

## Ask the Expert

SERENA WIEDER

ZERO TO THREE Board Members answer your questions about best practices and provide practical information you can use in your work with infants, toddlers, and their families.

**MEET:** Serena Wieder, PhD, is co-founder of the Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disorders (ICDL) and the ICDL Graduate School, and Director of the DIR®/Floortime™ Institute. She has been a board member of ZERO TO THREE since 1993. She coauthored *Engaging Autism*, *The Child With Special Needs*, and *Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health* with Stanley Greenspan. She also cochaired and coedited the ICDL Diagnostic Manual for Infants and Young Children and *Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood* (DC 0–3).



### Autism in the News

**Q: Why is autism getting so much attention these days?**

**A:** Parents are leading the way and bringing the rest of us along. Their work with media, Congress, and organizations such as the National Institutes of Health, advocating for more research, is a testament to what motivated parents can accomplish. Parents are also helping each other through countless chat groups, books, fundraisers, and have started the major autism organizations in America and around the world. What I think parents really want is to discover the best ways to form relationships with their children. The joy we see when a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) reaches the point where they light up with pleasure and seek out closeness and communication with their parents often inspires parents to speak out about their experiences. It is this intense desire for warm, loving, and learning relationships that has brought autism to the forefront of advocacy, research, and policy efforts, and clinicians and researchers are compelled to respond.

**Q: Are we seeing an explosion of autism cases?**

**A:** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, today 1 out of 150 children are being diagnosed with autism. Before the 1990s, estimates averaged around 1 in every 2000 to 5000 children. The seeming explosion in autism rates raises several questions, of course. Are we better at early identification now? Have we changed the criteria we use to define the disorder? Are we including more children under the classification of ASD compared to earlier definitions of classic autism? Are we more willing to give a diagnosis of ASD today than in the past when many children with Asperger's or high functioning autism would have been thought of as having behavioral problems, or being shy, or simply not social? Have we substituted ASD for earlier prevalent diagnoses of retardation

or childhood schizophrenia, which was used before the DSM defined autism in 1980? Or, are there environmental toxins increasing the numbers? These questions are debated in the press almost daily. Epidemiologists are studying these issues and the answers are not clear and may not be agreed upon. Most important is the question of whether we are better at early identification. And the answer is yes! The sooner we identify possible challenges in the infant's development, the sooner we can do something about it. "Wait and see" is no longer an option, nor is, "Boys talk later!" Early and intensive intervention can help.

**Q: Why is a relationship-based approach to autism treatment so important in your work with families?**

**A:** Recent discoveries in neuroscience, coupled with advances in developmental theory, offer promising new directions for the assessment and treatment of ASD, and underscore the important role of emotions in organizing and regulating behavior and thinking. For example, recent research may be redefining the criteria for ASD based on functional magnetic resonance (fMRI) studies identifying the brain's challenges with information processing and interconnectivity between the brain's sensory, motor, and cognitive regions (see Williams, this issue, p. 11). Developmental theory has long hypothesized that all sensation has both physical and affective (emotional) qualities. Emotions play a central role in creating links between the physical qualities of sensation, motor behavior, and cognition. Thus, a relationship-based approach synthesizes the information about early brain development so that interactions are at the center of assessment and intervention for children with autism. The new discoveries in neuroscience and developmental theory demonstrate the importance of integrating the different parts of the mind and the brain in human development, the compromises in this capacity in children with ASD, and

the capacity for relationship-based approaches to lead to improvement in these core capacities.

**Q: How can an early interventionist be most helpful on a short term basis?**

**A:** If you are working with very young children and their families, you have a special opportunity to not only identify the "red flag" behaviors or symptoms of a developmental problem, but to also guide parents using a relationship-based developmental perspective. Children with ASD, regulatory disorders, or uneven development are more different than alike, with unique profiles of relative strengths and challenges. But they are all developing children, and it is important to focus on the capacities they do have to relate to others in order to strengthen their foundations for healthy relationships, thinking, and learning. For the child who is derailed developmentally, it is critical to avoid fragmenting the intervention by focusing on splintered skills and rote behaviors. Even though you may not be working with a child and family long term, you can help with early identification, support families during the process of getting an assessment and findings, and with getting appropriate comprehensive services. The critical first step in intervention is to help parents connect and stay connected to their children through meaningful interactions that will bring the importance of their relationship into center stage and make it possible to do the necessary work to help their child.

ASK THE EXPERT for May 2008 will feature **Ross Thompson, PhD**, a professor in the department of psychology at the University of California, Davis. Dr. Thompson's work focuses on early personality and socioemotional development in the context of close relationships. Post your questions on the ZERO TO THREE Web site at [www.zerotothree.org/ask](http://www.zerotothree.org/ask).