



EI SESSION CHECKLIST

Tips for Building a Long-Lasting Positive and Productive Relationship with the Child and Family

BUILD RAPPORT W/ THE CHILD

Rationale: Trust and regulation are prerequisites for attention, communication, motor skills, and engagement.

Guiding Principle: Follow their lead so they can follow yours later

Checklist:

- ☐ Observe the child's interests, sensory needs, and communication attempts (gestures, sounds, eye gaze)
- ☐ Join their activity without altering it; match pace, affect, and intensity
- ☐ Position yourself at the child's height; use open, non-directive body language
- ☐ Narrate actions rather than directing behavior
- ☐ Use preferred objects/materials; mirror actions/sounds; introduce small variations when appropriate
- ☐ Respond promptly and warmly to all communication attempts
- ☐ Avoid demands during rapport-building
- ☐ Adjust to cues (move closer, give space, slow pace, offer movement/sensory regulation)

BUILD RAPPORT W/CAREGIVERS

Rationale: Family values, routines, and perspectives guide meaningful intervention and promote generalization.

Guiding Principle: Meet caregivers where they are—build confidence first, competence next.

Checklist:

- ☐ Begin with value-based, strengths-focused questions:
 - "What made you smile about your child today?"
 - "What felt like a small win this week?"
 - "What would you love to feel easier in your daily routine?"
- ☐ Establish a judgment-free tone (normalize challenges, validate feelings)
- ☐ Identify and name caregiver strengths (attunement, patience, consistency)
- ☐ Choose activities that align with family routines and cultural context
- ☐ Offer simple, clear explanations—avoid jargon
- ☐ Use collaborative coaching: Model → Invite caregiver → Observe → Give strengths-based feedback → Adjust together
- ☐ Encourage future visioning to support buy-in:
 - "If we imagine 6 weeks from now, what would you hope looks different?"
- ☐ Ensure strategies match the family's bandwidth and priorities
- ☐ Praise caregiver autonomy and leadership ("You know your child best")

MOTIVATORS

Rationale: Motivation drives engagement, regulation, and skill acquisition.

Guiding Principle: A preference is liked; a reinforcer strengthens behavior.

Checklist:

- ☐ Identify preferences through natural choices and sustained engagement
 - ☐ Test reinforcement:
 - Provide the item/activity after a behavior → If the behavior increases, it is a reinforcer
 - ☐ Include non-toy reinforcers (movement, songs, predictable routines, sensory input, shared interactions)
 - ☐ Rotate and re-test regularly; motivation shifts frequently
 - ☐ Ensure reinforcement is ethical, safe, and aligned with family values
 - ☐ Reinforcers do not have to be "functional." They are what the child is motivated by. If it is to play with something "their way" let them, if it is to run around in circles for a few minutes- let them (while you get the next activity ready).
- Do not try to teach functional play during this time.

Rationale: Progress occurs when sessions integrate motivation, communication, imitation, sensory regulation, and functional goals.

Activities should not guide our sessions, meaningful interactions and child autonomy and independence should.

Guiding Principle: Make it meaningful, make it functional, make it repeatable.

MOTIVATION FIRST

- ☐ Use preferred toys, actions, or routines to establish engagement
- ☐ Create natural opportunities through pauses, choices, or playful obstacles
- ☐ Refresh motivation during the session (switch materials, adjust energy, incorporate movement)
- ☐ Avoid power struggles; adjust YOUR expectations to maintain success

COMMUNICATION (ALL DISCIPLINES SUPPORT COMMUNICATION)

- ☐ Use strategic pauses to create opportunities for excitement and initiation
- ☐ Offer meaningful options (not just one item or something they are not interested in)
- ☐ Model functional communication (word, sign, pointing, tapping, AAC)
- ☐ Reinforce all attempts immediately
- ☐ Embed communication within play, movement, and daily routines
- ☐ Choices, choices, choices- give choices for cleaning up, what to do next, where to put things- the more the better

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT/IMITATION

- ☐ Start by imitating the child's actions, sounds, or play patterns
- ☐ Add small, natural variations for the child to imitate
- ☐ Use functional and natural imitation targets that are embedded in play (rather than out of context)
- ☐ Embed imitation within movement, sensory play, and object use
- ☐ Understand that some children may not yet be aware of their body and movements, so work on object imitation first.
Imitation is about building social engagement so make it fun and rewarding!

MOVEMENT AND SENSORY REGULATION

- ☐ Use movement as needed (jumping, running, crawling, pushing/pulling) and weave it naturally into play
- ☐ Match the child's sensory needs—add input if they seek it, reduce input if they avoid it (quieter space, slower pace, fewer materials)
- ☐ Remember: everyone stims—don't stop stims unless unsafe; instead, teach other ways to calm or focus
- ☐ Look for signs of dysregulation (running off, crashing, shutting down) and adjust your pace, activity, or approach
- ☐ Young children focus for 2–6 minutes; movement helps—if a child runs away, change your strategy, not the child

COACHING PARENTS

EXAMPLE

1. ☐ Model the strategy clearly in real-time
2. ☐ Explain the rationale in one simple sentence
3. ☐ Invite caregiver to try while you support
4. ☐ Provide immediate, strengths-based feedback
5. ☐ Connect the strategy to an existing home routine
6. ☐ Maintain a collaborative, supportive tone

1. Model: Provider pauses before giving the snack) "I'm going to wait one second so he can show us what he wants."
2. Explain Rationale (1 sentence): "This pause gives him space to communicate in his own way."
3. Invite Caregiver: "Try holding the snack for just a moment and look interested—he'll likely look at you, reach, or make a sound."
4. Feedback: "That was perfect—you paused just long enough, and he reached right for you. Beautiful job noticing that."
5. Connect to Real Routine: "You already have snack time every day; doing this once or twice during snacks helps him learn to communicate without adding anything extra to your plate."

SELF-REFLECTION

Rationale: A quick check-in helps you recognize what worked, stay flexible, and keep each session joyful and centered around the child and family.

Guiding Principle: Notice what felt good and what created connection. That's where growth happens.

.Checklist:

- ☐ Did I share genuine moments of joy with the child and caregiver?
 - ☐ Did I stay flexible and follow the child's cues and interests?
 - ☐ Did I make the caregiver feel heard, supported, and included?
- ☐ Did I embed goals naturally into play and routines instead of pushing an agenda?
- ☐ Did I help the child and caregiver feel more confident by the end of the session?