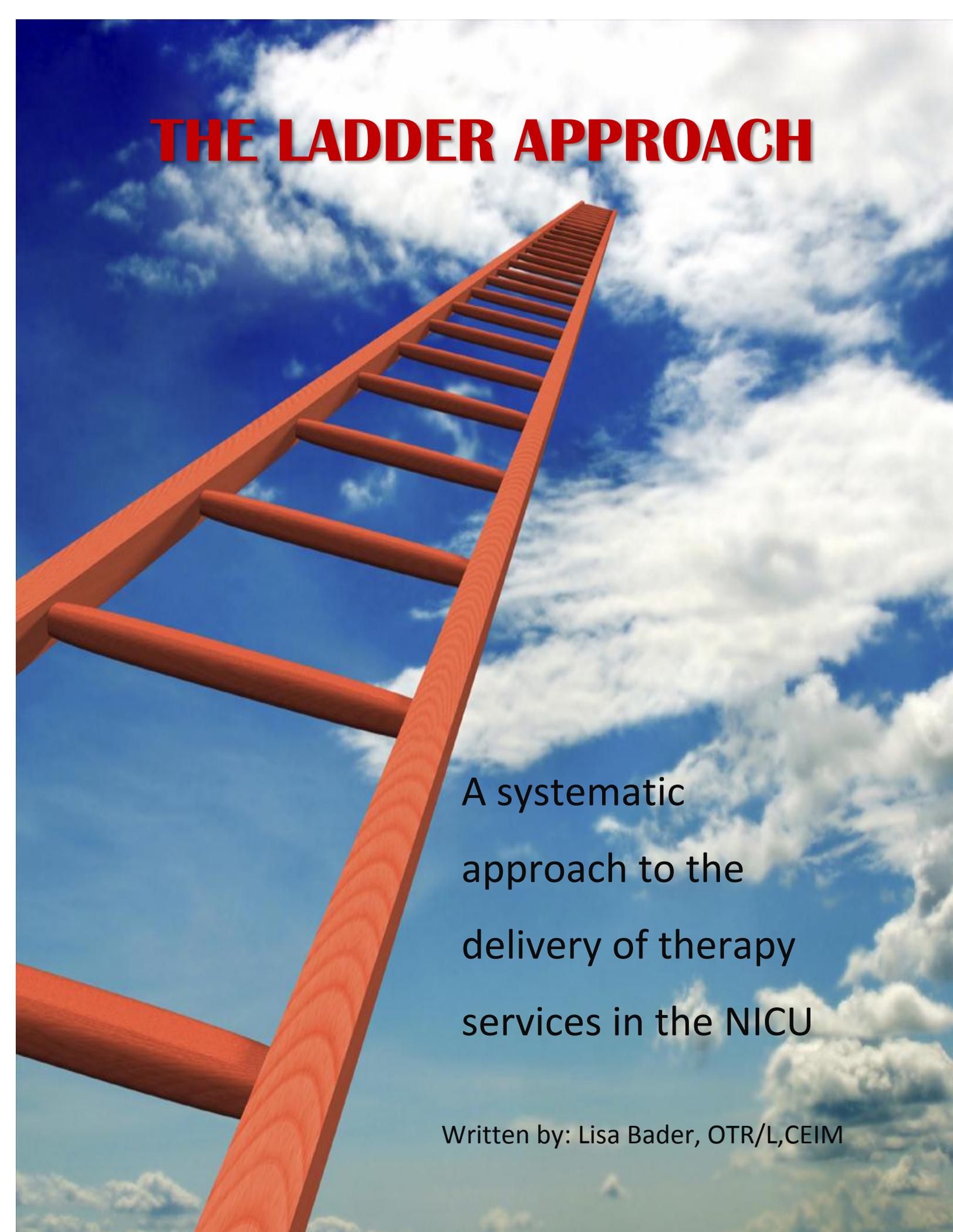


# **THE LADDER APPROACH**

A long wooden ladder extends from the bottom left towards the top right against a blue sky with white clouds. The ladder is made of light-colored wood and has many rungs. The sky is a vibrant blue with scattered white clouds. The ladder appears to be reaching towards the top of the frame, symbolizing a path or approach.

A systematic  
approach to the  
delivery of therapy  
services in the NICU

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## **Why use the Ladder Approach?**

The ladder approach is an innovative and structured way to deliver therapy services of any type (OT, PT, or ST) in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. As therapists, we tend to strive for structure, purpose, and reasoning in our work. We do not like to go into situations blindly or without purpose. Our national organizations are strongly advocating for evidence based practice in all realms of therapy. In the NICU, we have struggled to find our place and make our presence and purpose known and respected. Fortunately, many of us have found our “niche” and we are well respected in our NICU’s. However, there are many of us still struggling to “cement” our place in the NICU. I have been in both situations and, like many of you, have made that slow and deliberate journey in my NICU. For years, I walked around wondering if some neonatologist or nurse practitioner would “kick me out” of the NICU in the fear that therapies were harming not helping these fragile infants. The “ladder approach” for me was born out of necessity. I needed a way to show how valuable therapy services in the NICU can be. I pulled together all of the research and knowledge I have studied and gained over the years to make a tool that is simple to use. Whether you are a well-known member of your NICU team or just starting to develop a program, the ladder approach will help you gain reasoning and purpose behind your work. At the same time it will give other NICU team members and families an easier way to understand the valuable work you do in the NICU. It is easy to use and to understand. This approach will serve as a guide for NICU therapists based on theory and proven practice.

The “ladder” allows a therapist in the NICU to deliver treatment in an organized and predictable way. The NICU therapist is delivering treatment in the order of sensory system development while purposely working her way up the “ladder”. Furthermore, the infant guides all treatment sessions through their “communication” with the therapist. The ultimate goal is for the infant to achieve self-regulation, normal development, and normal sensory processing.

When looking at the ladder, the first rung of the ladder is “containment holds” and this is a tactile/proprioceptive treatment. One moves up the ladder in the order of sensory system development. As a therapist, you may insert a treatment technique NOT described in this manual in the appropriate place on the ladder and according to which sensory system is involved. Conversely, there may be a treatment described in the ladder that you do not use on your unit. You may omit any treatment you do not currently use. Hopefully, this manual will give you some new ideas to use or develop on your unit. If you are just beginning in your NICU, choose the treatment techniques that make the most sense to you and that can be easily discussed with NICU team members and families. It is not necessary to be familiar with all of the described treatments. It is only necessary that you are familiar with reading infant cues and using the ladder to guide you in your daily work.

Also included in the manual:

- \*Head Shaping and how to begin a head shaping program on your unit
- \*Infant driven feeding and our unit's specific feeding program and feeding pathway
- \*10 helpful handouts to use on your unit
- \*Goal setting using the Ladder Approach

