

Social Development Intervention

Social Development Intervention (SDI)¹ is the social therapeutic intervention taught in tandem with academics in the ASD Nest program. It is based on the developmental language model, relationship development, and social cognitive theories and is used to remediate the social and pragmatic language skills of children with ASD. SDI is a mandated therapeutic program facilitated by a Nest speech-language pathologist (SLP) in collaboration with classroom teachers. A crucial parallel to the focused SDI sessions is the generalization of SDI strategies and language throughout the Nest students' days. Teacher participation in SDI sessions ensures that students' social and pragmatic development is also supported in the natural classroom environment.

SDI focus time and generalization:

SDI focus time is a speech mandate—planned and facilitated in collaboration with the classroom teachers—that takes place five times a week in kindergarten and three times a week in all other grades. A Nest classroom teacher participates in SDI sessions, developing their understanding of the social supports so that they can be generalized across the students' day.

SDI Units & Team Planning Map:

There are five two-month SDI units that form the backbone of SDI. These units are introduced to the ASD Nest teams by the SLP at team meetings once every other month. The units are: I) My place in a group, II) Information gathering and active listening, III) Identifying and understanding feelings and emotions, IV) Peer interactions, and V) Taking responsibility. The SDI Team Planning Map guides the interdisciplinary team in planning SDI sessions for each unit, differentiating activities to account for the pragmatic language, problem solving, and social relational goals for each student in the group. The ASD Nest teams discuss how SDI concepts and goals will be woven throughout classroom activities, instruction, and across the school day to support generalization.

Social Development Intervention Guideposts:

The SDI Guideposts outline six focus strategy areas. The focus areas highlight the basics of SDI, as well as strategies addressing experience sharing, language and dynamic communication, problem solving, social cognition, flexibility, and incorporating strengths and interests. The strategies in these areas address the social challenges of students on the spectrum and are designed to foster their ability to participate in all classroom activities and to navigate the school day.

SDI Goal Planning Sheet:

The SDI Goal Planning Sheet (GPS) is divided into three goal areas: social relational development, problem solving, and pragmatic language, with a list of corresponding goals in each area. The GPS guides social goals, and is revisited three times a year by the SLP, classroom teachers, and occupational therapists for each individual student. The SLP uses these goals as objectives for the student's IEP.

¹ From the work of Susan Brennan, CCC-SLP, SDI Developer

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Additional Questions & Considerations:

Who plans SDI focus time?

Planning SDI sessions is the responsibility of the SLP, but Nest classroom teachers collaborate in this process. The classroom teachers' perspective is critical as they are with the students for the majority of the social experiences across their school day. These sessions are planned in advance and take into account the current SDI unit, the needs of the students in the group, and individual goals outlined in the IEP and informed by the GPS. It is essential that all adults participating in each SDI session know the plan for, and their role, in each session. SLPs turn-key each SDI unit during five full team meetings across the year (September, November, January, March, and May), and teams complete the SDI Team Planning Map in lieu of case conferencing Nest students on that day.

Which team members participate in SDI focus time?

The ASD Nest SLP runs the SDI focus time session along with one of the Nest classroom teachers. There should always be at least one less adult than students actively involved in an SDI session (e.g., if four students, no more than three adults). Both Nest classroom teachers must rotate into SDI. The frequency of their rotation is discussed with and decided by the ASD Nest team, but each teacher rotates into SDI at least once during every unit. Other members of the ASD Nest team may also participate in SDI, including the occupational therapist, ASD Nest cluster teacher or ASD Nest coach cluster, as appropriate, while maintaining the proper adult-to-student ratio.

What is the role of the non-SLP Nest professional during SDI focus time?

Each Nest professional's role in SDI focus time is discussed and outlined during SDI planning. Not all adults present at SDI focus time need take a lead the session. Adults in SDI may support one individual student, observe the group and take notes, complete GPS's, take video, or observe the SLP model a strategy. All adults in SDI sessions participate in order to further develop their own skills and to help better support their students in and outside the focused SDI time.

Are behavior systems used during SDI focus time?

The primary supports used in SDI focus time are social strategies due to the social, pragmatic foundation of the intervention. These supports differ from traditional behavioral strategies utilized in the classroom. Behavioral supports that organize students and promote self-regulation may be used in coordination with social strategies following a discussion by the interdisciplinary team.

Why do only Nest students attend SDI?

SDI focus time is specifically designed to meet the social relational, pragmatic language, and problem solving needs of students on the autism spectrum. This "lab time" allows Nest students to explore the concepts essential to their social development in a small, therapeutic setting with others with similar challenges. While some general education students may also benefit from traditional social support, the therapeutic nature of SDI is not relevant for these students.

A note on the ASD Nest Model:

This paper outlines an element of the ASD Nest Model. Fidelity of implementation to the model is essential for program consistency. While a degree of flexibility is necessary given individual school needs, the program benefits from schools' commitment to a cohesive model.