



# Relationship Development Intervention (RDI®)

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If you have a child with autism, you may be familiar with the various therapies available to you. It is common for children with autism to see a speech language pathologist, an occupational therapist, a child psychologist, and a number of other specialists. Each one addresses specific challenges for a child, and can help with the development of various skills.

In 2000, a new approach to helping children with autism came on the scene. Developed by Dr. Steven E. Gutstein, a research psychologist and internationally renowned pioneer in the field of developmental disabilities, this approach was outlined in his book, *Autism Aspergers: Solving the Relationship Puzzle: A New Developmental Program that Opens the Door to Lifelong Social and Emotional Growth*.<sup>1</sup> His intervention is known as Relationship Development Intervention (RDI®). Recognizing that children with autism have core neurological challenges, he proposed that first establishing and fostering a strong guiding relationship — usually with a parent — will enable children to maximize their learning in various therapeutic and home settings. Professionals who become RDI® certified are trained to teach caregivers the principles outlined by Dr. Gutstein to re-establish a guiding relationship with their children, and then to help them learn how to connect with others in developmental sequence. RDI® consultants work with parents and professionals to implement the RDI® program at home and, more recently, in a school setting.

## What is RDI®?

- The program teaches parents how to guide their child to develop reciprocal communication, genuine friendships, confidence, independent living skills, and the ability to flexibly navigate a dynamically changing world.
- It works by activating the child's growth-seeking drive, which allows the child to learn new skills.
- RDI® helps children who have challenges with motivation, communication, emotional regulation, episodic memory, rapid attention-shifting, self-awareness, appraisal, executive functioning, flexible thinking, and creative problem-solving.



- The program includes parent training in the home. The goal is not to turn family members into therapists, but rather to guide them to develop the strong relationships necessary to support their child's growth.
- A trained RDI® consultant works with a family to develop individualized objectives. These are based on the parents' profiles and the child's developmental level. They focus on skills like joint attention, sense of self-competence, ability to co-regulate, emotional responsibility, self-regulation, and dynamic or flexible thinking.
- Early in the RDI® program, the family learns about the core challenges of autism and how to create an environment that helps the child feel safe and excited to learn. The consultant can then assess the child's developmental readiness. This provides a complete picture of each person's strengths and weaknesses, possible co-occurring conditions, and developmental obstacles.

## Implementing RDI®

The two main phases in implementing RDI® are: re-establishing the guiding relationship; and overcoming individual obstacles.

### The Guiding Relationship

When children are born, parents hold them lovingly in their arms. As newborn babies can only focus on things 8 to 12 inches away, babies study their parents' faces and features. This is the first step in establishing a bond between a parent and a child that helps the child to form a trusting relationship in the early days of infancy.

When one of my autistic children was young, he couldn't look at my face. I know now that the sensory overload of looking at someone's face was too much for him to handle. This prevented us from forging a trusting relationship. In fact, I don't think he started trusting me until he was about five years old. My other son took even longer to develop trust in me.

This scenario is common as young children with autism are sometimes unable to make use of the cues needed to develop a bonded relationship. When my baby boy looked into my eyes, he felt like he was being attacked because of the sensory overload. For my part, I felt like he didn't care about me or love me. We had to build and reestablish a guiding relationship; this is the first step in RDI®.



Part of building this relationship is developing a deep understanding of your child's strengths and challenges. By paying careful attention and taking time to understand your child's needs, you can determine what is leading to a breakdown in the guiding relationship. For example, when people speak, their eyes and mouth are in motion, their body sways back and forth, and they use their hands to gesture. These actions are difficult for my son's visual system to process. As a result, he looks away in order to process the auditory information without having to simultaneously process how I am moving. He often tells me that he can either look at me or listen to me, but he cannot do both. When my son looks away, it is a sign that he's paying attention. As I have come to understand his sensory challenges, I can now appreciate the meaning of his actions.

The key is to understand who your child is. Pay attention to his or her needs, and use this information to establish a strong relationship of love and trust.

### Overcoming Obstacles

Once parents have developed an understanding of their child and re-established a guiding relationship, they need to identify critical skills that have not developed in a functional way. For example, my son missed critical visual cues when speaking with others. In another example, I worked with a young girl who relied entirely on auditory information. Every piece of information that she retained needed to be spoken. When her mother would raise an index finger indicating that she should wait a minute, the girl insisted that the mother **say** it and not use gestures. She could not understand visual cues. While auditory cues could be used most of the time, there were times when visual cues were important, such as when the mother was driving in traffic, or when they needed to be quiet during a religious event or ceremony.

Once parents identify which skills have developed and which are missing, they can help their children learn to process that kind of information in a way that works for them. Over time, my son learned how to listen to other people while looking at them. This allowed him to use their facial expressions and hand gestures to help him understand what they were saying. He learned how to

do this in a way that *worked for him*. Over time, the girl who preferred listening over interpreting gestures learned what each visual cue meant, one at a time, until she no longer relied solely on auditory information. When you understand your children's areas of need, it becomes easier to support them in ways that allow you to teach this critical information in a way that works for them.

Another child I worked with had such severe sensory sensitivities that he spent most of his days burrowed in the couch cushions. His mother was distraught because her son could not hug her or sit near her, and their bond of trust was virtually non-existent. We started by having him tolerate his mother sitting on the couch with him, while he burrowed. Eventually we worked out a way for the child and the mother to hold opposite ends of a scarf in lieu of holding hands.

RDI® also focuses on teaching concepts implicitly. When individuals figure things out on their own, the lessons learned stay with them. As an adult, this fact was reinforced for me when I tried to learn how to play a video game that my husband enjoys called Ingress. I would often join him, and he would tell me step-by-step what buttons to push or what to do. However, after weeks of trying to learn from him, I still did not understand what I was doing. It was only after he let **me** make the decisions and determine how to do it for myself that I actually learned how to play the game, even though I made mistakes along the way. The same holds true for our children. If we are constantly giving explicit instructions, they rely on the cues and instructions instead of internalizing the concepts for themselves.

## Relationships

It is important that we not underestimate the value and importance of relationships. We all need to be part of a community.

It can be difficult for autistic individuals to navigate a complex and dynamically changing world. Days can be unpredictable, and schedules are ever-changing. The world is complicated, and it's important for our children to learn how to navigate these challenges. Research has shown that individuals with guiding relationships and healthy family dynamics are better able to withstand the challenges of a changing world and less likely to die of suicide.<sup>2</sup> RDI® was developed to address this important need. Children who are happy to spend time alone and who enjoy their own company still need relationships to navigate the world. Even children who prefer to be alone usually have family; they are not truly alone. We all need others to support us and help us navigate our complex world.

If you love, trust and care for another person, you are willing to work hard for that person and try your best. For example, think about a supervisor that you like or dislike. The quality of your work and the effort you put forth will be greater if you have a positive relationship with that supervisor. The same is true for our children. By establishing a genuine connection and a solid foundation of trust and love with your children, you will see that they work harder and begin to thrive in areas they found challenging or with which they struggled. Learning can be optimized in the home, at school, and in therapy sessions.

Our children are resilient and strong, and are navigating a complex world. RDI® focuses on fostering a guiding relationship that will help them learn how to overcome challenges, handle dynamic situations, and foster strengths. For more information on RDI® or to find a local RDI® consultant, please visit [www.rdiconnect.com](http://www.rdiconnect.com)

## References

1. Gutstein, Steven E. (2000). Autism Aspergers: Solving the Relationship Puzzle: A New Developmental Program that Opens the Door to Lifelong Social and Emotional Growth. *Future Horizons Incorporated*. ISBN: 1885477708
2. Gutstein Steven (1987). Family reconciliation as a response to adolescent crises. *Family Process*, 26(4), 475-491



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