



# Relationship Development Intervention®

## *Empowering Parents and Impacting Lives*

When a child is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, parents often experience a range of emotions from disbelief and confusion, to sadness and fear, often feeling overwhelmed by the uncertainty of their child's future. Will they be able to make friends? Will they be able to hold down a job someday? Live independently? Have a family of their own? Will they experience quality of life?

These kind of questions can lead parents down a long path of uncertainty. A diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is frightening enough, but when coupled with the fact that only 12% of adults with autism, who received intervention throughout their childhood, are able to live independently, hold down a job, or maintain relationships outside of their immediate family, a parent can lose hope.

RDI® (Relationship Development Intervention) is a parent-led, relationship-based treatment program which gives parents the tools and strategies to help their children navigate an ever-changing, uncertain and dynamic world. Based on over 20 years of research, RDI® provides a step-by-step program to build the skills for competence and fulfillment. In fact, within 18 months, over 70% of children improved their diagnosis based on the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS). The majority of children also moved from a special education to a regular classroom without needing an aide.

### ***How RDI® Works***

RDI® can be accomplished within everyday interactions. Parents use the daily activities of life to introduce safe, but challenging experiences for the child. With the parents guidance, children learn to respond in more flexible, thoughtful ways to novel, increasingly unpredictable settings and problems. Trust emerges as children learn to recognize regularity and patterns, as well as adjust and adapt to uncertainty in a productive way. Parents are taught how to break down the complexity of learning into small simple components, to frame and scaffold activities for competence and success, to be mindful of slowing down for adequate processing time, and to both simplify and amplify information feedback. Ultimately, authentic competence emerges as the child takes greater responsibility for taking on tasks and problems with many partners in a variety of different settings. Children learn authentic, give and take communication and develop the ability and motivation to connect with others on many different levels.

### ***RDI® is specifically designed to address the core deficits of ASD:***

- **Emotional Referencing:** The ability to use an emotional feedback system to learn from the subjective experiences of others.
- **Social Coordination:** The ability to observe and continually regulate one's behavior in order to participate in spontaneous relationships involving collaboration and exchange of emotions.
- **Declarative Language:** Using language and non-verbal communication to express curiosity, invite others to interact, share perceptions and feelings and coordinate your actions with others.
- **Flexible thinking:** The ability to rapidly adapt, change strategies and alter plans based upon changing circumstances.
- **Relational Information Processing:** The ability to obtain meaning based upon the larger context. Solving problems that have no right-and-wrong solutions.
- **Foresight and Hindsight:** The ability to reflect on past experiences and anticipate potential future scenarios in a productive manner.

An RDI® consultant works with a family to identify which deficits may be obstacles for their child. Once identified, consultants and parents work together to create a remediation plan. Remediation, a core component of RDI, is unique because it corrects a deficit where it no longer constitutes an obstacle for the child. For example, to help a child that

struggles with flexibility issues, a typical approach would utilize visual schedules or transitional cues. While these are helpful and necessary compensations, they don't address the deficit: the child's inability to use flexible thinking. With RDI's remediation approach, a parent is taught how to introduce small amounts of uncertainty throughout the child's day, thereby increasing their ability to tolerate and accept new ways of thinking.

### ***Benefits of RDI®***

The world we live in is not static or predictable. One thing you can always count on is change. Parents can work around a younger child's rigidity. However, as the child grows, inflexible thinking can constitute an obstacle preventing quality of life. RDI® opens the door for what is called dynamic thinking which creates the possibilities that a child can grow to have:

- Problem solving skills
- Self-regulation
- Flexibility
- Empathy and perspective
- Competence and self-worth
- Adaptability
- Independence
- Stronger relationships
- And many other relationship based skills

With these remediated abilities, an individual with ASD can attain meaningful relationships, independence, and a high quality of life. For more information about RDI® or to find a certified RDI® consultant, visit [www.rdiconnect.com](http://www.rdiconnect.com).

### **References**

- Gustein, S.E (2009). *The RDI®book: Forging new pathways for Autism, Asperger's and PDD with the Relationship Development Intervention Program*. Houston: Connections Center Publishing.
- Burgess, A. & Gutstein, S. (2007). Quality of life for people with autism: Raising the standard for evaluating successful outcomes. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*. 12(2), 80-86.
- The research project: Gutstein, S., Burgess, A. & Montfort, K. (2007). Evaluation of the Relationship Development Intervention Program. *SAGE Publications and The National Autistic Society*. Vol 11(5) 397- 411



***Author: Christine Lindgren, M.Ed., Autism Specialist***

Christine is a RDI®certified consultant and director of the Responding to Autism Center in Kennewick, Washington. She has been an autism specialist for over 15 years and helps educate, treat, diagnose, and train professionals, families and children on the autism spectrum. You can learn more about her at [www.responding-toautism.net](http://www.responding-toautism.net). For more information on RDI, visit [www.rdiconnect.com](http://www.rdiconnect.com)