

A READER'S COMPANION



The Narrow Bridge
PRESS

A DIR/Floortime Primer

Excerpted from A Miracle of the Heart: A Father and Son's Autism Journey

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The DIR/Floortime method provided a roadmap and pathways for our autism journey — without question, the essential feature in Jacob's remarkable growth and development. This primer is a starting point; a far more comprehensive description of the model appears in the chapter "DIR/Floortime: A Parent's Perspective," and a full reading and resource list closes out the book.



Floortime is built on moments like this one — following the child's lead, staying close, staying present.

THE MODEL

DIR/Floortime

DIR — Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-Based
— brings together three concepts, or dynamics, that work as one.

D

Developmental

Identifies the Functional Emotional Development Levels (FEDLs) underlying all learning, relating, and communicating. Neurotypical children tend to advance through these stages naturally; sensory and processing challenges can hinder that progress for autistic children.

I

Individual Difference

Autistic individuals may face an array of challenges in how they take in information through their senses — a sensory profile that represents their "individual differences" and can undermine cognitive and emotional development.

R

Relationship-Based

As Drs. Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder, the founders of the model, taught us: *all learning is relationship-based.*

The keys to this relationship-based effort include:

- Recognizing that whatever that individual is doing has meaning to them.
- Following that person's lead and initiative.
- Thoughtfully drawing them into shared, increasingly complex interactions.

THE GOAL

To help autistic individuals and others with developmental and learning challenges return to a healthier cognitive and emotional developmental path.

DEFINITION

Floortime

A method where caregivers and clinicians seek to nurture and engage individuals through activities — often play — that promote relationship-based engagement.

The term comes from the notion that when we "get down on the floor" with autistic children, we engage them on their level — as equal partners.

IN PRACTICE

Circles of Communication

A "circle of communication" is the smallest unit of an interaction. Family members, clinicians, and support staff are guided to build an autistic individual's engagement one circle at a time — a miniature one-act play in which the autistic individual is both director and lead actor.

- ① The child initiates the interaction — running in circles, trying to open a door, walking away.
- ② The parent, caregiver, or Floortime partner responds by building on the child's initiative — playfully blocking the path, pretending the door is stuck.
- ③ The child responds in turn — changing course, moving the caregiver's hand from the doorknob.

The adult caregiver or practitioner builds on each circle of communication — perhaps by playfully changing the rules, as in lying on the floor so the child must run around or jump over him — toward growing numbers of circles and an extended interaction.

Central to creating circles of communication and advancing Floortime play:

- Whatever an autistic individual is doing has meaning for them.
- By following the autistic individual's lead, you are honoring them, entering their world, and finding a place where your worlds can meet.

Sensory Processing

Sensory processing speaks to how individuals take in information through their different senses. Individuals with sensory processing challenges may be hyposensitive (under-sensitive) or hypersensitive (over-sensitive) in one or more senses. Someone with auditory hypersensitivity may find background sounds painful; someone with hyposensitivity to touch may seek out intense tactile input — rubbing, pressing, or other stimming behaviors.

Beyond sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, a range of other sensory systems may affect those with autism spectrum disorders:

PROPRIOCEPTION

The awareness of one's body position in space.

VESTIBULAR

The sense of balance.

INTEROCEPTION

Awareness of the body's internal states — hunger, thirst, the need to use the bathroom.

Present from birth, sensory processing challenges affect how individuals receive and respond to the world around them — on a wide spectrum, from mild sensitivities that require small accommodations to profound differences that can significantly affect a child's ability to focus, connect, and participate in daily life.



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