

RDI goes to school

WHAT PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS CAN A PARENT GIVE TO YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER(S) FOR SUPPORTING THE RDI® ACTIVITIES YOU DO AT HOME?

by Cecile Wilson, mother of two sons on the autism spectrum

With RDI®, the goal is to “step back ... reflect, project, think about, consider and contemplate ... to combine thoughts, feelings, perceptions and memories and flexibly move back and forth between past, present and future, in a way which creates personal meaning.”ⁱ

Core Deficits of Autism

- **Episodic Memory or Autobiographic Memory**
analyzing events to select and focus on critical moments to record a personal, emotional memory for future use
- **Co-regulation**
understanding how to monitor, evaluate and fine-tune what is occurring in a social interaction
- **Joint Attention**
sharing reactions to a common perceptual event with another person
- **Relative Thinking**
obtaining meaning and solving problems based on the unique properties of an event in association with the subjective goals one might have for the outcome
- **Self-Regulation**
modifying behaviour based upon previous experience and anticipating the effects of current behaviour
- **Self-Regulating Communication**
using self dialogue to narrate, plan and reflect on experiences

The RDI® approach is consistent with the goals of the provincial curriculum and is easily implemented

The IPRC

The first step towards facilitating an RDI® program remediation objective in the classroom begins with the IPRC (Identification, Placement, and Review Committee). This document produced by this committee is called the Determination Record, but is commonly referred to as the IPRC. This document has two important purposes. Firstly, it is the contract between the school and the parents for addressing the educational exceptionalities of your child. Secondly, it both identifies your child's strengths and needs and forms the basis for developing the procedurally detailed IEP (Individual Education Plan). For these reasons, it is critical that the strengths and needs statements on the IPRC are accurate and precise. For example, rather than broadly listing “memory” as a strength, it should be differentiated between “memorizing facts, formulae and sequences” as a strength, and “episodic memory encoding and usage” as a need.

Core Deficits of Autism

The question then arises, what are the accurate and precise strengths and needs of my child? According to Dr. Steven Gutstein, the founder and co-developer of the RDI® program, there is a consensus among researchers that regardless of age, IQ, academic achievement, language facility or co-occurring disorders, autistic people have significant deficits in the six different areas: **Episodic Memory or Autobiographic Memory; Co-regulation; Joint Attention; Relative Thinking; Self-Regulation; and Self-Regulating Communication.**ⁱⁱ These were the deficits I used to construct the statement of needs I wanted to have placed on our son's IPRC.

IPRC Determination Record Areas of Strength

The Determination Record of the IPRC includes a section detailing the child's areas of strength. I find this a useful exercise for several reasons. First of all, it helps all concerned to realize that the child presents not only challenges but also brings certain qualities to the classroom that are available to be used to an advantage. Secondly, by making use of the child's strengths, s/he can experience competence in certain areas that be used as stepping stones to building competence in areas that are currently less developed. Thirdly, the teacher and student do not need to waste time working on skills that are already in place. To identify our son's strengths, I cross-referenced a list of things "You Don't Need a Mind For"ⁱⁱⁱ with our own experiences of success he had demonstrated on previous report cards, in classroom work and at home. From the list of twenty-five potential strengths, I selected seven: **memorization; following logical arguments, procedures and formulae; math computation; recounting a sequence of events; appropriate description, grammar and vocabulary; accumulating specialized knowledge; and using computers.**

Compare this list of strengths with the areas of strength listed on his previous IEP ("math/science/verbal skills-oral"), and it is clear we have already pinpointed the areas my son is unlikely to require any teacher intervention or support. His teachers are relieved of the need to do preliminary observations and assessments and can anticipate which tasks will likely cause him some difficulty and can proceed directly to addressing his areas of need.

IPRC Determination Record Areas of Need

With a statement of strengths listed, the next step is to construct a list of needs. In our son's case, I decided that the list of needs should be shorter than the list of strengths. This meant I had to carefully select and identify certain needs. I wanted to be sure the focus was on overcoming those deficits which for him were the most problematic in terms of succeeding both academically and socially. In addition, these needs had to be addressed in a simple, efficient way for his teachers to help him develop the mindfulness he was lacking.

I finally settled on five needs: **episodic memory encoding and usage; flexible thinking; joint attention; reflective thinking^{iv}; and self-regulation.** Compare these new categories once again with those of the out-going IEP: communication skills, social skills and non-verbal skills. Even though our son's teachers will require some additional information to define these newly identified needs, they are much more constrained than the old ones.

IEP Accommodations:

Although I feel I have a basic grasp on the particular meaning of these words when applied to autism spectrum disorders, I realized that our son's IPRC members might not have the same understanding, or may even be completely unfamiliar with some terms, like episodic memory, for example. In addition, I felt my request for changes on the Determination Record would be more likely accepted if I could demonstrate how easily these needs might be addressed and evaluated in the classroom setting. To that end, I took our son's current IEP and followed its format to identify the various accommodations, learning expectations, teaching strategies and assessment methods as they could be applied to episodic memory.

For the first section (the various accommodations), I once again used guidelines listed in the RDI® Program Seminar for Parents 2002 handbook to specify the following:

Instructional Accommodations:

- 1) declarative language
- 2) non-verbal cues (e.g. finger to lips, hand held up to indicate "stop," pointing)

- 3) spotlight communication by using contrast (e.g. softness, higher or lower pitch, slowness in speech; use facial expressions)
- 4) routine journaling of important episodes (incidentally, one of the focuses of the Ontario curriculum changes instituted in the '90's)
- 5) lesson previews
- 6) lesson reflection periods

Environmental Accommodations:

- 1) maintain routines but emphasize variation
- 2) provide clear time limits for task completion
- 3) set standards of quality depending upon the task
- 4) keep rules to the minimum necessary
- 5) keep a "win-win" atmosphere
- 6) use proactive behaviour management

Assessment Accommodations:

- 1) computer options

It seemed to me that the above accommodations already formed, in fact, part of the best practices strategies for classrooms recommended by various authorities. Listing them as part of the IEP merely indicates that both the educators and the parents were in agreement in recognizing the significance of these various accommodations.

One possible term that could have been misinterpreted in the Instructional Accommodations category was "declarative language." In grammar, declarative language refers to statements, as opposed to questions or commands. In the RDI® program, it also includes what is commonly referred to as exclamations ("Wow!", "No way!"). The key is that declarative language is used for experience-sharing. In the June 3rd, 2004 rdiconnect.com newsletter, reference is made to one research study which quantified the use of experience-sharing language among children on the spectrum as occurring only 1% of the time, compared with 33% of time even among developmentally delayed children.^v One of the most significant changes or accommodations teachers and parents can make, therefore, is to put more emphasis on the use of declaratives. (E.g. "I wonder how we might solve this problem." "Hmm, this doesn't look right." "Boy, that was funny!" "I can't wait to see the next episode!") Dr. Gutstein recommends a ratio of 80% declaratives and 20% instrumental (i.e. language used for the purpose of obtaining some item, information or result.)^{vi} In addition, giving the other person time to respond to a declarative – up to 45 seconds - provides the opportunity for more mindful communication instead of a preconceived response to a question with a limited number of possible replies.

Special Education Program: Program Goals: Learning Expectations, Teaching Strategies and Assessment Methods

Episodic memory is a key concept in the RDI® program. As Gutstein states in his September 30th, 2004 electronic newsletter: "You can't have any type of coherent sense of self or develop a strong level of executive functioning without Episodic Memory." Gutstein defines Episodic Memory (also called "Autobiographical Memory" by some researchers) as "a representation we form of an event in our lives, strongly anchored by an emotional appraisal of that episode, that we use to form a sense of ourselves and to anticipate our future."^{vii} This type of memory has three components: the raw pieces of data (the event itself), the emotions we experience and the meaning we extract from the interaction of these two components. Very often people on the spectrum will be able to recount the events that happened (an example of Semantic Memory), and perhaps the emotions they felt at the time (an example of Limbic

Memory), but they will have difficulty tying the two together to form a base of reference for remembering past events and evaluating future experiences (Episodic Memory). Dr. Gutstein illustrates the differences between the different types of memory with the following example: We went for a walk on Saturday. (Semantic Memory) I was very upset when we couldn't get across the bridge because it was washed out. (Limbic Memory) But then we ended up having a lot of fun because we waded across the creek in our bare feet and got to see some big frogs! (Episodic Memory)

Because of the significance of Episodic Memory and its seeming obscurity outside the realm of research, I chose Episodic Memory as the example of how to address this learning expectation. Again using the RDI® Program Parent Seminar handbook, I plugged Episodic Memory into the IEP format, ending up with:

Learning Expectations:

- 1) X will demonstrate the use of episodic memory

Teaching Strategies:

- 1) preview the lesson to help X focus on the important points of the upcoming lesson
- 2) spotlight meaningful information by using contrast
- 3) provide reflection periods after the lesson to determine what X has retained
- 4) use journaling to record the emotional content of the lesson (e.g. "I wasn't sure if our volcano would work or not, but I was really excited when it bubbled out a whole bunch of lava!" "That part of the story where the dog died was really sad. I wish they could have saved him.")
- 5) X predicts what might happen in a similar situation

Assessment Methods:

- 1) X will be able to pick out what s/he expects to be the important points of an upcoming lesson
- 2) X will repeat the meaningful information spotlighted by the teacher by repeating it in his own words
- 3) X will be able to say what his memories are of a lesson, emphasizing how he felt about the lesson (e.g. surprise, satisfaction, disappointment)
- 4) X will keep a journal which details his emotional reaction to an event
- 5) X will be able to predict possible emotional responses to a similar situation

From my own experience as a parent of two older children, and given my interest in education and my husband's experience as a teacher, none of the above strategies and methods seem foreign to me. Many good teachers already use these strategies and methods.

Results of the IPRC

The IPRC guidelines distributed by our School Board say that the parents must inform the IPRC committee ahead of their scheduled meeting of any changes they wish to see in the IPRC document. With this in mind, before our meeting, I submitted to our Learning Support Teacher the new statement of strengths and needs I wanted to see on our son's IPRC, along with the ways I could envision two of those needs (Episodic Memory and Flexible Thinking) being further specified on the IEP.

Our Learning Support Teacher was exemplary in her preparation for this meeting. She took the information I had given her and did her own research on the internet. When we met for the IPRC, she had copies of the information she had compiled ready to be sent along with our son's file to his new school and was very enthusiastic and excited about the new information she had gleaned. With her support, and the confirmation from our son's main teacher, we obtained almost exactly the strengths and needs I had asked for the IPRC. The two small changes the Learning Support Teacher made were to combine flexible thinking and reflective thinking as a similar category (partly, I think, due to a lack of precision on my part

and which I feel can be addressed in the future) and to attach social communication skills to joint attention, which, in fact, is a form of social interaction. The Learning Support Teacher also advised me that I would need to provide more background information to our son's new teachers and to maintain good lines of communication with them in order to ensure that the IEP would be developed in a manner consistent with the IPRC.

Conclusion

Showing the school personnel consideration by providing them with the relevant information beforehand and taking the initiative to be well-informed myself demonstrated that I viewed the school staff as partners and not antagonists. The time spent doing the preparatory work showed that the RDI® program could be implemented without undue duress on the teachers and was consistent with the demands of the curriculum. I look forward to the opportunity to meet with our son's new teachers and to build an IEP that will enable him to develop to his fullest potential, beyond the limitations of autism.

ⁱ <http://www.rdiconnect.com/archive/newletters/11082005/default.htm#mindfulness>

ⁱⁱ "Glossary of Terms used in RDI" in *Relationship Development Interventions Seminar for Parents*. Steven E. Gutstein and Rachelle K. Sheely (2002) A slightly different list of needs was summarized in the Connections Center Newsletter of September 30th, 2004 (on-line version). They are as follows: monitoring, evaluating and fine-tuning social interactions, which are often spontaneous and unpredictable (Social Co-Regulation"); sharing experiences and feelings with someone else ("Declarative Communication"); re-experiencing the emotions of an event and encoding it with what happened to arrive at a unique, personal meaning ("Episodic Memory"); and flexible, relative thinking about past, present and future events ("Dynamic Thinking").

ⁱⁱⁱ Power Point slide in *Relationship Development Interventions Seminar for Parents*, p. 16.

^{iv} As I write this, I think I made a typographical error putting "reflective thinking" on my request for changes to the IPRC. It seems in retrospect that I should have written "relative thinking;" however, I am confident that when I meet with my son's Grade 7 teachers I can clarify what I understand by "reflective thinking" and provide them with some sample ways of how to facilitate that activity.

^v <http://www.rdiconnect.com/archive/newsletters/06032004/default.htm>

^{vi} <http://www.rdiconnect.com/archive/newsletters/06102004/default.htm>

^{vii} <http://www.rdiconnect.com/archive/newsletters/09302004/default.htm>

Note: Excerpt of this article found in *Autism Matters* Fall 2006, Vol. 3, No. 2

If you are interested in learning more about RDI, check out the following books:

Gutstein, Steven E. (2001) *Autism/Asperger's: Solving the Relationship Puzzle*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.

Gutstein, Steven E. and Sheely, Rachelle K. (2002) *Relationship Development Intervention with Children, Adolescents and Adults: Social and Emotional Development Activities for Asperger Syndrome, Autism, PDD and NLD*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

_____. (2002) *Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children: Social and Emotional Development Activities for Asperger Syndrome, Autism, PDD and NLD*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

_____. (2002) *Under the Big Umbrella: The Underground Guide to Pervasive Developmental Disorders*. Houston, TX: Connections Center Publishing.

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