

**Connect and Relate for Autism**  
**Relationship Development Intervention®**  
**Light at the End of the Tunnel**



Relationship Development Intervention® Program 5.0  
Newsletter Article

**Light at the End of the Tunnel**

Guest Columnist:

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Many times I am asked, "How long will it take before we see some progress?" I would really like to say, "Miracles can happen over night." The reality is, like most other things, it takes work, dedication and patience.

The RDI® Program is a dynamic, changing process that follows a developmental model. It is unusual in the fact that we are NOT changing one discrete element or one discrete behavior. For many kids, we are literally changing how they view the world, how they respond to changes and we are placing a lot of new demands on them. These changes are done in a gentle, loving and safe manner that gradually allows the child and, perhaps, more importantly, the neurological systems to change.

As we do this, we provide the child with the tools that they will need to experience and adapt to these changes, without experiencing the overwhelming amount of anxiety and fear they can feel with changes in a dynamic world. It is usually the high levels of anxiety and fear that cause them to want to control a lot of elements of their life. This control can lead to difficulties with flexibility, rigidity and wanting things to always be the same. When they experience this loss of control and the increased anxiety, they can become more inflexible, want to control relationships and friendships and, when the anxiety and fear become too much, they are flooded with biochemical stress hormones that can cause major meltdowns.

As we give the child the tools of referencing and gazing, both for information and safety, we also give them security with knowing that everything is O.K. As we spotlight our emotional interactions with them, we build on positive episodic memories that allow the child to reflect back and realize that change from their static world to the dynamic world is safe. They in turn are more willing to accept direction and interaction from others and to experience the positive emotional memories of engagement, friendship and love.

**Building Competence in both Parent and Child**

All of this takes a little time. It also takes time for the parent to get into a natural flow with the RDI® lifestyle and it takes time for the child to build the positive episodic memory. While doing this we also boost the amount of experience-sharing communication and declarative language that we use. This REALLY helps to decrease the anxiety and fear by describing the action that is taking place. It also is an inviting change in language that does not give commands – it invites the child in a positive way to come with us. When we celebrate with declaratives, we also help to build the positive episodic memory of the event and the person that they are interacting with. As the child

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learns to use their own experience sharing communication and declarative language, it allows them to feel safe by describing the action and it also allows them to have others join their world in a positive and inviting way. Experience-sharing communication also gives the child the tools that they will need to form friendships and relationships with other children.

When all of these elements fall into place we build on something that very few children on the spectrum experience – we build on competence. At first, we support this competence by joining in with them, using the basic tools of broadband communication, referencing, gazing and the declarative language. Not only do we build competence in lifestyle activities BUT we are also building their competence to handle transitions, changes and the dynamic changing world that we live in. As these elements fall into place the child's neurological system and episodic memory are also changing in a positive way. This new feeling of competence gives them the security and the tools that they need to then approach the dynamic world in a new, less frightening way. Along with this sense of competence come the emotional changes that we see.

The child is then able to experience, understand and share emotions. We have built the necessary foundations that allow the child to understand emotional meaning by gazing at others for information, using experience-sharing communication to include others and to recall the positive episodic memories of success, engagement, competency and MOTIVATION. All of this has been done in a safe and loving manner that gives support and that follows a developmental model that builds on these skills.

We have now moved from working on single elements like referencing, gazing, etc. and the child is now able to form a GESTALT. "Gestalt" is a German term that means – shape and form. A gestalt is a pattern of physical, biological and psychological phenomena that becomes so integrated that it forms a functional unit – a "wholeness" that is integrated and working in unison.

**So, how long does it take before we start to see the light at the end of the tunnel?**

In a very rough sense, I have noticed that it usually takes about a year. Remember that every child and every family is different. The amount of energy that each family places into embracing the RDI® Lifestyle is also different. The more you commit yourselves, the more change you will see. Another thing that I have noticed is that the closer you work with your Consultant and the more that we, the Consultant and the parents, become a partner in this process, the more likely you will see positive changes. In essence, the consultant and the parents also form a working gestalt.

The feedback from the videos, the time we spend working through problems and learning from each other assists with the changes in the child. When you reflect back on what we are doing, it is a remarkable process that in turn changes the child. We have worked as a gestalt to change a static world into a dynamic one. We have made positive changes in neurological connections. All of this is done in a systematic, non-threatening and loving way.

Five years ago, if someone were to tell me the changes that you are seeing in your children were a direct result of your commitment to the RDI® process, I probably would have told myself, "yeah right." The changes we are seeing are dramatic. It is not a discrete element where we are taking data on. It is NOT one discrete change in behavior that we would like to see – it is a gestalt. It is the process of a child becoming whole – a process of putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

*This article, written by Thomas Brown, M.A., L.L.P., RDI® Certified Consultant, first appeared in the Autism Support Center's "Spotlight." Reprinted with permission.*