

How can I implement basic Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) principles into the everyday program of my autistic students to assist them in becoming partners in authentic emotional relationships?

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Biography



Christine has been teaching in special education for the past 15 years. She is currently in her second year of teaching the Autistic class at Greenbrier School in Brantford. She taught with the Toronto District School Board in a congregated setting for ten years working with students from 4-21 years of age who had developmental delays. Many of these students were also autistic. She taught for 2 years at the W. Ross McDonald School for Blind and Visually Impaired in Brantford. Christine participated in action research for the first time last year as she wanted to learn more about how she could augment the progress her students were making in the areas of Behaviour, Communication and Social interaction. Being asked to participate as part of a group studying a new social intervention for autistic students was the catalyst she needed to once again journey into action research.

Abstract

Those of us in the field of special education who have been lucky enough to work with students who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), have certainly come across teaching techniques or strategies that can be transferred to other special needs populations as well as regular stream pupils. Through my participation in this years action research project studying Relationship Development Intervention (RDI), I believe that the basic principles underlying this program, can help our students with ASD's develop the skills necessary to become partners in authentic emotional relationships to a greater extent than has been thought possible about this population. Within the body of this research, I hope to demonstrate how even the most basic principles of RDI, like Referencing, using Declarative Language, Experience Sharing, and building Episodic Memories, can be built into the daily routines of our classrooms. By implementing these principles, we can assist our students with ASD's in developing the skills they need to be more actively involved in the social world around them.

Situating My Inquiry

Greenbrier School is a Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8 school with a population of 266 students. It exists in a lovely residential area in Brantford, Ontario. The school has a history of strong support both in the community and among the students, for our two special education classes situated in this setting. Through the Toonies for Autism fundraising event, sponsored by the Autism Society of Ontario, that happened last year, as well as this year, the students in regular classes at Greenbrier are continuing to learn and be more understanding about students who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

An example of this would be the behaviour that was shown by the whole student body at our Toonie for Autism Assembly. As we had visiting students with their parents and friends, I asked the audience to be very quiet when they were clapping for the children as they got up to give their donation to the Autism Society representative. Not

only did they comply with this request, but whenever someone got up to speak, you could hear a pin drop in our gym. Even the younger children were very quiet as they had been learning about some of the sensory issues, like loud noises, when they visited my classroom the week before the assembly. (Christine Ryder, Personal Journal entry, April 30/2004)

I have six students who are all diagnosed with an ASD. They are predominantly non-verbal and have moderate to severe difficulties in the areas of Communication, Behaviour and Social Interaction. I have four full time Educational Assistants (EA's) and access to two others that help deliver the intensive support required by these unique learners. This year we are fortunate to have the Board Autism Team visiting our room to offer assistance, guidance and direction towards new interventions that are being successfully used to help our students with ASD's progress even further.

Some Background Information

Autistic students have significant difficulties in their ability to learn through conventional methods of teaching due to a very specific Triad of Impairments. These impairments require specialized routine-based programming for these students to reach their individual potentials.

These impairments include:

- 1 Extreme and/or restricted repetitive behaviour such as: aggression to self or others; outbursts of anger with no apparent antecedent, apparently inflexible adherence to routine; self-stimulatory behaviours (hand flapping, finger flicking, vocalizations).
- 2 Communication difficulties, both verbal and non-verbal: and inability to begin, be part of, end or even follow a conversation; word retrieval anxiety; stereotyped repetitive language (echolalia) parrot-like speech.
- 3 Impairments in social interaction: a lack of social or emotional reciprocity; they often appear to show complete indifference to those around them; they have difficulty making eye contact or reading facial/body language cue of those around them.

These are but a few of the examples that can be manifested in students with an ASD.

What is Relationship Development Intervention (RDI)?

It is a program developed by Dr. Steven E. Gutstein at the Connections Center, in Houston, Texas, U.S.A.. "RDI shares many features with other treatment approaches and readers will recognize contributions from Structured Teaching, Behavior Modification, the work of Eileen Miller, Barry Prizant and other effective social and communication intervention methods. The hallmark of RDI is the emphasis on the development of Experience Sharing" (Gutstein, Steven, E. Autism Aspergers: Solving the Relationship Puzzle, 2000, pg. 49).

Identifying My Areas of Concern

As this year began, I watched my students through the window at recess, or watched the interactions taking place in the classroom when our reading buddies came to visit . I thought about how much they had improved in the areas of behaviour, social interaction and communication. I started to think about how we, as a team, my Educational Assistants (EA's), the Board Autism Team, my parents and I, could further develop the life skills needed to continue to participate successfully in everyday life as independently as possible. As luck would have it, I was sent to the "Teaching Children with Autism Conference" that was sponsored by the Ministry of Education Ontario in September of 2003. It was here, that I was fortunate enough to attend a session that discussed Dr. Steven Gutstein's work on

RDI for students with autism. At the conclusion of this workshop, our Special Education Coordinator, Peggy Blair, asked if I would be interested in participating in an Action Research group that would study this intervention more closely. The group would consist of Peggy, myself, and a first year teacher with our board named Jenn Renner. We were all going to read Autism Aspergers: Solving the Relationship Puzzle, and the accompanying activity book, Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children to see if some of the principles could be used in our classrooms to further develop social/relationship skills with our students. We would also look at the Dr. Gutstein's activity for older students called Relationship Development Intervention with Children, Adolescents and Adults.

The following quote from Steven Gutstein's book Relationship Development Intervention with Children, Adolescents and Adults, made me think about how I wanted to help my students more fully develop the ability to share in emotional experiences.

Remove our emotional bonds with family, colleagues and friends and few of us would want to go on living. On a personal level we cherish relationships but, as a society, we sometimes do not appreciate their precious and fragile nature. We take for granted the capacity to make and keep friends. (Gutstein, Steven E. 2002, pg. 13)

People with an ASD have great difficulty navigating a world requiring constant interactions in social situations. They do not obtain the same degree of enjoyment or satisfaction from the day to day encounters that we, as people without an ASD do.

One thing we all agree on is that the desire and need for emotion-based relationships is universal to the human species. We cannot deprive them of our most fundamental reason for being. (Gutstein, Steven E. 2002, pg.13)

As an educator of autistic children, I have been trained to assist my students to learn the social skills necessary to be active participants in our very social world.

After researching Dr. Gutstein's work, I realize that we can assist individuals with ASD's to progress to an even higher level of interaction by implementing even the most basic principles of RDI moving towards the following goals:

- 1 Understand and appreciate the many levels of Experience Sharing.
- 2 Become an equal partner in co-regulating Experience Sharing interactions (Gutstein, Steven, E. Autism Aspergers: Solving the Relationship Puzzle, 2000, pg. 48).

What was the Catalyst for my Inquiry?

As I began reading Autism Aspergers: Solving the Relationship Puzzle, I began to wonder if I was in over my head. I felt everything Gutstein was talking about could never be learned by our students given the specific Triad of Impairments discussed previously in this paper. Gutstein himself was,

startled to learn that researchers had determined that many people with Autism develop interest and considerable ability in a limited part of their social worlds. Even without treatment, many seemed to understand the part of social behavior that does not require the sharing of emotions. Some become highly proficient in what researchers term 'instrumental' social interactions, where the interaction serves as an instrument—a means to an end to obtain some desired object, or information or stimulation. (Gutstein, Steven E., 2000, pg.xviii)

Along with these instrumental interactions, which serve the purpose of helping us meet our basic needs, there is a critical second type of interaction, referred to as Experience Sharing. The sole purpose of this type of social behavior is to provide an opportunity to share some part of oneself with a partner.

Instrumental actions, like standing on a line, are learned as scripted routines, performed in a specific manner to achieve a specific endpoint. On the other hand, sharing our experiences requires a unique type of information processing, referred to as Emotional Coordination. To be successful, we must process a constant stream of information about ourselves “in relation” to information about another person, while making split-second judgments based upon this data. Emotional Coordination involves learning to make constant subjective evaluations and re-evaluations of participants’ degree of connection to each other. “Do I feel too far away from you? Do you really understand my meaning? Am I too rough?” Continually asking and answering such questions fosters the maintenance and repair actions needed to keep the interaction from degenerating into chaos. (Gutstein, 2000, pg.xix)

I refer now to my Journal entry of March 22nd/ 2004:

When I first started the readings I felt, “What can I use in these books that my students will be able to learn since they have difficulty with attention shifting, emotional control, reciprocity, social interactions etc?” I thought I must read on, for with anything new, there must be steps-starting with very basic ones, leading to higher more developed skills. I had to, “not judge a book by its cover”, open my mind and see what Gutstein had to say. As I read the “Relationship puzzle” book, I found the thoughts of other researchers in the field of Autism incorporated into the RDI put forth by Gutstein. (Christine Ryder, Personal journal entry, March 22nd/2004)

For example, Linda Hodgdon writes, “effective communication does not just happen. It takes considerable effort from both the sender and the receiver of information to ensure that communication attempts accomplish their intent. Those who experience communication disorders encounter exceptional difficulty participating in the communication process” (Hodgdon, 2000, pg.7).

In other words, we, as educators, must help our special education students find the path that motivates a more active social role throughout their days both at school, home, and then on, into their futures.

Trying it out

After becoming familiar with the basic principles of RDI through my research, and by attending the RDI two day conference in Atlanta in May, I thought I should choose a student who would be our first participant in trying out what I had learned. First, I took a look at the Tracking Form in the Relationship Development Intervention with Children, Adolescents and Adults book. Although I could use the form offered in the appendix of this book, my particular students would need to start at a less complex level where the skills are broken down even further. Next, I filled out a Progress Tracking Form to get an idea of where our student was according to skills she would need to improve her ability to share in more meaningful experiences. Dr. Gutstein’s intervention contains six levels, with an accompanying 24-stage Relationship Development Intervention Model.

I did my first informal tracking of Ashley’s skills using the ‘progress form’ taken from (Gutstein, Steven E., Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children, 2002, pg.316/317). I must reiterate that this is an informal tracking of this particular student as I am not formally trained in RDI.

The following is a ratings key taken from, (Gutstein, Steven E., 2002, pg.315). By looking at this ‘key’, one can see our student’s base skills.

M = Mastered: (1) Performs the skill for the purpose of increasing the level of coordination, emotion sharing and mutual enjoyment with social partners. (2) Performs the skill independently over 80% of the time. Initiates without help, prompts, or rewards. (3) Performs the skill at a frequency expected in typical development. (4) Initiates the skill with different adults and peers (where indicated)and in different appropriate settings.

W = Working: (1) Performs the skill solely for the purpose of increasing the level of coordination, emotion sharing and mutual enjoyment with social partners. (2) performs the skill independently less than 80% of the time but more than 20% of the time. (3) Performs the skill in a majority of situations where appropriate, but at a frequency less than expected in typical development. (4) Does not frequently perform the skill with different adults and peers (where indicated) but does so in a variety of settings.

D = Developing: (1) Initiates the skill some of the time, to obtain some goal or reward that is unrelated to the social interaction. (2) Performs the skill independently less than 20% of the time. (3) Does not yet initiate the skill with different people or in different settings.

N = Not Yet: Does not perform the skill. Or, performs the skill only to obtain some reward or goal, unrelated to increasing coordination and shared enjoyment of social partners (e.g. get a treat, getting to watch TV).

(This is an abbreviated version of the full RDI Progress Rating Form. Complete forms can be purchased at www.connectionscenter.com)

The following 2 charts show that Ashley's skills lie in the Level 1, stages 1-4.

RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Rating Periods: Date 1: _____ Date 2: _____
Date 3: _____ Date 4: _____
Date 5: _____

Rate each item with an M, W, D or N	1	2	3	4	5
Level 1					
<i>Stage 1</i>					
1 Makes eye contact and smiles at you, inviting you to share the excitement and joy	D	W			
2 Obtains your attention before communicating	W	W			
3 Pays attention to your facial expressions and words while you are communicating	D	D			
4 Enjoys your attempts at simple pretend play	N ₄	N ₄			
5 Shares excitement when you act in a playful manner	D	W			
6 Communicates in a positive manner to invite you to participate in a joint activity	N ₄	N ₄			
7 Communicates appropriately to end or pause a joint activity	N ₄	N ₄			
8 Communicates excited anticipation during pauses in shared activities	D	D			
9 Shifts gaze to maintain focus on two different social partners during joint activities	D	D			
<i>Stage 2</i>					
10 References your facial expressions and gestures for comforting and reassurance	D	W			
11 Stops actions in response to your facial expression of disapproval	D ₂	D ₁			
12 Looks to your facial expressions and other non-verbal signals to obtain approval	D ₂	D ₁			
13 References facial expressions and other non-verbal signals to know what action to take	D	W			
14 Follows your pointing to determine where to look to find something	N ₄	D ₂			
15 Follows your facial signals like head nods, head shakes, smiles and frowns to determine where to look for something	N ₄	N ₄			

16 Keeps track of your whereabouts during interaction and even when not interacting	D	D			
<i>Stage 3</i>					
17 Communicates pride when he/she complies with your instructions as a helper	N ₄	N ₄			
18 Matches your action to imitate, when learning a new skill or activity	D	D			
19 Observes to make sure actions are at the proper speed and degree of care	N ₄	D ₂			
20 Readily accepts your coaching to guide actions	D ₃	D ₃			
21 Matches simple emotional expressions with you	D ₃	D ₃			
22 Accepts changes in activity schedule without becoming upset or resisting	D	D			
23 Stops activities and makes a change without becoming upset or resisting	N ₄	D			
<i>Stage 4</i>					
24 Regulates timing and matches your actions, in a number of different simple coordinated activities	D	D			
25 Shares face-to-face expressions of enjoyment, after coordinating actions with you	D	W			
26 Uses your facial expressions to coordinate his/her behaviour with yours in joint activities	W	W			
27 Enjoys shared, coordinated pretend play and role plays when led by an adult partner	N ₄	N ₄			
28 Synchronizes actions with you in a number of face-to-face coordinated activities	N ₄	D			
29 Coordinates movements with your guidance to alternate standing and moving face-to-face, back-to-back and side by side with you at a rapid pace of change	N ₄	D			

(Gutstein, Steven E., *Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children*, 2002, pg.316/317)

An Introduction

Ashley is a 10 year old non-verbal child who can exhibit many challenging behaviours. She uses picture symbols (pic-syms) to communicate with the adults in our class. I chose Ashley first, as she is a naturally curious student who was already demonstrating the ability to reference staff and students when they were doing something that was of

interest to her. By Referencing I mean, the ability to respond to a new or confusing situation by seeking cues from the facial expressions of another person. Infants have developed the ability to do this by four months of age. Many people with an ASD need to be taught this very basic skill to be able to move through the stages of developing social relationships.

One day in class, Ashley was asked to transition from a favoured to a less favoured task. She had checked her daily picture schedule and was unmotivated by what was coming next. Transition times are often the most difficult for our students as it means structure and routine have been interrupted for them. They feel a perceived loss of control and will often act out at these times not really knowing what is coming next, or knowing what is coming next might not be the most motivating activity for them. I refer now to my journal entry of March 24th.

Ashley was transitioning from her favourite 'Make a Ribbon' task, to her turn in our homemade Snoezelen Room. When she threw the Snoezelen pic-sym on the ground her EA and I knew she was preparing to exhibit some escalating behaviours, I began to sing her favourite song to her as I moved to this room and simply sat on the futon. I never took my eyes off her. She too, kept looking at me, surprised that I suddenly just started singing her song and made no attempt, other than the singing to have her follow me. She came and sat on the futon (still unsure of what was transpiring). I picked up her favourite blanket and threw it over her, counted 1-2-3 and then pulled it off and made goofy faces. Then her EA came in and did the same to her. Then Jenn (EA), threw the blanket over me. To our surprise, on the count of 3, Ashley came and pulled the blanket off me and we all laughed. Her smile was great. We add a variation of 1-2-3 tickle. On the count of 2, of the second time, she grabbed her tummy and started to laugh.

By now, we were 15 minutes into a positive interaction time and Ashley was visibly enjoying herself. Jenn and I were having a great time too, watching Ashley 'having fun' and wanting more of it. I explained to Jenn what I had been reading about 'experience sharing' and eventually involving the child as a co-regulator in the process. This was just the beginning for Ashley, and a great moment for Jenn and I. Our encounter was pure joy. We ended up playing the 'blanket tickle game', for almost half an hour. Any 'acting out' behaviours we documented for the rest of the day were quite minimal. (Christine Ryder, Personal Journal Entry, March 24th/2004)

I think the following 'Program Tip' from Dr. Gutstein sums up nicely what transpired in our 'Snoezelen room encounter'.

The goal of Experience Sharing interactions is to sense the joy and stimulation intrinsic in our social encounters. Each partner brings unique thoughts, feelings and actions to the interaction for the purpose of jointly understanding and sharing their emotional reactions. Conversely, the goal of instrumental interaction is to follow a script to reach a specific endpoint." (Gutstein, Steven, E., Autism Aspergers: Solving the Relationship Puzzle, 2000, pg. 49)

Throughout the entire 'blanket game' activity, we tried to use only Declarative Language with Ashley. Examples of this would be, "It's fun under the blanket, the blanket tickles me, Look at Jenn making a silly face, I like this game and so on". Often, not only with this population of students, but even mainstream and students with other disabilities, we tend to use more imperative language. When we use declaratives, we tend to elicit more natural social responses or interactions. The following is a chart received at a conference given by Dr. Gutstein showing the difference between using Declarative vs. Imperative language.

Imperative Communication	Declaratives	vs.	Imperatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Socialized” language (e.g. “Hello, my name is...”) • Make requests for something you want • Make attempts to influence others • Ask questions requiring specific answers • Offer choices • Demand • Annoy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That was the best one! • We’re walking faster • I am so tired • Look, there’s a giant spider • Watch out! • Here I come • I hope it ges here soon • Something is going to happen • I just remembered something • Uh Oh! • Yikes! • Oh No! • We can do it • I’m not having fun 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pick that up • Which one do you want? • What did you do today? • What color is this? • What comes next? • Stop that • Get dressed right now! • Look at me • Come over here • Do you want to do RD1? • What do you want to do next? • What is the right answer? • Waht do you call this • Give me that balloon • Say, “thank you”

(Gutstein, Steven E., Lecture notes, Getting to the Heart of Autism Conference, Atlanta,Georgia, May 15/16, 2004, pg. 4)

When we use declarative language, we are inviting someone to share not only new and exciting things, but also uncertain things. We build anticipation and invite involvement, and teach our students to be curious. We are, as Dr. Gutstein would say, creating a Dynamic system for our students to interact in. The next time we went to go to the Snoezelen activity, Ashley picked up her ‘boom box’ which had her favourite song on it, and she went to the room with it, sat on the futon and reached for her blanket. This is why we must help our students with ASD’s to build up a series of memories that will encourage their desire to participate and practice whatever activity it was that they enjoyed previously. This is called building “Episodic Memories”. If the memory from the previous task was unpleasant or frightening, it is unlikely that the student would like to do it again. We must be aware of how we present activities to our students, are they fun, are they novel, is anticipation included, is it too hard, too easy or simply boring? Memories may not always be joyous ones, but they may be memories that teach a particular lesson. For example, “I only turned on the hot water tap on, it was too hot for my hands”. “When I was outside in the winter without my hat, my ears felt cold”, and so on. Our students must build their social interaction skills on many kinds of Episodic Memories.

After having had the opportunity to speak personally with Dr. Gutstein at his May 2004 conference in Atlanta, I again thought to myself, “when we begin to implement some RDI principles into our students days, we should start by trying to build as many memories as we can of situations where we share information, anticipation, participation, happiness and fun. (Christine Ryder, personal journal entry, May 15th/2004)

Episodic Memory is how we form a ‘sense of self’. It is a central emotional organizing event. Specific details are secondary to conceptual understanding. It is a retention of shared enjoyment. Because of what happens in the neurological system of the developing autistic brain at about 18 months of age , these children don’t make the shift from using their limbic system to extract meaning, to the pre-frontal system where information is now stored in relational manner. We have to teach the children to retain memory. We do this by helping them to create memories. Memory is not something you wait for it is something you create. (Gutstein, Steven, E., Lecture notes, Getting to the Heart of Autism Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, May 15/16, 2004, pg. 10)

When the students have created an episodic memory of an event or encounter, it is likely they will return to participate again. Through this encounter with Ashley, I hope to have illustrated how even the most basic principles



- 1 *Ashley is pointing at the sentence she would like me to read to her. I say nothing and wait. Ashley is still at a stage where the adults who work with her, maintain control of the interactions until she is ready to be a co-regulator within the situation where we are practicing.*

duced quietude by engaging them in some sort of activity. This is what we must change. We need to teach our children with ASD's that they can not only impact on us, but they can also participate in the formation of relationships, become co-regulators in them, and then truly be involved in Experience Sharing.

When first doing the calendar activity with Ashley, she would come up to the front, choose the days of the week, calendar numbers and then weather words in a very rote fashion. She would watch what the child who went before would do, she would then rush through the activity as quickly as she could to return to her favourite activity of listening to music. One day, after she had put all the words and numbers on the calendar, instead of reading as she pointed at the words, I sat down with the other children in the circle. To my surprise she came over and stood in



- 2 *Ashley opens her mouth in expectation of me reading this first sentence to her. I shook my head (indicating 'not yet').*

of RDI, like referencing, using declarative language, experience sharing, and building episodic memories, can be implemented throughout the day within the body of our daily curriculum to help our students with ASD's become more active participants in authentic relationships. There are more examples of how we, as a staff, used these principles to encourage the other five students in our class to also become more active in developing relationships with us, their peer buddies, and each other. If I were to mention them all, this paper would be far too long to read. I will end with a discussion and some photographic evidence of Ashley referencing me at our daily Calendar time.

When beginning to work with RDI, we are the 'coaches' and we train the students to be our apprentices. As we have seen in our classroom, our students would be completely content to follow their very routinized day plan with as little interaction with those around them as possible. They are completely happy 'doing their own thing' until it is time for someone to impact on their self-in-

duced quietude by engaging them in some sort of activity. This is what we must change. We need to teach our children with ASD's that they can not only impact on us, but they can also participate in the formation of relationships, become co-regulators in them, and then truly be involved in Experience Sharing.

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3 *Ashley continues to reference my face until I nod (indicating I will read the sentence she is pointing to).*

started reading where she was holding the pointer. This same behaviour, went on for the next week. We kept using the same strategy of sitting down and making her have to work harder at referencing us before we would participate in the reading part of the calendar. After another few weeks of “playing the calendar game”, we noticed Ashley was recognizing the correct words on her own. She could even be first at this activity. If she was unsure of a weather or day of the week word, she would reference whoever was doing the calendar to help her make a choice. To test the theory that she now recognized what word she was reading, I started reading words out of order. She was pointing to them all correctly and laughing as I acted silly doing this. Two months after this initial incident, she now takes the pointer and instead of us reading from the top to the bottom, she laughs and points at all the sentences out of order. We were all

thrilled the first day she did this. Calendar was no longer just a routine activity, but it was something fun that we were sharing together.

As you look at the following sequence of photographs, you can see the referencing, and the sharing of enjoyment at the end as we clap together at her success.

Relationship competence requires a careful systematic layering of skills. They must be taught with increasing complexity and carefully added as the person gains new levels of understanding and mastery. Each step we take in constructing relationship competence serves as the scaffolding for the next step in a carefully crafted manner. (Gutstein, Steven E., Relationship Development Intervention with Children, Adolescents and Adults, 2002, pg.23)



4 *I made gesture with my left hand towards the calendar numbers and said excitedly, “and the date is!”...I looked towards the calendar indicating I wanted her to pick the correct date for our next sentence. She did pick the correct number and place it on the correct place on our daily calendar.*

Data Collection

My data includes still photographs of my students demonstrating their ability to reference the adult or peer with whom they are interacting. I also have video footage of some ‘experience sharing’ activities like, the coordinated “therapy ball bounce” in gym. It was here that we started encouraging the children to be more active partners when interacting with a partner in the gym. I have the voices of my educational assistants who have already seen the validity of using basic RDI principles with our students. The students are able to sit and focus for longer periods of time, interact more appropriately with adults and peers (more eye contact than before), and communicate to a greater extent than before (using their pic-syms).



- 5 Ashley referencing my face, we both clapped together at her success and fun at doing the calendar together.

Meetings with the parents serve to document the progress that the students are making as do comments from the principal, autism team members, EA's and other staff members. Lisa Knapper, the mother of one of the boys in our room, writes:

We are all great imitators-this is also true of people with Autism. They watch us all the time- even when we don't think they do. T.J., (my son), has learned through watching others work and hearing them speak. This program, RDI, will bring out more of this watching and also develop his need to be with other people. He will learn that people are also there to have fun with and enjoy, they are not just on this planet to enjoy him. Mrs. Ryder has told me a great deal about this program and I feel that it will be a wonderful thing for these students. (June 11th /2004)

Voices Sharing in My Journey

I am always interested in information about Autism. I find it an extremely interesting topic. I feel that learning more allows me to be a better EA. When I saw the video on RDI, it opened my eyes to a new approach. While some people feel that Autistic children cannot feel emotions such as joy or excitement, this video showed the opposite. Already the students in our class are responding to fun games and are referencing not only adults in the room, but also, the other students, (e.g. the day one boy gave his tickle pic-sym to another boy in our class). It is wonderful to see the students enjoy their day. I thought one of the most important thoughts put forth in this video is the idea that everyone should have a great quality of life. Autistic people included! (Pamela Lewis, EA. Room 10, June 15th / 2004)

I found the RDI video very informative. It made me understand our Autistic students to a greater extent. Socialization is a very important part of the life of Autistic individuals. I am very excited to start this program with our students. When you teach them social skills and they look at you with love, fun and friendship in their eyes, it is worth everything. This program is a wonderful thing!" (Jennifer Drydak, EA. Room 10, June 15th /2004)

Upon watching the film on RDI I made the observation that this intervention will help eliminate the verbal and physical prompting used in developing a skill. The child will have the new skill of referencing and being able to be part of the experience, instead of just learning a scripted version of how to interact. The child will learn to reference staff, peers, family members and perhaps even people in the community for support when having to make decisions. (Anita Frame deJong, EA. Room 10, June 15th /2004)

I found the RDI video and discussions with Christine Ryder (our teacher) very informative and helpful in understanding our Autistic children. It has now become an important part of every task or activity that we do with our children. (Julia MacDonald, EA. Room 10, June 15th /2004)

Discussion

I believe through this initial research into the RDI program, that Dr. Gutstein has developed an intervention that is at least one of the missing puzzle pieces that educators of people with ASD's have been searching for to improve their quality of life . Implementing even the most basic RDI principles into the daily lifestyles of our classrooms is needed to improve the quality of life of our students. Researching and discussing RDI principles with my EA's, parents, and other team members, has improved our interactions with not only the children , but each other. My professional practice has improved as I am constantly monitoring how many declarative statements I am now making throughout the day. If I may take this opportunity to quote my fellow action researcher, Peggy Blair, “ This is just good pedagogy” (Taken from my journal entry March the 24th/ 2004).

I would like to sum up this discussion with a quote from the June 17th,2004 RDI Newsletter. Dr. Gutstein is referring to Emotional Referencing, Social Co-Regulation and Declarative language.

If I were to give each of these a one-sentence synopsis, it would be the verbal or non-verbal indications of the following:

Emotional Referencing: Checking with someone else (or yourself) when you don't know what to do.

Social Co-Regulation: “Dancing” with a partner who can be spontaneous and unpredictable.

Declarative Communication: Sharing an experience or feelings with someone else.

If you think about it, all of these are visible, observable behaviors.” (Dr. Gutstein, Going to the Heart of Autism Newsletter, June 17th, 2004, pg. 2)

Next Steps

I intend to continue to research this work and implement the basic strategies that were discussed in this paper. I would very much like to be formally trained in RDI in the future as I believe this to be a program that will benefit all people with an ASD. My EA's and I will continue to read and stay current on the latest research into RDI to see what new strategies we can use to help our students become more able to share experiences with others. I will continue to videotape my students to document the progress they are making in the area of social interaction.

Conclusion

Through my participation in this years action research project studying RDI, I have come to the conclusion that the basic principles underlying this program, can help our students with ASD's develop the skills necessary to become partners in authentic emotional relationships to a greater extent than has been thought possible about this population. Not only is it a viable program to use with students who have an ASD, but the basic principles and activities used in this program, could be used with other children with special needs, as well as, mainstream students, to develop positive interaction behaviours and truer, intrinsic friendships for all.

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