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**NEW AUTISM TREATMENT RESOURCE: FIRST MICHIGAN CONSULTANT TO EARN CERTIFICATION IN RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION® PROGRAM**

**CALEDONIA, MICH., Sept. 19, 2005** – A Caledonia autism consultant is the first in Michigan to earn certification in the Relationship Development Intervention (RDI®) autism treatment program. Nicole Beurkens, director of the Horizons Developmental Remediation Center, has earned certification from Connections Center of Houston, Texas, which developed the RDI program.

A rigorous process, the Certification Program typically takes 18 months to complete. Consultants are trained to administer the RDA™ (Relationship Development Assessment™) and provide ongoing support to parents.

The RDI program is a cognitive model designed to work with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorders by providing consultation to families to address the core deficits, which include flexible thinking, communication, development of self and social/emotional relationships.

“We consider the role of Certified RDI Consultants such as Nicole to be nurturing the primary relationship between parent and child by raising the parents’ level of competence and confidence,” said Dr. Rachelle Sheely, who developed the RDI program with Dr. Steven Gutstein in 2001 and oversees the RDI Certification Program. “Most parents run into challenges from time to time, so having an ongoing relationship with a Consultant who knows their family can make a big difference.”

The prevalence of autism and associated disorders has sharply risen in recent years, with some education and medical professionals describing the rise as an epidemic. According to the most recent Michigan Public Schools Autism Prevalence Report compiled by FightingAutism, 7,259 Michigan children between ages three and 22 had been diagnosed with autism in 2003, up 54 percent from just 4,706 cases reported in 2000. Some, including Gutstein, believe the rise is at least partly

due to a loosening of the criteria used to diagnose autism as well as misclassification of autistic children as mentally retarded in the past.

Beurkens has a Master's Degree in Special Education and holds a professional teaching certificate with endorsements in autism and learning disabilities. She founded the Horizons Developmental Remediation Center, which services individuals of all ages with autism and other developmental disabilities. Beurkens provides consultation services to numerous school districts in West Michigan and provides training on autism and educational interventions to hundreds of parents and professionals each year. She can be reached at:

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**Editor's Note:** A downloadable high-resolution photo of Nicole Beurkens is available at <http://www.keeneypr.com/attachments/files/26/NicoleBeurkens.JPG>.

#### **About Connections Center**

Established in 1995, the Connections Center for Family and Personal Development, based in Houston, is a multi-disciplinary program to develop innovative evaluation and intervention programs for people with relationship disorders. Led by Dr. Steve Gutstein and Dr. Rachelle K. Sheely, the Connections Center staff provides a full range of evaluation and treatment services, including the RDI program. They provide education and training to families and professionals worldwide. More information is available at [www.rdiconnect.com](http://www.rdiconnect.com).

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