



## Understanding Relational Frame Theory: How it Supports My Child

Are you the parent of a child with autism? Or do they face other challenges with language, communication, or social behavior?

You may or may not have heard of the term relational frame theory (RFT); it sounds technical, but RFT is a powerful approach that helps us to understand how we learn language and how we think and make sense of the world.

In this blog, we're going to break it down in a simple and helpful way.

### RFT is Learning Through Relationships

Relational frame theory is a scientific explanation of how we learn through relationships between things, not just through direct experience.

For example:

- A toddler touches a hot stove and gets burned. That's direct learning.
- Later, the same child sees a red stove and avoids it, even though it's not hot. That's relational learning—making a connection between “red stove” and “hot” based on prior experience.

RFT says that humans are especially good at learning by forming these types of relational links, even if we've never experienced something directly.

### Why is RFT So Important?

Language is made up of relational networks. Think about how a child learns:

- "A dog is a kind of animal."
- "A Chihuahua is smaller than a Great Dane."
- "If this one is bigger, then that one must be smaller."

None of these are just memorized facts, they're about understanding relationships between words, categories and ideas. RFT explains how children go from simple word learning to more complex thinking like reasoning, comparing and even understanding jokes, sarcasm and metaphors. It's the foundation of flexible thinking.

## Examples of Relational Frames

RFT researchers have identified many kinds of 'frames', or types of relationships. Here are a few common ones:

- Same and different
- Bigger and smaller
- If... then
- Before and after
- More than / less than
- Opposites
- Here and there
- Now and then
- Perspective taking

These are not just academic, they are essential for problem-solving, social interaction and learning in school.

## What if Your Child Struggles with This?

Some children, especially those with autism, might struggle to form these kinds of relational links naturally. They may know labels for objects but have difficulty:

- Understanding how things go together
- Using comparisons ("bigger," "sillier," "more fun")
- Making inferences ("If mom is in the car, then the car is here")
- Understanding random concepts (like idioms in language)

When these skills don't develop, it can impact language, play, social thinking, and learning in school. RFT helps to identify these challenges early and teach them explicitly.

## Why Should Parents Care?

RFT gives us a clearer picture of what healthy brain and language development looks like. It helps explain:

- Why some children struggle with language or behavior
- How to build the steppingstones toward complex thinking
- Why teaching words in context and in relation to others matters so much
- Why children with autism can be rigid in their preferences, activities, etc.

It's not just about vocabulary; it's about helping children to make meaning from their experiences and to communicate with understanding. For children who struggle with flexibility, communication, or problem-solving, RFT-based approaches can offer targeted, developmentally appropriate support.

As a parent, you don't have to know all the technical terms, but understanding the power of relationships in learning is a great way to support your child.