

Raising the Bar with RDI®

Steven Gutstein Ph.D.

More than 30 years have passed since experts found that early intervention could help people with Autism and related conditions like Asperger's Syndrome (collectively referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorders, or "ASD"). Despite decades of dramatically increasing awareness, advocacy and funding, people on the autism spectrum are still marginalized in our society. Less than 12% obtain any kind of jobs. Less than 5% ever live independently. Real friendships are rare and marriages almost non-existent. And even after 30 years our basic approaches to people with ASD remain essentially unchanged! Despite incontrovertible proof that great majority of people diagnosed with the condition have normal intellectual potential. Despite research proving that people with ASD fail, because they do not learn to analyze, evaluate and adjust to the "dynamic" currents of the real world, our intervention programs and services do not even attempt to teach the thinking, problem solving, evaluating and analysis abilities required for an independent life in our ever-changing, rarely predictable society. Our expectations are simply much too low!

Relationship Development Intervention™ (RDI™) is worldwide movement; a community of professionals and parents who insist that it is time to "raise the bar" for the almost 1% of people with ASD. We believe that every human being is born with the drive for continued growth and competence. Somewhere along the line, as in ASD, this drive can be camouflaged, or covered with obstacles. But it never disappears. It simply waits for a time and place to thrive. That is what we intend to provide. We know that with the proper support and guidance, parents, grandparents and teachers can provide children on the autism spectrum with the cognitive, emotional and social tools needed to obtain high quality employment, real reciprocal friendships, independence and, in many cases marriage and successful family life. And we know that it is never too late to start.

How RDI™ works

No single problem causes ASD. Rather for each individual there is a unique "cocktail" of congenital problems that, when combined, serves as a "tipping point," disrupting their ability to participate in early parent-child communication, and preventing even the most masterful parent from conducting the thousands of hours of safe, productive guidance scientists refer to as the "Guided Participation Relationship." As a result of the loss of this essential early partnership, infants and toddlers with ASD retreat into safe but "static" worlds and avoid the everyday challenges, novel problems and uncertain situations that enable typically developing children to become competent, expert problem-solvers and communicators in the real world.

Certified RDI™ consultants are trained to reverse this dead-end process. They teach

parents, grandparents, teachers and other significant adults to re-construct the guided participation relationship. They help break down learning to think and perceive a world full of change and complexity into small, simple components. They teach adults to slow down and amplify information feedback, so that both adults and children are more readily able to understand and adjust to one another.

Adults learn to use the activities of daily life to embed safe, but challenging experiences for the child. Children learn to respond in more flexible, thoughtful ways to novel, increasingly unpredictable settings and problems. Safety and trust emerge as children learn they can see regularity and pattern, even in a continually more complex world. Real-world competence emerges as they take ever-greater responsibility for conquering authentic tasks and problems with many partners, in many settings.

These young “cognitive apprentices” learn that most real-world problems do not have perfect solutions. Success depends operating on a “good enough” basis - differentially allocating sufficient resources to meet specific standards, depending on the nature of the problem. Children learn that expectations and predictions must always be tempered by the idea that the unexpected can occur at any time and that if we take the surprise out of life it becomes hardly worth living. They develop the ability and desire to create states of connection between themselves and others on many different levels. They learn that real communication is a product of what we are thinking and feeling in relation to what our partners think & feel: Building temporary “mental bridges” to collaborate, compare, contrast, integrate, ally, understand and be understood.

Guides have access to a comprehensive online system of more than 1,200 staged objectives carefully developed by Dr. Gutstein to parallel the normal development of thinking, relating and problem solving. Objectives are linked to a state-of-the-art online team communication system, a full series of instructive “webinars” and multi-media learning modules and extensive web-based video library resources.

Parents who participate in the RDI program are reporting dramatic changes:

- Children are significantly more motivated to accept guidance
- Children value time interacting with parents over other activities and objects.
- Children are more interested in how parents and other family members feel.
- Couples report a significant reduction in conflicts and stresses related to the child
- They feel more hopeful and less fearful about what the future holds
- They feel a decreased need to act as a buffer and advocate for the child
- They perceive their children as engaging more in planned, thoughtful action and see a significant increase in their ability to generate productive creative ideas and responses

- Their children show a strong desire to take greater responsibility in their daily lives

2 ½ years after starting RDI less than 15% of children were still in special education classes (compared to over 90% prior to RDI) Parents reported an increase in age-appropriate flexibility and adaptation from 16% to over 70%, while over 90% of children were rated in the “autism” range by the ADOS prior to RDI, after 2 ½ years fewer than 10% received the “autism” rating.

Because of RDI, thousands of parents and educators have now realized that we can give our children and ourselves a second chance. We can provide our children with the opportunity to become dynamic thinkers and communicators. We can create pathways to success and a quality of life.