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## СУЧАСНІ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ В ГАЛУЗІ СПЕЦІАЛЬНОЇ ПСИХОЛОГІЇ.

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### RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION AS A DEVELOPMENTAL FAMILY-CENTERED MODEL OF ASSISTANCE TO CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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***Abstract.** The article provides a theoretical analysis of the Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) approach as a modern developmental family-centered model of support for children with special educational needs. The main theoretical foundations of the approach are outlined, formed at the intersection of attachment theory, neuropsychology, intersubjectivity research, and interpersonal neurobiology. The concept of dynamic intelligence is analyzed as the basis for the development of social thinking, behavioral flexibility, and adaptive abilities in children. The importance of guided interaction between adults and children in the formation of joint attention, emotional*

*co-regulation, and social understanding is substantiated. The role of the family as the primary developmental environment is highlighted, and the significance of parent coaching within the RDI system is defined. Special attention is given to the professional role of the psychologist, who within this approach acts not only as a corrective specialist but also as a consultant and facilitator of family interaction. Recent research in early intervention and family-centered support is analyzed, confirming the effectiveness of naturalistic models for developing children's social interaction. It is determined that the RDI approach focuses not on teaching isolated behavioral skills but on developing fundamental mechanisms of social cognition through live interaction in natural life situations. Prospects for further research related to expanding the evidence base of the approach and its integration into psychological support systems for children with special educational needs are outlined.*

**Keywords:** *Relationship Development Intervention, children with special educational needs, family-centered approach, early intervention, social thinking, parent coaching, psychological support.*

### **Problem Statement.**

Modern psychology is gradually moving away from a narrow corrective approach focused primarily on eliminating individual behavioral difficulties toward a comprehensive understanding of the development of children with special educational needs. Today, the focus is not only on the formation of specific

skills but also on creating conditions for harmonious personality development, the growth of social thinking, emotional competence, and the ability to flexibly adapt to real-life situations. This approach is particularly important when working with children who experience difficulties in social interaction, emotion recognition and

understanding, joint attention, and cognitive flexibility.

Despite the proven effectiveness of traditional behavioral methods in teaching specific skills, they often have limitations in transferring these abilities to everyday life. A child may demonstrate desired behavior in therapeutic settings but experience difficulties applying these skills in natural social environments. This creates a need for approaches that consider the natural course of development and the decisive role of interpersonal interaction as the foundation of learning.

In response to these challenges, the Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) approach was developed, aimed at fostering the fundamental mechanisms of social functioning, including dynamic intelligence, co-regulation, and understanding of social context. Within this model, the role of the psychologist also changes: they act not only as a corrective specialist but as a facilitator of

relationship development, a consultant, and a partner to the family in the long-term developmental process of the child.

### **Analysis of recent research and publications.**

Modern international research shows growing attention to family-centered and developmental approaches in supporting children with special educational needs. Steven Gutstein and Rachelle Sheely have substantiated the importance of parental involvement in developing a child's social thinking and dynamic intelligence within the RDI approach. Neuropsychological studies by Geraldine Dawson, Sally Rogers, Connie Kasari, and Ami Klin confirm the role of early intervention, social attention, and natural interactions in the development of children with ASD. The ideas of Daniel Siegel and Stephen Porges further strengthen this foundation by explaining the importance of co-regulation, safety, and interpersonal

relationships for brain and emotional development.

Despite the active use of the Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) approach in early intervention systems and psychological support for children with special educational needs, a number of aspects remain insufficiently studied. In particular, the scientific literature provides limited empirical research on the effectiveness of RDI in different sociocultural contexts, insufficiently examines the professional role of the psychologist as a facilitator of family-oriented support, and lacks data on the long-term impact of the approach on the development of children's social thinking and emotional regulation. Special attention should also be given to the integration of RDI into interdisciplinary support systems, the adaptation of the approach for different categories of children with special educational needs, and its implementation within the

national psychological and educational framework.

**The purpose of the article** is to theoretically substantiate the Relationship Development Intervention approach as a developmental family-centered model of psychological support for children with special educational needs and to determine its significance for contemporary family psychological support practice.

**Presentation of the main material of the study.** The Relationship Development Intervention approach was formed at the intersection of clinical psychology, neuropsychology and attachment theory. Its authors are American researchers Steven Gutstein and Rachelle Sheely, who viewed autism not only as a behavioral or speech deficit, but as a disorder of the development of social thinking and the ability to dynamic interaction. The central concept of the approach is dynamic intelligence, which is defined

as a person's ability to adapt to change, act in conditions of uncertainty, take into account the context and build relationships based on shared experience. According to S. Gutstein, it is this type of intelligence that underlies everyday social functioning, including cooperation, friendship, empathy, planning, flexible thinking and decision-making [5].

An important theoretical basis for the approach was John Bowlby's attachment theory, according to which early experience of interaction with a reliable adult forms the basic mechanisms of security, exploration of the surrounding world and emotional regulation [2]. Within the framework of RDI, these provisions are transformed into the concept of guided participation, where an adult acts as a guide for the child in a complex social environment.

At the same time, significant attention is paid not only to support, but also to the gradual introduction of the

child into situations of moderate uncertainty, which contribute to the development of adaptability. A significant contribution to the formation of the theoretical foundations of the approach was made by the research of early intersubjectivity by Colwyn Trevarthen. The scientist proved that already at an early age a child is capable of interpersonal coordination, joint attention and emotional synchronization [16]. In children with autism spectrum disorders, these processes often develop differently, which affects the formation of social cognition. In this context, RDI is aimed at restoring or compensating for early mechanisms of social interaction through structured everyday contacts. The contribution of Daniel Stern, who described the phenomenon of affect attunement, is also significant [15]. Within RDI, this idea is used as the basis for learning, where the child learns the meaning of situations through shared experience and emotional agreement with an

adult, rather than through direct instructions. The neuropsychological basis of the approach is related to the works of Daniel Siegel and Stephen Porges [11; 14]. Interpersonal neurobiology and polyvagal theory explain the mechanisms of activation of the brain's social interaction systems through safe contact. That is why RDI pays significant attention to the pace of interaction, rhythm, nonverbal communication, and co-regulation processes [11].

A special place is occupied by Simon Baron-Cohen's research in the field of social cognition and theory of mind. The scientist proved that people with autism often have difficulty interpreting the intentions and emotions of

others [1]. In this regard, RDI is focused not on teaching ready-made social rules, but on the formation of basic mechanisms for understanding another person through the experience of interaction. The current development of the Relationship Development Intervention approach is taking place in the context of research on the social brain, neurodevelopment, and parent coaching. A significant contribution to the development and dissemination of the approach was made by Rachel Sheely, who continues to research family-oriented intervention models and train RDI consultants [5].



# MANAGING MOMENTS

Lessons from Relationship Development Intervention (RDI)

January 2024

Mon	<b>Tip: Be mindful of movement.</b> Lesson from RDI: Use the RCR (Regulation, Challenge, Reorganization) cycle to organize learning.
Tue	<b>Tip: Try theater arts tools.</b> Lesson from RDI: Introduce variations as Just Noticeable Differences (JNDS).
Wed	<b>Tip: Work with your hands.</b> Lesson from RDI: Practice the four patterns of interactions.
Thurs	<b>Tip: Use visual and tactile tools.</b> Lesson from RDI: Increase the use of nonverbal communication. Lessons from RDI.
Fri	<b>Tip: Enrich family interactions.</b> <b>Activity: Family Folding Fun</b> Lesson from RDI: Practice experience-sharing communication.
Sat	<b>Tip: Grow systems and processes.</b> Lesson from RDI: Assign a clear role to your child.
Sun	<b>Tip: See what is taking shape.</b> Notice what is happening. Share enjoyable moments with your child.

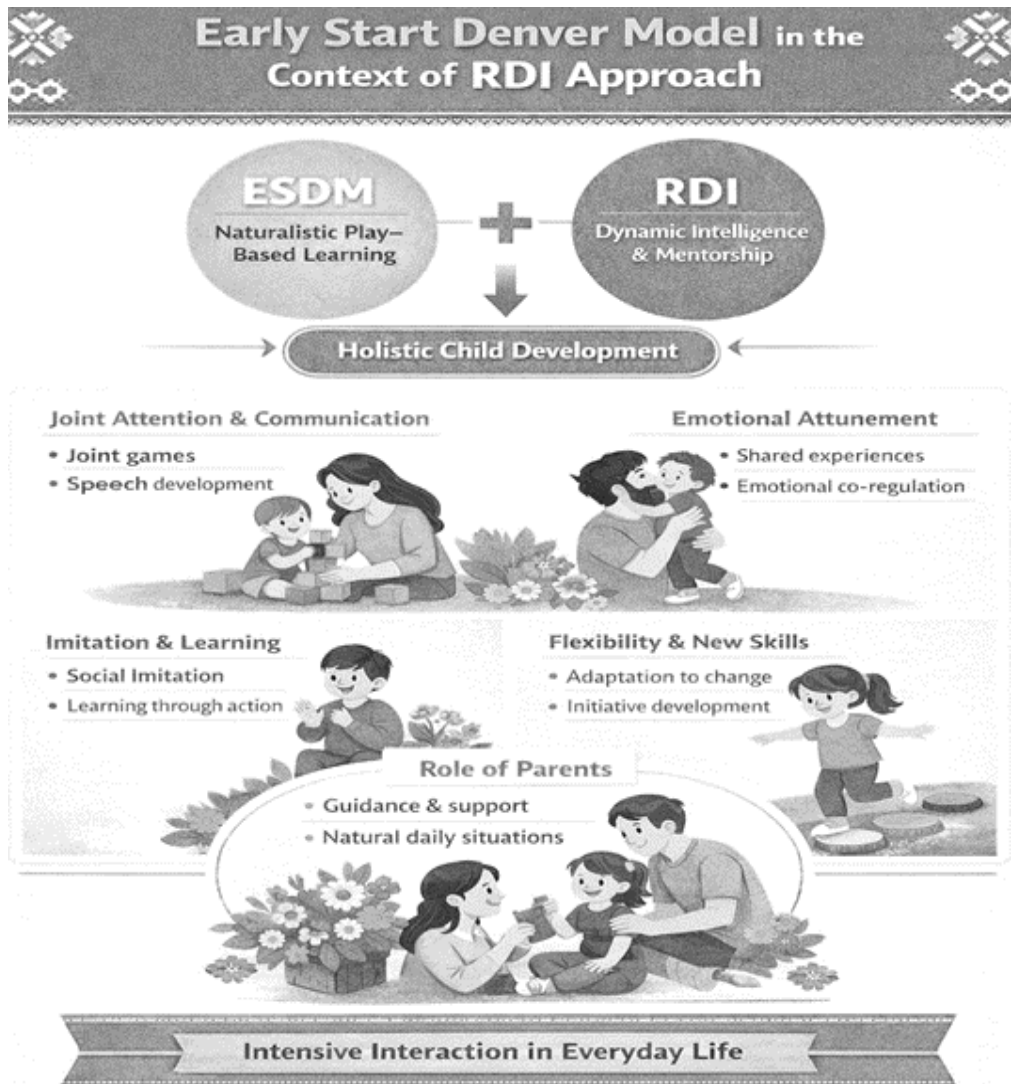
*Pic. 1.* Seven Tips and RDI [8].

Current research emphasizes the importance of long-term parental involvement as a key factor in generalizing social change. Within evidence-based psychology, research on parental mediation

interventions is of particular importance. Geraldine Dawson's work demonstrates the effectiveness of early nature-oriented interventions, where parents play a leading role. Similar results are confirmed by the research of

Sally Rogers, co-developer of the Early Start Denver Model, which emphasizes the importance of emotionally rich interaction in a natural environment [3;4]. In addition, Ami Klin's research

indicates the peculiarities of social information processing in children with autism, which justifies the need for intensive experience of live interaction, which is the basis of the RDI approach [7].



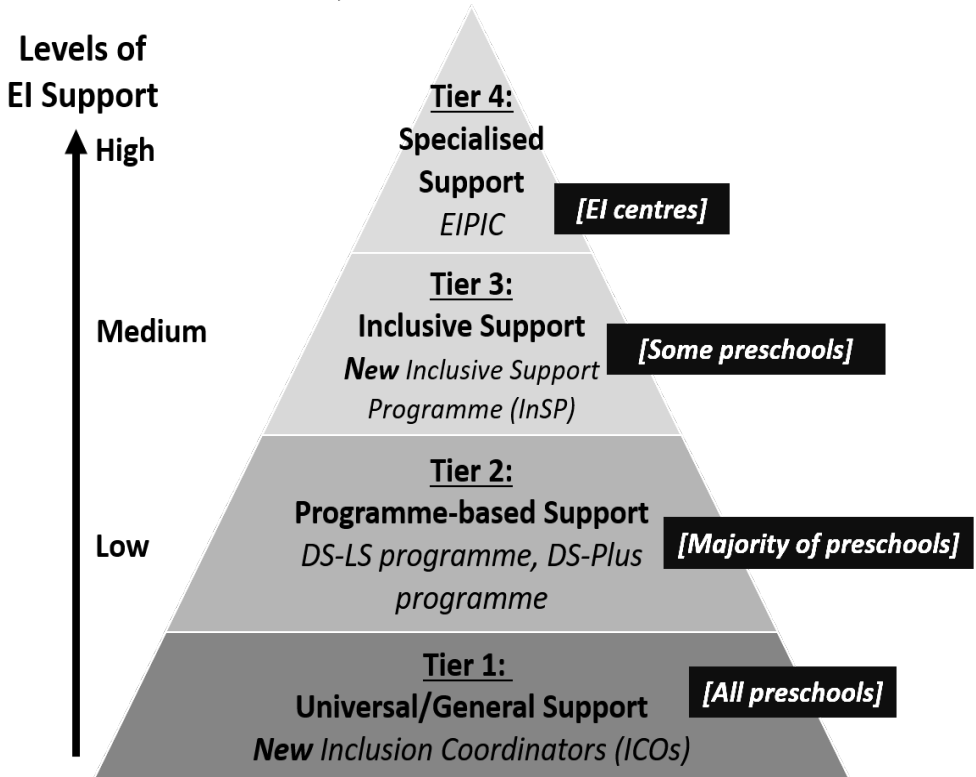
**Pic. 2. Early Start Denver Model in the context of the RDI approach.** (Created by GPT - chart based on the theoretical material of the article).

Thus, modern research in the field of early intervention, neuropsychology and family-oriented care forms the scientific basis for the application of the RDI approach. It acts as an integrative development model that combines the principles of attachment theory, sociocultural psychology and neuroscience. The specificity of the approach is to shift the emphasis from training individual behavioral reactions to the formation of basic mechanisms of social thinking through guided interaction of a child with an adult in natural life situations. The issue of parent coaching is actively studied by Connie Kasari, who emphasizes the effectiveness of teaching parents methods of supporting joint attention and social interaction [6]. These results are consistent with the key principles of RDI, where the family is considered the main

environment for the development of a child. In this regard, the professional role of a specialist is also changing. Within the framework of Relationship Development Intervention, the psychologist acts not only as a therapist for the child, but also as a consultant and coach for the parents. He performs a psychoeducational function, helping parents understand the neuropsychological features of the child's development, the importance of joint attention, co-regulation and mentoring interaction. An important tool for work is the analysis of video recordings of everyday situations, which allows determining the microdynamics of interaction, in particular pauses, pace, non-verbal signals and moments of joint attention. Another important area is coaching the mentoring position of parents and their emotional support. The psychologist teaches adults to

create optimal difficulties, regulate the complexity of interaction and maintain the child's motivation through a shared experience of success. At the same time, the

specialist helps to prevent parental burnout and form realistic expectations regarding the pace of the child's development [13].



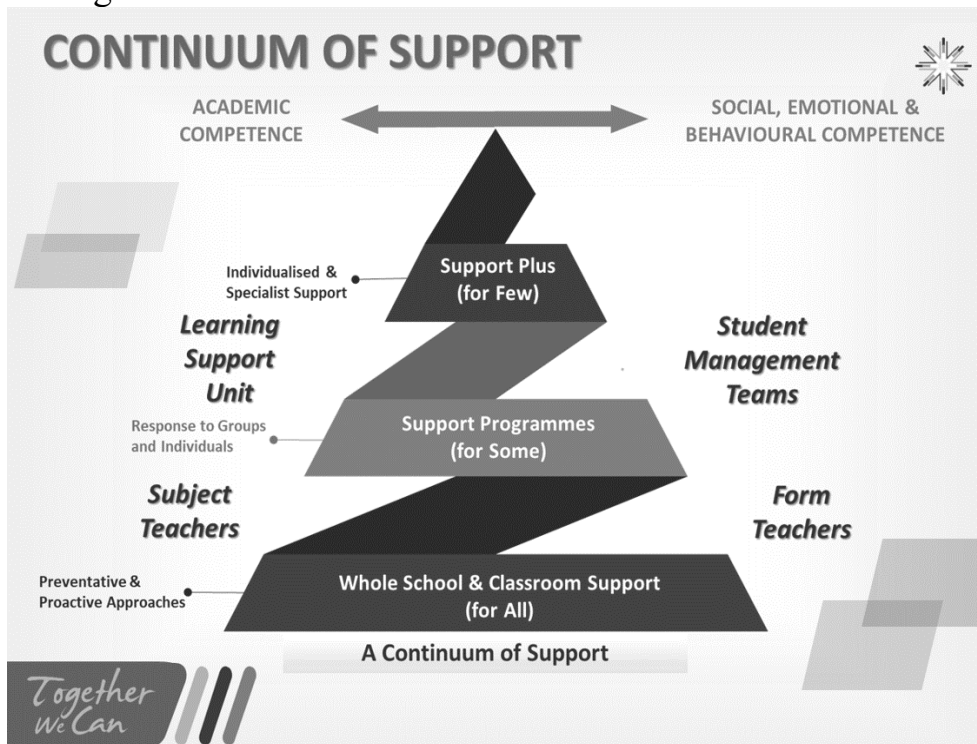
**Pic. 3.** New Initiatives to Enhance Inclusion and Support for Children with Developmental Needs [10].

At the same time, it should be noted that empirical research on the role of a psychologist in RDI is still insufficient, so the description

of the specialist's functions is largely based on practical recommendations and professional standards.

**Conclusions and prospects for further and future research.** As a conclusion, we may state that the Relationship Development Intervention approach can be considered as a promising model for developing the social functioning of children with special educational needs, consistent with contemporary views on the role of interaction and environment in psychological development. Its value lies in shifting the focus from

training isolated behavioral skills to fostering the fundamental mechanisms of social cognition that enable children to adapt to changing life situations. This approach contributes not only to the development of social thinking but also to emotional resilience, behavioral flexibility, and the ability to engage in shared activities, which are the problems of future scientific theoretical and practical psychological investigations.



**Pic. 4.** Literacy, Numeracy and Behavioural Programme [9].

The family-centered nature of RDI is of particular importance, as parents become active participants in the child's developmental process. Involving the family in support creates consistency of developmental influences, increases the stability of positive changes, and contributes to improving the family climate. Thus, psychological support extends beyond the specialist's office and becomes part of the family's everyday life, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the intervention.

At the same time, the professional role of the psychologist within this model requires further scientific exploration, particularly regarding specialist training, evaluation of parent coaching outcomes, and the long-term effects of the approach. Expanding the empirical evidence base and integrating RDI into psychological support systems for children with special educational needs may become an important direction for the development of contemporary psychological practice and interdisciplinary research.

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## **RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION ЯК РОЗВИТКОВА СІМЕЙНО-ОРІЄНТОВАНА МОДЕЛЬ ДОПОМОГИ ДІТЯМ З ОСОБЛИВИМИ ОСВІТНИМИ ПОТРЕБАМИ**

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**Анотація.** У статті здійснено теоретичний аналіз підходу *Relationship Development Intervention (RDI)* як сучасної розв'язкової сімейно-орієнтованої моделі допомоги дітям з особливими освітніми потребами. Висвітлено основні теоретичні засади підходу, що сформувалися на перетині теорії прив'язаності, нейропсихології, досліджень інтерсуб'єктивності та міжособистісної нейробіології. Проаналізовано концепцію динамічного інтелекту, як основу розвитку соціального мислення, гнучкості поведінки та здатності до адаптації у дітей. Обґрунтовано значення наставницької взаємодії дорослого і дитини у процесі формування спільної уваги, емоційної ко-регуляції та

соціального розуміння. Розкрито роль сім'ї як провідного середовища розвитку дитини та визначено значення батьківського коучингу у системі RDI. Особливу увагу приділено професійній ролі психолога, який у межах підходу виступає не лише корекційним фахівцем, а консультантом і фасилітатором сімейної взаємодії. Проаналізовано сучасні дослідження у сфері раннього втручання та сімейно-орієнтованої допомоги, які підтверджують ефективність природничо-орієнтованих моделей розвитку соціальної взаємодії дітей. Визначено, що підхід RDI спрямований не на формування окремих поведінкових навичок, а на розвиток фундаментальних механізмів соціального пізнання через живу взаємодію у природних життєвих ситуаціях. Окреслено перспективи подальших досліджень, пов'язаних із розширенням доказової бази підходу та його інтеграцією у систему психологічного супроводу дітей з особливими освітніми потребами.

**Ключові слова:** *Relationship Development Intervention, діти з особливими освітніми потребами, сімейно-орієнтований підхід, раннє втручання, соціальне мислення, батьківський коучинг, психологічний супровід.*