Creating Connections to Shining Stars (CCSS) 2026
David Raphael's Presentation
July 15, 2026

Good morning

I'd like to offer preface to my presentation. Think of it as a speech before the speech, as disturbing as that may sound

Elements of my presentation today will focus on the DIR/Floortime method for addressing autism related developmental issues. I focus on Floortime, because it is what I know, what we experienced. And for us, it was miraculous. Thus, the title of our book: "A Miracle of the Heart."

I ask that you do not take my presentation to suggest that Floortime is the only approach for addressing the issues of autistic children, or the right one for every family. It was the right one for us, and for us it was transformative.

Whatever approach or method you provide or pursue, from my perspective, you are all heroes.

Finally, Jacob has a saying that "If you know one autistic person, you know one autistic person." I recognize that Jacob's and our story may not be the story of every autistic individual and his or her family. We worked very hard and we were lucky. If you take anything away from our presentations, it was the commitment of every member of our family, and the professionalism, wisdom, and compassion of all the members of our treatment team. Characteristics that I know each of you share.

Now for the real speech

Can you see this pin? It says, "I embarrass my offspring." My goal today is to pursue that sacred parental responsibility to the fullest.

Some memories:

- When Jacob was 12 or so I asked if he wanted to go mountain biking with me. He replied: “Sure, just give me a minute to write my will.”
- I don’t remember his exact age, but I think he was in his teens when he came up with this commercial – and I paraphrase:
- “The day of the apocalypse is near; the earth will be consumed by fire. But I have good news, I just saved a lot of money on my car insurance.”
- When Jake was a Junior in college majoring in creative writing and minoring in philosophy, I asked him how his class in Dante was going. Without blinking an eye, he answered: “Well, Dad, we’re making our way through purgatory.”

Think about the symbolic capacity of those comments and capacity to make rapid-fire jokes.

How did we get here?

How did we go from a child who was non-verbal, perseverative, and most frightening of all, who seemed to be disconnected from the outside world to “I have good news, I just saved a lot of money on my car insurance” and “we’re making our way through purgatory?”

How did we go from a child who was diagnosed with PDD-NOS, autism, and, we were told, “he had significant cognitive limitations and would probably have to be institutionalized,” to a high school graduate who was awarded a Georgia HOPE Scholarship in honor of his academic accomplishments, a college graduate who majored in creative writing and minored in philosophy, and a young man who has co-authored a memoir.

I am happy to reveal to this select group the essential tool that enabled us to begin that journey

Let me explain:

On November 27, 1993, Jacob, my wife Jo, and I sat in the Bethesda office of Dr. Stanley Greenspan. Dr. Greenspan took an oral history, hoisted a large video camera on his shoulder, and told us to play with Jacob. We did this for 10 minutes or so and then he said: “Now I’m going to teach you to play with Jacob.” And he gave us our first lesson in Floortime.

We learned that Floortime play is not just playing. The essence is following your child’s lead whatever he or she is doing. Dr. Greenspan taught us about “circles of communication.”

In the context of the Floortime approach, a circle of communications is essentially a miniature three-part improvisation: Your child does something, you do something to respond building on your child’s action, and the child responds to your action. The goal of Floortime play is to promote multiple circles of communications as the foundation of a deeper engagement with the child and to create a path for the child’s return to a healthier cognitive developmental track.

This brings us to the Tootsie Roll bank, purchased for $5 to support the Kemp Mill Elementary School PTA.

Jacob loved the sound of pennies dropping into the bank.

When we got home from Dr. Greenspan's office, we were sitting in our bedroom with the Tootsie Roll Bank in my hands. He dropped a penny in the bank and went to drop another – but this time, I put my hand over the slot. He pushed it aside. That was our first circle of communication.

He grabbed another penny, went to drop it in, but I put my hand over it again. He pushed it aside again.

Again – this time I put tape over the slot. He pulled the tape off.

Again – I hid it behind my back. He crawled over me to get it.

Again – I hid it under the pillow – said with high affect "where did it go:" He threw the pillow aside and dropped the penny in.

Six, seven, eight circles of communication in a row – a joyful a father-connecting with his son, and a giggling child.

In our second or third meeting with Dr. Greenspan, I asked him, "When will Jacob begin to speak?"

He responded, "Speech is the icing on the cake."

Dr. Greenspan was telling us that, because of Jacob's sensory challenges, he could not successfully advance through essential cognitive developmental stages – most notably, the development of symbolic thinking.

As I understand it – and you're the folks that can correct me if I'm wrong, there are two essential elements of speaking. One is motor control and sensory processing of the tongue and mouth area. The other is the capacity for symbolic thinking. If you don't have the capacity for symbolic thought, then words, have little meaning. For instance, think of the three letters, D, O, G. They are just squiggles on the page or sounds entering your ear. But once you develop the capacity for symbolic thought, those squiggles and those sounds come to represent Lassie, Rin Tin Tin, Scooby-Doo and, in our family, Goldie, Clara, Augie, Maddie, and Jacob's dog, the highly destructive Sammy.

This brings us to the next essential tool in our shared journey.

In the months after we began Jacob's Floortime-based treatment program, we gave Jacob Aladdin's Cave of Wonder as a gift.

A day or so after he received this marvel of plastic engineering, we were playing with it and he moved Alladin into the cave and, pursuing the Floortime mantra of "following his lead", I moved Jafar in the way. He moved Aladdin. I moved Jafar – and I soon realized that the plastic figures of Aladdin and Jafar had become animated. It was the beginning of our symbolic play and his symbolic thinking.

From the day when toy figures of Aladdin, Jafar and Abu the monkey, became symbols, the length and quality of our Floortime play grew and grew. Over the next weeks, our den filled up with hundreds of toys, the essential therapeutic tools of Jacob's treatment plan.

Over the years, we continued to go to the den to "make stories" but at some point, we left the toys behind and made stories in our heads, without prompts - and these stories grew in complexity and length.

Soon our stories extended over months. We created a town - Polygon City and we built a complex community filled with intriguing characters. Joe's Coffee Shop, a

small cafe where people overindulged in caffeine and became incredibly hyperactive. Snob Square was filled with rich people who had lost the capacity to carry out the most basic human functions without help. A baseball team, the Polygon Primates, filled with quirky players.

Where does our capacity for abstract thinking take us? Taking it to another level, children begin to develop abstractions of abstractions. The letters, l, o, v, e, what do they look like? Abstract thinking enables us to create images in our mind, of people we care for and the warm feeling inside we feel when we are with them: parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses, Taylor Swift – okay that was a joke…for me.

In retrospect, our family's autism journey was filled with discovery, wonder, and joy. But it certainly didn't start out that way. As gratifying as our experience was, without question, it was a challenging time for our family. As I am sure you have experienced, each family and each family member will react differently and be impacted differently by autism. For me, Jacob's diagnosis and my fear of losing him to the isolation of autism, brought up the sadness and pain of my father's death when I was a teen.

Other family members were impacted as well.

In the months after Jacob was diagnosed, Jacob's older sister began struggling academically. Her teacher suggested psychological testing. We put it off – we were just too busy and too emotionally overloaded. But her difficulties led to health-related challenges. Finally, she was diagnosed with ADHD. We placed her on medication and arranged for tutoring. Her grades improved and her medical issues faded. I'm not proud of our lack of our immediate attention to her needs – but it was our reality at the time.

Autism and other developmental and physical differences are family affairs and each family, and each family member will respond differently.

As clinicians and educators, consider being conscious of how a child's autism diagnosis or other developmental or physical challenges impact the family. Autism is scary – and is scary in a different way for each family and each family member.

I'd respectfully propose that when working with a child who has developmental or physical challenges, the entire family is the client. But I'd also suggest that, whenever possible, engage family members as members of the treatment team. Tell us what to do. Put us to work. Each of Jacob's clinicians gave us home assignments. And that work, that role we played in addressing Jacob's challenges was curative for all of us.

In one of our recent conversations, Jacob commented: "Grief is a force." Our treatment team gave us the tools and guidance to put that force to work. Recognize the emotional challenges that family members may face – be kind and gentle when necessary. But, whenever possible, empower us by making us part of the solution.

Among the great joys of this period of my life are Jacob and my annual trips to national parks. The time together and the shared discovery of places of wonder are so meaningful. We've traveled together to the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Zion Canyon, and Yellowstone National Park. Tomorrow we'll head off to the Blue Ridge Parkway for two days of hiking.

We have several traditions when we take these trips. But the most important one is downloading science fiction books to listen to as we drive. In our first trip to the Grand Canyon, Jacob selected *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir. Last year, for his birthday, Jacob and I went to see the movie together.

For a small fee, I'll do my best not to give away the plot for those who have not seen it. But essentially, the story is about solving difficult challenges by learning to communicate with someone who is alien to you - learning to connect with the other and to enter each other's worlds.

Until we learn to communicate with the other, we are all aliens to someone else – another culture, another generation, another political perspective. Someone who perceives and processes the world differently than we do.

I believe this is true of how many people perceived individuals with developmental and physical differences. It is easy to view autistic individuals as being different and alien. They may have no spoken language, run in circles, flap their arms, and hold

their hands over their ears and scream. From the outside, these actions may seem bewildering and frightening. But while they may seem alien to us, the actions of autistic individuals have a meaning and a purpose.

In his wonderful book "Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism," Barry Prizant wrote: *We fail when we "treat the person as a problem to be solved and to be fixed rather than an individual to be understood*."

Our family learned to follow Jacob's lead rather than trying to stop behaviors that we didn't understand. If dropping pennies in a Tootsie Roll bank was meaningful for him – we made it meaningful for us. If Jacob was running in circles we got in his way, forcing him to change his path – and to close another circle. We began to see these behaviors not as an obstacle to forming a relationship but as invitations to nurture one.

We met in the middle and learned to respect and care about each other. Thus, rather than insisting that autistic individuals enter our world, we engage them based on their actions and their initiatives. We honor them for who they are and we find ways for our worlds to meet. And here is the other thing I learned, when we open ourselves up to the other, just like Rocky and Grace did in "Project Hail Mary," not only can we find that person, but we can find ourselves. In our case, Jacob and I found ourselves in the middle and saved each other.

I love this quote from Prizant's book "the best way to help autistic and neurodivergent individuals progress toward fulfilling, meaningful lives is to find ways to engage them with deep respect, to help them build a sense of self, and to foster connection and joyful experiences[1]."

"Follow your child's lead" was perhaps the most important thing we learned from Dr. Greenspan and his team. But another key lesson was that "all learning is

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[1] Prizant Ph.D., Barry M. Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism (p. 289). (Function). Kindle Edition.

relationship based". I think this is especially true when it comes to abstract concepts. You learn to understand and use the word "love" from someone you love and someone who loves you and demonstrates it through their smiles, hugs, and the lilt in their voice when they see you. I have a saying - "Love is the best M&M."

The same is true of values such as caring, compassion, thoughtfulness, and kindness. You cannot teach values through repetition and I'm not convinced that value flash cards can truly convey compassion or kindness.

But I know that you can - In your work, when your kindness shows through, when your caring is on display and your love is evident, children, teens and young adults will see it and recognize it. And family members and caregivers will learn from you and will model these behaviors.

You all bring such skill to your work. But, among greatest gift you share is your devotion and your love. And for that, all of us – all those families whose children have been challenged with developmental and physical differences – and have benefited, and continue to benefit from your professionalism, kindness, devotion and love - will be eternally grateful.

When Jacob was 13, I wrote an essay entitled "Zeno's Paradox", which is in our new book. The essay is based on an enigma, proposed by Zeno of Elea, a Greek philosopher who lived in the 5th century BCE. Among the paradoxical arguments that Zeno made is *if you keep on getting a half distance to your goal, you will never get there*. Think of taking half of that of that remaining slice of yummy chocolate cake in the refrigerator – maybe because you are trying to lose weight or you want to save some for other family members. Theoretically, if you keep on taking half, you'll end up splitting chocolate cake atoms.

When I wrote that essay was wondering what our goals for Jacob should be – because, as he grew, our hopes grew with him. But there always seem to be a half distance to travel. This excerpt from the essay Zeno 's Paradox speaks of his first experience at sleep away camp:

Although I'm not sure we ever openly spoke of this, for my wife Jo and me, Jacob's attending camp was a test of what we had accomplished and, perhaps, what we had not. If social engagement was Jacob's most significant challenge, then being at camp would be the proof test of how far he had come and how far he still had to go. We truly did not know what to expect. Would we receive a hysterical phone call from him the first day of camp demanding that he be brought home? Would the camp director call to tell us that it just wasn't working out? Jo and I said to each other that we must view each day as a success—each day would provide him with additional practice interacting with his peers. Even if he only stays for a few days...

After five days, a letter arrived from Jake. It began with among the most remarkable words he had uttered since he spoke his first word "meow:" "Dear Mom and Dad, camp is awesome."

After the first two weeks, we drove up to camp for visiting day. In front of us stood a tall, lean, and tan camper. He had taken on a teenage air of casual indifference. But as we walked through camp, he reached for my hand, and we walked together. A wash of great joy poured over me. He was entering and he was exploring this new world. He was heading out on his own. But the pleasure of his connection with me was still there and he still allowed me to be his partner and his guide.

Zeno was not with us on that walk; neither were my fears or anxieties nor my plans and visions for the future. They would all be back the next day. But for that one glorious moment, it was just the simple pleasure of a father and son walking hand in hand—the wonderful, intoxicating dance of human interaction.

Perhaps in the end, it is the holding of hands that counts: being with one another and walking together. Like putting pennies in the Tootsie Roll bank, it is the getting there that counts—the elaborate interplay of human interaction, human growth, and human discovery.

Why is Jacob different from any of us? We are all human beings in the making. What makes us human is not only our individual capacity for growth but our shared responsibility and our shared joy in enabling each other to grow.

This is the hope, the joy, and the victory: The great pleasure of each other's company, the delight in the shared journey, and the passion to help each other get there, wherever that place may be.

I am so grateful to all of you who have joined thousands of families on this journey of discovery, joy, and love.

Thank you