

The Horizon's Story
by Nicole Beurkens 2010

I did not set out to work with families of children with autism. In fact, twelve years ago my only exposure to the topic of autism was a required video and reading assignment for a special education course I took as an undergraduate. In college I majored in special education with a focus on learning disabilities and a minor in political science. Autism was not even a blip on my radar at that time.

All of that changed the winter before I graduated from college. I was doing a student teaching assignment in a middle school special education classroom. Secondary kids were a fun challenge for me and I had decided to look for a job in a middle or high school working with learning disabled and emotionally impaired students. My student teaching supervisor, who also happened to be the special education director for the district, had a different plan. For months she talked to me about a classroom program she needed to open for young children with autism. She was convinced that I had what it took to start this program and work with these students, and I was convinced she was crazy!

The months went by and toward the end of my student teaching she told me I would be visiting a classroom in a nearby district for children with autism. I went so I could tell her that I had seen it and really wasn't interested in that kind of teaching position. There was only one small glitch in my plan – after spending the day in that classroom I decided that I could actually see myself doing that. I felt an immediate sense of belonging with the children in that classroom, and was amazed by the potential I saw within them. I have always enjoyed a challenge, and I saw myself being able to thrive on the challenge of figuring out what made these kids tick and how to help them reach their potential.

Adventures in Autism

So, despite the fact that I did not have much experience with young children, let alone children with autism, I took the position. I guess I was putting a lot of faith in my supervisor's belief that I was going to be able to do this, despite the nagging feeling in my stomach that I had no idea what I was doing! That summer began my adventure with autism as I figured out how to set up a classroom and meet the needs of five children with autism ages 3-5. In many ways my gut feeling was confirmed – I had no idea what I was doing! And at the same time, I knew about kids and I found that common sense and all the good teaching strategies I had learned through my training were serving me well.

I spent the next three years soaking up as much information about autism as I possibly could. I attended seminars, read books (there were significantly fewer options at that time than there are today), subscribed to journals, visited other programs, and learned from a lot of trial and error with my students. I received training in applied behavior analysis, structured teaching, picture exchange communication, adapted curriculums, sensory integration, and on and on. During that time I earned a master's degree in special education with a specialty in autism. I was feeling pretty good about what I was accomplishing with my students. They were talking, most were participating for at least part of the day in regular education classrooms, we had a buddies program in place, and our classroom and students were an accepted and valued part of the school community.

Despite those successes, there was still this constant nagging sense of something being missing. Even though goals were being met and things on the surface were looking pretty good, I had a sense that there was something I was missing. I knew that even with everything we were doing the core problems for these students were still not being addressed. They still struggled with engaging in real unsupported friendships with peers, their communication felt different than other children, many repetitions were needed to build comfort with new things, and they didn't know how to really think about things. I decided to embark on a journey to find other options that I was sure existed for tackling these issues. By everyone else's standards I was doing a great job and my students were progressing. By my own standards, however, I felt I could do better. I felt my students had the potential to overcome these obstacles that continued to hold them back, if only I could figure out how to do it.

A Bend in the Road

Around this time my husband and I had our first child. I had always planned to return to teaching full-time after my maternity leave, but once our son arrived I knew I couldn't leave him all day everyday. Before the end of that school year I requested to reduce my position in my classroom to half-time. In an effort to pressure me to stay and continue running the program my school district refused and told me I would stay in that classroom full-time or take an open half-time position somewhere else in the district. I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under me, but life has a funny way of taking many twists and turns to end up where we belong. I decided to leave the district altogether. At the time it was very scary and upsetting, but it turned out to be the best thing that ever could have happened.

Through my years of teaching I had met people from many districts, and at that time those of us involved with autism were a pretty small group. After leaving my classroom word got out that I was no longer teaching full-time, and I had the opportunity to do some freelance consulting work for various districts in need of autism-related support. I spent the next couple of years doing consulting work and learning from hundreds of students and staff members along the way. I continued to think about what else might be out there that would allow me to tackle the core problems of autism, but I was so busy with consulting and expanding my personal family that I didn't spend a lot of time seeking out new things.

Through my work with children all over West-Michigan in the schools I began to see a huge need for summer opportunities for these children. I decided to start my own summer program for students, and Horizons was born. We began in the summer of 2003, in my renovated basement, with 2 staff members (myself included) and 13 children. By that winter I had given birth to child number 3, was finished with my graduate program, and had our first round of Horizons programming under my belt. I began to devote time to seeking the piece that was missing for helping my clients.

Desperately Seeking Something

My search was kind of like a search for that elusive piece of furniture or pair of shoes. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, but I knew I would recognize it when I found it. After many hours spent reading, researching on-line, and attending conferences I stumbled across something called Relationship Development Intervention®. That was it – I knew I had found what I was looking for. Finally, here was something that addressed the pieces that were so evident to me in my interactions with people on the spectrum, but that no other program or method addressed as an outcome. Here was a way to target the root issues instead of just covering up or working around the deficits. I had found the thing that was going to take my teaching and my clients' learning to the next level.

As excited as I was about this discovery, it would be a year before I could leave my family to start the certification training. I spent that year keeping up with RDI® on-line, reading the books, and attempting to apply my then limited understanding to the children with whom I was working. When I finally was able to attend training in September of 2004 it changed my life. I went into the process thinking I would have a new arsenal of tools to use with my clients. I came out of the process with an entirely new way of understanding autism and treatment.

A New Path

There are times in life when something comes at us that is so new and different from what we have known that it throws us off balance for a moment. Psychologists call that "cognitive dissonance." In those moments we have to decide how we are going to make sense of new information. We can discard it in order to stick with what we have always known – "I can't make this fit into what I already know and understand so I'm going to ignore it or reject it." We can try to force it to fit with what we already know – "I can fit this piece in here with what I already know about that, and then I can add this to this other thing I know, and what I can't fit in with what I know I will just add to it. I'll squish everything together and make it fit." Or, we can allow ourselves to recognize that what we have known just doesn't make sense in light of new information, and we have to get rid of it to make room for what does make sense – "What I thought I knew doesn't fit with what I know now. It just doesn't work to try to force these two ways of thinking together. I've got to shift my thinking to incorporate this new information in a way that makes sense." This third option is what occurred for me at my first RDI® consultant training seminar in Houston. I

was confronted with new information that put me into a state of cognitive dissonance. I was forced to stop and consider what I was going to do with this new information.

As I worked through this mental and emotional process I also watched those around me going through the same thing. It was evident almost immediately which path people were taking to address this dissonance. Some were rejecting it because it was too different from what they had already known. Some were trying to squeeze the new information into what they already knew – trying valiantly to make it fit. And others, like me, were discovering that our entire mindset had to shift. We had to radically change our conceptualization of autism and treatment to accommodate what we were learning. For me there was no other option. The research and information I was exposed to made too much sense and struck such a chord with me that there was no going back to the way I thought about things before. I could not in good conscience have that information about the core deficits of autism, the research-based potential for remediation, and the tools to begin that work and go back to business as usual when I returned home.

I left that first training in Houston completely changed from a professional standpoint. I returned to Michigan committed to work through the RDI® training program and totally shift the focus of my practice from direct work with students and school staff to consultative work with families focused on remediation of the core deficits of their child's autism. That decision was somewhat scary, as I had built a practice with a number of clients and I had no idea how this change would be received. I don't think for one moment that it was luck that the vast majority of my clients stayed with me during this huge shift in my practice. I also don't think it was because they liked me so much! I believe to this day that they stayed because the information I came back and shared made as much sense to them as it did to me. Family after family began to open up and tell me that they had been feeling the same things I had – that their children were making progress and doing well by external standards, but that in their heart they very much knew something was missing. Those families and I took a detour onto a new path toward remediation with RDI® and we have not looked back since.

The Journey Continues

That was over six years ago, and what began as a radical change in my thinking and understanding of autism in September of 2004 has blossomed into something I never planned or expected. The original seed planted in the summer of 2003 in my basement has grown into a 6,000 square foot facility with 10 staff members, 100+ families, and hundreds of school professionals served each year. We have been continually blessed with new opportunities to serve families in our community and around the world.

The future is so bright for families focused on the work of remediation – parents learning to guide their children and children learning to benefit from the wisdom and experiences of their parents as guides. We see changes daily – sometimes small and sometimes big, but the changes continue. I look forward to each new day, knowing that I am helping to facilitate powerful changes for the families with whom I work; knowing that I have the most amazing staff anywhere – professional, highly trained, compassionate, and as firmly committed to the philosophy of remediation as I am; knowing that we continue to be blessed with new families just discovering what their child is all about and becoming empowered to facilitate change; knowing that at the end of the day we will be one step further toward our mission to help individuals with autism and their families achieve quality of life for now and for the future – we will be one step closer to the horizon.