

# DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This paper by Dr. Laurent Mottron presents a powerful critique of dominant early intervention methods for autism, such as Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) and Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA). Mottron argues these deficit-based, normative models are ethically questionable, lack robust evidence, and fail to respect autistic learning styles and strengths. This document is core to Enliten's mission because it provides a comprehensive, parallel argument against the philosophy underpinning standardized testing: instead of trying to "fix" deficits to match a neurotypical norm (the goal of ABA), we should adopt a strengths-based approach that presumes competence and supports alternative developmental pathways.

## FILENAME

MOTTRON\_2017\_Critique\_of\_Early\_Intervention\_in\_Autism\_support\_for\_strengths-based\_education.md

## METADATA

- **Primary Category:** CLINICAL
- **Document Type:** critique
- **Relevance:** Core
- **Key Topics:** strengths-based\_approach, ABA\_critique, EIBI, neurodiversity, autistic\_learning, intervention\_ethics, alternative\_developmental\_pathways
- **Tags:** #ABA, #EIBI, #strengths-based, #neurodiversity, #autism, #intervention, #critique, #ethics, #implicit\_learning, #RIRBs

## CRITICAL QUOTES FOR ENLITENS

- "Once considered to be 'scientifically proven', the efficacy of these approaches has been called into question in the last decade due to poor-quality data, small effects, low cost-efficiency, and the evolution of ethical and societal standards."
- "The assumption that autistic children do not learn by themselves is clearly untrue. Implicit learning has repeatedly been demonstrated in autistic individuals and is actually slowed down by explicit instructions."
- "The aims of autism science are still normative and normocentric, from suppressing autism itself to mimicking non-autistic social behavior."
- "As highlighted by autistic adults, autism is part of the human condition and is here to stay, despite the triumphalism of some scientists."
- "The purpose of educational and child psychiatry interventions should rather be to allow the individual to achieve an abstract level of happiness, personal accomplishment, access to cultural material, and social integration, an essential human right, regardless of the way in which this is achieved and the form that it takes."

- "There is currently no scientific, ethical, or societal justification for EIBI."

# CRITIQUE OF DEFICIT-BASED INTERVENTION (EIBI/ABA)

## Questioning the Efficacy and Ethics of EIBI/ABA

- "The Author(s) 2017. This article is published with open access at [suspicious link removed] Abstract Early intensive behavioral intervention (EIBI) and its recent variant, naturalist developmental behavioral intervention (NDBI) aim to increase socialization and communication, and to decrease repetitive and challenging behaviors in preschool age autistic children." "These behaviorist techniques are based on the precocity and intensity of the intervention, face-to-face interaction, errorless learning, and information fragmentation." "Once considered to be 'scientifically proven', the efficacy of these approaches has been called into question in the last decade due to poor-quality data, small effects, low cost-efficiency, and the evolution of ethical and societal standards."

## Core Principles of EIBI/ABA

- "...the various currents of EIBI display a considerable overlap in terms of the techniques used and the underlying principles: precocity (the earlier the intervention is applied, the more effective it is likely to be), intensity (more intensive interventions are preferred, with as many as 25 h/week frequently recommended), highly structured and constantly monitored interventions, normativity (the less autistic the child is at the end of the intervention, the more successful the intervention is considered to have been), task-decomposition (information to be learned is broken down), the use of external or natural reinforcement, and extinction procedures."
- "Intervention targets map the definition of a combination of negative socio-communicative symptoms ('lack' or limitation of socially oriented behaviors) and positive, non-social symptoms (an 'excess' of restricted interests and repetitive behaviors)." "EIBI aims to render this bumpy profile flat and less autistic: increase prerequisites of typical socially oriented behaviors and communication, while suppressing repetitive behaviors and autistic interests."

## Scientific Backlash

- "However, the early twenty-first century has seen the emergence of critics of EIBI." "An influential autism research expert [13] questioned the presuppositions and ethical issues related to EIBI, and criticized the use of low standards in autism intervention research." "Its underlying principles and targets, the empirical demonstration of its efficacy, its cost-efficiency, and ethical justification are now widely questioned ([22]; see [40] for a review)."
- "The NICE guide highlights the limited nature of the changes that can be unambiguously attributed to the intervention itself. One of the major conclusions of this guide is that the quality of intervention research has been low or very low, and that it is therefore not possible to recommend ABA, or, more generally, EIBI."

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

## Critique of the "Prerequisite" Model

The author argues that forcing autistic children to master neurotypical developmental prerequisites (like eye contact) is flawed because autistic development follows a different, equally valid, pathway.

- "A dubious intervention target: prerequisites of learning and typical social functioning... This notion of a 'prerequisite' implies that the typical, non-autistic early manifestations of the targeted function must be mastered before the autistic child can develop more complex, or mature non-autistic behaviors."
- "The assumption that not reaching a developmental milestone at the age at which it is typically attained precludes the further development of a given function may, however, not be valid if the trainee follows a specific developmental route which does not cross typical prerequisites."
- "We favor the view that autistic people follow a different pathway through the developmental sequences that result in maturation and social and language acquisition."
- "Metaphorically, more puppies than kittens swim, but training a cat to swim at a young age will not make that cat any more like a dog as an adult."

## Understanding Autistic Language Development

The author posits that autistic language acquisition often follows a non-social, non-linear pathway, which traditional interventions ignore.

- "In prototypical autism... the developmental sequence of autistic speech follows a 'bayonet'-shaped pathway." "After the unremarkable acquisition of a handful of words at approximately 18 months of age, speech development appears to halt, reaching a plateau, or even regressing."
- "In most cases [67], this non-verbal plateau is followed by relatively rapid, but atypical, speech development at the age of about 40–60 months, including immediate and delayed echolalia and pronoun reversals ('you' for 'I')."
- "...the reduced sequence of communicative overtures-delayed echolalia enhanced decoding abilities-speech delay-late attainment of functional speech, suggests that autistic children mostly learn language in a non-communicative manner."
- "The normocentric, step-by-step, prerequisite approach of classical ABA to the prosthetic construction of language should be abandoned."

## A Strengths-Based View of Repetitive Behaviors (RIRBs)

Instead of viewing RIRBs as deficits to be eliminated, the author reframes them as manifestations of autistic intelligence, interest, and information-seeking.

- "We developed the 'enhanced perceptual functioning' (EPF) model to account for unique aspects of autistic perception." "One of the main proposals emanating from this model is that perception influences overt behavior and contributes to intelligence to a much greater extent in autistic than non-autistic individuals."

- "Some RIRBs (e.g., an early interest in letters, staring at objects for longer) are, thus, manifestations of sophisticated information processing..."
- "The way in which most RIRBs continue to be seen in intervention programs is exemplified by their grouping with 'problematic' behaviors in intervention studies, even being viewed as a justification for punishment [37]."
- "Our position is that they should be encouraged and nurtured, as they are manifestation of interest in all children." "We feel that it is unjustified to try to eliminate manifestations of interest, even if these RIRBs are 'obsessive'."

## POPULATION-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

### Underestimation of Autistic Intelligence

The paper argues that intellectual disability is often conflated with prototypical autism due to biased, language-loaded assessment instruments, supporting the need for alternative, strengths-based evaluation.

- "Prediction 1: intellectual disability is associated with syndromic autism, not prototypical autism."
- "It is frequently overlooked that Kanner discarded intellectual disability in his first group of 11 autistic children, for whom he reported indices of normal intelligence."
- "The early measurement of intelligence in institutionalized adults [33] resulted in most being found to have an intellectual disability when tested with verbally loaded instruments. Even the non-verbal subscales of these instruments can yield deceptive results, as the instructions given are also heavily language-loaded [14]."
- "Our group has provided substantial evidence that intelligence is 'at risk of being underestimated' in young non-verbal autistic individuals [11]."
- "Reported rates of intellectual disability in autism vary by approximately 40% between US states providing data (Utah: 20%; South Carolina: 60%; [9])." "This suggests that the proportion of autistic individuals with intellectual disability cannot be accurately determined with the instruments currently used for its measurement."

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS (A STRENGTHS-BASED MODEL)

The author proposes five testable predictions that form the basis of a strengths-based educational model for autism, providing a framework that Enliten can adapt for its assessment philosophy.

1. **Presume Competence:** "intellectual disability is associated with syndromic autism, not prototypical autism." The model assumes normal non-verbal intelligence is the default in non-syndromic autism and that assessment tools must be adapted to reveal this competence.
2. **Support Autistic Learning Styles:** "favoring access to written verbal material and auditory non-communicative language should favor the long-term development of

speech." This involves providing materials like subtitles, keyboards, and audio tapes, respecting that autistic children may learn language non-communicatively first.

3. **Value and Utilize Interests (RIRBs):** "including periods of free access to material of 'special interest' in the child's time-schedule will decrease 'captivity' RIRBs, and problematic behaviors." This reframes RIRBs as information-seeking behaviors that should be nurtured and integrated into a child's education, not suppressed.
4. **Promote "Lateral Tutorship":** "lateral tutorship of autistic preschoolers in natural parental and daycare settings improves the well-being of parents and school age children more than early, personalized, professional, face-to-face intervention." This involves an adult engaging in a shared interest in parallel with the child, fostering social bonding through that interest rather than through forced neurotypical social routines.
5. **Prioritize Inclusion and On-Site Support:** "inclusion in regular, but supervised daycare centers and parental support, associated with on-site crisis solving, is a more cost-effective educational intervention than EIBI/NDBI." This argues against segregated, intensive therapy in favor of inclusion in natural environments with support provided as needed, which is less costly and more beneficial for social integration.