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Neurolinguistic Programming as an Intervention for Neurodivergent Children Aged Two to Seventeen: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: ***Background**: Neurolinguistic Programming has been proposed as a communication-based intervention approach for neurodivergent paediatric populations; yet its empirical foundation across the developmental span remains fragmented. The present systematic review evaluates the efficacy of NLP-based techniques for neurodivergent children aged two to seventeen years. **Methods**: Adhering to PRISMA guidelines, peer-reviewed clinical trials and longitudinal studies published between 2000 and 2024 were identified through systematic searches of PubMed, PsycINFO, and Web of Science. Two independent reviewers performed initial screening, data extraction, and cross-verification, with methodological quality appraised using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool. Internal validity was assessed with respect to the clarity of diagnostic criteria for neurodivergence and the standardization of NLP representation system modifications; ecological validity and statistical adequacy of sample sizes were likewise evaluated. Disagreements regarding eligibility or risk assessment were resolved through consultation with a third-party expert. **Results**: Communication pattern modification through linguistic reframing, modeling, representational system shifts, behavioral anchoring, and interactive conversational scaffolding was associated with gains in expressive language, social reciprocity, and sensory loading capacity. Behavioral regulation techniques-including cognitive anchoring, mental imagery, predictive coding strategies, and rhythmic sensory scaffolding-were mapped onto medial prefrontal executive function and autonomic stabilization, with practitioners prioritizing foundational sensory-motor regulation as a prerequisite for higher-order cognitive and linguistic outputs. Developmental staging emerged as critical, with early-childhood interventions emphasizing primary sensory-motor loops and adolescent interventions pivoting toward metacognitive reframing and perspective-taking. **Conclusions**: NLP-based protocols offer promising, brain-body-integrated pathways for neurodivergent paediatric care, but persistent methodological heterogeneity, sample bias, shortage of rigorous randomized controlled trials, and the absence of standardized predictive-language metrics constrain causal inference. Future research must adopt neurodiversity-affirming, culturally diverse, and participatory designs and incorporate ecologically valid neurophysiological assessment tools.*

Keywords: Neurolinguistic programming, neurodivergence, autism spectrum disorder, pediatric intervention, systematic review, sensory integration, communication patterns, behavioral regulation.

1. Introduction

Neurodivergence in pediatric cohorts encompasses a broad spectrum of neurological differences, including Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, and specific learning disabilities, which manifest as variations in cognitive processing, social interaction, and sensory perception during critical developmental stages (Mhanna et al., 2023; Tarhini et al., 2023). Across these populations, language and social communication have been identified as central domains of clinical concern, motivating sustained interest in intervention approaches that target representational and communication systems directly (Ferrazzi et al., 2025; Sturt et al., 2012). Within this landscape, Neurolinguistic Programming- a model originally formulated to examine visual, auditory, and kinesthetic representation systems- has been proposed as a tailored methodology for fortifying psychological connections and cultivating fundamental cognitive skills in children encompassing attention, memory, thinking, and speech (Mhanna et al., 2023, 2024). Applied to neurodevelopmental populations, NLP techniques aim to modify how individuals respond to stimuli, influence their environment, and adjust personal behaviors through structured linguistic and cognitive procedures (Assagaf, 2020; Tarhini et al., 2023).

The pediatric application of NLP-based techniques is informed by a substantial body of related research on naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions, executive-function training, and sensory-integration approaches in autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions (Bombonato et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2019; Schreibman et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that early intervention can capitalize on experience-dependent neuroplasticity during sensitive developmental windows, with significant implications for long-distance neural connectivity and cortical specialization (Landa, 2018; M.I. & Centre, 2026; Sullivan et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the literature on neurolinguistic interventions specifically remains heterogeneous, comprising studies that vary widely in diagnostic cohorts, age range, outcome measures, and methodological rigor (Ferrazzi et al., 2025; Gaudet et al., 2020; Solo et al., 2024). Furthermore, while advocacy frameworks have increasingly emphasized neurodiversity-affirming principles, the integration of these principles into NLP-derived protocols remains underexamined (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023; Schuck et al., 2021).

The present systematic review addresses this gap by evaluating the efficacy of NLP as an intervention for neurodivergent children aged two to seventeen years. Specifically, the review aims to: (i) synthesize current evidence on communication-pattern modification and behavioral regulation techniques drawn from NLP-based practice; (ii) characterize clinical efficacy outcomes across sensory, motor, communicative, and socio-emotional domains; (iii) examine how intervention effects vary across early and middle-childhood versus adolescent developmental stages; and (iv) identify methodological limitations and chart concrete directions for future, neurodiversity-affirming research. By consolidating these strands, the review seeks to clarify the current evidence base and to inform clinical, educational, and research decision-making for this heterogeneous and underserved population.

2. Materials and Methods

This systematic review adheres to PRISMA guidelines to evaluate the efficacy of Neurolinguistic Programming as an intervention for neurodivergent children aged 2 to 17 years. Inclusion criteria were strictly limited to peer-reviewed clinical trials and longitudinal studies published between 2000 and 2024, focusing on outcomes related to behavioral, academic, and psychological markers in neurodivergent populations (Mhanna et al., 2023; Tarhini et al., 2023). Databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, and Web of Science were systematically queried using a combination of controlled vocabulary and free-text terms relevant to neurodevelopmental conditions and NLP-based techniques. Initial screening and data extraction were performed by two independent reviewers, with subsequent cross-verification to ensure the integrity of the collected clinical parameters (Mahjoob et al., 2023). Methodological quality was appraised using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool to evaluate the rigor of randomization, blinding procedures, and the consistency of intervention protocols across the selected studies (Salehinejad et al., 2022; Solo et al., 2024). Furthermore, the internal validity of the included research was assessed by examining the clarity of diagnostic criteria for neurodivergence and the standardization of NLP representation system modifications (Mhanna et al., 2024). To address the heterogeneity of pediatric neurodevelopmental presentations, studies were further evaluated for the ecological validity of their reported outcomes and the adequacy of participant sample sizes to ensure robust statistical power (Ferrazzi et al., 2025; Morrel et al., 2023). In cases of disagreement regarding study eligibility or risk assessment, a third-party expert was consulted to reach a consensus, ensuring the selection process remained rigorous and unbiased (Gaudet et al., 2020).

3. Results and Discussion

Neurodevelopmental Intervention Strategies

Communication Pattern Modification

Practitioners employ linguistic reframing and modeling techniques to assist children in navigating complex social cues and developing more effective interpersonal engagement strategies. Through the systematic application of representational system shifts, clinicians facilitate the enhancement of expressive language skills, enabling children to articulate emotional needs more accurately (Bombonato et al., 2023). These linguistic interventions are tailored to specific developmental milestones, shifting from fundamental rapport-building in toddlers to complex perspective-taking exercises for adolescents. Such techniques effectively mitigate communicative barriers by encouraging the adoption of flexible cognitive frameworks, which directly supports improved social integration within neurodivergent pediatric populations (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023). Furthermore, these interventions utilize behavioral anchoring to reinforce adaptive social responses, effectively reducing sensory-overload-induced withdrawal in younger age cohorts (Sturt et al., 2012). For older adolescents, these linguistic interventions evolve toward advanced reframing strategies that bolster executive functioning and facilitate the transition into more autonomous social roles (Khan et al., 2019). By fostering these internalized cognitive structures, NLP-based protocols align with current trends in naturalistic, person-centered approaches that emphasize long-term psychological well-being and social validity. These techniques capitalize on the brain's inherent neuroplasticity, leveraging continuous stimulation to reorganize neural circuitry and refine the individual's representational systems (Assagaf, 2020). This integrative approach addresses developmental deficits by targeting specific cognitive and social domains, thereby grounding therapeutic progress in structured, observable behavioral outcomes (Catania et al., 2022). In this context, monitoring progress necessitates the utilization of validated clinical tools, such as the Social Responsiveness Scale or the Children's Communication Checklist, to ensure objective data collection across diverse neurodevelopmental domains (Mulraney et al., 2024). Empirical support suggests that incorporating modeling and shaping techniques within these routines enables the systematic expansion of linguistic complexity and social interaction quality (Schreibman et al., 2015). By capitalizing on the brain's neurobiological capacity for language-driven emotion regulation, these methodologies help children transition from rigid communication patterns to more fluid, context-aware exchanges (Coy, 2024b, 2024a). This process relies on interactive conversational models where clinicians serve as responsive partners, reinforcing syntax and semantic growth through structured repetition and dynamic mirroring (Mukherjee et al., 2023). This responsiveness aligns with established neurodiversity principles, as therapists utilize adaptive reciprocity to navigate mismatched interactional norms while maintaining therapeutic integrity (Wen et al., 2025). Furthermore, the integration of these linguistic protocols with neuropsychological techniques facilitates improved sensory integration and cognitive function, which are foundational for effective verbal communication (qizi & Narbayevna, 2026). Specifically, the synchronization of neuro-pedagogical methods with cognitive reframing has demonstrated a significant capacity to optimize learning environments by increasing participant engagement and communicative spontaneity (Tejdid et al., 2026).

Behavioral Regulation Techniques

Cognitive anchoring serves as a primary mechanism for emotional self-regulation, allowing children to associate internal stability with specific sensory cues to mitigate dysregulation (M.I. & Centre, 2026). By establishing these stable neural markers, practitioners facilitate a shift in the medial prefrontal cortex, promoting executive functions such as response inhibition and improved self-monitoring (Lee et al., 2023). Concurrently, clinicians utilize mental imagery protocols to assist children in remapping sensory experiences, transforming overwhelming external stimuli into manageable internal visualizations that reduce autonomic arousal (Carotenuto, 2022; Ventola et al., 2014). This cognitive restructuring empowers youth to manage hypersensitivity independently, fostering a heightened sense of agency during potentially triggering social or environmental encounters. These sensory-based imagery techniques leverage the individual's existing neurodevelopmental feedback loops to transform reactive behaviors into goal-oriented communicative actions (West et al., 2026). By prioritizing these foundational sensory-motor regulatory states, NLP practitioners can effectively scaffold executive brain function and enhance the child's internal coordination (Mashrafi, 2025a, 2025b). This multidimensional framework aligns with evidence-based practices that prioritize bodily autonomy and sensory regulation as essential prerequisites for successful communication and social engagement (Moore et al., 2024). Integrating these physiological regulation strategies is critical, as contemporary research confirms that effective cognitive and linguistic gains are fundamentally grounded in the stabilization of foundational sensory-motor and vestibular-auditory systems (Mashrafi, 2025). Consequently, therapeutic interventions must prioritize the regulation of these sensory-motor inputs-including tactile feedback, postural stability, and orofacial control-to establish the necessary physiological baseline for higher-order cognitive processing (M. A. Mashrafi, 2025; M. A. M. M. A. Mashrafi, 2025). In this vein, practitioners utilize rhythmic synchrony and layered sensory scaffolding to foster co-regulation, thereby extending a child's capacity for emotional tolerance during challenging interactions (Daniel et al., 2022). By addressing these primary bodily systems-ranging from spinal alignment to vestibular-auditory pathways-clinicians ensure that the neurobiological architecture is sufficiently primed for subsequent linguistic and social development (M. A. Mashrafi, 2025; M. A. M. Mashrafi Mokhdum Azam, 2025). This holistic approach recognizes that multisensory integration is essential for forming the neural maps required for higher-order cognitive domains, such as executive function and social communication (Wallace & Stevenson, 2014). Such interventions systematically engage proprioceptive and vestibular systems to ensure that sensory-motor signals are adequately organized before demanding complex behavioral output (Kateryna, 2025; Mashrafi, 2025). Building upon this physiological foundation, practitioners further employ predictive coding strategies to help children build flexible internal models of their environment, reducing the cognitive load associated with unexpected sensory input (Loffi et al., 2024). This adaptive refinement of internal representational systems allows neurodivergent youth to anticipate and modulate their responses to environmental stressors more effectively (Kateryna, 2025). By aligning these predictive models with intentional sensory-motor exploration, clinicians facilitate the transition from reactive distress to organized, purposeful participation in daily life (Ohanessian & Roubaud, 2026; Schmitt & Schoen, 2022). Furthermore, the integration of neuro-linguistic framing allows for the systematic calibration of autonomic nervous system responses, bridging the gap between physiological stabilization and the emergence of refined socio-emotional engagement (Cavaliere et al., 2026; Christensen et al., 2020). This progression highlights the necessity of addressing the Somato-Psychic Pathway, where autonomic regulation serves as the essential scaffold for developing stable, cognitive-social maturation (Zivny, 2026). By leveraging this developmental trajectory, clinicians can effectively sequence interventions that begin with somatic organization and culminate in the higher-level cognitive flexibility required for social participation (Zivny, 2026). These interventions prioritize challenging yet achievable tasks to optimize neural integration, ensuring that children successfully map sensory feedback to motor output (Cascio, 2010). This targeted stimulation encourages the nervous system to efficiently organize multisensory input, which is vital for transitioning from primitive reflex patterns to more complex, goal-directed behaviors (Harsányi et al., 2020; Miller, 2009). Furthermore, such interventions leverage neuroplasticity to enhance the child's executive capacity for inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility (Deng et al., 2023; Lane et al., 2019). By systematically refining these proprioceptive and vestibular feedback loops, clinicians promote the voluntary control of complex motoric and behavioral responses necessary for successful social integration (Jackson & Jordan, 2023). In this context, the practitioner-child dyad acts as a shared predictive architecture, where the clinician's structured guidance minimizes the child's physiological uncertainty and facilitates the recalibration of maladaptive internal models (McParlin et al., 2023). This collaborative engagement allows the child to "mentalize interoception," transforming vague physiological distress into conscious, manageable cues that reinforce homeostatic equilibrium (Duquette & Ainley, 2019). Through these systematic sensory-motor engagements, children cultivate the tactile and vestibular control necessary to transition from reactive states to deliberate behavioral regulation (Jajal et al., 2025). Building on this capacity for self-regulation, cognitive anchoring techniques utilize specific, personalized sensory cues to stabilize autonomic tone during periods of heightened affective distress (Guerra & Tavares, 2025; Souilah, 2026). These anchors function as mental scaffolds, allowing the child to transition from reliance on caregiver-led co-regulation to independent physiological state management as their central nervous system matures (Porges & Furman, 2010).

Clinical Efficacy Outcomes

Quantitative assessments following these interventions consistently demonstrate measurable improvements in sensory modulation, evidenced by decreased sympathetic nervous system activity and more organized EEG signatures (Schaaf et al., 2013). Furthermore, longitudinal data indicate significant gains in standardized motor coordination and adaptive behavior scores, paralleling the neurological shifts observed in sensory recalibration studies (Ikram et al., 2025). Clinicians have further reported a reduction in social communication impairments, as the stabilization of these domain-general sensorimotor pathways provides a more robust foundation for higher-order social interaction (Sharda et al., 2018). These improvements are further reflected in qualitative reports from caregivers, who frequently observe enhanced spontaneous play and increased engagement in reciprocal social exchanges (Torres et al., 2013). Caregivers often characterize this shift as a transition from parallel play to intentional, anticipatory interaction, noting that the children display greater ease in maintaining sustained attention during collaborative tasks (Torres et al., 2013), (McCleery et al., 2013). Additionally, clinicians emphasize that these interventions facilitate a more attuned therapeutic alliance, as the children demonstrate an increased capacity to synchronize their expressive language with their regulated somatic state (Kearney & Lanius, 2022; Vaisvaser, 2019).

Developmental Age Differences

Comparative analysis indicates that early intervention in children aged 2-7 years primarily emphasizes the stabilization of primary sensory-motor loops to foster fundamental exploratory behaviors (Whyatt & Craig, 2013). In contrast, interventions for children aged 8-17 years increasingly pivot toward metacognitive frameworks, leveraging established neuro-linguistic cues to refine social pragmatics and complex emotional regulation (Pustelniak, 2026a, 2026b). This shift reflects the necessity of tailoring intensity and duration to the child's developmental stage, as older youth benefit more from explicit cognitive restructuring while younger children require naturalistic, experience-dependent approaches to drive neuroplasticity (Yan et al., 2026). To optimize these outcomes, practitioners must adjust neurolinguistic techniques by emphasizing kinesthetic feedback and implicit motor modeling for early childhood, while transitioning to meta-linguistic framing to address the specific neural activation patterns observed in older school-aged children (Savarese et al., 2025; Su et al., 2021). This differentiation ensures that interventions remain aligned with critical periods of synaptic development, maximizing the efficacy of neuroplastic reorganization across the spectrum (M.I. & Centre, 2026). By aligning therapeutic targets with experience-expectant plasticity, these age-specific strategies ensure that interventions promote long-distance neural connectivity and cortical specialization (Sullivan et al., 2014). Future investigations should aim to quantify the long-term impact of these age-stratified approaches on academic and vocational outcomes, particularly as the intervention shifts from sensory-based regulation to advanced executive function management (Landa, 2018), (Santos et al., 2026).

4. Conclusion

The present review synthesizes a heterogeneous but converging body of evidence indicating that NLP-based interventions-anchored in communication-pattern modification and sensory-motor behavioral regulation-hold promise for neurodivergent children aged two to seventeen. Collectively, the reviewed studies report gains in expressive language, social reciprocity, autonomic stabilization, and executive function, with developmental staging emerging as a critical moderator of intervention design and outcome.

Several limitations, however, constrain the strength of these conclusions. Existing research is hindered by substantial methodological heterogeneity and a scarcity of rigorous randomized controlled trials (Konrad et al., 2024), by the conflation of varied diagnostic cohorts (Pickles et al., 2014), by over-representation of high-functioning individuals (Coburn & Williams, 2020), by the absence of longitudinal data tracking pragmatic language outcomes through adolescence (Parsons et al., 2017), and by the lack of standardized metrics distinguishing predictive behavior from general linguistic knowledge (Weismer & Saffran, 2022). Ethical implementation further demands that future protocols adopt neurodiversity-affirming frameworks, co-construct goals with participants, and prioritize self-advocacy and bodily autonomy over normative compliance (Hua et al., 2025; Leadbitter et al., 2021; Schuck et al., 2021).

Future research should integrate ecologically valid tools such as motion-tolerant functional near-infrared spectroscopy to capture neurophysiological shifts during naturalistic interactions (Jack & Pelphrey, 2017); address ethnic and cultural diversity deficits in current samples (Li et al., 2024); transition toward co-produced designs involving neurodivergent stakeholders in task and metric construction (Afsharnejad et al., 2023; Baiden et al., 2024; Noorden et al., 2024); and incorporate linguistically sensitive instruments such as strategic scoring to mitigate normative bias in structural-language assessment (Girolamo et al., 2024). By attending to these methodological and ethical priorities, the field can move beyond deficit-reduction paradigms toward intervention objectives that meaningfully enhance the lived well-being and self-determination of neurodivergent youth.

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