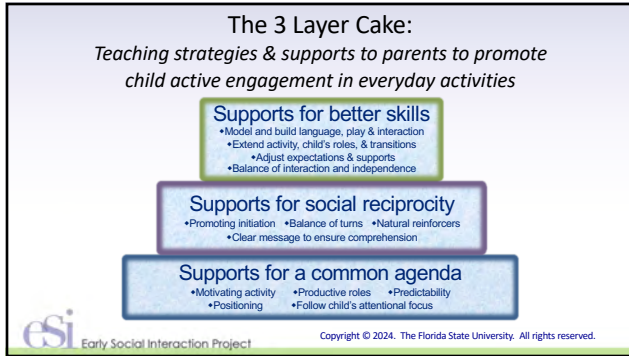
Is the child...

well regulated?	socially connected?	responding to bids for interaction?	flexible?
productive?	looking at faces?	initiating directed communication?	using generative language?

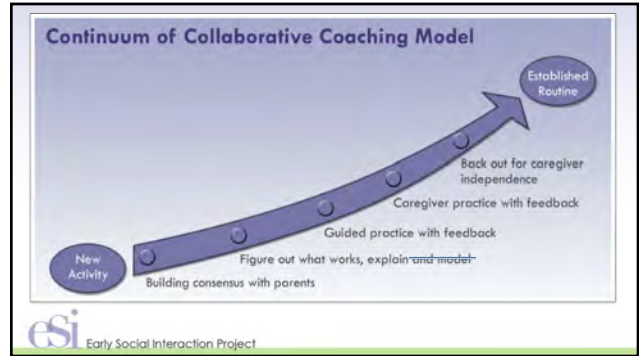
Step 1: Coming Together      Step 2: Keeping Together      Step 3: Working Together

Copyright © 2024. The Florida State University. All rights reserved.

6



7



8

### Intensity matters...

... so how do we achieve 25 hours per week in which the child is engaged **actively** and **productively** in meaningful activities?

(National Research Council, 2001)

esi Early Social Interaction Project

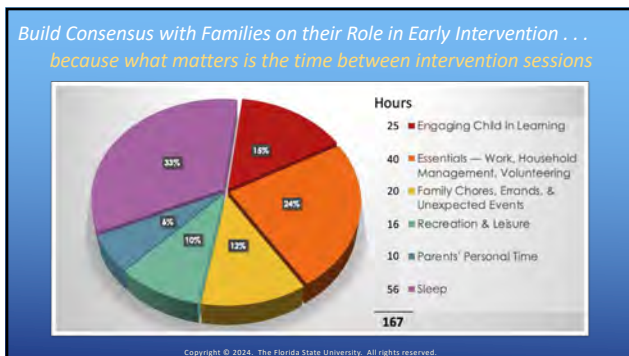
9

### Build Consensus with Families on their Role in Early Intervention . . .

because *what matters is the time between intervention sessions*

Copyright © 2024. The Florida State University. All rights reserved.

10



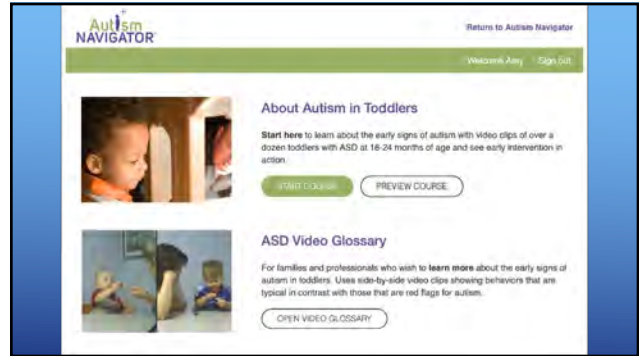
11

Autism NAVIGATOR® AutismNavigator.com

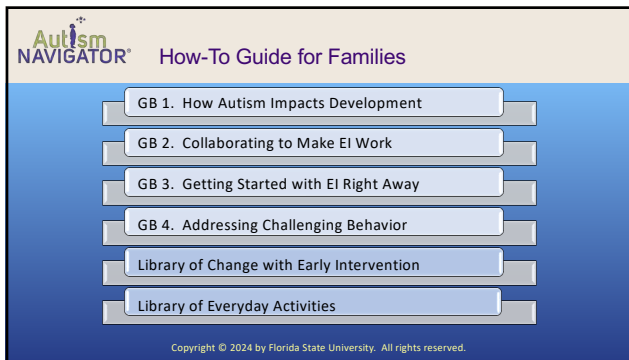
12



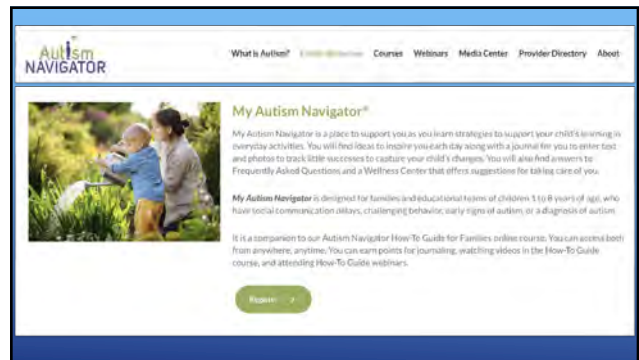
13



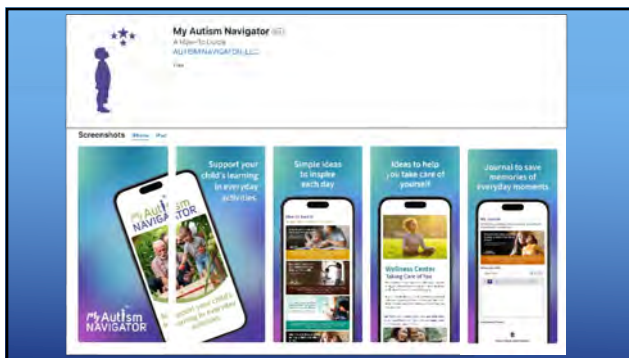
14



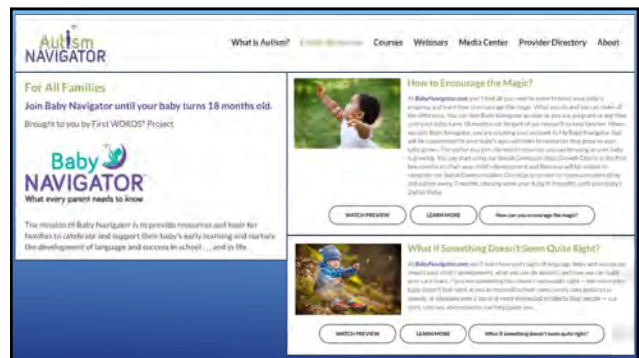
15



16



17



18

# Everyday Activities of Toddlers and Their Families Making Every Moment Count



Toddlers learn by doing. They learn about their world and how to interact with others by exploring and participating in activities around them. For children with social communication delays or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), this is very important. Learning in everyday activities where they use what they learn makes the skills immediately useful and functional and more likely to generalize. Everyday activities and routines at home provide an incredibly rich source of learning opportunities for toddlers.

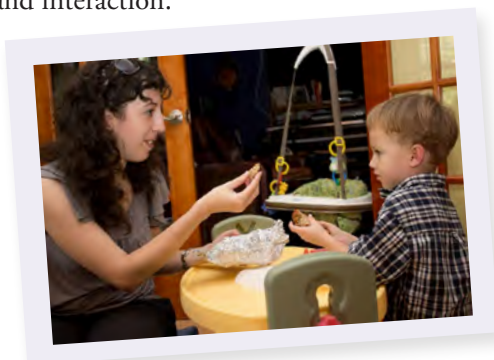
Everyday activities can vary widely across families and cultures, but there are many common activities that families share. Despite differences, most families spend time eating, caring for each other, doing family chores, playing, and learning together. By taking advantage of the activities that you are already spending time doing, you can provide the intensity needed to support your child's learning. This extra support is critical for children with social communication delays and ASD to reach their potential.

All families of toddlers spend some time in everyday activities in the following 8 activity categories:



**Play with People** includes social games such as peek-a-boo, “I’m gonna get you” and hide & seek. It also includes songs and rhymes like “Ring-around-the-Rosy” and “Itsy-bitsy Spider.” Because children with ASD can become overly focused on objects, keeping objects out of the activity removes the competition for their attention. It is a good category to get started with because you can quickly learn to provide supports for many components of active engagement and be successful getting your child to look at them, laugh, and share enjoyment.

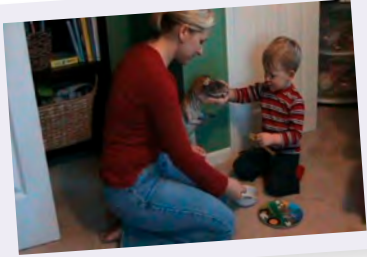
**Play with Props** is a good next step before activities with small toys and objects. Props include play equipment such as a slide, rocking horse, or swing, and moveable objects, such as a large ball, wagon, blanket, or sofa cushions. Having large props is a way to introduce objects in play without too much competition for attention. By adding motivating actions and movements, you can help to create enjoyment with the object and interaction.



**Meals and Snacks** provide a great context for sharing enjoyment and interests as well as natural everyday practice of requests and protests. By having your child participate in preparing the food, cooking, setting the table, and cleaning up, you can create more opportunities for practice and learning.

**Caregiving Activities** such as washing hands, dressing, changing diapers, bathing, and brushing teeth happen many times a day and can be structured to offer many opportunities for productive roles, social interaction, and communication.





**Play with Toys** includes constructive play with solid objects like blocks and puzzles; or fluid materials like play dough, sand, or finger paint, and pretend play with vehicles, animals, or dolls. Children with ASD may have limited skills in pretend play or restricted interests to particular toys. They may have relative strengths with constructive play, and therefore, that may be easier to get started to promote social interaction when playing with toys.

**Family Chores** like picking up toys, putting clothes in the laundry, feeding a pet, getting the mail, or taking out the trash or recycling are opportunities to engage your child. Taking advantage of the time that you already spend doing family chores can create learning opportunities during these necessary tasks.



**Books, Letters, and Numbers** can help promote language and literacy. Children with ASD are often interested in shapes, colors, letters, and numbers. These activities can be set up to promote interaction and sharing interests with books, magazines, photo albums, iPad apps, or computer games.

**Transitions** are the moments that occur between activities and are critical to adding predictability to what is coming next as well as expanding opportunities for learning throughout the day. Teaching your child how to “make a plan” as one activity ends can help provide a smooth transition and promote active engagement from one activity to the next.



Practice makes perfect! Learning to embed intervention supports and strategies in a variety of everyday activities across these 8 categories will promote learning and generalization for both you and your child. However, moving from simply having opportunities to promoting active engagement for a toddler with ASD can be challenging. It may require careful planning and support by you and your early intervention provider. Families may need help to expand meaningful activities with new ideas or to add new types of routines and activities that will build your child’s inventory of experiences.

Variety is the spice of life! As you gain confidence and your child makes gains, you are encouraged to create “hybrid” categories by mixing elements, such as playing with toys in the bathtub, looking at a photo album during snack, or playing a social game during diaper changing.

All the world’s a stage! The home provides a safe context for you to become comfortable and confident using intervention supports and strategies that you are learning. But don’t forget that learning opportunities extend beyond the walls of home.

These 8 activity categories can be extended to places in the community. Families go to the grocery store, the post office, the doctor, and run all sorts of other errands. Toddlers and their families also spend time at the neighborhood playground, library, church, or temple. Families visit other family members and friends, attend school activities for siblings, or go out to dinner. These natural environments in the community also provide rich and varied opportunities where learning can occur.

Parents are often surprised to find that some of the most fruitful opportunities for a child to learn occur in the context of the activities you are already doing each day. When you take a close look at how your family spends time, you will find moments for learning where you least expect it. Most importantly, by taking advantage of the ordinary events of everyday life, you really do make every moment count for your child’s learning. Moments add up to minutes and hours that are critical to achieve the intensity needed to impact learning and development for a child with ASD.

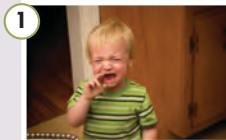
# About Active Engagement



## What is Active Engagement?

Children are actively engaged if they are....

Step 1: Coming Together



**1 Well Regulated.** Your child feels generally content and their needs are met. When fussy, they get over it easily.



**2 Productive.** Your child is doing something productive in an every day activity or in play, and can include people in those experiences.



**3 Socially connected.** Your child notices you by turning or looking toward you, pays attention to what you are doing together and keeps the interaction going.

Step 2: Keeping Together



**4 Looking at your face often.** Your child looks toward you both when asking you to do something and sharing enjoyment and interest.



**5 Responding to your voice and words.** Your child may not yet understand exactly what is being said, but understands that you have asked for their attention or for them to do something.



**6 Communicating directly to you.** Your child uses gestures, sounds or words to send a message without being asked.

Step 3: Working Together



**7 Being Flexible.** Your child moves easily between actions, activities, or materials rather than getting “stuck” on certain objects or ideas.



**8 Generating new ideas.** Your child comes up with creative ideas to advocate for themselves, to describe something they see, to share with you about a new and different plan, or a new way to play.

## Why is active engagement so important?

Active engagement means a child is ready to interact and learn, be productive, communicate with those around them, and “hang in” when faced with challenges or change. Learning how to keep your child actively engaged is important, because research shows that children with autism spectrum disorder who have at least 25 hours of engaged time per week do better in kindergarten than those who do not.

*Coming together is a beginning.  
Keeping together is progress.  
Working together is success.*  
--- Henry Ford

You are learning strategies to help you keep your child engaged so that you can achieve 25 hours of time each week helping your child interact and learn. Active engagement can occur in every day activities that your family already spends time doing like caregiving, having meals and snacks, playing, sharing books, and doing family chores. It can also happen in community settings such as a grocery store, playground or a restaurant. Your interventionist will help you see what elements of active engagement are going well, and what areas need more support. Your effort to promote active engagement now will have a lasting impact on your child’s social and academic success.

# It All Comes Down to How You Use Your Marbles . . .

*. . . because what matters is the time between intervention sessions.*



Early detection and early intervention can have a lifetime impact for children with autism. The early signs of autism can have a cascading effect on brain development and lead to significant social, language, and cognitive deficits, as well as challenging behaviors, if they're not caught early. By catching autism early, you can access intervention earlier and guide your child's success.

Research indicates that children with autism should spend at least 25 hours a week **actively and productively engaged in meaningful learning activities** to improve outcomes. This sounds like a lot, but by using activities you are already doing, a few hours here and there each day can provide the intensity needed for children with autism. What matters is how engaged your child is in learning from moment to moment and activity to activity. It



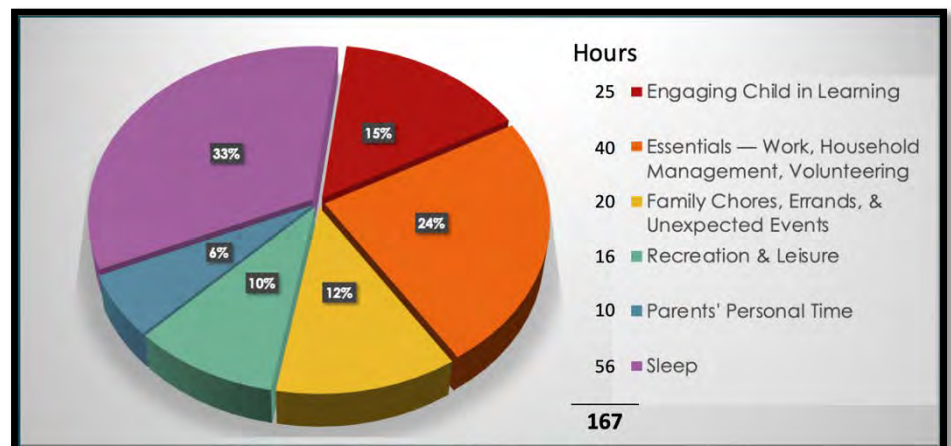
is important to look at a variety of activities spread across the day to support your child's active engagement and promote generalization of learning across activities.

The single marble on the left represents the hour a week you have with your early intervention provider, which is what most families get in early intervention until their child enters preschool. The jar on the right has 167 marbles and represents the 167 hours that go by until your next intervention session.

**What matters most, is the time you have between intervention sessions** — you can make a bigger difference in your child's success than an interventionist who only has an hour or even a few hours a week.

Trying to engage your child 25 hours a week may seem overwhelming. But consider that 25 marbles out of the 167 marbles is just **15%**. So, there is still time for all of the other things you need to do in your week. This chart shows an example of how the 25 hours might fit in. As this becomes second nature, you will be able to support your child's learning in most activities you are already doing, making it easier to achieve the intensity needed.

The hour that your early intervention provider has with you each week would be best spent **coaching you** to figure out **with you** how to improve opportunities for learning in activities you are already doing each day.



## How can my everyday activities help achieve the intensity my child needs?

Think about all the activities you are already doing each day that might have possible learning opportunities for your child — activities that you do together, like meals and snacks, caregiving, and play, as well as activities you need to do but might not yet include your child in, like family chores. *Autism Navigator How-To Guide for Families* offers a **Library of Everyday Activities** with hundreds of videos organized into the following 8 categories of everyday activities to illustrate how parents can promote active engagement in their toddler with autism.

### Everything grows out of

**productive roles** — you will learn how to help your child participate actively in productive roles. By asking yourself, “What are my hands doing that I can teach my child to do?”, you will learn how to expand the roles your child can do, activity by activity. To get started, this can be as simple as having your child walk into the kitchen

instead of being carried, pull their pants up with less help, or throw away a napkin. This will add minutes, and then hours to achieve the intensity needed to impact your child's learning.



As your child approaches preschool age, you will be thinking about preschool educational settings. Getting your child ready to participate actively and productively in everyday school activities is important to consider. Collaboration with the educational team can help families embed supports in everyday activities at home that can add to learning opportunities at school and further promote generalization of learning across settings.

Many everyday activities at home can offer opportunities for learning concepts needed at school — both academic lessons and rules and responsibilities. For example, family chores like watering the garden, feeding pets, filling soap dispensers, and cleaning windows can be lessons in STEM — Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math. Getting ready for a meal or going out in the yard can teach children to follow rules and take on responsibilities like how to put things away, get out needed materials, pass out food, or take turns while playing with a ball.



At school, level of active engagement can vary by degree of teacher direction —

whether the teacher is directing the teaching trial, lesson, assignment, and work agenda or this has been delegated to the student. This can also vary by group size — from individual instruction, to peer partners or small groups, to whole class instruction. To promote inclusive education, it is important to increase child-directed learning. Early intervention can build social communication skills critical for active self-directed learning that sets the stage for school success.