

TCS's FAQ on DIR

First, what does DIR mean and what is the DIR Model?

DIR stands for Developmental, Individual-Difference, and Relationship-Based. The DIR Model is essentially a framework for understanding how human development occurs in all people. It is especially helpful in understanding what isn't working right in any individual who is struggling to develop.

The *Developmental* part refers to the idea that there are basic capacities that all humans gradually master, typically in the first five years of life. These start with the basic ability to self-regulate (to be calm, organized, and able to attend), the ability to sustain reciprocal interaction (back-and-forth communication), the ability to think in ideas (e.g., "I want some milk," "I don't like red shirts," "I'm sad because my team lost,"), and the ability to engage in complex thinking, which includes understanding the perspective of others, negotiating, compromising, and engaging in logical thinking. These capacities aren't purely hierarchical (in the sense that it is possible to be a logical thinker but still have poor self-regulation), but most developmental difficulties come from incomplete mastery of the "lower" levels—being regulated, engaging with others, and staying reciprocal.

The *Individual-Difference* part refers to a wide range of aspects of our bodies—how our sensory systems take in and organize information, how our language and auditory systems work, how our visual-spatial processing systems work, how our motor systems work. We all have differences in these specific areas, leading us to have different learning styles, different personalities, and different ways of understanding the world. In this model, when trying to help people to grow, it is extraordinarily important to understand as clearly as possible just how an individual's body works. What we often see in individuals who are having trouble developing is that some of these individual differences fall into an extreme of some kind (e.g., extreme sensory over-reactivity, extreme language processing difficulties, extreme motor planning and sequencing challenges, and so on).

The *Relationship* part of the model is really the intervention part. Warm, nurturing, affectively connected relationships enable any individual to grow (that is, to master those developmental capacities mentioned before). In the case of individuals who are not developing easily, it is useful to look carefully at the Individual Difference profile to come up with more targeted ways to engage and interact. But it is almost always from within a trusting relationship that significant, sustainable growth occurs.

What is the main goal of a DIR program?

The main goal of any therapeutic DIR program is to generate and sustain back-and-forth interaction. Only when we are interacting are we learning. The main goal of a DIR school is to educate, but learning can only happen when an individual can organize his or her environment, and as a result stay engaged and interactive. As a result, TCS puts a tremendous amount of energy into generating and sustaining interaction.

This sounds like a comprehensive model. Is it only for autism?

It is a comprehensive model, and it isn't only for autism. In fact, at TCS you see a wide range of individual profiles, and while everyone certainly falls in the category of "challenges in relating and communicating," it is true that the DIR Model is an excellent framework for understanding all people. Floortime is a wonderful thing to do with any child, regardless of their developmental profile.

Is Floortime the same thing as DIR?

Floortime is a specific activity or intervention that is part of the DIR Model. Floortime refers to the process of "getting on the floor," or meeting an individual at his or her level and trying to help him/her to be engaged and interactive. Floortime is most often thought of as pretend play, but in fact it can be anything from chase and tickle games to conversations about politics. The essential part of Floortime is that you build your engagement and interaction around the individual's particular interests. This is because when something has meaning and interest for an individual, he/she is much more easily engaged and interactive.

If Floortime focuses on following a child/s lead, isn't this tantamount to spoiling the child? In the real world, we all have to learn things not of our own choosing. How does following the child's lead help with this?

The starting point when working with any individual is "following their lead." Following someone's lead means beginning your efforts to connect with them around what they are doing, what they are thinking about, or what they are focused on. It does not mean that the only activity, or even the main activity, is giving someone everything they want. In fact, the main activity is supporting an individual in getting engaged and interactive with you, which often means communicating about what that individual is interested in or is actively doing. A good Floortime practitioner will be able to keep the focus on what is really important—the interaction—and not in any way be "spoiling" the child.

It is worth noting that many individuals who have developmental difficulties try to exert extreme control over their worlds. This might look like highly ritualized or repetitive behavior, or it might look like extreme emotional rigidity. The way to help these individuals to grow is to start by focusing on calming, soothing, and regulating, and this often can be achieved by joining their world in some way. That might be something like spinning coins with them, or helping them to line up cars, or talking about Pokemon characters. As a floortime practitioner, once you have helped someone to be engaged and interactive with you, you will then begin to create small, playful challenges that coax an individual to stay interactive while also stretching his or her ability to engage in problem-solving activity that gives them practice managing their emotions. This is about as far from "spoiling" as you can get, since often these individuals will struggle to stay connected to you as you insert challenges.

Our tendency is often to increase our behavioral control—to add more discipline. While it is sometimes possible to teach people to comply with our demands, this is not a good way to teach people to gradually manage their own internal experience, so that as they move towards adulthood they actually get better at learning new things, at staying communicative with others, and at accepting with equanimity the frustration and disappointment that is a part of every human's experience.

In order for anyone to learn things “not of his own choosing,” one has to be able to manage one’s feelings. It takes a relatively high level of emotional sophistication regulatory self-control to be able to subject yourself to something that is hard, that you don’t like or easily understand, or that you have no great interest in experiencing. Without help managing those emotional underpinnings, most individuals with challenges will put a lot of energy into avoiding these activities, which often leads to conflict, defiance, and/or withdrawal.

One last thought: we’ve all had the experience of being passionate about a subject or an activity. When we get the opportunity to think about, talk about, or actually do these things that have great meaning, our entire beings come to life. We are more articulate, more capable, more connected—in a word, more alive. Taking advantage of this intensity is a key component of Floortime in specific and the DIR Model in general. We are “harnessing affect” to enable ourselves and others to function at the peak of our abilities.

Do you do Floortime all the time at a DIR School?

No. Floortime is a specific activity that is done at school within certain periods. Having said that, the entire school is infused with a Floortime spirit, so in many other activities one can see the essence of floortime—a focus on engagement and interaction, building on individual interests, and stretching individuals to communicate and relate around things that have meaning for them.

TCS uses a range of validated techniques with students. Mel Levine’s (All Kinds of Minds) work in the area of learning differences, used in schools across the country, contributes significantly to how TCS understands students. Lindamood Bell’s “Visualizing and Verbalizing,” also widely used in schools, is one of many techniques that helps TCS to address specific learning differences. TCS uses highly interactive, discussion-based learning for those students for whom it is suitable, but also lots of experiential learning techniques for every student.

A DIR school does not limit its use of “best practices” in the world of education, and the professionals at TCS are frequently seeking out and applying strategies gleaned from education conferences and other sources. Like any good school, the teachers at TCS are committed to excelling at their craft, and this means understanding as many techniques as possible. A DIR school is not a place where teachers, in some mindlessly limiting way, only “follow the child’s lead.” That is a reductionist way of understanding the nature of this kind of school.

Is there any research support for the DIR Model?

First, the link to a good summary of DIR-related research:

<http://www.icdl.com/dirFloortime/research/index.shtml>

The question of research support is one of the great frustrations for a DIR practitioner.

One of the key ideas in Greenspan's and Wieder's work is the Individual Difference part, that each person with autism has specific strengths and weaknesses. This understanding suggests why some interventions work for one group but not for another. Someone with a certain biological profile might benefit from a gluten-free diet, for example, while someone with auditory processing difficulties might benefit from Tomatis Listening Therapy. Once you recognize that "autism" is a fairly broad label, it makes sense to begin to try to figure out what are the sub-categories within that broad label, and much of Greenspan's and Wieder's work has focused on this. As a result, their strongest research comes in the form of a 200 case "chart review," which draws some tentative conclusions about the definition of these different sub-categories and also provides a more comprehensive, longer-term look at outcomes. This research is encouraging, as the results are quite positive. The study can be found in Greenspan's book *Engaging Autism*, among other places.

The criticism of this research is that it is not a double-blind, experimental format. Instead, it basically represents a summary of what might be called single case research, which is recognized in the scientific community as a valid research technique, but is also considered to have less external validity (i.e., harder to generalize the results).

Many of the basic ideas as well as some of the specific techniques used in a DIR approach have been researched in other areas. Much of this research is in the fields of early childhood development, speech and language pathology, occupational therapy, neuroscience, and other related fields. Relational therapy is also not a new idea, having been popularized by Carl Rogers and others. What is missing, however, is a grand, unifying, simple study that enables people to say, "DIR works for autism."

A little history of the research of autism intervention may help. Ivar Lovaas did some pioneering research in 1987 on the efficacy of a behavioral intervention called Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA). This study found that nine of 19 autistic children who went through treatment reached normal functioning, which was defined as "measuring in the normal range of IQ and being able to complete the first grade unassisted."

The reason this study is important is because, based on its results, ABA became the gold standard for autism intervention. Most other approaches are regarded as not meeting this standard. Understanding the limits of this research is essential, because once we recognize how incomplete the ABA research is, we can more easily open our minds to other approaches. I'll list a few concerns here:

- The criteria for success in this study are limited (IQ and attendance in first grade). I don't think anyone would suggest that these two achievements alone represent a successful outcome for someone with autism.
- The measures in this study are not directly related to the core deficits of autism as defined by the DSM IV. The core deficits have to do with impaired communication and social functioning, among other things.
- The percentage of success is low—less than 50%—and the sample size is small (19). The study makes no effort to define sub-categories of individuals that may make this research

more meaningful. In other words, the intervention is treated as a one-size-fits-all strategy, and a fairly low success rate is regarded as valuable.

- The results of follow up “replicability” studies are inconsistent.

When thinking about research, it may also help to understand that a lot of Greenspan’s work is focused on redefining the nature of developmental disorders, and his work has had significant influence in many areas. Greenspan is regarded nationally as a brilliant thinker, and he has worked with the National Institute of Mental Health and many other organizations to redefine much of the field. In addition to the books he has written, Greenspan, Wieder, and others in the ICDL have had significant impact in how the field understands infancy and early development, and how it conceptualizes assessment and intervention for young children. Greenspan has worked on a future revision of the DSM IV and other diagnostic systems, and he has published one of his own. The lack of a specific kind of research should not invalidate the tremendous value of all of this other work.

So why use a DIR approach instead of a behavioral approach?

First, a DIR approach does not arbitrarily limit or exclude any specific intervention technique. By developing an individual profile, a practitioner can then design an intervention plan that uses a wide range of techniques. Second, a key feature that the DIR approach adds to any intervention is the understanding of the central role that “affect” plays in fostering engagement and interaction. When a therapist or teacher uses his/her affect to activate and engage the affect of a child, the effect is palpable. Affect is the grease that helps the wheels of interaction (learning) turn. Third, the DIR approach really treats the child as a whole person, respecting his/her needs and wishes even while coaxing him/her into interaction.

How does all this help a student to learn?

When a student feels respected and understood, they are more able to get and stay in states of shared attention and regulation. This enables them to be engaged and interactive, which means they are learning. Students at TCS join a community that is completely focused on helping them to be involved and interactive all the time. The results, we have seen time and again, include students feeling happy at school, becoming more active and involved academic learners, and figuring out how to get along with others and how to develop sustained relationships.

Does a DIR school have classes, subjects, tests, and homework?

The short answer is yes, but all of this is tailored to the individual student. The long answer is that while there is a set schedule with specific classes and often pre-determined content (sometimes including tests and homework), the focus of this school is on helping individuals to become self-motivated, organized, inquisitive learners and emotionally balanced, socially capable members of a community. The school has a lot of built-in flexibility, including one-on-one tutoring periods and classes in topics of special interest to students. There are also lots of spontaneous and semi-planned discussions, activities, communication challenges, negotiations, and relationship-building activities. And don’t forget, TCS is an accredited institution capable of granting a high school diploma to students whose work meets the appropriate standards.

How do you know that this approach is working at TCS?

Every student who attends this school is happier, more engaged, more trusting, more self-reflective, more communicative, and more actively involved in his life than prior to attending this school. Every student is learning at a more complex level than he was prior to attending this school. Every student has more and better friendships than he had prior to attending this school. Every student feels a part of a vibrant, tolerant, and inclusive community. Students who used to feel suicidal, don't. Students who used to have high absentee rates, don't. Students who used to be isolated and bullied, aren't. Every student now demonstrates a better potential for independence, completion of school, and work/living in the larger community.

How has DIR affected the lives of families at home?

Regardless of how dedicated particular families have been to learning the DIR approach, it is fair to say that every family has been encouraged to treat their child as a complex, nuanced individual. TCS has helped families to understand the particular strengths and challenges of their child, and has supported them in shifting their focus from discrete skills to more basic developmental capacities. This includes supporting parents in having better relationships with their children and helping them to focus on supporting the students more explicitly in the areas of communication and relatedness. Most parents have reported that their lives at home have improved because of their experience at TCS.

How does this program prepare students for adulthood?

This program recognizes that each student puts in a lot of hard work to develop relationships in this community, and it makes sense to recognize that these relationships, and the trust and comfort in the community, should not be given up lightly. TCS is committed to helping its students make a successful transition into adulthood. Depending on the individual, this may include work internships, taking college classes with support, and help with a wide range of skills related to independent living, from using public transportation to creating and using bank accounts and participating in the widest possible range of daily living activities.