

# Relationship Development Intervention

## Developing a Guiding Relationship

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An essential first step in Relationship Development Intervention (RDI®) is establishing a guiding relationship. Parents learn why it is so important and how to do it when they participate in an RDI® program. A guiding relationship between a parent and child refers to the parent learning to mindfully and dynamically guide their child to learn and make discoveries through the support of meaningful interactions that involve opportunities for growth. These interactions focus on promoting competence, dynamic intelligence, experience sharing and co-regulation, among other areas. Through this process, the child learns that interactions with his or her parents are enjoyable, motivating and build confidence.

### Strategies to Promote a Guiding Relationship

While each RDI® program is highly individualized, there are some key strategies that can be implemented as parents learn to mindfully support their child.

#### ○ Slow Down Your Pace and Take the Pressure Off

When we don't get a response right away, we often tend to repeat, quicken our pace, or make a demand. This can be counterproductive when encouraging a child to respond authentically. When we allow children to process, problem solve and consider how they might want to respond, we help to establish trust that space will be given and that responding authentically is important as opposed to giving a rote or scripted response. We can give our children up to 45 seconds to process. We may be surprised with the response we receive when we take the pressure off and give our children the gift of time!

#### ○ Use Declarative Communication

Declarative communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, refers to a style of communication in which the parent shares open-ended comments such as opinions, perspectives, observations and statements that display curiosity. Nonverbal communication can also be offered declaratively through facial expressions to convey excitement or disgust, or gestures

to communicate surprise. Indirect cues are used in place of direct prompting to encourage a child to think and problem solve in a less demanding environment. This provides an opportunity for the child to respond in his or her own way. Sharing our personal view as a guide without the expectation of a specific response also supports our child in taking a perspective. When practicing this style of communication, it is important that our intention be to create a shared moment or to provide a problem-solving opportunity as opposed to getting a specific response. Examples of declarative language include the following: "Wow that's a huge cake! It looks delicious," or "I found your shoes, here they are!" and "I really enjoyed being a part of your fieldtrip. You looked like you really loved seeing the elephants and hearing the funny sound they made!" I urge parents to give it a try and see how their child responds!

### ○ **Introduce Co-regulatory Patterns During Interactions**

Parents should invite children to participate in activities that foster a back-and-forth, reciprocal interaction between parents and children with both parties having a meaningful and authentic role. Consider roles that build on a child's competence and interests but that would not be distracting, and that would also be enjoyable for parents. Interactions can be simple, and the environment should be supportive and avoid such obstacles as the child's favorite toy or a blaring TV. Examples of such interactions might include tossing a ball back and forth, taking a walk together, completing a simple recipe with the child placing each ingredient in the blender, or creating a simple art project in which the child adds glitter and the parent adds paint to make a joint piece. The activity acts as the backdrop to establishing a dynamic flow with the child while fostering engagement and trust. Adding new and interesting ways to participate in previously experienced co-regulatory patterns will support children in understanding how things can be similar and different. It also encourages dynamic intelligence, which is necessary for navigating real life.

### ○ **Focus on Sharing Experiences and Enjoying Each Other's Company**

This point can't be emphasized enough. Remember to focus on building a guiding relationship. Genuinely connecting emotionally and enjoying time together without a specific outcome in mind leads to greater trust, positive shared memories and more internal motivation. Prioritize interactions that involve shared smiles, unexpected silly moments, creating anticipation, laughing together, and just being fully present with the child. Try to loosen up and have fun! Even if the child doesn't respond right away, set the stage to connect emotionally by inviting him or her to join in, or even model the role without added pressure as the first step.

Remember that it can take time and patience to develop a guiding relationship. Quality is more important than quantity. Parents should make sure they have the energy and feel ready to slow down and be present with their child when introducing moments of connection. If needed, they can spend some time doing something that is calming and centering for them before inviting their child to participate in an activity. This might involve meditation, prayer or even moving their body. They should do whatever feels good to them and help them be in a calm and present mindset. My advice to parents is to be kind to themselves. If your child doesn't respond right away, that's ok. Try again the next day with a fresh lens.



Brooke Wagner, M.A., RDI® Program Certified Consultant, has been supporting Autistic individuals since 2001 and has been implementing Relationship Development Intervention for over 22 years. Brooke is the founder and owner of Therapeutic Approach to Growth (TAG), a private agency that supports Autistic individuals of all ages in Southern California. She is passionate about treating each client with dignity and respect, while honoring what is important to them and their family values. She finds it most rewarding to support parents to feel empowered, to have hope, and to feel excitement about taking the lead in their child's growth journey. To learn more about TAG, Inc., and RDI® services, more information can be found at [www.tagforgrowth.com](http://www.tagforgrowth.com). Brooke's podcast, Finding Hope on the Spectrum, can also be found on podcasting apps.

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