Meltdowns and Tantrums:

Supporting Emotion Regulation in Autistic Children

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at the University of South Carolina

Community-Oriented Lab for Autism and Behavioral Interventions (COLAB): PI – Sarah Edmunds, PhD
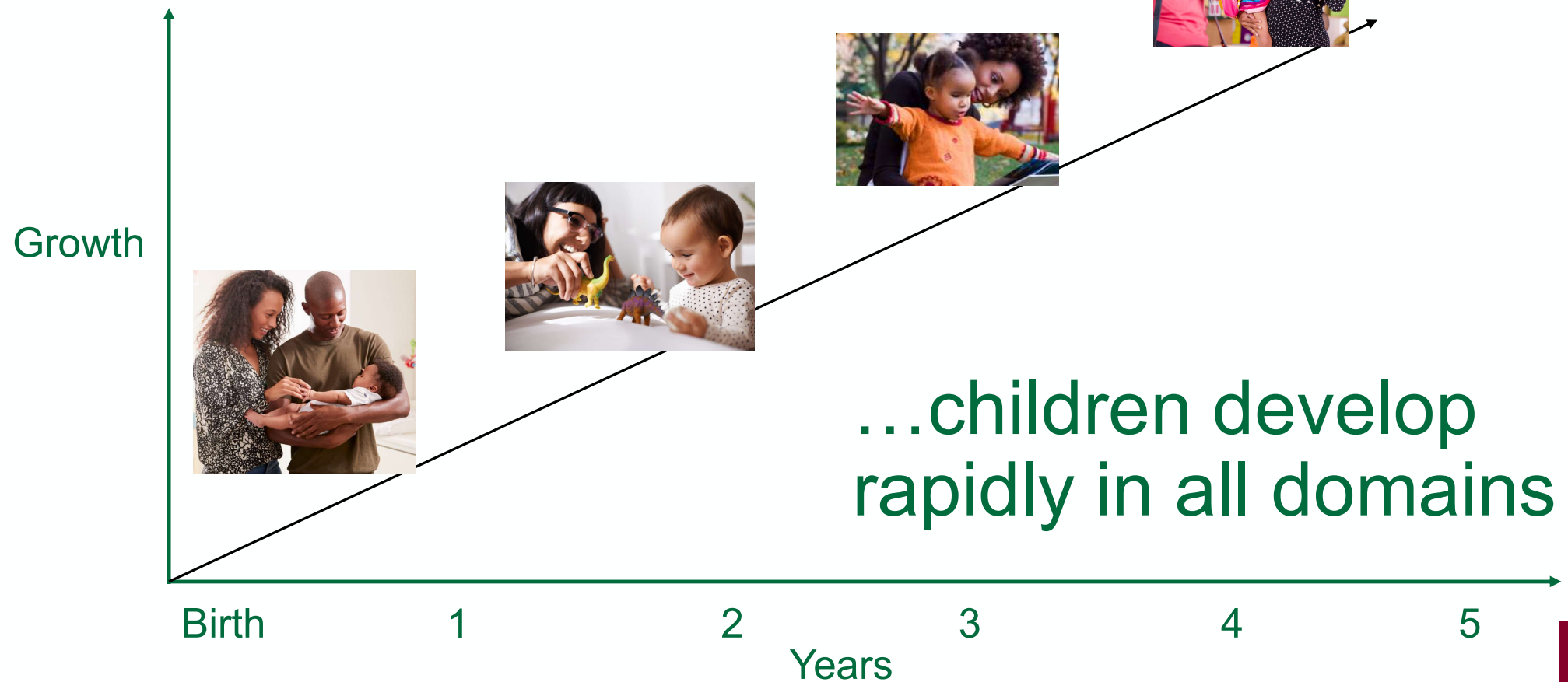
AutismConnect - April 2nd, 2025

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

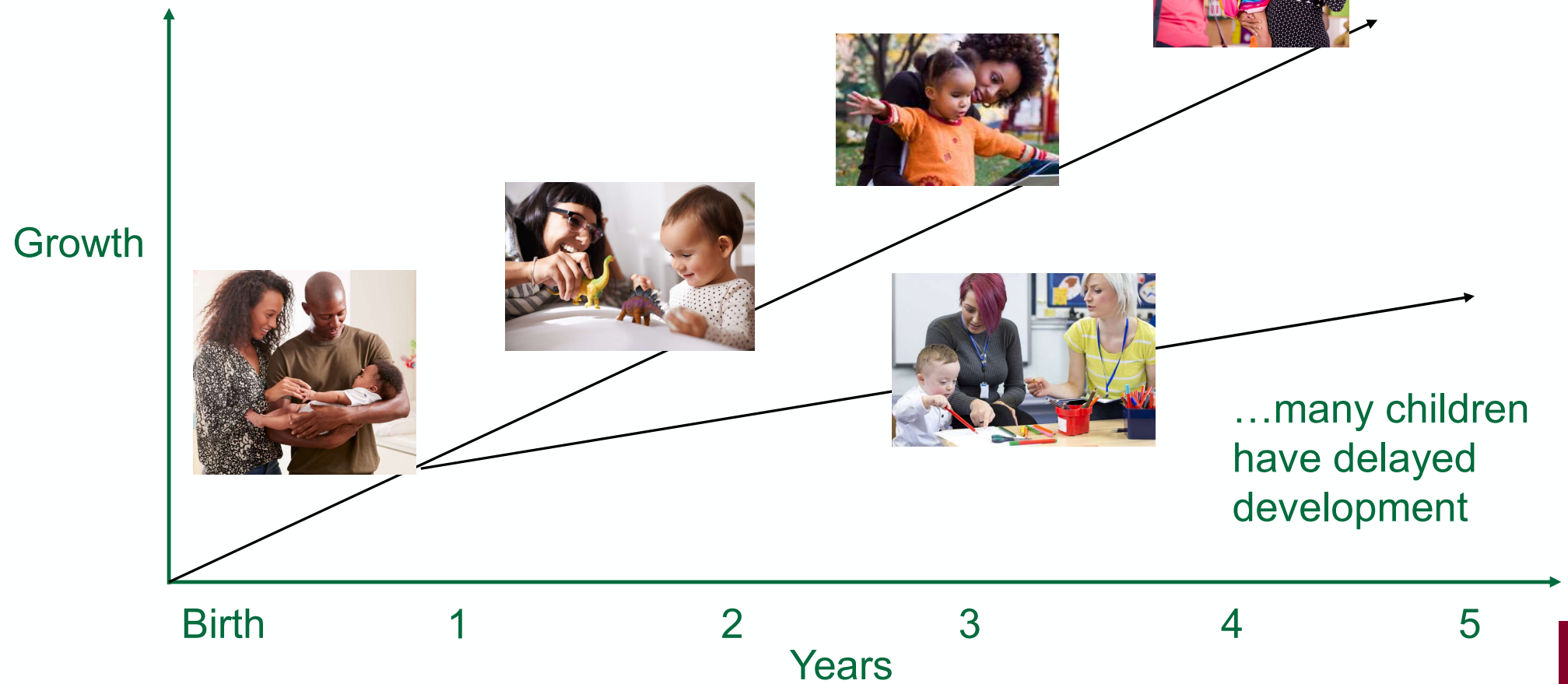4. Discuss examples of these strategies to use at home or in practice

Introductions

- Are you a parent, a professional working with children, or both?
- If you are a parent, how old is your child?
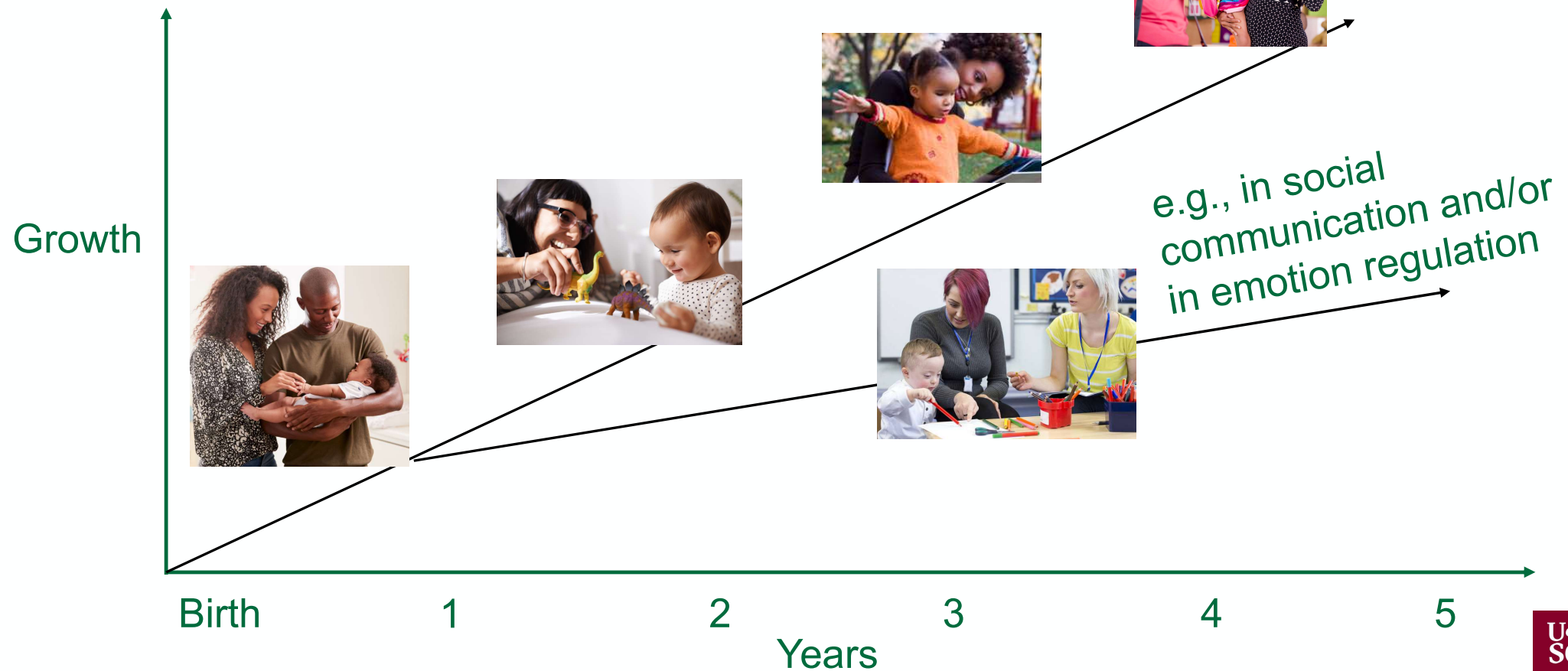- If you are a professional, what is your job role?
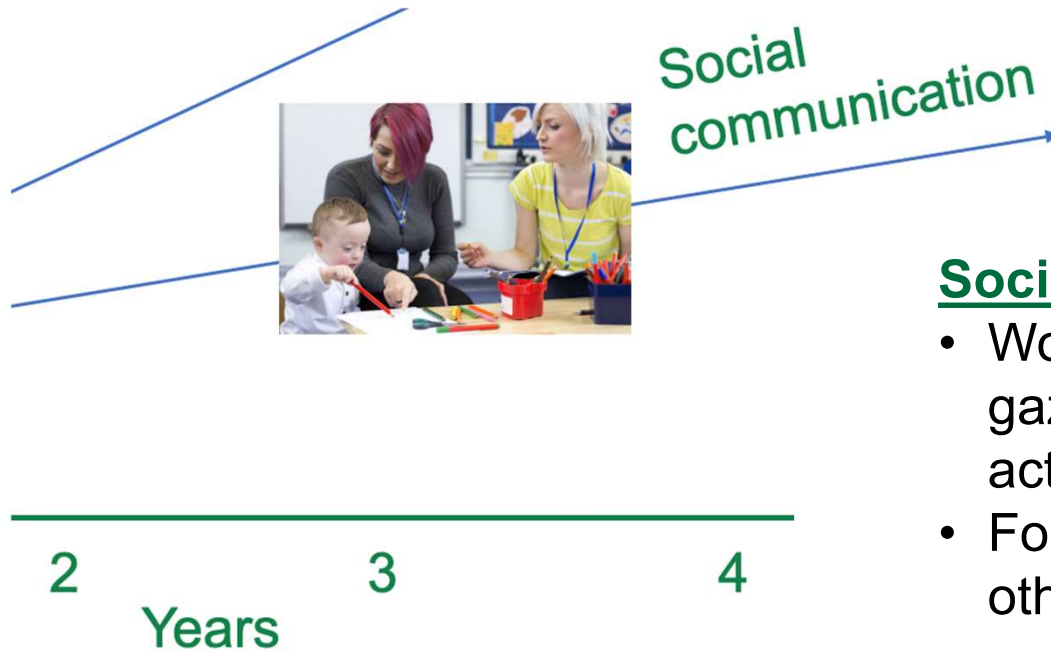
In the first five years of life

…children develop rapidly in all domains

Growth

Birth   1   2   3   4   5

Years

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

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Social communication

2   3   4
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
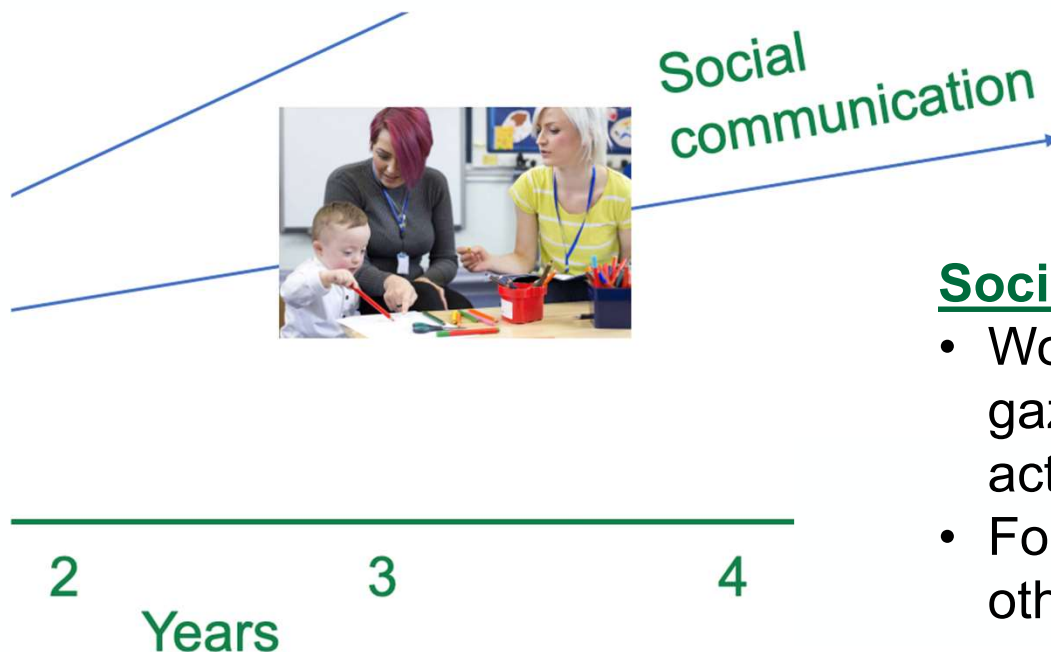
Social
communication

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

2   3   4
Years

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

Emotion dysregulation in toddlerhood is normal…to an extent

Emotion regulation

2   3   4   5
Years
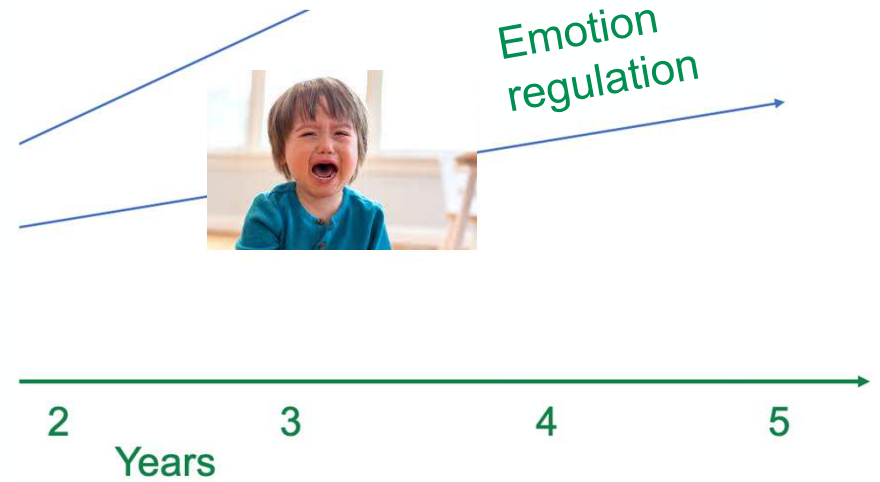
Brief, mild, predictable tantrums are common in toddlerhood

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

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:

1. Figure out *why* tantrums or challenging behavior is happening
   - What are they 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:

1. What happened <u>right before</u> the behavior?
   - What happened right before similar behaviors in the past?

2. What happened <u>right after</u> 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 |
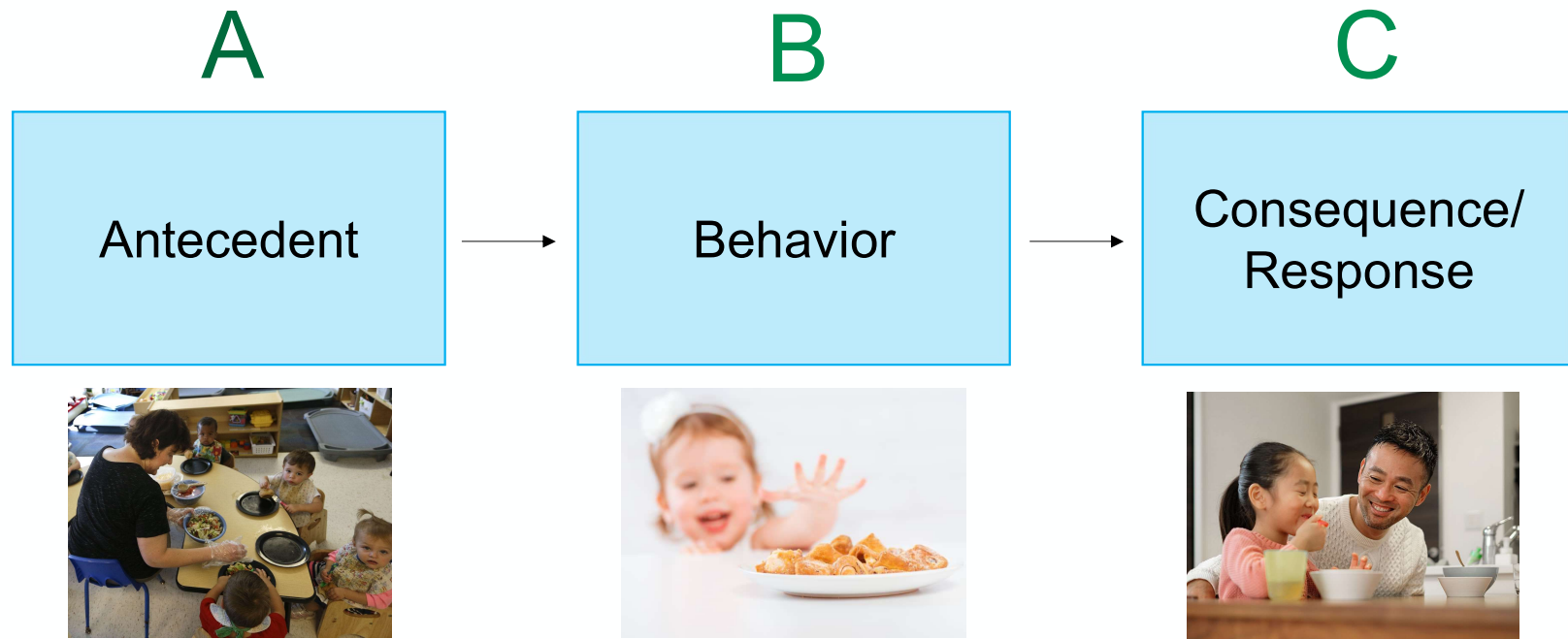
- There is structure in how we learn: "if I do this in this situation, then this happens"
- We understand children's behavior as communicating a need- i.e., having a function
- Teaching children a skill to use to meet that need

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. Too much unpredictability
6. Fatigue

Common *why*'s (functions)

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   - 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. **Too much unpredictability**
6. Fatigue or hunger

Sensory overwhelm

Unpredictability
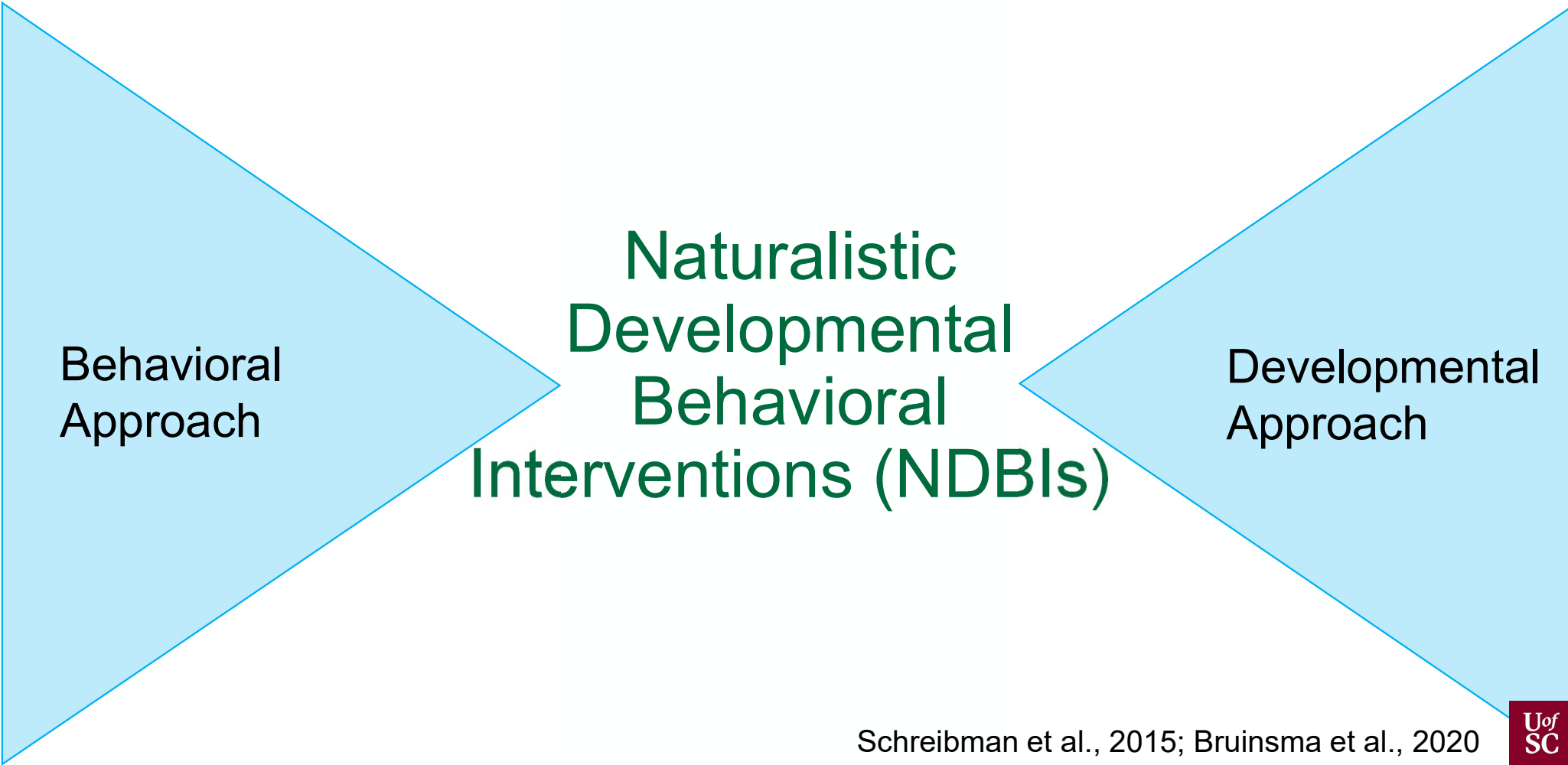
Part 2: How can we prevent the tantrum?

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

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)
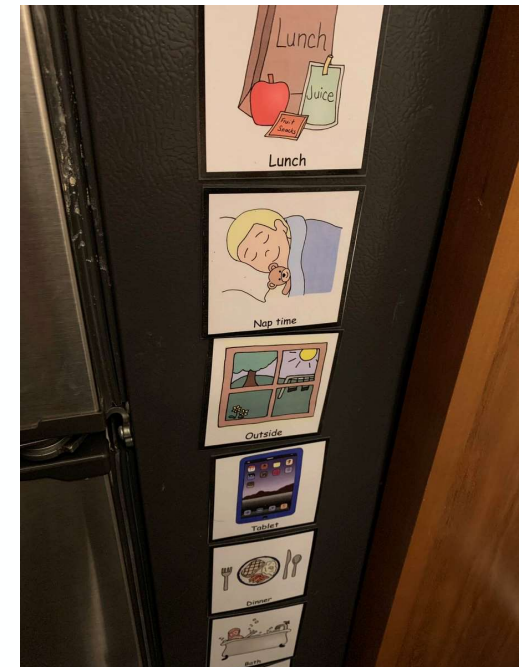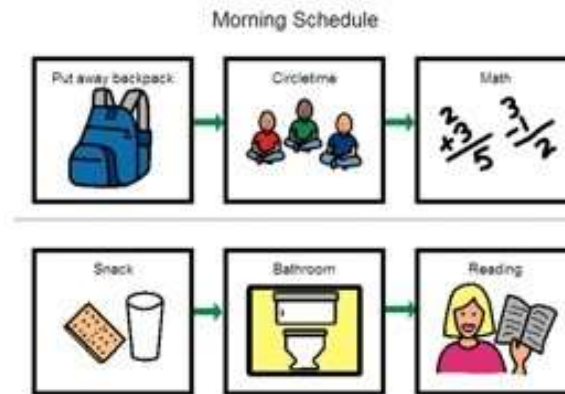
Plan ahead for "likely" tantrum times

- 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?

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And then:
  Give "special time" or positive attention outside of tantrums

Behavioral
Approach

Naturalistic
Developmental
Behavioral
Interventions (NDBIs)

Developmental
Approach

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

…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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Behavioral Approach

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (NDBIs)

...development "cascades" (e.g., relationships and play help children develop in a predictable trajectory)

Developmental Approach

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

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

Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions for AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Yvonne Bruinsma
Mendy Minjarez
Laura Schreibman
Aubyn Stahmer
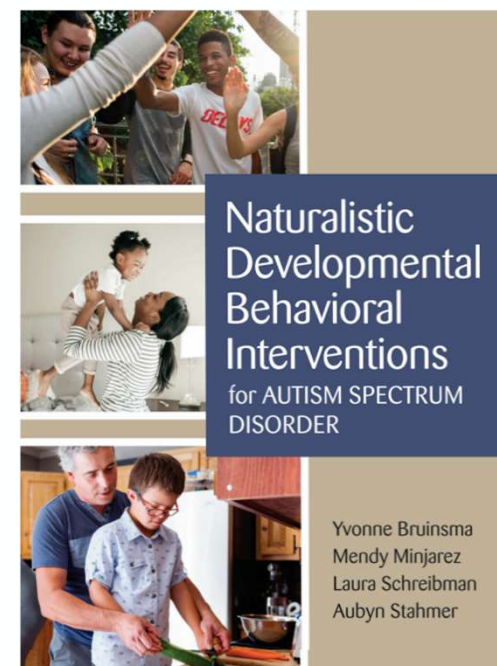
Sandbank et al., 2020; Hampton et al., 2021

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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

NDBI learning opportunities are <u>embedded</u> in play

Antecedent → Behavior → Response

Language

Antecedent → Behavior → Response

Social reciprocity

Antecedent → Behavior → Response

Imitation

But, how do we use NDBI strategies to play with children who are struggling with meltdowns and tantrums?
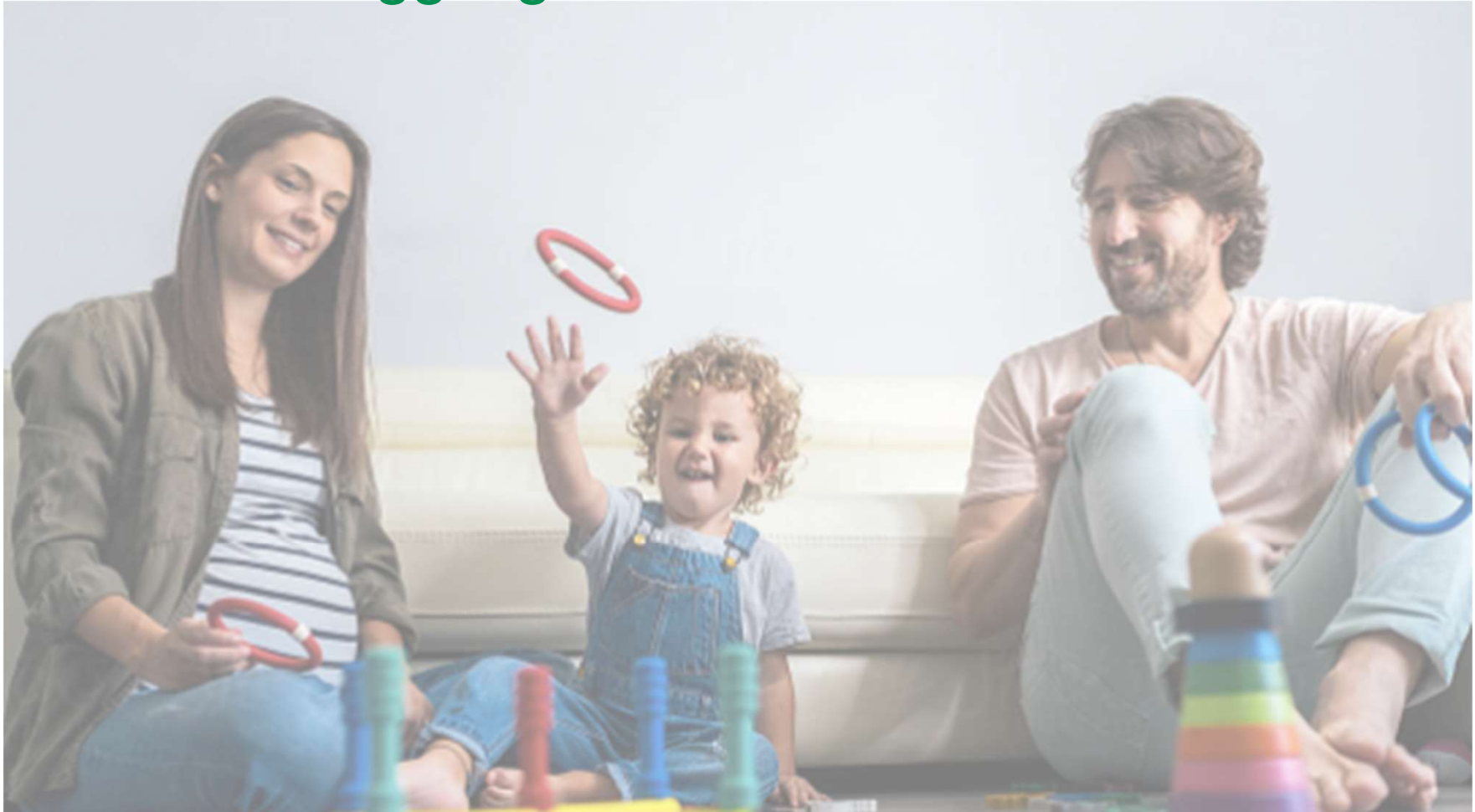
Part 2: How can we prevent the tantrum?

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 <u>existing</u> 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!

Then, we want to:

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

2. P*revent* the more intense tantrums or challenging behavior.
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NDBIs: positive attention, communication skill development

3. Handle the tantrum in the moment, using what you know about the *why*.

Practice

To try to get something they want	➡
To try to avoid or escape something	➡
Inability to communicate	➡
Sensory overstimulation	➡
Fatigue or hunger	➡

Part 3: How can we handle the tantrum?

1. Breathe, self-validate

2. Think positive first: are there any delays in skills contributing to a pattern of tantrums/meltdowns?

3. Think positive second, too: re-commit to special time outside of tantrums

4. Hold the boundary (if applicable)…

5. Ignore the tantrum behavior and…

   …. attend to any positive behaviors

6. Does the child continue to tantrum if/when you are no longer paying attention?

7. If so, ignore the behavior…(as long as the child is safe)

   …But not the child...

8. When the child is calm again, give the child a positive way to solve their "why"

9. Prevention: give child a way to ask for what want that is positive, and encourage them to practice

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

Using communicative temptations

Preferred toys and snacks: to tempt requesting

Preferred activities, songs, and games to tempt requesting and sharing interest

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
- Ignore the behavior, not the child
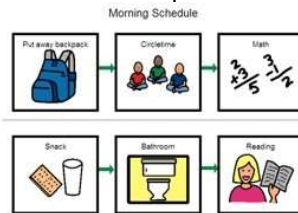
But most importantly:

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

My Favorite Resource:
Vanderbilt TRIAD Videos

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

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Vanderbilt TRIAD Videos

Early Intervention Training Series

○	Engagement	Open
○	Session One: Understanding the ABCs of Behavior	Open
○	Early Intervention: Communication Series	Open
○	Early Intervention: Challenging Behavior Series	Open
○	Early Intervention: Challenging Behavior Series	Open

This series of Basic Online Training Sessions has been created to help you better understand the function of your child's challenging behavior. The modules will provide resources to aid in developing a preventative plan to reduce instances of challenging behavior and a reactive plan that will help to reduce future occurrences of challenging behavior. Each module should take 10-20 minutes to complete. Some modules recommend that you complete homework activities before moving on to the next module in the series.

Thank you! Questions?

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Community-Oriented Lab for Autism Behavioral Interventions (COLAB)
www.uofsc-colab.com

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