



**Pioneered by Serena Wieder, Ph.D, and the late Stanley Greenspan, MD, the Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-based (DIR) approach provides a theoretical and practical model that helps educators, clinicians, and parents comprehensively assess and create an intervention program, tailored to the individual strengths and challenges of each child. This approach emphasizes that a child develops within the context of relationships. Here, shared interactions between therapist and/or parent and child that are meaningful, positive, and pleasurable create the foundation necessary for development to occur across areas.**

Objectives of the DIR/Floortime approach are to build healthy foundations necessary for a child to develop social, emotional, and intellectual capacities.

The **D** describes development from the perspective of the individual, where they are and where they are headed. Understanding the unique developmental process means allowing space for each person to be respected and guided in his or her own personal developmental journey.

The **I** describes the unique ways each person takes in, regulates, responds to, and comprehends the world around them.

The **R** describes how relationships fuel our development. Humans are social beings and relationships are a key to our human development. DIR harnesses the key affective (emotional) aspect of these relationships to promote development.

Understanding DIR can help us promote healthy development in all children, but it is especially powerful in helping children on the autism spectrum or with other developmental or emotional challenges.

**The ultimate goal of the DIR/Floortime approach is developing children who:**

- Are well regulated
- Have healthy relationships
- Are happy and in touch with their emotions
- Are independent thinkers and problem solvers
- Are prepared emotionally, socially, behaviorally, academically, and vocationally to live successful and happy lives (Celebrate the Children, 2014)

# What is DIR?

**According to the DIR approach, there are three key components to an effective intervention for a child with ASD that should be considered by the multidisciplinary team. These key features include the use of a developmental framework, consideration of each child's individual differences, and strong relationships. Each of these areas is outlined below:**

## Development

Since autism is a neuro-developmental disorder, it naturally makes sense to begin any intervention by finding where the child is developmentally, based on the development of typical children, and interacting with the child at his/her appropriate level. A reciprocal, back and forth flow of developmentally appropriate interactions allow the child to move up the 'developmental ladder' to develop the fundamental capacities that all humans gradually master, typically in the first five years of life. These start with the basic ability to self-regulate (to be calm, organized, and able to attend), to be engaged across a wide range of emotions, to sustain back-and-forth communication, and moving up the developmental ladder toward complex problem solving. These foundations then underlie and promote healthy development that evolves into symbol formation, language and intelligence.

## Individual Differences

When creating an intervention program, we must take into consideration each child's unique interests, sensory-motor profile, and strengths. We should be thinking about how a child's sensory system is taking in and organizing information, how the language and auditory systems work, how the motor systems work, etc. We all have differences in these specific areas, leading us to have different learning styles, different personalities, and different ways of understanding the world. Once individual differences are understood and utilized effectively as part of an intervention, learning occurs at a much more rapid pace.

## Relationships

Relationships are the vehicle for affect-based developmentally appropriate interactions, and are the foundation for learning to occur. Consider the individuals you have learned the most from. Chances are, your list includes a parent, friend, mentor or favorite teacher. That's because the influence that relationships have on our personal and brain development is both enormous and drastically underestimated. Once strong relationships are built with therapists and/or caregivers, the child feels more comfortable, motivated, and secure to learn in a safe and supportive setting.

# What is Floortime?

"When we do what the child loves, the child will love being with us!"

- Dr. Rick Solomon

**Floortime is at the heart of the DIR/Floortime approach and it is the play component of a comprehensive program for infants, children, adolescents, and their families with developmental challenges. For this reason, Floortime is also commonly considered, "Play with a Purpose!"**

During floortime sessions, a child's play partner, typically the primary caregiver or interventionist, will get down on the floor with the child and interact, or play at the appropriate developmental level. The floortime interactions should be spontaneous, affect based, and child-led; promoting a continuous flow of interactions which are used to entice, sooth, challenge, and encourage the child up the hypothetical developmental ladder.

The profile created for the child, based on the DIR model outlined above, guides Floortime interactions and helps the adult to know how and where to enter a child's world based on their individual differences and developmental capacities, as well as the immediate and long-term goals of the play based interaction.

## Components of Floortime

**The primary components of floortime including following the child's lead, joining the child's world, and then expanding.**

### Follow the Child's Lead

In the process of following a child's lead, the adult is able to determine what is enjoyable, of interest to, and meaningful to the child. When this is done as an initial basis for interaction, the child is then naturally able to remain regulated and engaged for longer periods of time. Consequentially, this experience moves the child forward developmentally.

This concept is one that we can all relate to. For most of us, when we are in the company of someone who is available, fun, attentive, and emotionally validating, we want to continue to spend time and interact with them. We want to remain connected to the other individual who seems to understand where we are coming from and share our interests. Conversely, if we are with someone who does not make us feel good about ourselves or doesn't understand/respect our interests, we likely would want to escape the interaction as soon as possible. This analogy helps us to relate to and understand the importance of following a child's lead.

## Joining the Child's World

Once we have followed the child's lead and taken the time to get to know the child, understanding what they enjoy and how they experience the world, we are able to join the child and support them in reaching higher levels of development. The ultimate goal in joining a child's world is to pull the child into a shared emotional experience around these interests.

In order to do this, the therapist or parent expands on that initial level of motivation by incorporating mutual interests of others, while supporting any neurological differences that may be impeding developmental progress. Through these motivating interactions, development is targeted from the foundations of self-regulation and engagement, all the way through emotional and abstract thinking and reflection. Through this process, a reciprocal interaction is created that results in overall improvement in brain development and processing. The most recent research in the field of autism now supports the notion that critical neurological connections are made when children are engaged in pleasurable and meaningful interactions (Osgood, 2011).

## Expand!

When the child is engaged, attentive, and happily participating with others, we're able to expand on the foundations we have already created. Here we continue to build upon the child's interests, motivations, and passions to include a broader range of activities, words, and topics. Using motivating and meaningful back and forth interactions, we can begin to challenge the child with the support of parents or therapists at the 'just right' level, making sure that the child doesn't become overwhelmed or 'lost' in the activity. Once the child is engaged, interested, and motivated, the sky's the limit!



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