

Estradiol promotes habituation learning via an unidentified target, bypassing the suppressive effects of the established Estrogen Receptors

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Abstract

Habituating to the constant stimuli in the environment is a critical learning process conserved across species. We use a larval zebrafish visual response to sudden darkness as a model for studying habituation learning, where zebrafish reduce their responses to repeated stimulations. In this paradigm, treatment with estradiol strongly increases learning rate, resulting in more strongly suppressed responses. We used knockout mutant lines for the Estrogen Receptors (*esr1*, *esr2a*, *esr2b*, *gper1*) in an attempt to identify the receptor(s) mediating these effects. These experiments failed to identify a necessary receptor (or combination of receptors). Surprisingly, *esr1*, *esr2a*, and *gper1* mutants showed weak but consistent increases in habituation, indicating these receptors suppress habituation learning. These experiments demonstrate that estradiol is a complex modulator of learning in our model, where the learning-promoting effects are mediated by an unidentified estradiol target, and the classical Estrogen Receptors act in competition to subtly suppress learning.

Introduction

A primary function of the brain is to learn from experiences and adjust behavior in response. One aspect of learned behaviour involves sharpening attention and behavioural resources toward salient cues by ignoring irrelevant background stimuli. For instance, it may be critical to recognize the alarm calls of a nearby animal, whereas continually registering the steady hum from distant traffic is far less important. The capacity to reduce responses to repetitive, non-essential stimuli is known as habituation, which is considered the simplest form of learning and memory (*Rankin et al., 2009*).

We study a paradigm for long-term habituation where larval zebrafish reduce their responsiveness to sudden pulses of whole-field darkness, or dark flashes (DFs) (*Wolman et al., 2011; Randlett et al., 2019; Lamiré et al., 2023*). We recently reported that multiple hormonal signaling pathways show strong modulation of habituation

learning performance, including melatonin, progesterone, and estrogen (*Lamiré et al., 2023*). The ability of these signaling pathways to modulate learning is consistent with previous results in other systems and paradigms (*Nilsson and Gustafsson, 2002; Naderi et al., 2020; Dillon et al., 2013; Rawashdeh et al., 2007; Jilg et al., 2019; El-Sherif et al., 2003; Barros et al., 2015*), and may be an important mechanism to shift learning and memory performance or strategies based on biological rhythms or external fluctuations like seasons, weather or the day/night cycle.

In this project we have focused on estrogen signaling. We identified multiple estradiol analogs which strongly increased habituation learning when bath applied at 5-10 μ M doses (ethinyl estradiol, estradiol valerate, and hexestrol, *Lamiré et al., 2023*). 17 β -estradiol (here referred to as estradiol) is the most potent and biologically active form of estrogen, and is used in a variety of clinical contexts including contraception, hormone replacement therapy, and feminizing hormone therapy (*Kuhl, 2005; Unger, 2016; Farkas et al., 2022*).

Our discovery of a role for estradiol in promoting habituation learning is not surprising, as it has well-documented effects on other learning and memory processes (*Frick, 2015*). This has been most extensively characterized in the hippocampus, where estradiol promotes behavioural performance and the cellular/circuit hallmarks of hippocampal plasticity, including Long-term potentiation (LTP) and modulation of dendritic spine density (*Iqbal et al., 2024; Luine, 2014; Finney et al., 2020; Nilsson and Gustafsson, 2002*). While the role of estradiol in habituation is less well explored, it has previously been shown to increase memory retention for olfactory habituation in mice (*Dillon et al., 2013*), indicating it plays conserved roles in plasticity regulation across paradigms.

Estradiol signals via two established classes of Estrogen Receptors (ERs): the ligand-activated transcription factors ER α , and ER β , and the seven-transmembrane G-protein coupled receptor Gper1. ER α/β are thought to mediate the long-term "genomic" effects of estrogens through transcriptional activation of target genes, and thus are typically termed nuclear ERs. Estradiol also has acute effects on physiology – often called "non-genomic", or "membrane-initiated". These acute effects are thought to be mediated largely by the G protein coupled receptor Gper1, which signals via multiple G-proteins, and potentially epidermal growth factor (EGF) receptor transactivation (*Prossnitz and Barton, 2023; Revankar et al., 2005; Filardo et al., 2000*). In this way, Gper1 signalling impacts multiple core second-messenger systems, including: adenylyl cyclase, ERK, PI3K-Akt, and nitric oxide synthase. There is evidence from receptor-specific pharmacology and genetic knockout experiments in mice for a role of all of these receptors in hippocampal plasticity (*Finney et al., 2020; Koitmäe et al., 2023; Briz et al., 2015*).

Pharmacological experiments in adult zebrafish indicate that nuclear ERs are involved in the consolidation of object recognition memory, while Gper1 is involved in the consolidation of object placement memory (*Naderi et al., 2020*). Therefore, both classes of receptors are good candidates for plasticity regulation in zebrafish. However, we are unaware of any previous studies using genetic knockout lines to test for the function of zebrafish ERs in learning or memory.

In this project we aimed to identify the relevant ER(s) mediating the effects of estradiol on habituation using genetic knockout alleles. Zebrafish have single gene encoding ER α (*ER1, esr1*) and Gper1 (*gper1*), and two homologs of ER β : ER2a (*esr2a*) and ER2b (*esr2a*) (*Romano et al., 2017; Menuet et al., 2002*). We found that none of these mutants were insensitive to estradiol's effects, indicating that estradiol acts in this context via an alternative receptor or pathway. Surprisingly, our experiments found that mutants for *esr1*, *esr2a*, and *gper1* actually habituate more than their sibling controls. While the effect size is small and behavioural-genetic experiments can be variable, these data indicate that these ERs actually act to inhibit habituation learning, rather than mediating the habituation-promoting effects of estradiol that we observe pharmacologically.

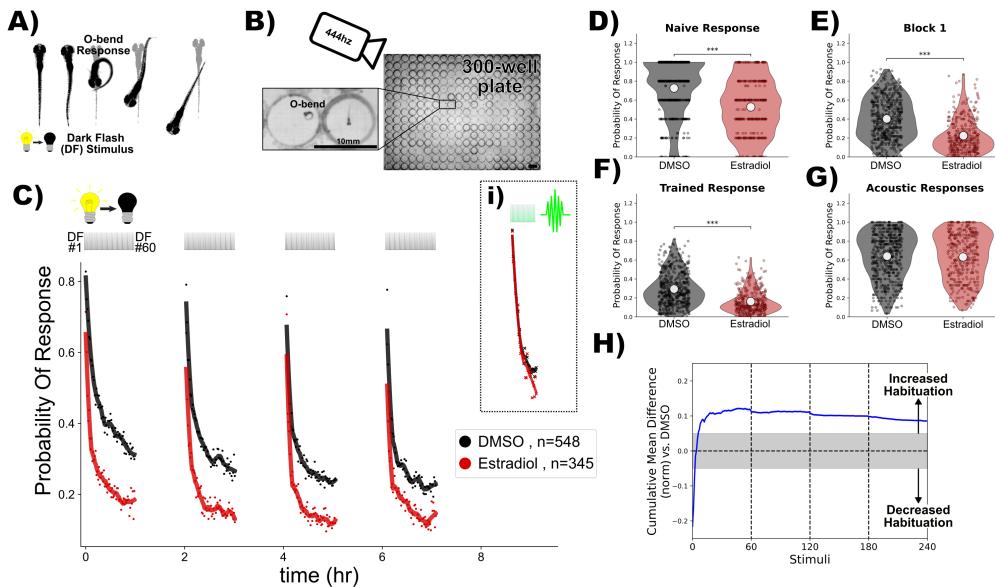


Figure 1. Estradiol increases habituation learning.

A) In response to a dark flash (DF), larval zebrafish perform a large turning manoeuvre termed an "O-bend" response.
 B) High-throughput setup for recording and quantifying responsiveness using a high-speed camera recording at 444hz observing larvae in 300-well plates. Scale bar = 10mm.
 C) Treatment with estradiol (red) results in more rapid and profound decreases in the probability of response to DF stimuli during habituation training relative to DMSO vehicle controls (black). DF stimuli are delivered at 1-minute intervals, in 4 blocks of 60 stimuli, separated by 1hr of rest (from 0:00-7:00). 1.5 hours later a block of 30 vibration stimuli are delivered at 1-minute intervals (i). Each dot is the probability of response to one DF. Lines are smoothed in time with a Savitzky-Golay filter (window = 15 stimuli, order = 2).
 D-G) Distributions responsiveness for different epochs of the experiment. Each dot is the per-fish average of the epoch. Statistical significance was calculated using Mann-Whitney U test, *** = $p < 0.001$. D) the naive response to the first 5 DF stimuli; E) the mean response to the remaining DF stimuli in the Block 1 (DFs 6:60); F) the trained response to the last 45 DFs in all four training blocks (DFs 16:60,76:120,136:180,196:240); G) the 30 vibration stimuli delivered with a tap from a solenoid on the 300-well plate platform.
 H) Cumulative mean difference (CMD) plot quantifying relative habituation performance after estradiol treatment. These plots display the cumulative average differences in the mean response across larvae of the treatment group (estradiol) relative to the control group (DMSO). Difference from 0 reflect a divergence in the change in responsiveness across the 240 DF stimuli in the 4 training blocks, with positive values reflecting increased habituation. The widths of the line is a bootstrapped 99.5% confidence intervals. The gray boxed region reflects the expected non-significant effect size (Randlett et al., 2019).

Treatment groups are: Estradiol = 10 μ M estradiol treatment ($n = 345$ fish); DMSO = 0.1% DMSO vehicle controls ($n = 548$ fish)

Results

75 Estradiol increases visual habituation learning

76 In response to a sudden global darkening stimulus, which we refer to as a dark flash (DF), larval zebrafish execute
 77 an "O-bend" maneuver, characterized by a deep "O"-shaped bend and a high-amplitude turn (Burgess and
 78 Granato, 2007, Figure 1a). Habituation learning manifests as a progressive reduction in response to repeated
 79 stimuli, and this learning can be retained for seconds/minutes, or hours/days for short-, and long-term habituation,
 80 respectively (Rankin et al., 2009). We use high-speed cameras, machine-vision analysis, and 300-well plates
 81 to quantify habituation across large populations of larvae to identify molecular/genetic mechanisms of long-
 82 term habituation (Figure 1A,B, Randlett et al., 2019; Lamiré et al., 2023). When stimulated with DFs repeated at
 83 1-minute intervals in blocks of 60 stimuli, larval zebrafish exhibit long-term habituation, reducing not only the
 84 probability of executing a response, but also modulating the latency and other kinematic aspects of the response
 85 (Randlett et al., 2019).

86 Our previous small-molecule screening experiments identified multiple synthetic Estrogen Receptor agonists
 87 as positive modulators of DF habituation learning, including ethinyl estradiol, estradiol valerate, and hexestrol
 88 (Lamiré et al., 2023). The major effect we observed was a stronger decrease in the probability of executing
 89 a O-bend response during the training/learning blocks. We have confirmed and extended these results using
 90 estradiol, which is the major natural estrogen in vertebrates.

91 An acute dose of 10 μ M estradiol potently increases habituation learning, which is observable when the

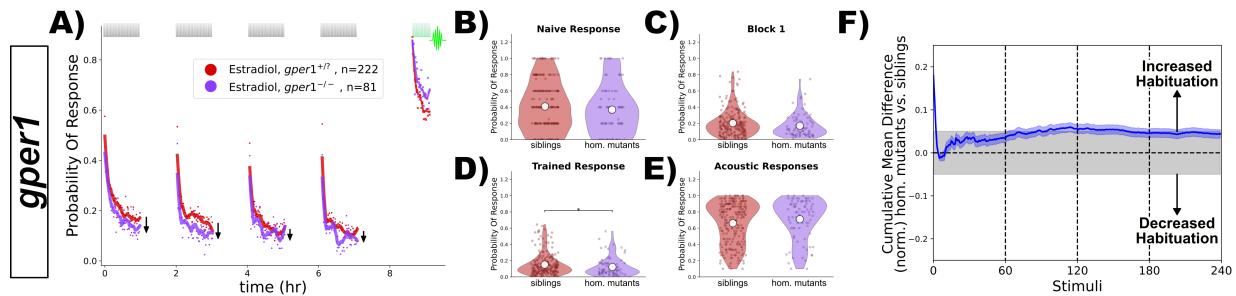


Figure 2. *gper1* mutants do not show habituation deficits after treatment with estradiol.

A) Homozygous *gper1*^(-/-) mutants (n = 81 fish, purple) do not show impaired habituation relative to sibling controls (*gper1*^(+/+) and *gper1*^(+/+), n = 222 fish, red). Rather, there is a slight suppression of responsiveness in the mutant group (arrows), indicating weakly increased habituation. Each dot is the probability of response to one stimulus. Lines are smoothed in time with a Savitzky-Golay filter (window = 15 stimuli, order = 2).

B-E) No significant differences are observed in the responsiveness distributions for the naive response to the first 5 DF stimuli (B), during the first training block (C), or the vibration response (E), while a subtle but statistically significant decrease in responsiveness is observed in the trained response (D). Statistical significance was calculated using Mann-Whitney U test, * = p < 0.05.

F) Cumulative mean difference (CMD) plot quantifying habituation performance of mutants relative to sibling controls, consistent with slightly increased habituation rate in mutant larvae.

92 response probability of the population of estradiol-treated larvae is compared with DMSO-treated vehicle con-
93 trols (Figure 1C-H). Consistent with our previous experiments (Lamiré et al., 2023), there is a reduction in the
94 naive responsiveness of the estradiol-treated larvae to the first DF stimuli (Figure 1D), but the major effect is
95 observed during the training phase (Figure 1C,E,F), as is revealed by the consistent positive deviation in the
96 cumulative mean difference (CMD) plots that are normalized to the naive response level in order to quantify
97 response suppression indicative of habituation performance (Figure 1H, Randlett et al., 2019). Importantly, the
98 responsiveness of the larvae to vibration stimuli delivered after the DF stimulation (Figure 1Ci), which elicit c-bend
99 escape responses (Kimmel et al., 1974), is indistinguishable from controls (Figure 1G). From this we conclude
100 that estradiol does not affect global arousal levels but rather has specific effects on habituation learning.

101 Gper1 is dispensable for estradiol-promoted habituation learning

102 The effects of estradiol that we have observed occur very rapidly – larvae are only pretreated with estradiol for
103 ≈25min-1hr before the first DF. This is the time necessary to set the apparatus and begin the experiment. Since
104 the nuclear hormone receptors are thought to primarily exert their effects via transcriptional alterations, this
105 necessitates a delay in their signaling. For this reason, we first hypothesized that membrane-initiated signaling
106 through Gper1 was the most likely mechanism.

107 To test this we used a knockout allele *gper1*^{uab102} (Romano et al., 2017), and generated larvae from *gper1*^{uab102}
108 heterozygous or homo/heterozygous crosses to generate clutches of larvae of mixed genotypes. Larvae were
109 treated with estradiol during habituation, and were subsequently genotyped. We reasoned that if *gper1* is
110 required for the effect of estradiol on habituation, mutants would be insensitive to estradiol and habituate
111 significantly less than sibling controls. Contrary to this hypothesis, we found that *gper1* mutants showed no
112 deficits in habituation (Figure 2). Remarkably, rather than observing the anticipated inhibition of habituation,
113 *gper1* mutants appeared to habituate slightly more than controls, with the responsiveness level slightly but con-
114 sistently below the sibling controls across stimuli (Figure 2A). This is further supported by a weak but statistically
115 significant decrease in the responsiveness of the larvae during the training period (Figure 2D), and a deviation
116 towards positive values in the CMD plot (Figure 2F). From these experiments we conclude that Gper1 agonism
117 does not promote habituation learning, but rather may act to suppress it.

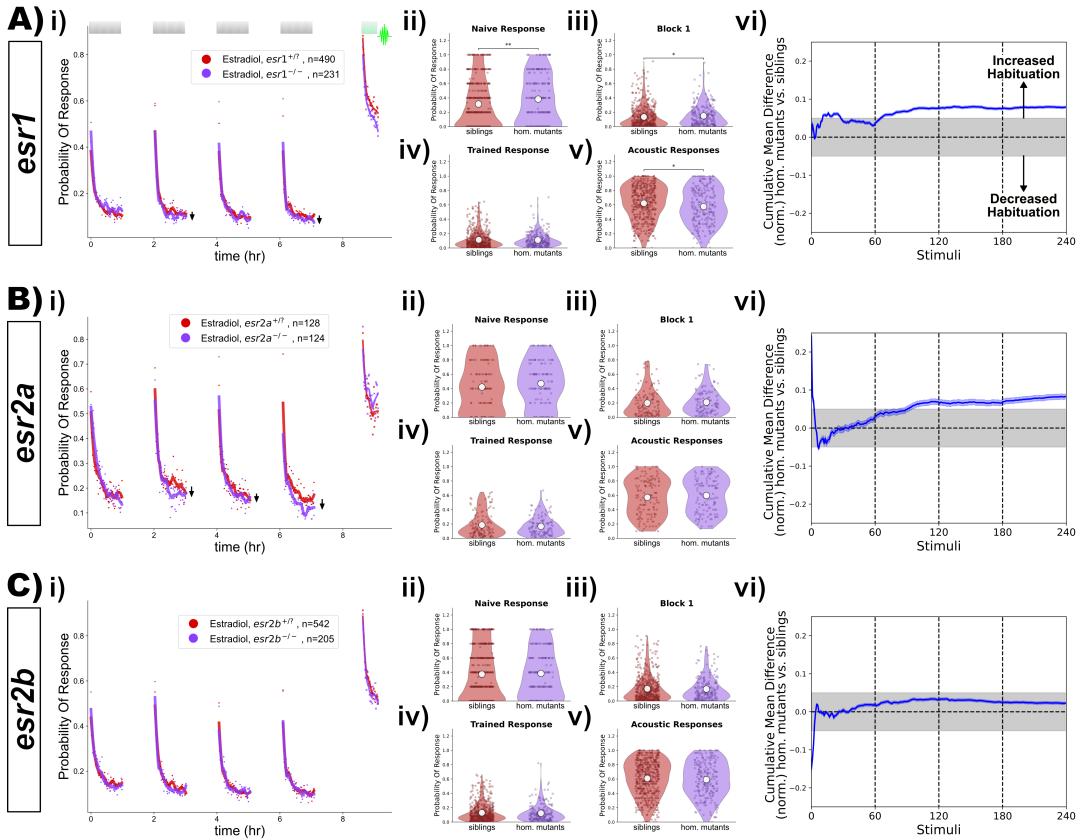


Figure 3. *esr1*, *esr2a* and *esr2b* mutants do not show habituation deficits after treatment with estradiol.

A) Homozygous *esr1*^{-/-} mutants (n = 231 fish) do not show impaired habituation relative to sibling controls (*esr1*^{+/+}) and *esr1*^{+/+} (n = 490 fish).

B) Homozygous *esr2a*^{-/-} mutants (n = 214 fish) do not show impaired habituation relative to sibling controls (*esr2a*^{+/+}) and *esr2a*^{+/+} (n = 128 fish).

C) Homozygous *esr2b*^{-/-} mutants (n = 205 fish) do not show impaired habituation relative to sibling controls (*esr2b*^{+/+}) and *esr2b*^{+/+} (n = 542 fish).

i)-vi) For each lettered section:

i) Responsiveness to stimuli comparing homozygous mutants to sibling controls (heterozygous or wild-type). Each dot is the probability of response to one stimulus. Lines are smoothed in time with a Savitzky-Golay filter (window = 15 stimuli, order = 2). Suppression of responsiveness is indicated by arrows, potentially reflecting increased habituation.

ii)-v) Distributions responsiveness for different epochs of the experiment. Each dot is the per-fish average of the epoch. Statistical significance was calculated using Mann-Whitney U test, * = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01. **ii)** the naive response to the first 5 DF stimuli; **iii)** the mean response to the remaining DF stimuli in the Block 1 (DFs 6:60); **iv)** the trained response to the last 45 DFs in all four training blocks (DFs 16:60,76:120,136:180,196:240); **v)** the 30 vibration stimuli delivered with a tap from a solenoid on the 300-well plate platform.

vi) Cumulative mean difference (CMD) plot quantifying habituation performance of mutants relative to sibling controls

118 Nuclear ERs are dispensable for estradiol-promoted habituation learning

119 Since we found that *gper1* was unnecessary for the habituating-promoting effects of estradiol, we next focused
120 on the three nuclear receptors in the zebrafish genome: *esr1*, *esr2a* and *esr2a*. Using the same strategy as for
121 *gper1*, we analyzed previously established knockout mutants (*esr2a^{uab134}*, *esr2a^{uab134}*, and *esr2b^{uab127}*), looking
122 for a mutant with insensitivity to estradiol. However, we failed to identify any deficits in habituation (*Figure 3*).
123 To our surprise, we again found that both *esr1* and *esr2a* mutants showed subtle increases in habituation
124 (*Figure 3Avi,Bvi*), similar in magnitude to what we had seen for *gper1* mutants (*Figure 2F*). From these data we
125 conclude that none of the nuclear ERs are required for the effects of estradiol on promoting habituation. As
126 for Gper1, ER1 and ER2a show a weak inhibitory effect on habituation, indicating that they also act to suppress
127 habituation learning.

128 Nuclear ERs are simultaneously dispensable for estradiol-promoted habituation 129 learning

130 While our experiments demonstrated that *esr1*, *esr2a* and *esr2a* mutants remain sensitive to estradiol, it is
131 plausible that they could act in a redundant fashion to mediate the effects of estradiol on habituation, perhaps
132 via co-expression in a critical cell type. To test for this possibility, we generated combinations of mutants by
133 crossing individual lines together (*Figure 4*). A likely scenario could be that the two ER β paralogs, ER2a and
134 ER2b, act redundantly. However, we found that double mutants for *esr2a;esr2b* did not show habituation deficits
135 (*Figure 4A*). Neither did we observe suppression of habituation in double mutants for *esr1;esr2a* (*Figure 4B*), or
136 *esr1;esr2b* (*Figure 4C*). Finally, we tested triple mutants for all three nuclear ERs (*esr1;esr2a;esr2b*), but again failed
137 to identify suppressions in habituation (*Figure 4D*).

138 We note that we did see a statistically "significant" increase in DF responsiveness in the *esr1;esr2b* double
139 mutants (*Figure 4Cii-iv*). This is attributable to a small increase in naive responsiveness, and did not result
140 from habituation deficits according to our normalized CMD analysis (*Figure 4Cvi*). Considering that we did
141 not observe any increased responsiveness in the triple mutants (*Figure 4D*), we conclude that the observed
142 increased responsiveness in the double mutants is likely a result of biological noise, that only rose to statistical
143 "significance" due to the very large number of larvae tested in our high-throughput experiments.

144 Consistent with the paradoxical effect of increased habituation in *esr1* and *esr2a* single mutants (*Figure 3A,B*),
145 we again observed that double and triple mutants containing these genes also showed a slight increase in
146 habituation (with the exception of the *esr1;esr2b* double mutants). This adds further support to the model
147 in which ER1 and ER2b act to suppress learning in this context, rather than promote it.

148 Gper1 and nuclear ERs are simultaneously dispensable for estradiol-promoted 149 habituation learning

150 While it is unclear how the GPCR Gper1 might act redundantly with the nuclear ERs, we nevertheless decided
151 to test this possibility by combining the *gper1* and the *esr1*, *esr2a*, and *esr2b* mutations (*Figure 5*). As with the
152 previous iterations of this experiment, we did not find combinations of mutants with suppressed habituation
153 (*Figure 5*). Consistent with our model of (*gper1*, *esr1* and *esr2a*) having inhibitory affects on learning, we again
154 found that most of these combinations of mutants showed evidence of increased habituation (*Figure 5i,vi*). While
155 the responsiveness distributions did not show significant differences (*Figure 5ii-iv*), the normalized CMD plots
156 consistently showed positive deviations, which reflect increased habituation (*Figure 5vi*).

157 Despite the fact that we analyzed the behaviour of 1152 larvae and successfully genotyping all 4 ER genes
158 in 373 individuals (after >4600 genotyping PCRs), we were only able to identify a single quadruple mutant larva
159 lacking all known ERs (*Figure 5E*). This is likely simply due to the limitations of combinatorial Mendelian inher-
160 itance, and the fact that *esr1* and *esr2a* are linked on chromosome 20. While it is dubious to conclude much
161 from an n = 1 experiment, we find it remarkable that this larva exhibits the strongest increased habituation of

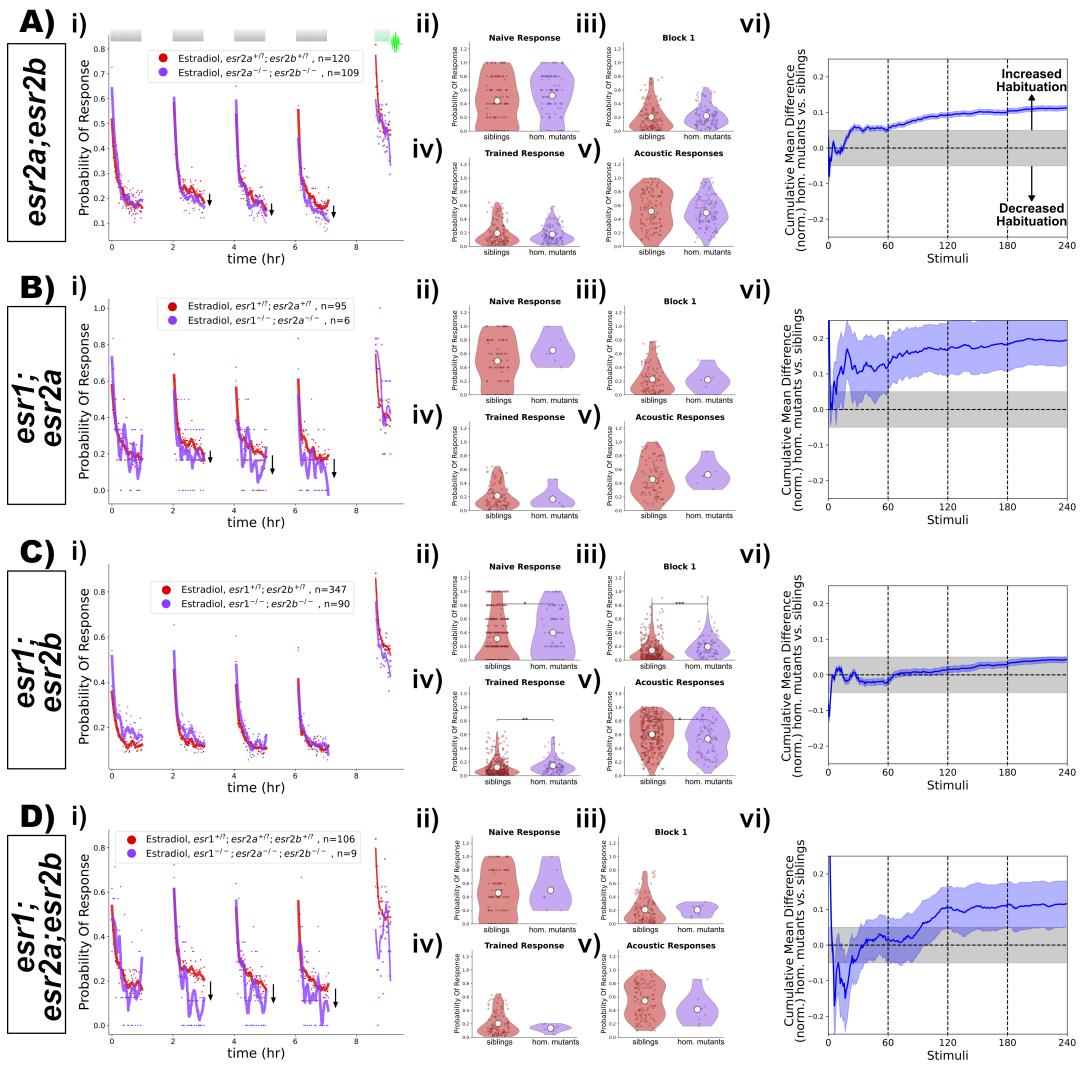


Figure 4. Double and triple mutant combinations of *esr1*, *esr2a* and *esr2b* do not show habituation deficits after treatment with estradiol.

A) Homozygous *esr2a^{-/-;}esr2b^{-/-;}* double mutants (n = 109 fish) do not show impaired habituation relative to double heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (^(+/?);^(+/?), n = 120 fish).

B) Homozygous *esr1^{-/-;}esr2a^{-/-;}* double mutants (n = 6 fish) do not show impaired habituation relative to double heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (^(+/?);^(+/?), n = 95 fish).

C) Homozygous *esr1^{-/-;}esr2b^{-/-;}* double mutants (n = 90 fish) do not show impaired habituation relative to double heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (^(+/?);^(+/?), n = 347 fish).

D) Homozygous *esr1^{-/-;}esr2a^{-/-;}esr2b^{-/-;}* triple mutants (n = 9 fish) do not show impaired habituation relative to triple heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (^(+/?);^(+/?);^(+/?), n = 106 fish).

i-vi) For each lettered section:

i) Responsiveness to stimuli comparing homozygous mutants to sibling controls (heterozygous or wild-type). Each dot is the probability of response to one stimulus. Lines are smoothed in time with a Savitzky-Golay filter (window = 15 stimuli, order = 2).

ii-v) Distributions responsiveness for different epochs of the experiment. Each dot is the per-fish average of the epoch. Statistical significance was calculated using Mann-Whitney U test, * = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01. **ii)** the naive response to the first 5 DF stimuli; **iii)** the mean response to the remaining DF stimuli in the Block 1 (DFs 6:60); **iv)** the trained response to the last 45 DFs in all four training blocks (DFs 16:60,76:120,136:180,196:240); **v)** the 30 vibration stimuli delivered with a tap from a solenoid on the 300-well plate platform.

vi) Cumulative mean difference (CMD) plot quantifying habituation performance of mutants relative to sibling controls.

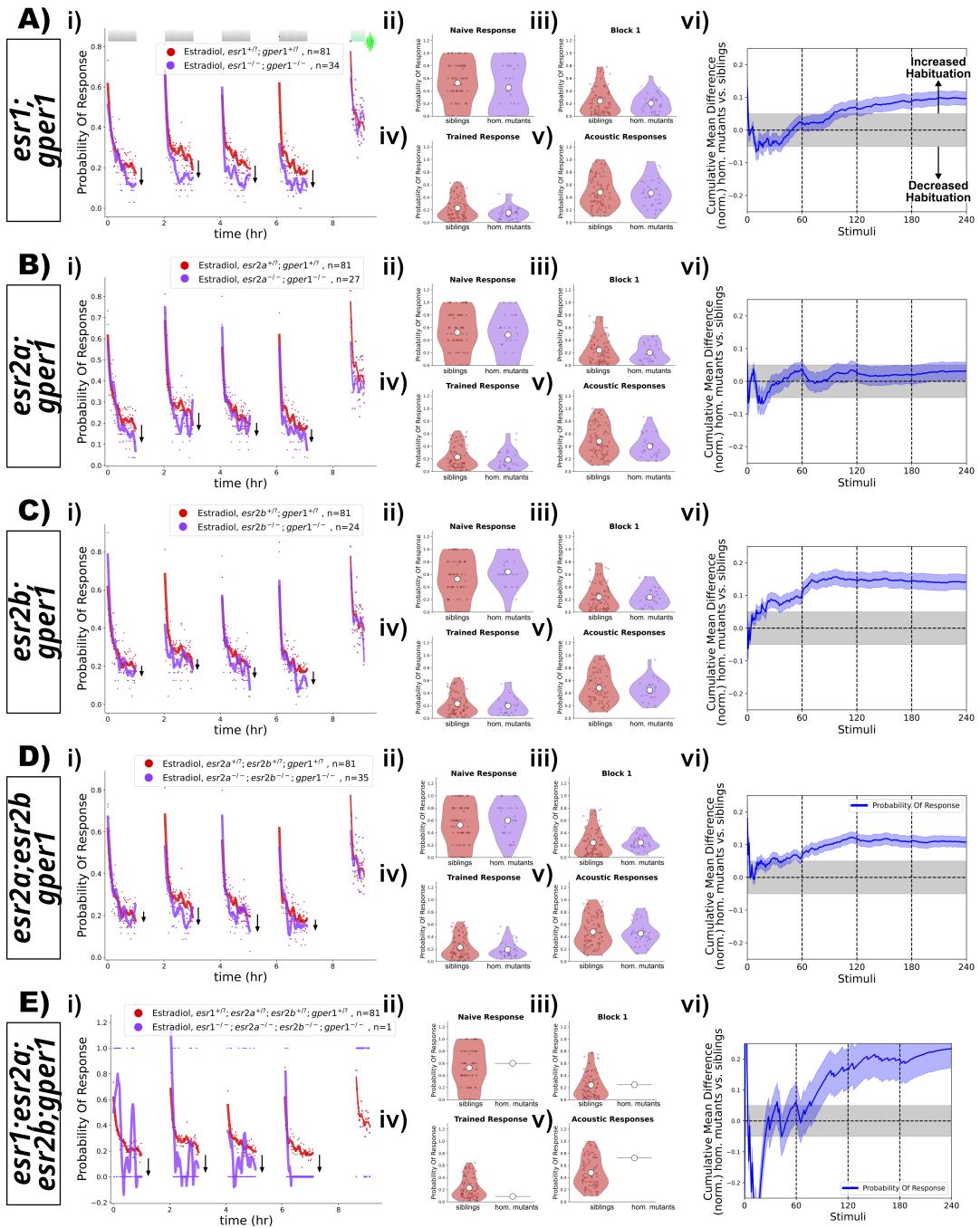


Figure 5. Double, triple and quadruple mutant combinations of *esr1*, *esr2a*, *esr2b*, and *gper1* do not show habituation deficits after treatment with estradiol.

A) Homozygous *esr1^{-/-};gper1^{-/-}* double mutants (n = 34 fish, purple) do not show impaired habituation relative to double heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (n = 81 fish, red). **B)** Homozygous *esr2a^{-/-};gper1^{-/-}* double mutants (n = 27 fish, purple) do not show impaired habituation relative to double heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (n = 81 fish, red). **C)** Homozygous *esr2b^{-/-};gper1^{-/-}* double mutants (n = 24 fish, purple) do not show impaired habituation relative to double heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (n = 81 fish, red). **D)** Homozygous *esr2a^{-/-};esr2b^{-/-};gper1^{-/-}* triple mutants (n = 35 fish, purple) do not show impaired habituation relative to heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (n = 81 fish, red). **E)** A single homozygous *esr1^{-/-};esr2a^{-/-};esr2b^{-/-};gper1^{-/-}* quadruple mutant (n = 1 fish, purple) does not appear to show impaired habituation relative to heterozygous or homozygous sibling controls (n = 81 fish, red).

i)-vi) For each lettered section: **i)** Responsiveness to stimuli comparing homozygous mutants to sibling controls (heterozygous or wild-type). Each dot is the probability of response to one stimulus. Lines are smoothed in time with a Savitzky-Golay filter (window = 15 stimuli, order = 2). **ii)-v)** Distributions responsiveness for different epochs of the experiment. Each dot is the per-fish average of the epoch. Statistical significance was calculated using Mann-Whitney U test, * = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01. **ii)** the naive response to the first 5 DF stimuli; **iii)** the mean response to the remaining DF stimuli in the Block 1 (DFs 6:60); **iv)** the trained response to the last 45 DFs in all four training blocks (DFs 16:60,76:120,136:180,196:240); **v)** the 30 vibration stimuli delivered with a tap from a solenoid on the 300-well plate platform. **vi)** Cumulative mean difference (CMD) plot quantifying habituation performance of mutants relative to sibling controls. As mutant larvae were all derived from the same experiments, the sibling control data (red) is the same in A-E).

162 all of our experiments, with suppression of responses (**Figure 5Ei**), and strong positive deviation in the CMD plot
163 (**Figure 5Evi**).

164 Discussion

165 **The promotion of habituation learning by estradiol is mediated by an unidentified 166 target**

167 Our experiments indicate that Gper1, ER1, ER2a and ER2b do not mediate the positive effects of estradiol on
168 habituation learning. As this is fundamentally a negative result, it is difficult to conclusively demonstrate this
169 beyond any doubt. One major caveat relates to the actual functional nature of the mutant alleles that we have
170 used. These are all Cas9-generated small deletions resulting in frameshift mutations that lead to early stop
171 codons, and are thus predicted null/knockout lines. Despite this genetic confidence, it is always possible that
172 residual activity could still remain, perhaps via alternate splicing or alternate start codons. For this reason, we
173 were originally unsure if we would publish these results at all. However, we recognize that this bias against
174 publishing negative results is bad for science. Negative results from well-designed and executed experiments are
175 of value for the community and making this knowledge public is our duty as responsible scientists (**Mlinarić et al.,
176 2017**). These high-throughput neurogenetic experiments are also a massive amount of work – raising, testing and
177 genotyping thousands of zebrafish larvae. This was undertaken primarily by technicians and Master's students,
178 all of whom deserve recognition, irrespective of the perceived "impact" of the outcome of their experiments.

179 While the possibility of "residual activity" in our mutants is a clear limitation of our approach, we argue that
180 this alternative interpretation is very unlikely. The *esr1uab118* and *esr2buab127* alleles both exhibited a lack of estradiol
181 responsiveness in other tissues (**Romano et al., 2017**), and *esr2buab127* mutants are female sterile/subfertile
182 (D. Gorelick, personal communication), indicating a non-functional receptor. Similarly, *gper1uab102* mutants show
183 a lack of estradiol responsiveness in heart rate modulation (**Romano et al., 2017**). Interestingly this was only
184 observed in maternal-zygotic mutants. While it seems unlikely that sufficient maternal mRNA/protein for Gper1
185 could persist in 5dpf larvae, we can formally rule this out with our current datasets. The *esr2auab134* mutants
186 have no previously published phenotype, and so we do not have an independent positive control for the nature
187 of this allele. However, the best evidence we have against the "residual activity" hypothesis is that we actually
188 found phenotypes in our assays for *esr1uab118*, *esr2auab134*, and *gper1uab102* mutants. These phenotypes are just
189 of the unexpected sign, where mutants show increased habituation (discussed below).

190 **Potential mechanisms for estradiol-promoted habituation learning**

191 We have concluded that the lack of habituation deficits in our mutants is due to the presence of an alternative
192 receptor or pathway that mediates the learning-promoting effects of estradiol. In support of this model, a
193 very recent study of estradiol-induced thrombosis came to the same conclusion, namely that an unidentified
194 target mediates this process in larval zebrafish (**Yu et al., 2024**). Importantly, these thrombosis experiments
195 were performed on different knockout alleles which are full genetic deletions, in which "residual activity" is not
196 plausible. Together with our observations, these data suggest that a novel estradiol target exists which has
197 multiple critical functions (at least in zebrafish).

198 What might this unidentified target be? Various leads exist in the literature. One hypothesis posits the
199 existence of an unidentified "Gq-mER" (Gq-coupled membrane estrogen receptor) (**Qiu et al., 2006; Vail and
200 Roepke, 2019**), and therefore estradiol may signal via additional GPCRs beyond Gper1. Another possibility is an
201 interaction between estradiol and other membrane receptors, for example: the Voltage-Gated Sodium Channel
202 Nav1.2 (**Sula et al., 2021; Treviño and Gorelick, 2021**), transient receptor potential (TRP) channels (**Payrits et al.,
203 2017; Ramírez-Barrantes et al., 2020**), or various other ion channels (**Kow and Pfaff, 2016**). The robust nature of

204 our "non-canonical" but clearly estradiol-dependent phenotype, combined with the high-throughput nature of
205 our behavioural assays, could be an ideal assay for future screening efforts to attempt to identify novel estradiol
206 target(s).

207 **Multiple Estrogen Receptors act to suppress habituation learning.**

208 While we were surprised to find that the classical ERs do not promote habituation, we were shocked to find clear
209 evidence of the opposite! We found that *esr1^{uab118}*, *esr2a^{uab134}*, and *gper1^{uab102}* mutants habituate more than
210 their sibling controls (**Figure 1**, **Figure 2**), consistent with a role for these ERs in inhibiting habituation. While effect
211 sizes of these magnitudes border on those that are easily dismissible as "noise", they were not only observed in
212 the single mutants experiments, but also in the double and triple mutant combinations of these alleles (**Figure 3**-
213 **Figure 5**), providing good evidence that they are biologically meaningful effects. In fact, these multi-mutants
214 generally exhibited larger effect sizes, consistent with an additive interaction.

215 Untangling the mechanisms of ER1-, ER2a- and Gper1-dependent suppression of habituation will require
216 considerable further work. The additive interaction we observed genetically indicates that the ERs act cooper-
217 atively to suppress habituation learning. All three receptors are expressed in the larval zebrafish brain (**Thisse**
218 **and Thisse, 2008; Romano et al., 2017**), but whether they are acting in the same or different cell types awaits
219 characterization. The study of this inhibitory pathway may be challenging since it opposes the major learning-
220 promoting effect of estradiol, and therefore may be more straightforward to study after the identification and
221 deletion of the estradiol target that promotes habituation.

222 **Conclusion**

223 What began as a straightforward study to identify the receptor(s) that mediate the habituation-promoting effects
224 of estradiol has instead led us to a surprising and paradoxical result; canonical ERs do regulate habituation, but
225 are suppressive and act in opposition to the habituation-promoting effects of estradiol. This fits with the general
226 theme of our studies of this habituation paradigm – we find increasing complexity and contradiction within this
227 "simple" learning process the deeper we look. This began with our detailed observations of behaviour, leading
228 us to conclude that habituation results from a distributed plasticity processes that adapts different aspects of
229 behavior independently (**Randlett et al., 2019**). We believe that this property underlies our subsequent discover-
230 ies of pharmacological and genetic manipulations that can result in either specific changes in specific aspects of
231 habituation (but not others), or even opposing effects, where a single manipulation can simultaneously increase
232 and decrease habituation, depending on which component of behavior is measured (**Randlett et al., 2019**;
233 **Lamiré et al., 2023**). This complexity appears to be a fundamental property of habituation (**McDiarmid et al.,**
234 **2019**), and that the study of habituation will likely continue to surprise us, hopefully leading to unexpected
235 insights into the nature of plasticity underlying learning and memory.

236 **Materials and Methods**

237 **Animals**

238 All experiments were performed on larval zebrafish at 5 days post fertilization (dpf), raised at a density of ≈ 1
239 larvae/mL of E3 media supplemented with 0.02% HEPES pH 7.2. Larvae were raised in a 14:10h light/dark
240 cycle at 28-29°C. Adult zebrafish were housed, cared for, and bred at the following zebrafish facilities: Plateau
241 de Recherche Expérimentale en Criblage In Vivo (PRECI, SFR Biosciences, Lyon) and the Animalerie Zebrafish
242 Rockefeller (AZR, SFR Santé Lyon Est, Lyon). Adult zebrafish used to generate larvae were housed in accordance
243 with regulations of the PRECI and AZR facilities, which are regulated by an internal animal wellbeing committee,
244 and were approved by the animal welfare committee (comité d'éthique en expérimentation animale de la Région

245 Rhône-Alpes: CECCAPP, Agreement # C693870602). Behaviour experiments were performed at the 5dpf stage,
246 and are thus not subject to ethical review, but these procedures do not harm the larvae.

247 Mutant lines were obtained from D. Gorelick's lab, and were of the following alleles:

248 *esr1^{uab118}* is a 4bp deletion (ZDB-ALT-180420-2), yielding a predicted null frameshift/stop mutation, confirmed
249 by a lack of estradiol responsiveness in the heart as assayed by *Tg(5xERE:GFP)^{c262}* expression (**Romano et al.,**
250 **2017**).

251 *esr2a^{uab134}* is a 2bp deletion (ZDB-ALT-180420-3), yielding a predicted null frameshift/stop mutation (**Romano**
252 **et al., 2017**)

253 *esr2b^{uab127}* is a 4bp deletion (ZDB-ALT-180420-4), yielding a predicted null frameshift/stop mutation, con-
254 firmed by a lack of estradiol responsiveness in the liver as assayed by *Tg(5xERE:GFP)^{c262}* expression (**Romano**
255 **et al., 2017**).

256 *gper1^{uab102}* is a 133bp deletion (ZDB-ALT-180420-1), yielding a predicted null frameshift/stop mutation, con-
257 firmed by a lack of estradiol responsiveness in heart beating rate in maternal-zygotic mutants (**Romano et al.,**
258 **2017**).

259 **Genotyping**

260 *esr1^{uab118}* was genotyped by PCR using the forward/reverse primer pair:

261 GCTGGTCACCTTGAATGCTT/TGAGATGTGAGAGATGACTAGGA with a T_m of 58°C yielding a 381 bp PCR product
262 that was digested with the restriction enzyme ApeKI. The mutant product is not digested, and the wild type has
263 two bands at 177 and 204 bp.

264 *esr2a^{uab134}* was genotypes by PCR using the forward/reverse primer pair:

265 CTTCAGCTGCAGGAAGTGGAAAGTCGGGCTTAGCGACTG with a T_m of 58°C yielding a 236 bp PCR product that
266 was digested with the restriction enzyme MboI. The mutant product is not digested, and the wild type has two
267 bands at 180 and 56 bp

268 *esr2b^{uab127}* was genotypes by PCR using the forward/reverse primer pair:

269 TGGGCCTGAGATGCAGTAGT/GTGTGTGCTTGGCCTCCTC with a T_m of 60°C yielding a 431 bp PCR product that
270 was digested with the restriction enzyme Mbil. The mutant product is digested into two bands of 150 and 281
271 bp and the wild type into 3 bands of 78, 150 and 198 bp.

272 *gper1^{uab102}* was genotypes by PCR using the forward/reverse primer pair:

273 ATGGAGGAGCAGACTACCAATGTG/CCATCCAGATGAGGCTGCAA with a T_m of 60°C yielding a mutant product of
274 372bp and a wild type product of 505 bp.

275 **Pharmacology**

276 β -Estradiol (Sigma E2758, here referred to as "estradiol") was dissolved in dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) and stored
277 at -20°C. Larvae were treated with estradiol immediately before the behavioural assay by pipetting 10-30uL of
278 10x solution directly into the behavioural wells, always with a final concentration of 0.1% DMSO in E3.

279 **Habituation behaviour testing**

280 Larval behavior was evaluated in 300-well plates using an updated version of the experimental setup previously
281 described (**Randlett et al., 2019; Lamiré et al., 2023**). Briefly, 300-well plates were custom made using laser-cut
282 acrylic sheets where each well measures 8 mm in diameter and 6 mm in depth, corresponding to an approximate
283 water volume of 300 μ L. These plates are suspended under a water bath held at 31°C, acting as a heated lid to
284 minimize condensation and maintain a 29°C water temperature within each well. Behavioral recordings were
285 made using a Mikrotron CXP-4 camera running at 444hz in conjunction with a Silicon Software frame grabber
286 (Marathon ACX-QP, Basler), illuminated by IR LEDs (TSHF5410, digikey.com). Visual stimuli were presented using
287 a rectangular array of 155 WS2813 RGB LEDs (144LED/M, aliexpress.com). For the DF stimulus, the LEDs were

288 briefly switched off (1 s), then linearly returned to the original brightness over a 20 s interval. Vibration/Tap
289 stimuli were administered using a solenoid (ROB-10391, Sparkfun). This behavioral paradigm was designed to
290 be symmetrical: each 1 hr block of stimulation was followed by 1 hr of rest. During these rest periods, the camera
291 was moves using a stepper motor controlled linear actuator (Hanpose HPV4, 500cm), which moved the camera
292 between two plates, allowing us to screen up to 600 fish per experiment across two 300-well plates.

293 Control of the apparatus (RGB LEDs, solenoid, camera linear actuator) was implemented via a Raspberry
294 Pi Pico microcontroller running CircuitPython (<https://circuitpython.org/>) (code : `code.py`) and custom Python
295 software which handled the camera acquisition via the **Python wrapper of the Silicon Software Framegrabber**
296 **SDK**, triggered stimuli via the Raspberry Pi Pico, and tracked the head and tail coordinates of the larvae across the
297 300-wells at a baseline framerate of between 20-30hz (code : `Run_BigRig2.py`). When a stimulus is delivered (DF
298 or Vibration/Tap), a 1-second "Burst" video is recorded at the full frame rate as a Tiff file, from which the head
299 and tail coordinates are subsequently tracked offline (code : `TrackBurst_BigRig.py`). Larval zebrafish tracking
300 was done via background subtraction and morphological operations implemented using multiple open-source
301 packages, including: OpenCV (*Bradski, 2000*), scikit-image (*Van der Walt et al., 2014*), NumPy (*Harris et al., 2020*),
302 SciPy (*Virtanen et al., 2020*), and Numba (*Lam et al., 2015*).

303 Data analysis

304 Data was analyzed in Python using custom written analysis scripts (code : `Analyze_EsrHab.py`). Responses to
305 DFs and vibration/taps were identified as movement events that had a cumulative tail bend angle greater than
306 3 radian (O-bend)and 1 radian (C-bend), respectively. Data was analyzed using multiple open-source packages,
307 including: NumPy (*Harris et al., 2020*), SciPy (*Virtanen et al., 2020*),Numba (*Lam et al., 2015*) and Pandas (*Wes*
308 *McKinney, 2010*). Data was plotted using Matplotlib (*Hunter, 2007*) and seaborn (*Waskom, 2021*). Statistical "sig-
309 nificance" between the distributions was tested using the Mann-Whitney U test implemented in Scipy (*Virtanen*
310 *et al., 2020*).

311 The cumulative difference plots to assess changes in habituation performance for the treatments were cal-
312 culated as previously (*Randlett et al., 2019*), where we first calculated the average response across larvae for
313 each group for each DF. This generated a mean vector for each group. These two vectors were normalized
314 by dividing them by the naive response (mean response to the first 5 DFs), and then the treatment group
315 was subtracted from the control group, yielding a "mean difference" vector between stimulus and controls at
316 each flash. From this mean difference vector we calculated the cumulative mean distribution using Numpy's
317 'nancumsum' function divided by the number of stimuli experienced, or the index of the vector. To generate
318 statistical confidence in these distributions, we bootstrapped 2000 replicates, and calculated the 99.5% confi-
319 dence intervals using SciPy's 'stats.norm.interval' function. The assumption of this analysis is that if the two
320 groups are habituating similarly, then the "mean difference" vector will exhibit a noise distribution centered at a
321 mean of 0, and thus the cumulative mean distribution would remain near 0. Treatments that affect habituation
322 will show strong increasing or decreasing cumulative mean distributions, reflecting increased or decreased
323 habituation performance throughout training, respectively. We use an empirically defined threshold of ± 0.05
324 as the statistically meaningful effect size in this analysis, as is reflected in the shaded gray regions in the plots
325 (*Randlett et al., 2019*).

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329 Data Availability

330 Software and analysis code is available here: https://github.com/owenrandlett/2025_HabEstrogen. All datasets
331 used in these analyses are available here: [HabEstrogen_Datasets](#).

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