

## **1. Guidance for parents seeking to secure an EHC Plan**

A user-friendly document that helps parents to think through the steps they may need to take in order to collect the evidence that their child needs an EHC plan.

### Early Stage SEN

## **2. Bright Futures School's special approach to working on core autism difficulties**

At Bright Futures School (BFS), our experience is that it is the impact of our pupils' autism which is the biggest obstacle to their ability to access the academic curriculum. We have also observed that autism tends to get in the way of our pupils' ability to make and maintain meaningful friendships and to become independent.

At BFS, we use what we call 'level 1 foundational guiding' to enable staff to change their communication and interaction style in order to reduce demands on pupils, build trusting relationships with pupils and support the pupils to start to understand and use non-verbal communication. As a result, pupils who have been out of school for some time and/or have a history of unsettled placements are able to engage fully with the curriculum and with school life.

Our 'guiding' approach is based upon the principles and practice of Relationship Development Intervention (RDI). We provide level 1 foundational guiding as part of our core offer.

In order for the child to build on the social communication foundations developed in level 1 guiding and to support our pupils to be able to respond 'in the moment' to the ongoing changes and challenges that are part of all the social communication upon which reciprocal interaction and understanding of others is founded, we recommend that parents undertake level 2 guiding – a parent-led home programme of RDI.

In typical development, the interpersonal engagement between parent and child in the early years acts as the vehicle for the child to start to:

- Cope with, and enjoy unpredictability and uncertainty
- Regulate their emotions; understand themselves and other people
- Encode special 'episodic memories' that underpin resilience, self-esteem and self-actualisation.

A parent-led RDI home programme uses the parent-child relationship to give parents another opportunity to help their children to master the developmental milestones that underpin the above abilities. Level 1 guiding in school can support this but would not, on its own (without the parental input in the home), lead to generalisation of social communication competence or the mastery of more sophisticated and advanced social communication competence.

We do not provide level 2 guiding as part of our core offer.

We have supported some BFS families to secure an RDI home-and-school programme (HASP) where BFS Learning Mentor/s go into the pupil's home during the school day in order to model for parents how to put RDI/guiding into practice. As of September 2020, we no longer have the capacity to offer HASPs but we are able to provide existing evidence from school in support of a parent-led home RDI programme if parents are keen to undertake level 2 guiding.

### **Social communication interventions vs teaching 'social skills'**

RDI is one of a handful of social communication interventions that meet all the criteria outlined in NICE guidelines CG170 for approaches that seek to work on the core social communication difficulties at the heart of autism.

Traditional approaches tend to require explicit teaching of 'social skills' that do not allow the child/young person to develop or to apply social competence in a naturalistic way. Such approaches would include: social stories; comic strip conversations; direct instruction; behavioural shaping; modelling. These approaches are embodied in resources such as 'Social Thinking', 'Talkabout for Teenagers', and 'Socially Speaking'.

Through the use of a parent-led RDI programme (or, we anticipate, a HASP), the young person's social competence becomes reflexive or instinctive because they have participated in the special 'guiding relationship' with RDI-trained adult 'guides' and so are able to use the thinking of others to integrate information from multiple communication channels simultaneously and to adapt, in the moment, to the ongoing and multiple changes that are part of a social communication exchange.

They do not have to stop and think about what another person's facial expression or prosody or gesture means, or stop to try to unravel the intention behind a communication partner's communication, which is what has to happen when 'social skills' are explicitly taught. In explicit teaching of 'social skills', by the time a young person has taken the time needed to decode the non-verbal communication, the conversation has moved on and:

- The autistic young person is out of synch with their communication partner
- Any natural 'flow' to the conversation is lost
- The communication partner begins to lose interest in the interaction and the young person with autism – who may not have developed the social communication competence to realise that the communication has broken down and/or to make a communication repair – is unable to get the interaction back on track.

Rather than pushing a button or following a script, truly reciprocal relationships require us to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate the state of our connection to one another and to make ongoing adjustments in order to remain socially co-ordinated.

The essential skills of relationship differ from the typical 'social skills' taught in classes or in social skills groups. We are accustomed to thinking of 'social skills' as teaching behaviours such as making eye contact, waiting your turn, smiling, asking good questions and similar behaviours. Scientists refer to these as *instrumental skills* and they are mainly about someone getting what they need and about fitting in. Both types of skills are important, but only relationship skills lead to the ability to have friends and intimate relationships.

Instrumental skills are applicable to situations in which people typically behave in predictable, scripted ways and when we employ them, we tend to use people like instruments to get our needs met. Relationship skills have a very different purpose. They are used when social contact is an end in itself: to create and deepen connections between people, share excitement and joy, and participate in joint creative efforts.

Relationships, like friendships and children's play encounters, occur in a rather unpredictable, non-scripted improvised manner. Flexibility and creative thinking are valued, along with remaining co-ordinated. There is no Plan B for when a script doesn't go according to plan, yet ongoing change and novelty is a hallmark of the communication that underpins all human relationships.

The two types of skills require very different learning methods and this fundamental difference is the reason that Relationship Development Intervention was developed.

### **'Dynamic intelligence'**

Dr Gutstein, Clinical Psychologist, autism researcher and co-founder of RDI, coined the term 'dynamic intelligence' to describe the ability to adapt one's thinking in the moment in response to ongoing uncertainty, change and challenge, including social communication breakdowns.

He has written several articles on why dynamic intelligence is vital for a good quality of life and essential for forming friendships and relationships, including:

<https://www.rdiconnect.com/developing-dynamic-intelligence-is-crucial/>

<https://www.rdiconnect.com/dynamic-intelligence-is-dependent-on-challenge/>

as well as several podcasts on dynamic intelligence, including:

<https://www.rdiconnect.com/autism-podcast/dynamic-intelligence/>

Dr Gutstein has also written/broadcast about why explicit teaching of 'social skills' and/or following social 'scripts' does not lead to dynamic intelligence and real life 'in the moment' social communication competence:

<https://www.rdiconnect.com/more-than-social-skills-episode-49/>

<https://www.rdiconnect.com/episode-45-were-not-teaching-skills/>

<https://www.rdiconnect.com/relationship-skills-and-social-skills/>

Relationships do not rely on pre-selected scripts, and actions that we choose to take in a relationship encounter depend heavily upon what our partner is doing at that instant. Therefore, the appropriate response will change from moment to moment. We seek out relationships to add new ideas, to integrate ideas and to collaborate and co-create. Relationship encounters are filled with novelty and variation. Because they involve the ongoing introduction of novelty, relationships interactions require constant evaluation and regulation. A parent-led RDI home programme (or, we anticipate, a HASP) enables autistic children and children with other developmental disabilities to develop the ability evaluate the state of their connection to others on an ongoing basis in order to keep social interactions on track.

### **Our experience of putting 'guiding' into place with pupils at BFS**

When Bright Futures School was set up in 2010, the intention was to integrate RDI/guiding into the curriculum in the hope that school staff would be able to bring about similar dramatic changes as those effected by parents who were leading a traditional RDI home programme.

What actually happened was that some good gains were seen in the children with whom staff worked intensively in school, but these gains did not generalise outside the school environment and the children plateaued after mastering foundational social communication milestones.

This happened with the exception of one pupil, Philip, whose parents were also running an RDI programme in the home. Over a period of about 10 years, Philip's ADOS score (which shows the severity of the autism) decreased from 19 out of 22 to 12 out of 22, with a correspondingly significant impact on the family's dynamics, as well as a major impact on Philip's ability to cope with, and enjoy the world. Philip has written about his experience [here](#).

In January 2020, another parent of a child at BFS started to participate in a home-and-school RDI programme, following a successful appeal for this provision at SEN Tribunal. This pupil has made more progress with RDI in just 6 months working intensively with her Mum than staff at school were able to make with school-based 'guiding' over 3 years.

### **Autism research shows that it is parents who have the ability to reduce a child's autism severity score**

It is significant that the only pupils at BFS who made significant social communication progress were those children whose parents were also implementing RDI in the home.

### **Autism research studies demonstrate that it is parents who are key to developing social communication competence in children and young people with autism:**

Drew, A., G. Baird, S. Baron-Cohen, A. Cox, V. Slonim, S. Wheelwright, J. Swettenham, B. Berry, and T. Charman. (2002). "A pilot randomized control trial of parent training intervention for pre-school children with autism." *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 11, 266-272.

Aldred, C., Green, J., and Adams, C. (2004). "A new social communication intervention for children with autism: pilot randomized controlled treatment study suggesting effectiveness." *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 45(8), 1420-30.

Jones E. A., Carr E. G., Feeley K. M. (2006). Multiple effects of joint attention intervention for children with autism." *Behavior Modification*. Nov. 30(6):782-834.

Schertz, H. H., Odom, S. L. (2007). Promoting joint attention in toddlers with autism: a parent-mediated developmental model. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Sept. 37(8) pp. 1562-1575.

Solomon, R., Necheles, J., Ferch, C. & Bruckman, D. (2007). Pilot study of a parent training program for young children with autism: The P.L.A.Y. Project Home Consultation program." *Autism* 11, no. 3, 205-224.

Mahoney, G., and F. Perales (2005). Relationship-focused early intervention with children with pervasive developmental disorders and other disabilities: a comparative study." *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 26(2), 77-85.

McConachie H, Diggle T. (2007), "Parent implemented early intervention for young children with autism spectrum disorder: a systematic review." *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*. Feb, 13(1), 120-9.

and most importantly, the biggest ever randomised controlled trial of an autism intervention:

['PACT: a long-term follow-up of a randomised controlled trial' Green et al, The Lancet 2016.](#)

We would not therefore expect any BFS pupil to be able to generalise outside the school environment, any learning/competence gained from level 1 guiding in school. Even when information on guiding has been shared with parents, none of our BFS parents have been in a position to apply it successfully. This is not a criticism of parents. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of the amount of training and ongoing support that all parents need in order to be able to use the RDI/guiding framework as a lifestyle approach within their families.

It takes a member of staff between 6-12 months at Bright Futures School practising the implementation of the guiding framework in at least one school session per day every day on a 1-1 basis with a pupil with no distractions in order to master use of the RDI/guiding framework. It involves videoing their work with the child, uploading the footage and sending it to an external RDI consultant together with an analysis of their own use of the framework.

This is reviewed by the external RDI consultant and written feedback given to the staff member. Staff also have 'in the moment' on the ground support from school's Head of Development, who is a certified RDI Consultant with longstanding experience of the implementation of the approach. Without that in-person support, staff would take much longer to master their use of the approach.

BFS is only able to provide level 1 guiding at school: it is completely unfeasible for this kind of level 2 intensive training to parents to be offered as part of BFS's core offer.

Social communication interventions including RDI tend to incorporate a 'lifestyle' approach in their methodology. This allows parents to work the intervention into everyday routines, enabling the child to be immersed in a home-based social communication environment. This is crucial because what contributes significantly to the success of the intervention is:

***the parents' ability to spot natural, authentic opportunities for social communication learning that arise as part of everyday living***

together with the fact that

***the parent is the natural 'guide' to the child's 'mental apprentice' in typical development.***

**Supporting parents to secure an RDI home-and-school programme via their child's EHC plan**

We have been able to collaborate with an external RDI Consultant to provide this training and ongoing support (level 2 guiding via a home-and-school programme/HASP) to some of our families who have secured an education personal budget via their child's EHC plan to cover the additional costs. Our success in supporting families to secure this provision has exceeded our expectations and at September 2020, we no longer have capacity to offer it to any further BFS families.

#### **Useful RDI/guiding related resources**

- [The Connections Centre](#) (RDI HQ)
- [List of RDI Consultants](#) (search on 'UK'):
- [Autism Guide](#): a Facebook group where parents and RDI Consultants exchange information and ideas about using RDI
- [PBS VS Developmental](#): Why we feel that behaviour-based approaches for autism (PBS, ABA) are not appropriate.
- ['Social communication interventions and RDI'](#): an explanatory paper written by the Head of Development at Bright Futures School which has been helpful in submissions to SEN Tribunals

- Links to blogposts that explain different aspects of 'guiding'/RDI, along with video footage of adult guides using RDI/guiding with a child/young person with autism:

## **Subject**

[Introduction to Bright Futures School and to 'guiding'](#)

[Co-regulation \(the 'back and forth' of social interaction\)](#)

[The Guided Participation Relationship](#)

[A video showing the development of language, joint attention and episodic memory in a BFS pupil](#)

[Alex sets up a simple pattern to allow Saoirse to step into her co-regulatory \(socially reciprocal\) role](#)

[Connection & experience-sharing](#)

[Using non-verbal communication to facilitate emotional connection](#)

['It's not about the carrot!' – showing how the activity is just the vehicle to enable the interaction to take place](#)

[Using non-verbal communication, pausing & pacing to seek & share emotional reactions](#)

[Videos showing a BFS pupil's progress after 1 year of RDI](#)

['Why bother' interacting? The importance of fostering internal motivation to engage with others](#)

[Pausing for experience-sharing](#)

[Facilitating gesture](#)

[PDA and RDI](#)

[Philip, a young autistic man, talks about what he calls 'Social Integration Therapy' and why this doesn't really help autistic people](#)

[Philip shares his experience of RDI](#)