Intensive Interaction: where has it come from? ... and where is it going?

A research-informed analysis.

Graham Firth

UK NHS Intensive Interaction Project Leader (Retired)

Intensive Interaction Institute – Founding Director (Retired)

Intensive Interaction Institute – Lead for Research & Publications

What is Intensive Interaction?

Intensive Interaction is a person-centred communication approach that directly promotes social inclusion and communication, regardless of their age.

Intensive Interaction is a responsive approach to communication that values each individual's uniqueness, with practitioners consciously adjusting their communicative style to facilitate mutual connection.

Kongress
der Gesellschaft
für Unterstützte
Kommunikation

Before Intensive Interaction* – in the UK

- In the beginning there was just *'Tender Loving Care' (TLC)*:

Across much of the 20th century, for many children and adults with severe/profound learning difficulties, life-long '**care**' was the norm, with little thought given to potential educational or psychological development.

- Then there was a *'Stimulation'* phase:

This phase moved away from the passivity of '**TLC**', with activities developed to variously 'stimulate' people e.g. rebound, multi-sensory rooms, etc. However, people were still often engaged in activities that they had no control over.

(*Informed by the work of **Cath Irvine (**SLT) in *Understanding Intensive Interaction: context and concepts for professionals and families.* JKP; 2010, p. 22-25)

Before Intensive Interaction* – in the UK

- Next came a **'Behavioural'** *phase:*

This phase attempted to structure activities for people in order to somehow 'improve' or modify their behaviour. Thus, 'teaching' (and care) often became outcome focused, with learning 'programmes' set for individuals.

- Then (now?) came a **'Person-Centred'** or **'Responsive'** phase**:**

This phase looked to create activities and services on an individualised basis (in theory), building on their strengths and personal preferences. This is evidenced in the development of approaches like **Intensive Interaction**.

(*Informed by the work of **Cath Irvine (**SLT) in *Understanding Intensive Interaction: context and concepts for professionals and families.* JKP; 2010, p. 22-25)

UK–WELTEN VERBINDEN
LEIPZIG · 06.–08.11.2025

Kongress
der Gesellschaft
für Unterstützte
Kommunikation

The 1980s: The development of Intensive Interaction

- The staff at Harperbury Hospital School (lead by Dave Hewett & Melanie Nind) became uneasy with using behaviour modification techniques.

- They started to think about how to help their students develop their sociability and their 'fundamental communication' skills and understandings.

- Dave and Melanie met with Dr Geraint Ephraim, a clinical psychologist who had developed an approach he called '**augmented mothering**', who suggested they read up on infant-caregiver interactions.

- In 1988 the first Intensive Interaction paper was published : '**Interaction as Curriculum**' by Nind & Hewett in the *British Journal of Special Education.*

A new century (from 2000-2010):
more dissemination and more research :

- Dave Hewett continues to disseminate Intensive Interaction widely, and in 2002 Dave and SLT Cath Irvine organise the first **Intensive Interaction Conference**, attended by well over 200 delegates at Birmingham University.

- More books: '**Implementing Intensive Interaction in Schools: Guidance for Practitioners, Managers, and Coordinators**' (2003) by Kellett, M. & Nind, M..

- Also in 2003, the first Intensive Interaction website, was launched at **www.IntensiveInteraction.co.uk**.

- In 2008, the first **Australian I.I. Conference** was held in Brisbane.

UK–WELTEN VERBINDEN
LEIPZIG · 06.–08.11.2025

Kongress
der Gesellschaft
für Unterstützte
Kommunikation

A new century (from 2000-2010):
more dissemination and more research :

More '**outcome focused**' research is published, including:

- Kellett, M. (2000) **'Sam's story: evaluating Intensive Interaction in terms of its effect on the social and communicative ability of a young child with SLD',** *Support for Learning*, 15, 165-71.

- Leaning, B. & Watson T. (2006) **'From the inside looking out – an Intensive Interaction group for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities',** *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 34, 103-109.

- Samuel, J., Nind, M., Volans, A. & Scriven, I. (2008) **'An evaluation of Intensive Interaction in community living settings for adults with profound intellectual disabilities'** *J. of Intellectual Disabilities,* 12, 111-126.

- Zeedyk, S., Davies, C., Parry, S. & Caldwell, P. (2009) '**Fostering social engagement in Romanian children with communicative impairments: The experiences of newly trained practitioners of Intensive Interaction**', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37(3), 186-196.

Kongress
der Gesellschaft
für Unterstützte
Kommunikation

2010 onwards: the use of Intensive Interaction broadens across user and practitioner groups with service, professional and policy development

- Intensive Interaction is now used across a wider range of groups of people e.g. intellectual disability, autism, dementia, Acquired Brain Injury, challenging behaviour (due to communication breakdown), children with PDA or PDOC/MCS.

- The approach has moved out from special education classrooms into mainstream schools, families, residential and day services, speech therapy, occupational therapy, psychological services, etc.

- The approach is now taught on a variety of professional qualifications, at both undergraduate and post graduate level.

- Intensive Interaction is explicitly advocated in UK Government and NGO practice guidelines e.g. the Dept. of Health, the Dept. of Education, the RCSLT, the BPS/APS, NIHCE, MENCAP, NAS, etc.

- Intensive Interaction is now used across the world (nearly).

UK–WELTEN VERBINDEN
LEIPZIG · 06.–08.11.2025

Kongress
der Gesellschaft
für Unterstützte
Kommunikation

2010 onwards: the research focus broadens and begins to differentiate in the user group and context of use.

- Harris, C. & Wolverson, E. (2014) **'Intensive Interaction: to build fulfilling relationships',** *Journal of Dementia Care*. 22(6), 27-30.

- Berry, R., Firth, G., Leeming, C. & Sharma, V. (2014) **Clinical Psychologists' Views of Intensive Interaction as an Intervention in Learning Disability Services,** *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 21(5), 403-410.

- McKim, J. & Samuel, J. (2020) **The use of Intensive Interaction within a PBS framework**, *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *49*(2), 129–137.

- Strange, J. (2021**) Improvised music to support Intensive Interaction for children with complex needs: A feasibility study of brief adjunctive music therapy**, *British Journal of Music Therapy,* 35 (2), 43–52.

- Berridge, S. & Hutchinson, N. (2021) **Mothers' experience of Intensive Interaction**, *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 26 (2), 391–406.

UK–WELTEN VERBINDEN
LEIPZIG · 06.–08.11.2025

Kongress
der Gesellschaft
für Unterstützte
Kommunikation

Intensive Interaction now and into the future …

Phases of Intensive Interaction evolution:

1. Development Phase (1980s onwards)
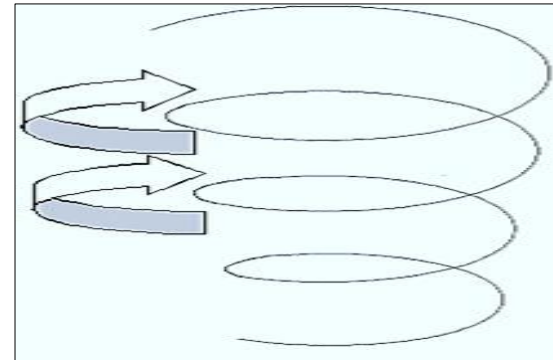
2. Dissemination and Research Phase (1990s onwards)

3. Service and Policy Development Phase (2000s onwards)
e.g. DoE - QCA/QCDA, DoH - VPN, NICE, RCSLT, etc…

4. Differentiation and Integration Phase (2010s onwards)

In a Developmental Spiral?

2023:

Fotoglou, A., et al. (2023)
'Sociability: The key to sensory processing disorder'
Brazilian Journal of Science and Technology, 2(1), 82-97.
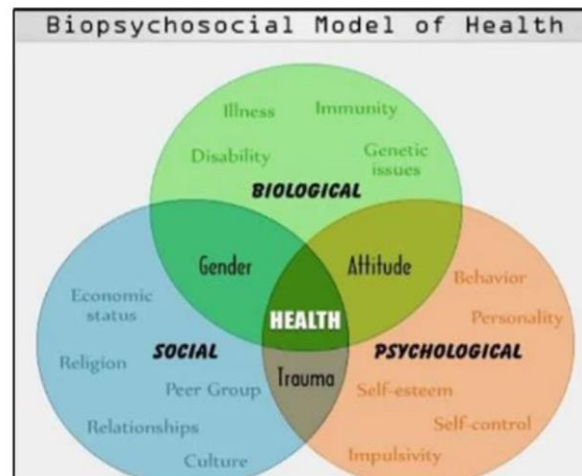
The bio-psycho-social model of health?

'… the outcomes demonstrated a direct link between sociability and sensory processing disorder with interventions and therapeutic programs implemented … One of the most effective interventions that helps [is] **Intensive Interaction** *with high contribution to the sensory regulation of children mainly with autism.'*

2025:

A new psychological 'Model' of Intensive Interaction
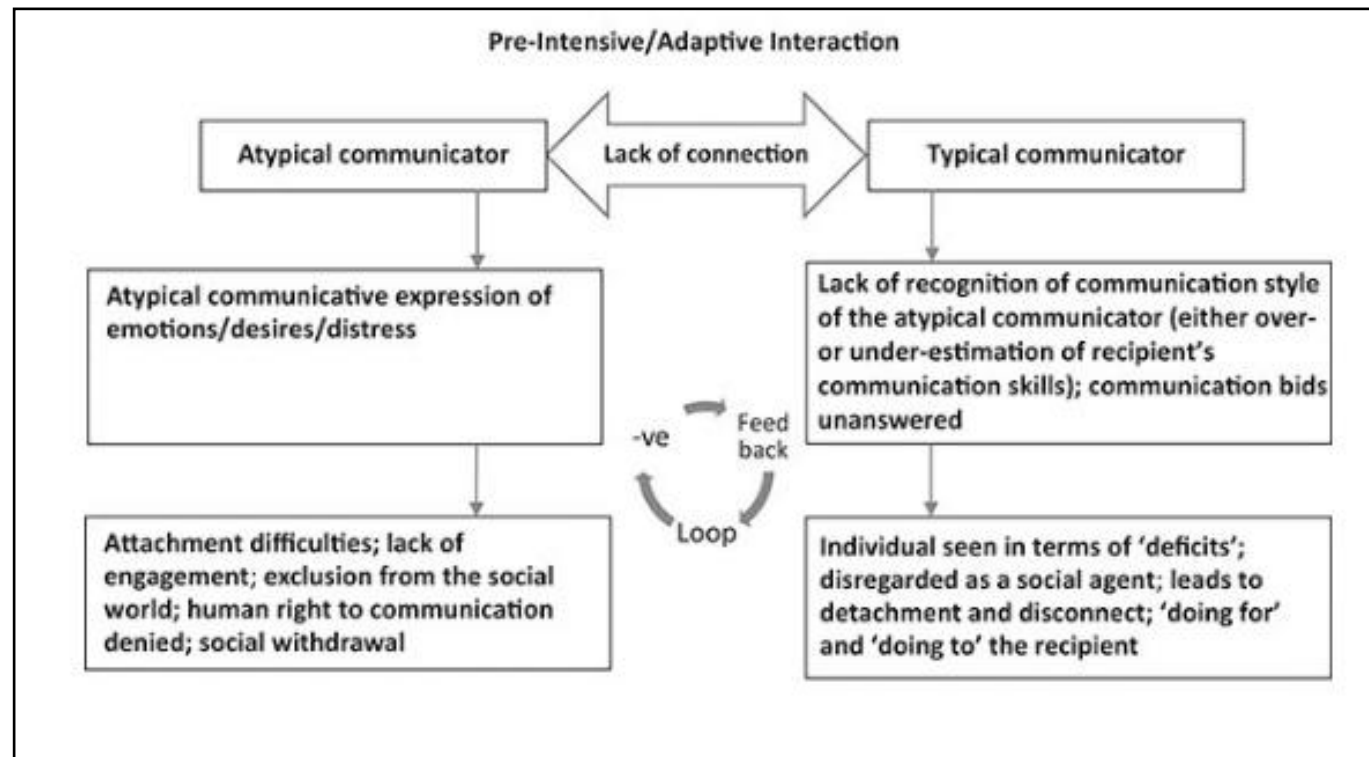### *'Integrating Intensive Interaction Principles into Psychological Practice'*
Doswell, S. & Ellis, M.

Part A: Pre-Intensive (Adaptive) Interaction

Pre-Intensive/Adaptive Interaction

Atypical communicator	Lack of connection	Typical communicator

Atypical communicative expression of emotions/desires/distress

Lack of recognition of communication style of the atypical communicator (either over- or under-estimation of recipient's communication skills); communication bids unanswered

-ve Feed back Loop

Attachment difficulties; lack of engagement; exclusion from the social world; human right to communication denied; social withdrawal

Individual seen in terms of 'deficits'; disregarded as a social agent; leads to detachment and disconnect; 'doing for' and 'doing to' the recipient

2025:

A new psychological 'Model' of Intensive Interaction
'Integrating Intensive Interaction Principles into Psychological Practice'
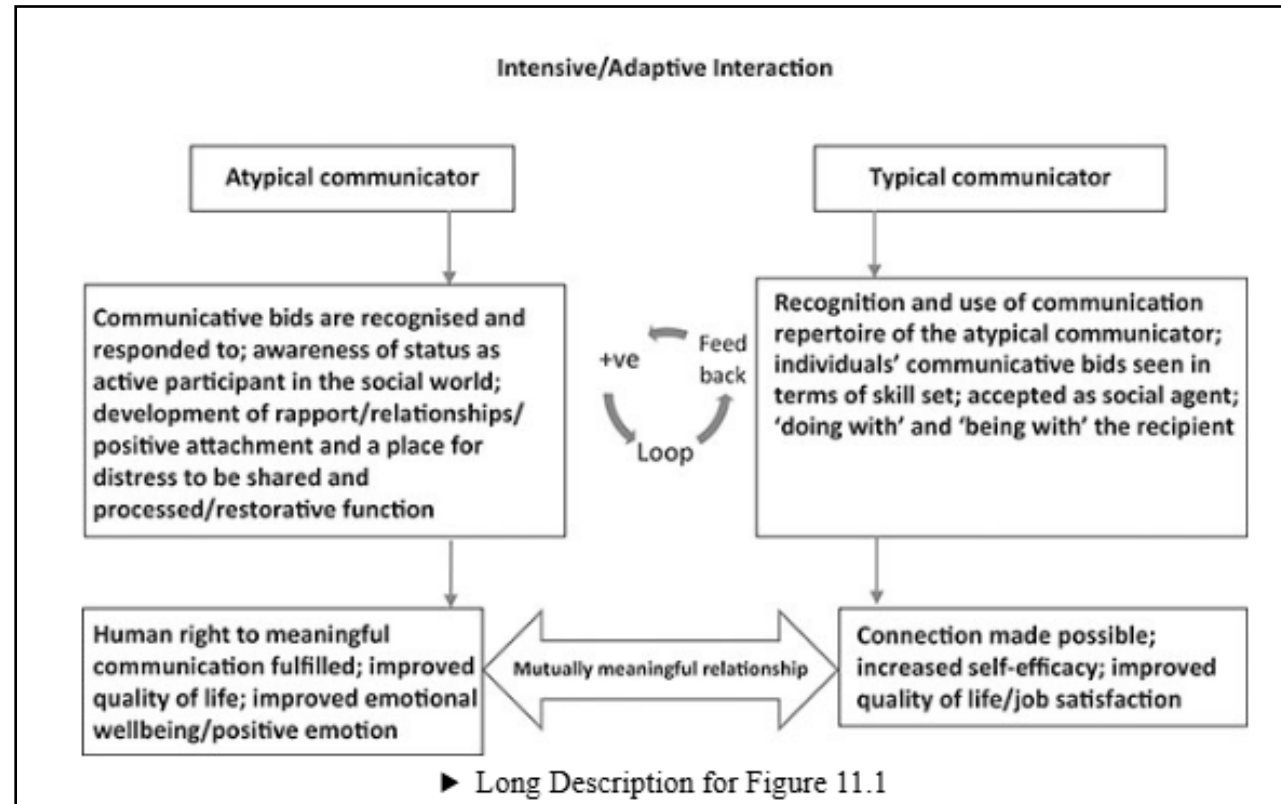### Doswell, S. & Ellis, M.

Part B: with Intensive (Adaptive) Interaction

Intensive/Adaptive Interaction

Atypical communicator		Typical communicator
Communicative bids are recognised and responded to; awareness of status as active participant in the social world; development of rapport/relationships/ positive attachment and a place for distress to be shared and processed/restorative function	+ve Feed back Loop	Recognition and use of communication repertoire of the atypical communicator; individuals' communicative bids seen in terms of skill set; accepted as social agent; 'doing with' and 'being with' the recipient
Human right to meaningful communication fulfilled; improved quality of life; improved emotional wellbeing/positive emotion	Mutually meaningful relationship	Connection made possible; increased self-efficacy; improved quality of life/job satisfaction

▶ Long Description for Figure 11.1

Kontakt und weitere Informationen in Deutschland gibt es beim Institut für Intensive Interaction:

(Contact and further information in Germany is available from the Institute for Intensive Interaction - Lena Grans-Wermers, Franca Hansen and Sarah Klug).

info@intensiveinteraction.de

www.intensiveinteraction.de

Danke fürs Zuhören …

Graham Firth

e-mail me at: *graham.firth@IntensiveInteraction.org*

Please follow my Blog and visit my website at:
www.ConnectingwithIntensiveInteraction.com