

age of 9 months). The parent-child feedback system then breaks down and the child's development spirals away from typical development, depriving them of the very relationship which is in fact the true gateway to complex cognitive, emotional and social functioning. As researcher Peter Hobson then says, "*We need to realize that one of the most powerful influences on development is what happens **between** people. Or, in the case of autism, that one of the most harmful things that can affect development is when certain kinds of interaction fail to happen between people.*"

So a primary goal of the RDI® Program's remediation approach to treating autism is to assess exactly where the child left the path of typical development, and then to restore the parent-child feedback system, so the parent has the opportunity to go back and guide their child through the missing steps in a systematic way. Then, just as in typical development, once the parent-child feedback system is in place, each small step becomes an experiential building block to the next, with new skills emerging without needing to be explicitly taught.

Goals of the RDI® Program

New findings from researchers like Hobson and Minshew have made this third generation of autism treatment possible. While still in its infancy, the RDI® Program is already bringing change to thousands of families and we will continue to use the latest research on the brain, autism & developmental psychology to:

1. Design a dynamically evolving, comprehensive program with the potential to remediate the core deficits of ASDs and provide the majority of people with ASD a quality of life.
2. Provide parents with the tools so that they can give their children opportunities for success.
3. Develop the ability for families to independently carry on the process.
4. Increase the child's motivation to accept challenges and master new, more complex environments.
5. Help children develop the internalized ability to succeed in complex dynamic systems which require continuous information processing.
6. Develop the ability for children to independently discover new ways of engaging with their world.

Often described as "the missing link" in the treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorders, the Relationship Development Intervention® (RDI®) Program is a cognitive-developmental treatment program that helps parents learn how to guide their child to desire and succeed in genuine give-and-take relationships, while addressing:

- motivation
- communication,
- emotional regulation,
- episodic memory,
- rapid attention-shifting,
- self-awareness,
- appraisal,
- executive functioning,
- flexible thinking, and
- creative problem-solving.

The RDI® Program is based on the latest scientific research about autism, the brain and developmental psychology. The initial study on the RDI® Program is the first study to ever demonstrate that a clinical intervention method can change a child's diagnostic classification on the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS). This ground-breaking study has been accepted for publication by the peer-reviewed Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders (JADD) and is currently "in press."

For more information, visit our web site at www.RDIconnect.com.

Part 2 of a 4-part series for Autism Awareness Month.
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relationship development intervention
www.RDIconnect.com



**Remediating Autism,
Asperger's and PDD-NOS
through Relationships**

Remediating Autism through Relationships

Because of the new autism research that has been done in the last 10 years, for the first time we have had an opportunity to put many parts of the “autism puzzle” together:

1. Those with Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome and PDD-NOS (the Autism Spectrum Disorders - ASD) do not have a behavioral or social disorder, but a neurologically based information-processing disorder.

Remediation:

applying a “remedy.” A gradual, systematic process of correcting a deficit, to the point where it no longer constitutes an obstacle to reaching one’s potential.

2. The specific information-processing disorder we call “autism” affects all those on the spectrum and has a profound effect on their internal relationship with themselves and their relationship with others. In turn, this has a devastating effect on their motivations and abilities for friendships, employment and independence, regardless of their IQ, language abilities or academic achievements.

3. Autism impacts those on the spectrum in very specific ways: in their motivation and ability to share experiences, co-regulate with others, integrate their own thoughts, feelings and meaning to create personal memories they can use productively in the future (episodic memory), their ability for self-awareness and appraising ‘best-fits’ between themselves and their environment, and their capacity for flexible, creative thinking and problem-solving. We refer to these as the “core deficits” of ASDs.

Essential Attributes of Friendship

Asher, Parker and Walker: Developmental Psychologists and children’s friendship researchers

- Flexible and responsive to others
- Make others feel important & desirable
- Find areas of commonality & connection
- Value others’ feelings, imagination & ideas
- Monitor, maintain & repair relationships
- Manage conflicts effectively
- Trusted, accepting & empathic allies

4. First and second generation compensation approaches to treating autism spectrum disorders have not been shown to impact outcomes related to employment, independent living, friendship or marriage, nor has any improvement in language and

academic skills ever been correlated with improvements in core deficits of autism spectrum disorders.

The Need for Third Generation Treatment – Remediation

When we put the above pieces of the puzzle together,

it becomes obvious that if we are to improve outcomes, we need to specifically target the information-processing deficits for treatment. We already know that children on the autism spectrum can learn. In fact, many

are considered very “bright” with even gifted IQs. The question is, can we help them learn the motivations and abilities that will help them succeed in real life outside of school or other institutions? Can we help those with ASD learn the foundational “success skills” that are not measured by IQ tests?

Many of these success skills we often take for granted in typical individuals: enjoying novelty, being able to cope with uncertainty, “going with the flow,” connecting with others, valuing other’s feelings, ideas and imagination, being flexible, responsive and adaptable, managing and resolving conflicts, seeking out challenges, collaborating with others, taking initiative, being part of a team, assessing situations, seeing the big picture, being resourceful, improvising a solution from what’s available, finding “good enough” solutions, being open to feedback, learning from mistakes, etc. These are just some of the skills needed for friendships, employment and thriving in life. And these are exactly the kind of things that must be on the remediation “curriculum”, if we are to help those on the spectrum lead productive, independent adult lives.

While second generation therapies attempted to teach “social skills” as a way to help compensate, studies have shown one major problem with this type of compensation is that the skills do not generalize. In one study, Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen’s research team

provided instruction in Theory of Mind skills. Their multiple week course taught a group of intelligent children with Autism methods of understanding how other people think and perceive things. All the children completed the course and passed the “final exam.” In theory, they now possessed the skills to go into the

world and become involved in understanding the unique minds of the people around them—literally opening up a whole new universe to these children. Yet, in their follow-up of the children’s real world behavior, the investigators were dismayed to find that the children did not act any differently in

conversations. They were no more curious about other people’s minds than prior to the course.

Employability Skills

The “Employability Skills 2000+” Conference Board of Canada list is comprehensive, including:

- be flexible • be adaptable • show initiative
- seek & appreciate different points of view
- think & solve problems • be resourceful
- work with others • learn from mistakes
- respond constructively to change

A Developmental Approach for Developmental Disabilities

If you think about the way children learn, however, the results of Baron-Cohen’s study are not surprising at all. Typically developing children are never taught “theory of mind” skills in a course with a final exam, nor do we ever worry about their relationship skills “generalizing” outside a classroom. They aren’t “taught” to connect with others, nor do they learn how to value others’ ideas or see others’ point of view through any lesson plan. They don’t learn to share experiences with others or think or solve problems or become self-aware or create meaningful personal memories through scripts, rules or instructions. They learn by engaging in a *relationship*.

Typical children are not explicitly taught, but do *learn* the foundations of success skills very early in life, even before the development of spoken language. Their learning happens in the real world, from parent to child, through their active engagement with each other. This learning would not be possible without the interpersonal relationship to guide their development. However, those on the autism spectrum have a neurological vulnerability which causes them to leave the path of typical development (most often before the