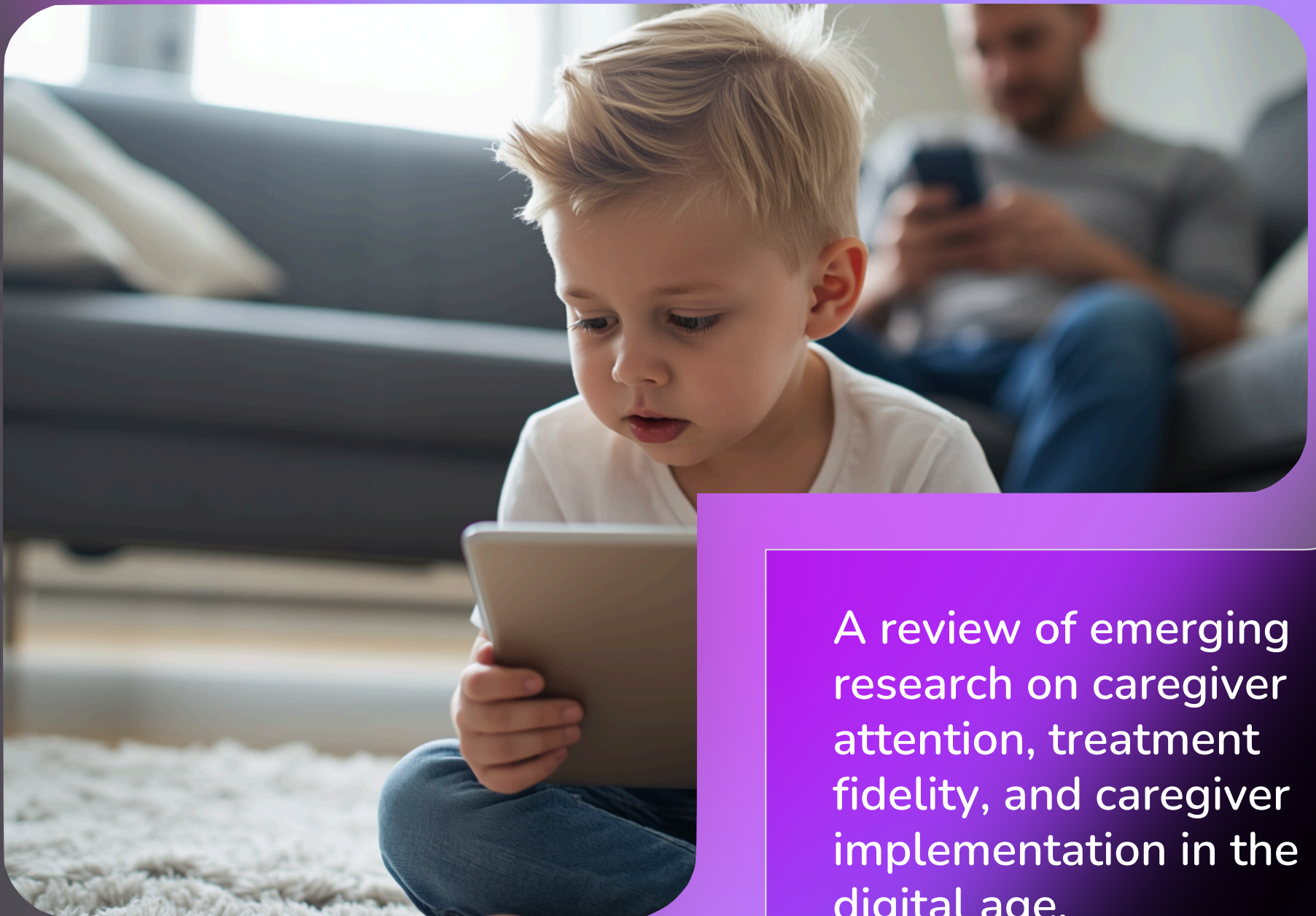




A review of emerging research on caregiver attention, treatment fidelity, and caregiver implementation in the digital age.

What

Toy Story 5

accidentally reveals
about screen time and
caregiver bandwidth



It Was Never Just The Kids Staring At The Screens.

Is screen time the result of distracted parenting, or a *consequence of parental expectations?*

When Pixar announced that the central conflict of *Toy Story 5* would revolve around Bonnie choosing the Lilypad over toys, the premise was easily understood and frankly, a bit obvious. But in the movie, there was another story unfolding in the background, one that the film never explicitly acknowledges.

Whenever children appeared engrossed in digital devices, their parents were almost always in the same room with them, equally doomscrolling. No character calls attention to it. There is no dramatic speech about distracted parenting. In fact, you might miss it entirely. Yet once noticed, it becomes difficult to ignore.

Research on "technoference" suggests that caregiver distraction—whether digital or non-digital—can reduce the quality of parent-child interaction.

For behavior analysts, that raises an important question: if learning depends on opportunities for practice and reinforcement within the natural environment, how might increasingly fragmented attention influence home carryover?

"Families want to follow through, but they're stretched thin and get distracted."

Anonymous BCBA





Parents Must Be Always On, Always Available.

So then for home carryover,
when are they *actually* available?

For children with autism, home carryover bridges the gap between what is learned in therapy and what occurs in the natural environment.

But do our expectations for parents to continue caregiver implementation at home fully account for the realities of today's always-on, always-available society?

55% of US employees feel obligated to answer work messages after hours.

20% of employees actively work on the weekend, checking email before noon.

16% is the year-over-year increase in evening meetings from 2024-2025.

Sources: Pew Research Center, Microsoft

Practice Plans Require Consistency, But Caregiver Capacity Isn't Infinite.

How does infinite digital availability leave finite capacity for home carryover?

Behavior intervention plans, replacement behaviors, visual supports, and social stories are designed to extend learning beyond the therapy room, but they also rely on caregivers having the time and bandwidth to create and implement consistently.

When implementation requires creating individualized social stories, preparing visual supports, or remembering every antecedent strategy, even highly engaged caregivers can struggle to keep up. And BCBAs and RBTs simply don't have additional administrative bandwidth to create these tools for the caregivers, either.

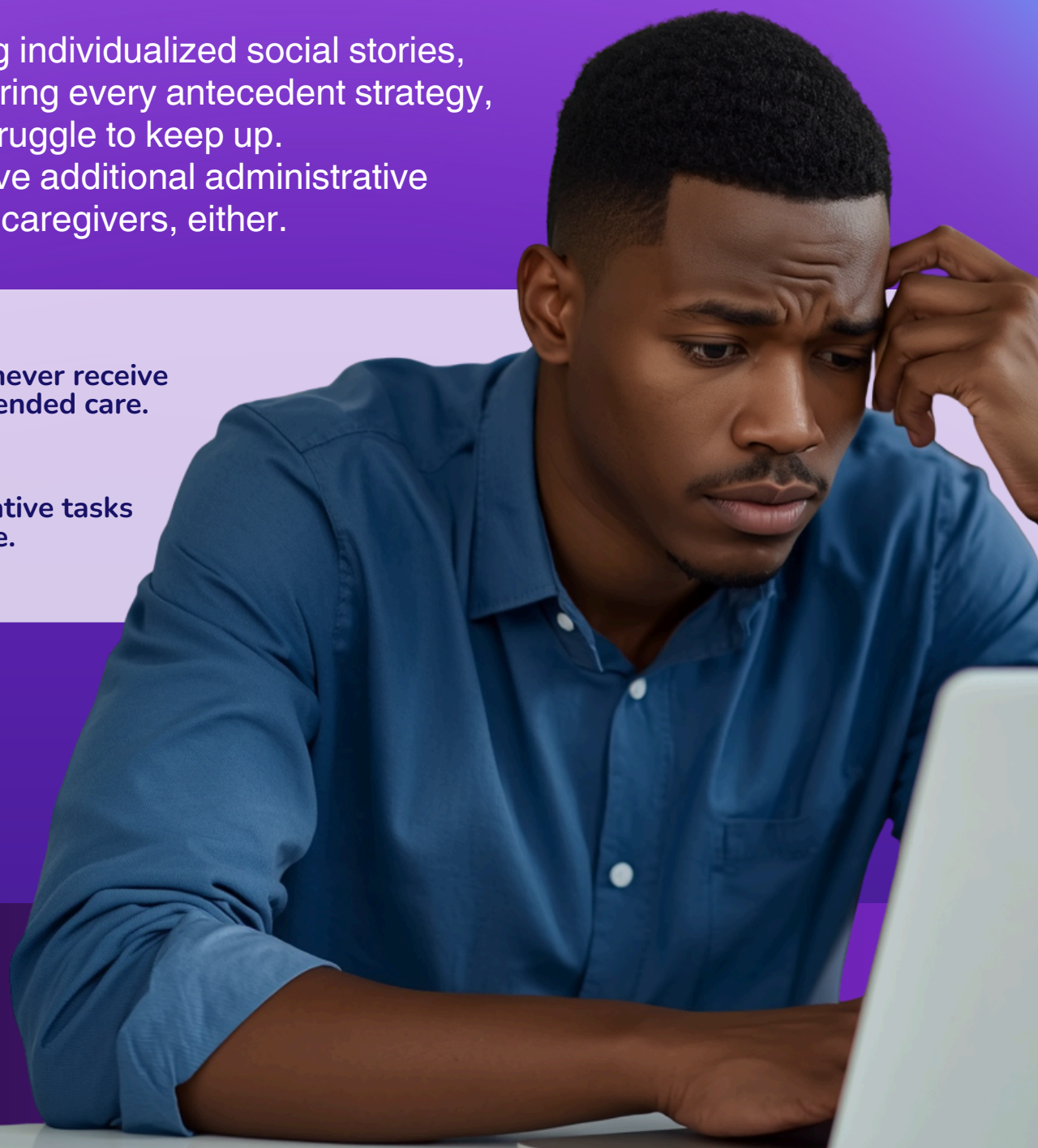
67% of children with autism never receive the full level of recommended care.

61% of BCBAs say administrative tasks pull time from client care.

Sources: Autism Speaks, Rethink BH

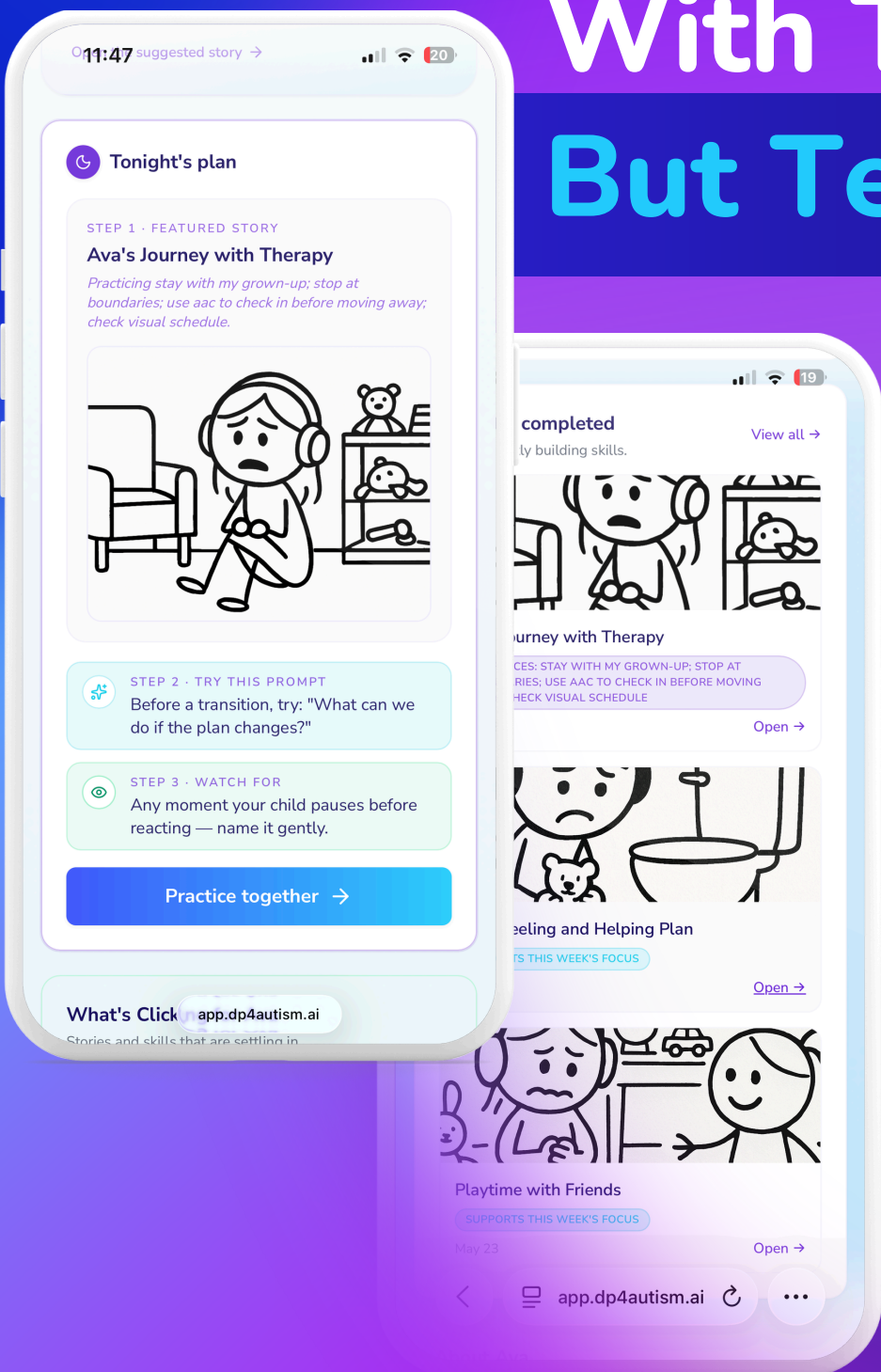
"Between work, therapy appointments, another child, and running a household, I don't have time for all the homework. Sometimes I feel like giving up."

Anonymous Parent





Toy Story 5 Didn't End With Tech Disappearing, But Tech Finding Its Place.



Perhaps the lesson is the same
for all of us, too.

In *Toy Story 5*, Lilypad didn't "beat" the toys, and the toys didn't "beat" Lilypad. Instead, both facets of Bonnie's life worked in tandem to create a better world for Bonnie, because in the end, they both wanted what was best for Bonnie.

For behavior analysts, that may be the more meaningful takeaway. Rather than asking caregivers to eliminate screens altogether, perhaps we should help them transform some of the screen time that's already happening into meaningful opportunities for carryover.

Just like tech shouldn't replace toys, tech should also not replace caregiver involvement. But when used wisely, it can help reduce the friction that prevents caregiver involvement.

Treat Caregiver Bandwidth As An Environmental Variable.

When treatment integrity decreases, consider whether caregiver capacity, not caregiver commitment, is the limiting factor, and openly discuss schedules and work hours during sessions.

Model Realistic Home Carryover Strategies.

Designing recommendations around routines families already have—not routines we wish they had—may be one of the most effective ways to improve generalization.

Help Caregivers Understand How To Use Screen Time With Intention.

The quality and context of screen use matter more than screen time alone. Identify opportunities to use technology to rehearse transitions, replacement behaviors, and other skills that align with goals.

Consider How Technology Can Reduce The Implementation Burden.

If home carryover depends on individualized social stories, visual supports, or practice materials, simplify how families access them. The easier it is, the more likely it is to become part of the child's natural environment.

References

Autism Speaks. (2025). Autism by the Numbers 2025 annual report.

<https://link.assetfile.io/2stobhQOQXuStGVTvrvDGZ/2025+ABN+Annual+Report.pdf>

Hayes, S. A., & Watson, S. L. (2013). The impact of parenting stress: A meta-analysis of studies comparing the experience of parenting stress in parents of children with and without autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43(3), 629–642.

JAMA Pediatrics. (2024). Caregiver screen use and child outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2821940>

LEARN Behavioral. (2024). How to handle screen time with your child with autism.

<https://learnbehavioral.com/blog/how-to-handle-screen-time-in-your-child-with-autism-2>

Maïano, C., Normand, C. L., Salvas, M. C., Moullec, G., & Aimé, A. (2016). Prevalence and correlates of bullying perpetration and victimization among youth with autism spectrum disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(8).

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-015-2669-8>

Barbera, M. (2023). Autism and screen time: Why I wouldn't stop screen time.

<https://marybarbera.com/autism-and-screen-time/>

Microsoft. (2025). Breaking down the infinite workday: 2025 Work Trend Index.

<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/breaking-down-infinite-workday>

People Management. (2024, September 11). Half of employees feel pressured to respond to work outside hours, research finds. <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1789238/half-employees-feel-pressured-respond-work-hours-research-finds>

Pew Research Center. (2023, March 30). How Americans view their jobs.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/30/how-americans-view-their-jobs/>

Pixar Animation Studios. (2025). Toy Story 5. <https://www.pixar.com/toy-story-5>

RethinkBH. (2025). BCBA State of the Profession Survey 2025.

https://cdn.brandfolder.io/O2DHL91/at/pxfqfg95nxsfh5hcrchfc2x/RethinkBH_BCBA_State_of_the_Profession_Survey_2025.pdf

Author's note: This report incorporates peer-reviewed literature, government reports, industry surveys, and qualitative insights gathered through interviews with practicing BCBAs and caregivers to contextualize emerging challenges related to home carryover and caregiver implementation.

About DP4 Social Stories

Named after founder's oldest son, DP4 uses meaningful tech to help bridge the gap between therapy and everyday life for children with autism. Rather than asking families to eliminate technology, DP4 helps transform the screen time that's already happening into opportunities to practice individualized treatment goals. The platform automatically creates personalized social stories, visual schedules, communication cards, first-then boards, and other visual supports based on each child's diagnosis, developmental level, interests, and treatment goals. Designed to reduce caregiver burden—not replace clinical care—DP4 helps extend learning beyond the therapy room and into everyday life.

Learn more at www.dp4autism.ai.

