Autism Intervention: Positive Support With A Relationship-Based, Developmental Model

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DIR 101
A Basic Overview of the DIR/Floortime Model

Dave Nelson, MA, LPC
Executive Director, The Community School

Stanley Greenspan, MD – Great Kids 2007
1941-2010 - His work touched the lives of countless children & families

Today’s Roadmap

› Broad Overview of the Model and its Roots
› Description and examples of the key developmental concepts
› How the DIR Model is applied
› Examples of DIR/Floortime work in action
› How to Learn More

Two Videos: At One Year

Graham  David

As parents, therapists, and educators, what are our goals for the people we support?

Basic Goals for All

› Emotional and Physical Regulation
› Engagement and Reciprocity (Interaction)
› Social Problem Solving
› Logical Thinking

DIR 101 for Parents and Professionals
An Introduction to DIRFloortime
Mastering These Basic Goals Leads To...

- More Successful Communication
- More Realistic Thinking
- Greater Pleasure and Emotional Durability
- Greater Empathy
- Better Perspective-Taking
- Better Cognitive Functioning
- More Successful Relationships
- Increased Participation in Community
- More Independent Functioning

What About These Challenges?

- Sexuality, pregnancy, and child-rearing
- Transportation
- Money Management
- Independent living
- Healthcare
- Not getting scammed
- Social activities
- Paying for everything
- Technology management
- Family relationships
- Work/career
- Elder care

The D in DIR: What Are The Functional Developmental Capacities?

- Calm, Organized, Self-Regulation
- Shared Attention
- Engagement
- Two-Way Reciprocity and Gestural Communication
- Shared Social Problem-Solving
- Emotional Ideas
- Complex Logical Thinking

The I in DIR: What Are Individual Differences?

- Sensory Reactivity and Processing
- Language Processing
- Visual-Spatial Processing
- Motor System Processing (including motor planning and sequencing)
- Health Issues
- Family/Culture/Environment Issues

The R in DIR: Relationships

- Learning is social. It occurs during emotionally meaningful tasks and interactions
- Relationships are vital
- Every individual can advance and grow
- Feelings (affect) provide the “glue” to link thoughts and actions

The more engaged and interactive you are, the more rapidly and completely you learn to participate in communicating, complex relationships and successful social problem-solving.

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How Does “Affect” Work?

- Affective interactions help children/people regulate around sensory experiences.
- Affective interactions and experiences allow the child/person to draw meaning from sensory events.
- Affect helps the mind create connections between different developmental domains, like memory, motor, cognitive, visual spatial, etc.

Rosemary White, 2009; Beth Osten, 2006.

What is Affect?

Think of an orchestra...

Where Affect is the conductor leading the way!

How is Affect Communicated?

- Affect cueing underlies all communication.

Affect cueing is the expression of one’s intentions and emotional state, through subtle vocal and motor acts – and, simultaneously, the ability to read the vocal and motor cues given by the other as to his/her state and intentions.

Video: Still Face Experiment

- How affect helps us coordinate and “co-regulate”
- The disorganizing effect of stress

Greenspan At Work

Possible Elements of a DIR/Floortime Program

- Floortime
- Semi-Structured activities
- Structured/Targeted Intervention (multi-disciplinary, based on profile)
- Biomedical interventions
- Family support

ICDL Clinical Practice Guidelines
**Floortime: The Heart of the DIRFloortime® Program**

- Generally 6-8 sessions per day recommended.
- 20+ continuous, undisturbed minutes per session, preferably in the home in a space free of interruptions.
- As parents and professionals begin to understand Floortime as both a strategy and a philosophy, hundreds of micro moments and experiences lead to “Floortime all the time and everywhere.”

*Source: Engaging Autism, p 186*

**Semi-Structured Activities**

- Initial goal: mastery of gestural, problem-solving and complex imitation. May need structured exercises to work on:
  - Motor planning and sequencing
  - Visual spatial processing
  - Affective gesturing
- Once the initial goal is achieved, the focus of semi-structured learning is dynamic problem-solving interactions

**The Power of Family Support**

- What the parent offers is unbeatable knowledge about one particular child
- What the professional offers is extensive knowledge about children in general
- These two combine to:
  - Deepen their relationship with their child
  - Help professionals & parents see strengths/challenge areas
  - Help parents advocate for their child
  - Help parents find the support they need

**Traditional Treatment Approaches**

- Compliance and easily observable skills are emphasized (simplified).
  - To increase wanted behavior: reward.
  - To decrease unwanted behavior: punish or ignore.
  - Assume that bottom line improves with discrete skills.

**Traditional Treatment: Potential Difficulties**

- Child performs only when extrinsic reward is possible.
- Child gains rote skills rather than abstract reasoning.
- Core deficits are not improved with discrete skill improvement.
- Lack of generalization of skills.
- Child is discouraged (due to being asked to do what is impossible.)

**Relationship-Based Treatment Approaches**

- Surface behavioral changes are not the end goal. Internal changes are.
- Isolated skills and compliance are deemphasized.
- Intrinsic rewards and motivation are key, starting with finding pleasure in relationships.
- Affect is emphasized at all times.
**Relationship-Based Treatment Approaches**

- Seek to understand strengths and core deficits rather than focusing on outward symptoms and behaviors.
- Support and increase core functions of relating, communicating, reasoning and thinking.
- Remove or bypass constitutional barriers.
  - (e.g. speaking slowly to a child with auditory processing challenges; avoiding sensations a child finds aversive)

**Recent DIR Research**


**Functional Emotional Developmental Capacities**

- D = Developmental Capacities
- I = Individual Differences
- R = Relationship Based

- “Inside-Out” approach to a wide array of developmental problems and educational practices.
- Affectively charged relationships are essential for development.

**Regulation as a Continuum**

- Regulated
- Withdrawn/Avoid
- Overaroused/Agitated

**FEDC 1: Staying Self-Regulated**

"To learn to interact socially, children need to be able to focus, be calm, and actively take in information from their experiences with others; from what they see, hear, smell, touch, and taste; and from the way they move.”

From Engaging Autism, p 43
FEDC 1 – Key Features

A child who is attentive and regulated is able to:

- Remain regulated (not over or under-reacting) in response to internal or external stimuli
- Enjoy interaction without immediately withdrawing
- Respond to comforting and attention
- Maintain longer and longer “flows” of interaction
- Begin to “woo” his caregivers with a deeper and deeper relationship, setting the stage for baby and caregiver to “fall in love.”

FEDC 1 – Sample challenges to development

The synchrony between a caregiver and child may impact the child’s ability to develop regulation. For example:

- A child who is sensitive to sound and touch may withdraw from parents who try to cuddle or sing bouncy songs. The parents may feel rejected or frustrated or incompetent.
- A calm baby who seems uninterested in the world may not respond to calm, mild-mannered parents. They may decide the baby is happier by herself than with them.

FEDC 2 – Engaging and Falling in Love

Refers to the “child’s ability to engage in relationships, including the depth and range of pleasure and warmth, as well as related feelings, such as assertiveness, sadness, anger, etc. that can be incorporated into the quality of engagement and stability of engagement (even under stress).”

FEDC 2 – Key Features

A child who is engaged and relating:

- Recognizes special caregivers
- Shows anticipation
- Begins to develop gestures he can use to communicate
- Laughs/smiles joyfully at caregiver; reciprocal social smiling/cooing – initiating and responding
- Is able to handle an ever-widening array of emotional experiences and feelings and can begin to “read” the affect of others (smiles, frowns, excitement)
- Is better able to progress in areas that may be difficult, e.g. motor planning, language, etc.

Video: Happy Twins

Video: Early Capacities

Baby Reciprocity

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A child may have difficulty engaging and relating if he:

- Has a sensory system that derails his ability to tune into relevant stimuli and tune out irrelevant stimuli.
- Is unable to be calm and regulated (lacks adequate mastery of FEDC 1).

This baby is self-absorbed and not attuning to his social environment (mother).

Mother makes wonderful, gentle, sweet overtures and he does not respond.
- Not engaged in the social surroundings,
- Hyper-focused on the computer toy

Pursue activities that promote optimal arousal and regulation.
Create an inviting environment.
Join perseverative play – make it interactive.
Imitate.
Help child with activities/interests.
Connect subject matter to an interest.

By about six months of age, babies begin transforming emotions into signals for communication. For this to happen, caregivers need to read and respond to babies’ signals and challenge the baby to read and respond to theirs. Through these exchanges, babies begin to engage in back and forth emotional signaling, or two-way communication.”

A child working at this level may:
- Gesture purposefully to get what he wants (reaching, taking, pulling, pointing, making sounds)
- Play with objects while also engaging with caregiver
- Respond to a caregiver’s cues; for instance, when father offers a toy, baby takes it and puts it in a container
- Demonstrate emotions such as closeness, pleasure, protest, fear, etc.
- Recognize he causes people and things to react (Mom coos back, block falls when he drops it)

In this clip a typically developing 18-month-old is playing a game of hiding and finding toys.

Look for:
- Mutual attention
- Shared pleasure
- Non-verbal cues and responses
- Rich affect and gestures
- Motor planning
FEDC 3 -- Sample challenges to development

- A child who has not developed reciprocity or an understanding of how to read another’s affect will have difficulty becoming more purposeful.
- A child’s ability to begin gesturing will be impeded if he has an undeveloped or underdeveloped map of his own body (does not have an understanding of his body in space).

Source: Astra FDL posters, plus CSN p77-78

Promoting Communication of Simple Intentions

- Use simple language
- Make affect inviting/enticing
- Insist on a response
- Show anticipation
- Make 'big' gestures
- Be very animated

FEDC 4: Key Features

A child working at this level will be able to:
- Begin to negotiate for wants and needs
- Begin to recognize emotional patterns
- Play with an increasing emotional range
- Imitate something new that a caregiver introduces
- Sequence actions—motor planning—to execute an idea or desire

FEDC 4: Sample Challenges to Development

- A child with constrictions may not easily interpret caregivers words and gestures, making interaction and communication confusing rather than pleasurable.
- A child with motor planning deficits may have difficulty sequencing the sounds and movements that are necessary for long chains of interaction.
- A child with constrictions might have difficulty remaining engaged and interactive when feeling strong emotions. Meltdowns may occur often.

Video: More Crunchies

- Cole is a typical 10-month-old, just beginning to interact with Purposeful Social Problem Solving Communication behaviors (FEDC 4).
- His solid capacities at FEDCs 1-3 support his efforts to get something he wants from his mom.

Video: Big Red Ball

- Thomas, a 2 ½ year old with difficulty verbally expressing himself, has a history of disengaging when he becomes frustrated.
- Note especially
  - How Thomas makes multiple attempts to get his mom to play the way he wants.
  - The power of affect to organize
Techniques to Promote Shared Social Problem Solving

- Use affect to keep the child motivated.
- Use Playful obstruction/Undoing.
- Plan out a strategy together.
- Work out a 'Plan B' together when 'Plan A' fails.
- Accept a wide range of emotions.
- Set up treasure hunts/play hide and seek.

**FEDC 5: Communicating Emotional Ideas**

“At this stage, children use pretend play to symbolize real or imagined events such as tea parties or monster attacks. They also now use symbols to manipulate ideas in their minds without actually having to carry out actions. This allows new flexibility in reasoning, thinking and problem solving. Language and the use of symbols become more complex from the beginning of this stage to the end of the following one…”

**Key Features (2)**

- Using symbols to stand for things
- Projecting own thoughts and feelings onto characters
- Elaborating on ideas through extended pretend play sequences
- Expressing ideas that often convey emotion
- A growing range of emotional themes, including closeness, dependency, assertiveness, and humor

**FEDC 5 – Key Features (1)**

A child at FEDC 5 will be able to…

- Understand facial expressions and other affective cues for wide range of emotion (e.g. jealousy, disappointment)
- Begin to relate to what someone else is experiencing, responding appropriately to the feelings of others (e.g. my friend is sad because she fell down)
- Raise feelings and impulses to the level of ideas, engaging in conversations to convey what he is thinking, feeling, wishing
- Resolve conflicts in social situations
- Demonstrate a sense of humor

**Functional Emotional Developmental Capacities**

- 9 Reflective Thinking internal standards
- 8 Gray Area Thinking
- 7 Multiple Perspectives Thinking
- 6 Complex Logical Thinking
- 5 Emotional Ideas
- 4 Shared social problem solving
- 3 Purposeful Communication Ability to initiate communication, think, affect
- 2 Engaged Communication Ability to engage in relationships with trust and full range of affect
- 1 Self-Regulation Ability to be Calm, Alert, and Attend

Why is Pretend Play So Important?

- Expands experiences and understanding
  - Pretend play offers a safe arena to practice and experiment with real-life feelings, abilities, ideas, relationships, situations, etc.
- Vital precursor to the ability to think abstractly
  - Pretend play uses symbols that become more elaborate as child “climbs the symbolic ladder”

From Engaging Autism, p 48

Firefighters (1:44)
Common Emotional Themes in Play

- Nurturance and dependency
- Pleasure and excitement
- Curiosity
- Power and assertiveness
- Anger and aggression
- Limit setting (containing feelings - aggressive feelings, excited feelings, yearning feelings)
- Fears and anxieties
- Love, empathy, and concern for others
- Control

*The Child with Special Needs, pp. 206-208*

FEDC 5: Sample Challenges to Development

- A child with constrictions may not use his emotions effectively to organize his thoughts and behavior. He may appear overly literal or fact-based (emotions seemingly absent).
- A child who is not comfortable with a range of emotions may become fearful and anxious in pretend play (emotions are disorganizing), or play may be limited to a few comfortable scenarios.

Video: More Coffee

- Alex is a 3-year-old boy whose challenges include auditory processing.
- With his dad’s help, he is able to engage in simple pretend play.

FEDC 6—Building Bridges & Communicating Reasons

- Where FEDC 5 is about generating and communicating emotional ideas, FEDC 6 is about building bridges between emotional ideas.
- “Logical thinking leads to new skills such as debating, math, and scientific reasoning. Children can now invent things, such as a new game, and play games with rules.” (Engaging Autism, p 49)

FEDC 6: Key Features

A child at FEDC 6 will be able to...

- Reflect on his own feelings
- Ask and answer “Wh” style questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how)
- Give opinions and reasons for her feelings and actions
- Use logic and abstract thinking
- Debate, negotiate, and express choices
- Hold a sustained sense of self and others

Key Features (2)

Pretend play at FEDC 6 includes:

- Logical and emotional connections (don’t have to be realistic)
- Time and space concepts
- More elaborate, complex dramas with identifiable topics
- Full range of emotional themes, including conflict,loneliness, aggression, frustration and morality
FEDC 6: Sample Challenges to Development

- A child who is unable to build bridges between ideas may be repetitive and mechanical, or may appear fragmented in his play.
- A child with constrictions may not be able to see the abstraction and logic behind ideas.
- A child with constrictions might have difficulty understanding the concepts of temporality and spatiality (time and space).

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The nervous system shuffles incoming information and prepares for responses. Incoming information must be registered, discriminated, categorized, and judged. The nervous system must react quickly and appropriately, including: Fight, Flight, or Freeze. If sensory registration is problematic, Fight, Flight, Freeze responses may be exhibited too often. Moodiness, over-reactivity may often show.

A person’s sensory threshold is the level at which their nervous system responds to stimulation. Thresholds vary person to person and sensory system to system. The concept of sensory threshold helps us understand how individual children register sensation.

Some children have many challenges including severe motor planning challenges, low muscle tone, auditory, visual-spatial and language challenges. How can we support children in FEDCs 1-3 when they don’t appear to clearly show us their idea or intention?

Push for higher levels whenever you can.
- Challenge the child to think and elaborate.
- Ask abstract questions.
- Move up and down “ladder” as necessary.
- Keep going for more and more circles.
- Ask ‘interesting’ (not rote/labeling) questions.
- Go for connection rather than good behavior.
- Help child tolerate/stay with a wide range of affects.
- Stay empathetic.

Check-in and read cues to assess the child’s level of affect and arousal level.
- Use rich and varied communication: gestures, facial expressions, sounds, touch, and verbalization.
- Attend to the child’s general sensory profile as well as his current emotional state.
- Tailor interactions to child’s individual differences.
- Up or down regulate the child by using affect or sensory motor actions/activities.
- Maintain connection and shared attention to ultimately get the child to the optimum arousal level.
Follow the Child’s Motivation

- Start with what he is interested in.
- Use “rich” affect to get something cooking.
- Include gesture, voice and movement.
- Enrich communication with rhythms, tone of voice, tempo and relating style.
- Maintain shared attention.
- Allow the child to be the play director.
- Pursue the child’s feelings, expanding the emotional range.
- Repeatedly wonder “How can I turn what he is naturally doing into interactive and dynamic play?”

Move Up and Down the Ladder

- Move focus of interaction up and down the ladder as needed to maintain engagement in a shared world.
- Start where the child leads you.
- Move up the developmental ladder whenever possible.
- Move down when you lose regulation, attention, engagement.
- Continue to follow the child’s motivation.

Maintain Continuous Circles of Communication

- Maintain co-regulation.
- Open and close circles of communication, extending the series around one theme when possible.
- Keep back and forth verbal and non-verbal exchanges going constantly (goal is 20+ circles).
- Try to create rapid back and forth (be sure to provide appropriate response time).
- Remain flexible and in the moment.
- Repair communication as needed.

Expand and Challenge the Child

- Within the play, provide developmentally appropriate challenges.
- Expand and integrate emotional content: life themes, types/styles of interaction, sensations (all modalities), motor requirements/movement and processing capacities.
- Engage multiple levels of FEDCs simultaneously, moving up and down “the ladder” according to child’s responses.
- Capitalize on child’s strengths while gradually working on challenges. Remain non-coercive.
- EXPERIMENT! Be creative! Stay playful! Remember the RELATIONSHIP is what gets things cooking!

Social-Emotional Fundamentals

- Infant research tells us that emotion and relationship are essential to healthy development.
- Many important social-emotional milestones happen in a child’s first year of life.
- Positive, relationship-building interaction is characterized by warmth, engagement and security, and involves exchanges that are reciprocal, pleasurable, emotionally meaningful, and co-regulated.

“Fundamental things that happen” through Emotionally-Charged Relationship

- Draws child into shared world
- Motivates child to attend and communicate
- Supports self-regulation
- Creates sense of purpose
- Strengthens spatial skills
- Creates foundation for learning math concepts and reading comprehension

From Engaging Autism, Chapter 6: Fostering Attention and Engagement under the DIR

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Video: I’m Going to Tickle You!

Where do we go from here?

- www.ICDL.com for information on conferences and training opportunities

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An Introduction to DIRFloortime

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