

What is DIR®/Floortime™ and Why is it “Best Clinical Practice”?

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The Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship based approach to helping children with special needs, known as DIR®, was first described by Dr. Stanley Greenspan in two monographs published in the 1970s. This approach is the culmination of years of observation and study of infants and children, done by many outstanding researchers since the 1940s. Bringing together knowledge from Piagetian, Skinnerian, and psychoanalytic models, Dr. Greenspan’s contribution was in recognizing the critical importance of relationships and affect to learning. DIR®/Floortime is a framework for understanding child development, a philosophy that emphasizes the critical importance of relationships and affect, and a set of treatment strategies built upon those principles. DIR® is a broad and comprehensive approach which encompasses all disciplines that work with children.

Interdisciplinary

DIR® is unique among educational and therapeutic modalities because of its strong emphasis on the interdisciplinary understanding of the child. The framework encompasses the whole child, considering underlying capacities, which are viewed as primary, followed by more specific abilities, such as language or movement or cognition. The framework of six basic functional milestones which cross disciplinary lines are:

1. Shared attention and regulation
2. Forming relationships, intimacy and trust
3. Two-way reciprocal communication
4. Sustained, co-regulated interactions
5. Creative use of ideas
6. Logical bridging of ideas

All disciplines contribute to the shared understanding of the child, including occupational therapy, physical therapy, medicine, music therapy, vision therapy, speech and language therapy, audiology, psychology, education, and mental health. While each person works within their own discipline, there is a great appreciation for the contributions and perspectives of other disciplines, and a great reliance on teamwork, shared training, and on-going collaboration. The shared framework of the developmental milestones supports this shared approach.

Developmental

The DIR® approach always considers a child's behavior, skills, and capacities from a developmental perspective. This means that the history of a child's experiences, the pattern of interactions, the expectations and history of change form a very meaningful context for determining goals and interventions. Each child's strengths and weaknesses along the developmental ladder are appreciated as building towards higher capacities. This is a hopeful and optimistic framework which presumes that by strengthening foundational levels there will be developmental progress toward higher levels.

Affect and emotion

The most profound contribution of Greenspan is the recognition of the importance of affect as the great force which organizes and motivates learning. DIR® is based upon a consistent focus on the affect in the child, and on a continuous flow of affective interactions. DIR® and Floortime strategies are built upon supporting affective development. This places an extra importance on mental health insights and perspectives. By harnessing the power of affect a child reaches their highest potential.

Relationships and Families

All DIR®/Floortime intervention is done in the context of relationships, with the parents being the primary relationship for a child. Parents and other caregivers are provided strategies to support their child's developmental at all times, not so much to place the burden of care upon them, but to improve the quality of relating, communicating, interacting, and natural learning that is possible throughout the day. We regard parents and families as experts about their own children and because our intervention is family focused we rely less on outside people spending time training the child when we can instead help families have quality nurturing interactions more of the time. Work from a DIR® perspective requires an understanding and support of all the important relationships in a child's life.

Individual Differences

There has been important new appreciation for the unique ways in which children experience the world, in terms of sensory responses, and in the way they are able to respond and regulate their bodies' movements and reactions. The DIR® approach dictates that all interactions need to be tailored to the child's unique individual differences. Through careful observation, and discernment of an individual profile, we can better understand the motivations for a child's behavior and how to interact and support a child's development.

Process not Product

DIR® is an approach which addresses a child's underlying capacities or processes: to take in information, to think, feel, respond, and interact. It is not an approach based upon eliciting, rewarding or discouraging specific behaviors. The result of DIR® is a child who is able to adapt to new situations, be flexible in responses, and is creative, warm, and considerate of others.

Floortime™ strategies

Floortime, developed by Greenspan with contributions by Dr. Serena Wieder, is a specific way of interacting with a child, involving spontaneous free play, in which the adult follows the child's lead. Floortime is one part of a DIR® approach. The most important part of following a child's lead is affect attunement- recognizing how the child is feeling and forming a connection or relationship built from that shared understanding. The adult can then entice the child into deeper and more complex interactions, and challenge them to reach higher levels of development. This is done without directing, and thus empowers the child to build new functional capacities. A child who learns in this way initiates interactions, can work cooperatively towards a shared goal, can solve novel problems and forms their own personal value system. Research in education, called 'incidental teaching' supports the efficacy of teaching while a child is affectively invested in their own idea.

Parents often need coaching and modeling to do Floortime successfully with their child. A child with autism for example may have behaviors that are confusing or disturbing. Parents may try to teach their child in ways that may work with another child, but are not successful with the child with special needs. Parents may feel discouraged, anxious or frustrated. Each child and each family have their own challenges, strengths and personalities. Clinicians need to have training and on-going mentorship and support to be able to work with many different children and families. DIR®/Floortime offers a very rewarding approach to building relationships and developmental capacities. The benefits are profound and long lasting, both for the child, and the parent-child relationship.

Semi-structured Problem Solving

In addition to Floortime, DIR® also includes semi-structured problem solving, within informal activities and during other therapeutic modalities such as speech therapy or occupational therapy. Semi-structured problem solving means that instead of free play, there is now an adult guided agenda, such as a problem to solve, a task to perform, a skill to learn, or an end product to create. Even with semi-structured activities, the DIR® approach emphasizes the importance of continual affect attunement, reciprocity in sustained two-way communication, and challenging the child through the full range of functional emotional milestones. A complete DIR® program includes not only daily Floortime interactions, but also semi-structured activities and a complement of therapies, all using DIR® principles to address all of a child's special needs.

Use of structure

Structure means imposed agenda, routine, schedule, controlled environment, and/or directed activity. There is often a temptation to impose structure in children's activities, and in therapeutic approaches. Culturally, children's lives are increasingly more scheduled and structured. For children with developmental challenges such as autism, there is a recognition that they may perform better with imposed structure. Children with autism have more difficulty understanding and adapting to change in their environment and routine. However, in order to increase a child's capacity for being flexible and tolerating change, it is necessary to provide opportunities for exploration and discovery and experiences with novelty and surprise- in graded and tolerable amounts. The concept of the 'just right challenge' is not new and has been described in different ways over the years. Now it must be applied to behavioral learning for children with autism. The goal shifts from best performance or desired behavior, to the goal of co-regulating through a challenging experience, and ultimately becoming more flexible and adaptable. Structure is a tool to be used in a balanced way within a DIR® program to not only support optimal behavior and regulation, but also using activities with less structure such as Floortime to support the development of adaptability, initiative and creativity.

Natural environment

The benefit of working in natural environments is a popular and widely supported concept. It is based primarily on the recognition of importance of parent-child relationships, and the need for therapists in early intervention programs to support that relationship in the context of typical daily activities. The interpretation of natural environment as being strictly in the home often conflicts with the idea that children with autistic behaviors respond better in a structured environment. A home environment is not typically highly structured. How do we reconcile these divergent directives? Do we make the home unnaturally more structured or abandon the home for a structured

school or clinic based program? First, it is important to recognize that the environment for the child often consists of a relatively small area of physical space. It is natural for a young child to play on the floor- this may be in a corner of a room, or sometimes in a designated playroom. It may sometimes be a larger space such as a yard or park. In a natural environment there is freedom of movement within this space, toys or other materials to manipulate, and a caregiver available for interaction and supervision. Natural environments might also include the bathtub, the mealtime table, the park, a store or a restaurant- each location and activity provides a different degree of structure, but all involve typical relationships and interactions. Natural environments provide a range of structure, and clinic or school environments can also provide a wide range of structure. The appropriate questions are what degree of structure will support the developmental goals, and how are parents or natural relationships being supported, and not where does the intervention take place. DIR® works in the context of relationships, and is directed towards a natural flow of interaction, during play as well as more structured activities, whether at home, in the community, or in a clinic setting. Not only can the child learn in different physical locations, but by building underlying capacities, a child who learns through a DIR® approach is able to carry those abilities and utilize them in a variety of situations and experiences.

Best Clinical Practice

Best clinical practice for children with developmental disabilities is an approach which is comprehensive, interdisciplinary in perspective, and has a primary focus on affective interactions and relationships. The DIR® approach described by Dr. Greenspan provides this framework and Floortime strategies provide specific guidance for interactions. Children may benefit from many disciplinary therapies and programs. These can all contribute to a child's overall development by utilizing a DIR® approach, with emphasis on tailoring interactions to the child's unique individual profile, sustained reciprocal flow of interaction, and building underlying functional capacities. This approach is founded upon the accumulated knowledge of the past 50 years of study of infants and children. The research which supports this approach includes all of the major contributors to the field as well as broadly accepted clinical practice standards. DIR® and Floortime provide a conceptual framework for both parents and specialists to better understand child development, and a roadmap towards supporting development for children with special needs. This optimistic approach builds upon the unique ability of humans to learn, guided by affect, and the capacity for children to become empathetic and creative individuals with unending potential for continuing growth.