

Web-Based Radio Show

Individual Differences in Understanding the World: Understanding How Your Child Copes with What Makes Him or Her Unique

The different ways in which each and every child is unique and also how we can become flexible and help our children become flexible, even when they have unique differences that often lead them to want to be rigid or want exact predictability in their worlds


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I want to welcome everybody to our second Web Based Radio Show. I want to thank you for standing by. We were 15 minutes late in getting started today. I appreciate your patience and for those who couldn't wait, as we did last week the show is being archived so it can be accessed at any time forever and ever, hopefully but certainly for the next several weeks you'll have time to listen to it. You can listen to it in bits and pieces or the whole show. So again, I'd like to thank you for standing by and we are ready to get started now. As you can imagine because this is a new endeavor, it is so unique to be bringing real radio with call-in onto the internet that there are numerous technical glitches which I must confess I understand very little of. We have experts here, including Josh Metz who I thanked last week and I thank even more this week for getting us on and hopefully as we get over our maiden voyages the system will get more and more routine and expectable. But for the moment, we need to just acknowledge that electronics, like human beings, are not perfect and we don't always work perfectly and we have to be flexible.

That is the theme of the lessons for today's focus because today we are going to be talking about the different ways in which each and every child is unique and how we can become flexible and help our children become flexible, even when they have unique differences that often lead them to want to be rigid or want exact predictability in their worlds.


I'm going to go into that in just a second, but first I want to cover a few more administrative details. As you know, this is a live call-in show. Because we have had lots and lots of questions come in since last week, we have decided that the best way to



proceed, at least initially, until we hear from you to the contrary, is to select questions based on your emails during the week. Then we'll take the questions that represent most of your interests, as well as a few unique ones that may not represent everyone's interests but seem especially interesting and important to cover. The selected emails will then be discussed live on the air and we invite those of you who wrote those emails and those questions to call in. So we will schedule call-ins actually, with individuals who have been kind enough to send us an email and hear them live hear our discussions live. So please send in your emails during the week and please do not try to call in during the show because we will be selecting individuals for that based on the emails coming in during the week.

Now as you recall last week, we talked about the broad goals of our effort. What do we really want for our children and how can we do better? Should the goals be, as you recall, simply teaching children to read or write or sit still or look, or do we want the broad goals to be what we call "Functional Capacities" such as the ability to share attention with another person, to really engage with trust, to signal with gestures and emotions and show people what you want; to be able to problem solve with others in a shared way. Do we want children to use ideas creatively and meaningfully? Do we want them to be able to build bridges between ideas and connect ideas together to be logical? Those are what we propose to be the six main goals that we want for our children.

Now it is critical to focus on these important functional goals that we call "Functional Developmental Capacities." Within these goals are the building blocks of healthy development - not only healthy intellectual development, but healthy emotional development and social development. And also the building blocks for academic skills like reading and writing and math and you have to understand your world in order to do these things successfully. So as we discussed last week, we want to focus on these important building blocks. As we also discussed, each of these building blocks is a protection against certain symptoms and helps you overcome symptoms. So when you learn to think creatively and use ideas creatively and the next you know you are no longer echolalar and no longer just repeat scripts. When you can join in with others in social problem solving, you no longer are repetitive or perseverative. So each of these major functional capacities offset symptoms, build strengths, and it's the foundation for healthy social development, intellectual development and academic skills as well.




Now today we are complimenting the discussion of last week. We're looking at what makes each child unique in terms of the way they take in information. As you all know, every one of us is biologically different. We all are born with important differences. However we were created and whatever our religious belief about what creation is or non-religious belief, one thing is for sure: Mother Nature or our Creator made us all unique and special. And the question is: What is the best way to characterize this specialness? In technical terms we talk about genotypes and we talk about our genetics. But how do the genes express themselves? How does our physical makeup that happens from our development before we're born express itself? How do the early physical differences that are part of maturation and are part of our biology express itself?

What we've done is we've identified a number of ways in which children process information and organize their actions that express the uniqueness of our biology. And by focusing on these specific differences, we can look at the unique signature of each child, the unique way in which each child engages the world in terms of understanding the information coming and the planning of the response to that information.

Let me go through these briefly, because as you'll see, each of these is critical for understanding the child's uniqueness and helping that child then use their uniqueness, even if it seems like a challenge to eventually become more confident, to eventually turn that uniqueness or even challenge the uniqueness into a strength. So let's look at them.


The most prominent one we see often in children with special needs and learning disabilities, but also in children without challenges, is differences in auditory processing and language. That's the way in which we receive information and comprehend it. It has to do with the registering of information through the ears, the decoding of that information – making out different sounds and discriminating the different sounds such as whether it's a high pitch or low pitch sound and finally, making sense of the sound in terms of words. We know that is not easy. Many children have difficulties with it. But even children who don't have challenges have differences. Some can, even as babies, understand a pattern like ("shave and a haircut, two bits") and they brighten and alert to the surprising ("two bits"). But other babies are confused by this pattern, and these can be babies who are without any special challenges. So there are a lot of differences, just like with adults. Some can listen to a lecture and remember all of it, and others can only remember the first and last sentences.



Now in addition to auditory processing and language, we also have motor planning and sequencing. That is the ability to take from him what we hear and then plan an action. We see this with a little baby who is beginning to turn and look at where the voice comes from. That requires a planned action. It is automatic, but it is still a motor action that has a number of steps to it: the looking, the turning, the finding the face. Later on when a baby is 16 months old, taking mommy by the hand and walking to the refrigerator and pointing to the food requires many actions in a row. This type of motor planning and sequencing also is the underpinning for something that is later called “Executive Functioning.” It is the ability to solve problems as a 7 year old or 8 year old, and the ability to stay on task and follow through. This is difficult for many children, not just with special needs but with attentional learning problems, but also children without challenges, very considerably on this ability. We need to know how to strengthen it.


Now our third capacity we look at that expresses the unique biology of a person is what we call “Visual Spatial Processing.” That is the ability to understand what we see. So for example, when a toddler is coming into a new house, can he size up where the rooms are? Can he figure out where mommy is? Can he find his way back to the living room and find his mommy or does he get lost in the bedroom and then get panicked and scared and cry and mommy has to come find him? Can a 3 year old understand how to build a little play house and put next to the house a barn or a garage. Does he understand the relationships and space for these different buildings? Or does he just take the car in and out of the garage repetitively? That also has to do with what we call “Visual Spatial Processing” – understanding information that you have taken in through sight.

Now in addition, we have yet one more ability that we look at when we look at the unique biology of the child, which is the ability of the child to modulate or regulate sensation as it is coming in. For example we know that many children with special needs are over sensitive to things like sound and touch. This means that they are over-reactive, so light touch which ordinarily is very pleasurable to a child might feel like you’re rubbing a scratch. Also with sounds, the ordinary human voice can feel like you’re screeching really loud to some children, even though it’s being spoken in a soft manner. So we need to understand how children listen differently, experience touch differently, and even sights – bright lights or sunlight can be very overwhelming to some children. But it is not just the over-reactivity to certain sounds. It is also that some



children are under-reactive to certain sounds. For example, some children hardly register when you talk to them. Or they hardly register when you touch them. So they are very under-reactive. They may either retreat because they are not in touch with their world or they may seek out extra sensations so they may run around trying to bang into you or try to get extra sensory input because they crave and need so much sensory input because they are so under-reactive. They may be under-reactive to pain, in which case they seem impervious when they fall or bang into things but actually it isn't because they are impervious, it's just that they don't register quite as intensely as other children do.

So what we need to be aware of is that children's uniqueness, the unique biology expresses itself in terms of their taking in sounds, taking in sights, modulating or regulating sensations in terms of hypo- or hyper-reactivity to touch and sound, and the way in which they plan actions. So this is the way in which each child's unique signature gives you a picture of that child. Now why is that so important? For one, obviously if the child is very over-reactive to sound or touch or very under-reactive, we need to know that because for the over-reactive child we need to sooth and help regulate that child so we can pull that child into a relationship. For the under-reactive child we are going to have to do just the opposite. We're going to have to energize up to pull that child in, use loud noises or tense, compelling noises, extra touching. If the child is stronger visually than they are auditorially, we're going to use that to pull it into a relationship and engage them. Basically what we try to do is we try to tailor our learning interactions to the child's unique profile of biological differences. This processing profile we have been talking about, in order to help that child master the goals we talked about last week; the goals of attending and relating and communicating and thinking - if we know the child's unique profile, then we tailor our learning interactions to help that child master the fundamental milestones. And just as we talked last week, if each of these processing differences there can be relative problems associated with it. So a child who cannot plan actions can easily get lost in repetitive actions because they can't plan meaningful actions. But as we help that child become more interactive, they don't need to do that anymore. They then can begin planning meaningful actions. And here is the key thing about it: As we help children climb the ladder of mastering their functional milestones, the ability to engage and relate and be purposeful and problem solve and use ideas, at each of these levels we're helping the child master the challenges of their unique biology. So the child who cannot plan actions as he learns to problem solve, is also improving his planning of actions. As we



help him use ideas, he can now use an idea to help plan what he wants to do. So he gets stronger in his planning of actions. As a child who is very sensory over-reactive learns to interact with others, he can begin regulating his environment. He can point to say, “be quiet”. Or he could go to the teacher and point and indicate he has to go out of the room because it’s overwhelming to him. So he can now be purposeful and intentional controlling his world rather than just be overwhelmed. Once he can learn to use ideas, he can think, “Whew, I’m overloaded!”

So each of the functional capacities has to be mastered and helps us also master our unique biology and turn a potential problem into a strength. The child that is hyper-sensitive can become very intuitive and empathic and sensitive to other people’s needs rather than be overloaded. The child who is good visually but weaker auditorally can become a great artist or architect because they can use those visual skills. So each one of these kids has unique potential. So it can either be the source of a problem or unusual potential depending on how we use it. And how we use it depends on understanding it and then harnessing it to engage the child in learning interactions that help him master their important milestones of relating, interacting, thinking, communicating, and so forth.

Now we are going to go to our first call and we have a very, very good question and so bear with me for one second. So our first caller is now on the line.

SG: Hi, this is Dr. Greenspan.

Caller: Hi Dr. Greenspan.


SG: Welcome to our Web Radio Show.

Caller: Thank you very, very much. Thank you for having me! My name is Laura and I have a son Jesse and I had emailed you about his imitation skills.

SG: Do you want to share your question with everybody on the air?

Caller: My question is, my son will be turning 2 on the 25th of February. He’s been diagnosed with autism when he was 18 months old. My question is, do autistic children have a natural ability to imitate or can they only be taught?


SG: That is a very, very good question and I also wanted to thank you. You are our first live caller of this new Web Based Radio Show. So you honor us and I want to



thank you for being the first. And the question as most of you heard, but just to repeat it, is this little child has the unique capacity to imitate everything. Even things you don't want him to imitate from what I understand from your written question. And is this characteristic of children with autistic spectrum disorder or not characteristic?

What we find is that there is a huge range in the ability to imitate. Some children with autistic spectrum disorders have a very, very hard time learning to imitate. And often, going back to our individual differences that we were talking about, children with severe motor planning problems, they have a hard time imitating because they can't plan the actions that are needed to imitate. In other words, if you imitate, you see someone that is, say, putting a hat on. But you may understand putting a hat on and you may even want to do it. But to copy it, you have to be able to put your hand out, grab the hat, put the hat on your head, and then maybe take it off your head. So that requires a 3 or 4 step action. And that is not easy for some children to do. So some children have a hard time with that and they have to learn to imitate very, very gradually. We may work with something very simple like, "touch your nose" or just "jump" or just "take a step" or even just "bang on the table". It's a very simple action. Something that they may be very familiar with and begin there and then go to a two-step action, such as "bang on the table and then take the car and bang the car on the table" and then "take the car and move it forward then move it backward". Or maybe making a sound that they can already make like "eee eee eee" and from the "eee eee eee" going to the "ahh ahh ahh" and "baa baa baa" and "boo boo boo". So with some children it's very gradual. But you are very, very fortunate because children who can imitate quickly, who have that motor planning capacity to do that, can often be very, very quick learners.

Now the key is when a child can imitate that readily and that quickly, is to harness that capacity, that strength, that motor planning strength, into interaction, and get what we call a "continuous flow of back-and-forth signaling" going with that child. So it shouldn't be just "look, copy my touching my nose" or "copy this word". It should be a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction involving lots of imitations. So it could be learning new words, it could be pretend play, it could be just having fun. The main thing is back-and-forth. The child does something like push the car and we point and say, "where is the car going?" and the child moves it in this direction and we put our hand out blocking the car, "can't go there, the policeman says no", the child then moves the car in another direction and giggles, and now we have a continuous flow of back-



and-forth interaction. That is the key. When you do that, that wonderful capacity of imitation turns into a wonderful capacity of communication.

Thank you for that wonderful question.

Caller: Thank you for answering it. We are very dumbfounded at the fact that anything that I want to do he just helps me get on with my day on certain things. Like I said, “plugging in the vacuum” and all these things and I said, “oh my God I’m a bad mother, I never taught him that, and why is he learning all these things?”

SG: Well, it is a blessing. It speaks volumes of what he is capable of. So the main thing is to harness that ability and it do it all the time and enjoy it and make it part of two-way communication. That’s the emphasis.


Caller: Thank you very much, Dr. Greenspan.

SG: Thank you.

Now what I want to do is turn this over to my colleague, Serena Wieder, just to see if she wants to add a few thoughts about imitation and Serena has done some pioneering work in using imitation to help people become imaginative and become great pretend players. One of the challenges for children with special needs but with learning differences and typical children who don’t have any challenges at all, is to learn to be more and more imaginative. How do we turn imitation into a wonderful imaginary drama? Serena?

SW: Thank you. There’s no question, once you have the capacity to imitate, the challenge is, how do we apply it to meaningful behavior and meaningful interactions? The easiest way, of course is, to work around problem solving. The child can then see the sequences involved in opening a container and climbing up the steps to get something they would like and begin an interactive by joining them in the problem solving.

Another way to approach symbolic play through imitation is really to offer the child a symbolic solution. So, for example, if the child might want to have a drink, you can offer them a cup. The cup might be empty, but if you take a drink and he begins to see your gesture and understands that you know what is involved, offer him the cup and say, “here sweetheart, take a drink”, he will begin to get this notion, “hmmm? Is this real or not real?” The one way we know the symbolic world opens, and I do want to




note that you're encouraging symbolic worlds the moment you put that teddy bear into his crib because you're already telling the child here is something that is going to symbolize you. It's going to be the object you'd like them to feel secure with and attached to. This, at later stages in the game, involves using the symbolic toy that represents the real thing as if it's real. By using it, the child will see you and will often imitate you.

Sometimes the symbolic world opens because something looks so real. So the first play most children will get into will be to imitate you talking on the phone. The next will usually involve imitating you using either pretend food or an empty cup. As long as you stay with symbols and stay with things that are very realistic and meaningful when we start out, you'll find that the child will begin to do the same thing. So the moment that you see his need or his interest you offer him the symbolic object and he might use it.

I actually don't encourage the use of the word "pretend" because one of the wonderful ways you know a child is really pretending is when they don't have to stop and say "pretend," that they actually continue with the sequence of actions and use the toys and imitate what you are doing and begin using you too so now you are working around an idea. You are working in his mind and that leads to a picnic or it leads to going down the slide. A very nice way children can be lured in is if you start playing with a toy and you set it up. Now depending on a child's motor planning capacities, you may want to keep things pretty simple to start out. Few children will resist pushing a figure down a slide if it's just standing there, and especially if you cue them with something like, "ready, set, go." The most important issue is how to make it meaningful and interactive. Once they show some interest you can build the next stem and they can then join you and take over. But it's a great break though when a child begins to imitate and imitation is the first part of pretending.


SG: Thank you Serena. As Serena was sharing with you, part of our critical functional capacities is the ability to use ideas imaginatively, like pretending. So as a child learns to attend and engage and communicate with gestures and problem solve, the next step is turning wonderful interactions into imagination, which is the ability to use ideas in a fresh and original way. That means the ideas the child is using are connected to the child's emotions; connected to the child's will and desire; connected to the child's intentionality. So it's not just a memorized idea where the child says, "door" or "hat" or looks at a picture and identifies it. It's the ability to express what is



on your mind – “I want to go outside”, “I’m happy”, “I’m sad”. And as Serena was pointing out, imitation is the key transition into that because pretend play may start with hugging the doll, kissing the doll, imitating what mommy and daddy are doing, and then all of a sudden the child will put their own innovative twist on it such as, the doll falls down, and then the child says on his own, “poor dolly”. Now we are off and running into imitative pretending, not just imitative play on it’s own.


Another question that has come in, and it gets to the heart of what many of you have asked. I want to read this one because it is so, so important. *“How do I woo my child when I’m not having very fun. I’ve been doing Floortime for a couple of years and I’m more relaxed but I’m often worrying that I’m not doing it right. And when I start worrying, I tense up and it’s hard for me to fake it and I know I’m not having the spirit that I want to have.”*

This is so important. I was just saying to a family just the other day, and I was coaching them and just relaxing and enjoying and as they were ready to leave, and both mommy and daddy were wonderful and interacting with their child they were wonderful at doing Floortime, they really followed the child’s natural interests and really got nice interaction going where the child was very engaged and enjoying doing things with her parents, but mommy and daddy both said, “How do we know we’re going to be doing it right and we’re not going to be able to do this when we go home and you’re not going to be here to coach us?” I said something for the first time that I had never said before, but I realized it was the heart of really engaging with your child and the heart of the answer to this person’s question, which is: “The only mistake you can make in Floortime or in trying to relate with your child is not showing up.” In other words, there’s no way to make a mistake. If you don’t do it, if you get so anxious and so down on yourself that you feel, “gee I can’t do this right” that you stop doing it and you try to just have others do it – a lot of parents feel that a babysitter could do it better or a hired therapist could do it better – but in fact, nobody does it better than mommy or daddy because it’s mommy and daddy or grandma or uncle or siblings who the child loves the most because he’s the most familiar with the family members. So they have the most meaning for the child, although other people can come to have great meaning as well. So it’s very, very important for the family members to be getting in there and trying to relate and tailoring their interactions to the child. The only mistake you can make is not doing it, not showing up. Anything you do once you’re on the floor trying, at the child’s level, will be appreciated by the child and it will be helpful. And then it’s a question not




so much about doing it wrong but different degrees of rightness. In other words, you'll find that the more you do it, the better and better you become. So sure we have principles: follow the child's lead, build on the child's natural interests, and then work up the developmental ladder. Engage the child, help get the child's attention, then start two-way back-and-forth communication, try to get into some continuous flow of back-and-forth gesturing, and then if the child is capable to imitation, try to use some ideas – maybe get into imaginative play and discussions depending on how high the child can go. But the most important part of that is the continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction. But again, even if you don't do it perfectly – you're not following the child's lead or introducing a little too much or you're being a little too controlling, or you're not being active enough or energizing up for your child who is under-reactive, the key is to just show up and keep working at it because you'll get better and better at it. So relax, enjoy it, and recognize that there are only different degrees of "goodness". There's only one "bad" which is not doing it. So if you are feeling uptight or tense, the best way to get over your doubt is to do more of it. It's like any other endeavor. If you're learning to dance for the first time or ice skate for the first time, you're very nervous the first couple of times. You're going to fall, you're going to do it wrong, and you're not following your coach's advice. But the thousandth time, however, you're a pro. You're a veteran. You've done this before. Do a lot of it. The more you do, the more relaxed you'll become. Everyone is going to have their own learning curve. Remember the principles are simple: try to tune into your child, try to understand what your child needs in terms of these unique processing capacities that we have been talking about – how your child responds to sound or touch, whether they take in things more easily through what they see or what they hear, how they plan their actions. Build on those differences by catering your interactions to them and experiment and explore. There are only different degrees of doing it well. I find that most parents and most caregivers and most therapists are far better than they imagined. They are their own worst enemies. So relax and just do a lot of it. The more doubts that you have and the more artificial you feel, as this questioner raises, the cure is do more and more and more. It does get better as you do more of it. So show up, is the answer to this question.

Now, before we take some more questions, I just wanted to elaborate a little bit more on how this processing profile of the child - what makes the child unique - plays out not just in children with special needs and not just in children with learning disabilities, but also plays out in children without any challenges at all. Each and every child, even children who, again, have no known challenges, all have their own signature,



all have their own unique biology. When parents want to help children reach their potential, they have to understand the unique biology of the child in terms of these processing differences, because the way to help a child not just reach their potential but what we call “redefine their potential” – helping the child become a truly great kid in the sense that we use the term “great kids” all the time. You see a friend and you say, “he has great kids” – what do we mean by that? And I find that we apply that term to children who have special needs, learning disabilities or no challenges at all. What we usually mean is that child is warm, engaging, sweet, often a little bit imaginative, has an impish quality, has a gleam in their eye, seems to sense our needs, and we find almost all children, from children with special needs and learning disabilities to children without challenges can become great kids in this sense if we work with them properly by understanding their individual differences. And also for those parents and others who are concerned with improving children’s academic skills, those thinking skills, those creative skills, it’s the same approach. You have to understand how your child is unique. I think it is sort of obvious that this will help with the child relating and trusting and having better empathy and being a sweeter person because they feel understood. You are relating to them in a fuller way.


But what about math skills? What about reading skills? For those who are achievement oriented? Well the point is, it’s the same interactions, the same reading of the child’s differences. For example, we are learning that the reading, there can be many different reasons why a child will be either a gifted reader or have challenges. Reading requires taking in information through what you see, connecting it to things you hear – you hear the word, you hear the sound, but you have to connect it to the letters that you see on the page, and then you have to find meaning for that word. And the comprehension side, the meaning for that word, the meaning for that sentence, the meaning of that paragraph – and later on, the meaning of the paragraphs that you’re going to write as you’re doing essays comes from your ability to think. So when you strengthen a child’s visual spatial capacities – the ability to understand what they see and what they hear, you’re improving their ability to read in the rote sense it’s not just taking the words off the page but also to comprehend and eventually to articulate and write essays, because you’re improving their thinking skills. So tuning into individual differences is the basis for learning regardless of the degree to which you may have challenges or not have challenges in your nervous system.



When we look at special needs, learning disabilities, learning differences, and children without challenges we are doing basically the same thing. We're understanding how that child is unique, we're tailoring learning interactions to the child, and that helps us mobilize the child's potential and we redefine the child's potential because you don't know the child's potential until you engage in these types of tailored individualized learning interactions. In other words, it's not as though the potential exists and we find it, the way we interact with the child defines the child's potential because the brain is not fully developed and the mind is not fully developed. It's developing as a consequence of the way we interact with children.


Now we're going to move to another question. This one comes from a parent who says, *"My son has really been doing well with our attempts at home with Floortime methods. However, we often keep having really great days and then some terrible days. Some days he seems right on, always responding and interested in us and our world, and other days he spends much time staring into space only responding through a lot of badgering."* Mommy goes on and on giving examples, but basically the question is, big variations from day to day. How do we account for that? Well, here's what is interesting. As we understand individual differences in sensory activity and auditory processing, we notice that children will vary from day to day. Some days they are much more sensitive to touch or sounds. Some days they are much more under-reactive. Some days they process sounds better. Some days they process sounds less well. So you can see the difference is not just in the child's behavior but in how they use their biological differences on particular days. Now is this shocking or surprising? Who of us doesn't have good days or bad days? How many of you play tennis or play bridge or do other things that require a high level of skill? I'm a tennis player, for example, and I'm often amazed at how often I can feel like a pro out there and the next day I can get out there and feel like a total klutz. Same nervous system, same body, maybe I got a little more sleep, maybe it's something I ate, often I can't find an explanation.

The important point to remember is human beings vary considerably from day to day in the way their nervous system works. These are ordinary variations. Sometimes we can identify reasons for it and sometimes we can't. When you're just learning to walk, that variation will determine whether you fall or whether you walk. When you're just learning to speak, it will determine whether you can use your words or not use your words at all. When you're just learning to engage with others, it may have to do with whether you stay engaged and responsive or whether you're in your own world.




However when you have mastered all these things very well, it may affect whether you have a headache, or whether you feel kind of bouncy, or whether you just feel like you're getting through the day. It's the same variations, but depending on where you are on the nervous system development, it may affect us differently. It always affects the most recent thing we've learned because they are the hardest for us. So we see the biggest variations at the different sides of the life cycle – in infants and toddlers and young children we see enormous variation because it hits us over the head. Again, when we're elderly we see variations because our memories are failing a little bit so it affects that system more. So it affects the most vulnerable systems or the more newly learned systems. But we should expect it. And for every child, don't get worried about the variations, don't say, "Oh my God he's lost his language." I can understand why you feel that way, but don't get lost in that word. Instead identify it. Say, "What is the range my child operates in?" In other words, every child operates in a box. The top of their box are the things they do on their very best days or the very best moment of their very best days. So we have children who on their very best days can answer lots of "W" questions, such as, "Where is the car going?" and "Why do you want to go outside?" "Well, it's because I want to play." But on their worst moment of that same day, they'll tune out and you'll say, "Why do you want to go outside?" and the child will go, "Door, door, door, open door." "But why open door?" "Door, door" and start banging on the door. So we may get a very different response even within an hour let alone within different days. Well, that is the child's range. From repetitive use of words to fully meaningful use of words and actually building bridges between his words and understanding a "why" question. So we need to identify that range. Then our goal becomes not just to keep with the top of his range because that is impossible. To be human we are going to vary. We want our children to be human. So we want to move that whole box up.

So it's just as important to work with the child when he's at the top of his box because then we're helping him go from answering why he wants to go outside to giving us two reasons of why he wanted to go outside. So we're stretching his ability at the top. But also, when he's at the bottom of his box, it gives us the opportunity to bring the bottom up. Unless we bring the bottom up, we'll never get the whole box up. We need to lift it from both sides, the top and the bottom. So when he's just saying, "door, door, door, open door" we want to calm him down and say, "ok let's open door, who should open it – mommy or you?" And he replies, "I can't! I can't!" and you say, "Can daddy help us?" and he says, "Daddy, come help open door." So now we have helped



the child go from repetitive “open, open door” to “Daddy come and help, Mommy you do first” and even in that interaction you’re likely to help the child once you get him out of the anxiety of “door, door, door” because you’re calming him down through interaction, you’re likely to help that child be able to get to the point where he can tell you why he wants to go outside. So you have brought that bottom up through skillful interaction. So recognize the box. Recognize the whole range for that child. And let that child help you help him. I’m going to let Serena amplify this a little bit because it’s a very, very important point and it affects so many children.


SW: I think the point that when a child is more down and inconsistent, I often hear reports that “well, he said it once and he said it twice, but he hasn’t said it again”. You want to focus not so much on what he might have done at the top but meet him where he is at the bottom and move back to the gestural level. You have to re-connect, you have to get in there. If your child is more under-reactive, it looks like he is spacing out, you may want to move in on a more sensory motor level and you can walk your little fingers as you approach the spot he seems to just be staring at. Provide some nice deep pressure to just help him feel more in his own skin and in his own body. Make sure you get in front of him rather than behind him so you make it easier to organize the visual spatial piece of what you want him to take in together with your words. But we have to build up by getting the regulation. If it’s a child who needs to warm up, and you just kind of feel like he has just collapsed on you and he is kind of not telling you where to go with the car but just rolling it back and forth, well then his tone is down. Children will show us their solutions when they have a challenge with whole sensory processing system. So we get down and join their solution. The little boy who is just more under-reactive and lying down and pushing back, he is trying to seek some support from the floor. Lie down on the floor with him. In front of him, in fact. And as he starts pushing the car you could either meet him or crash into him or push it further. But try to get engaged. Once you have the engagement and once you can begin to get the little child more mobilized in his own body and in his movement, we can start moving up the ladder to the higher level. Very often we don’t take into account enough where the child is in his own system. We tend to go to solutions because children who talk or sing or fill in the blank, we do much more of it. And they get much more practice. What you want to think about is what the child is doing to help himself in the moment and how we can meet him there and then we want to think about what we can do to strengthen that area so that he doesn’t just collapse but has some idea of where he can go with that interacting with you.



SG: Thank you Serena. Now we have another question: *My child is a special needs child with communication delays and OT issues. He is 3.5 years old. We find that he is quite challenging in terms of not listening and obeying us, i.e., his parents. How can we force the communications and increase his willingness to listen and obey?*

Now many parents have asked questions about how to get our children to listen and obey and to be more obedient. And it's a real dilemma for not just parents but educators as well. The biggest question that I have from school is the same. Little Johnny or Little Susie won't listen or obey. Now this complaint and this worry is not just for children with special needs. Children with learning disabilities, children with behavioral and emotional problems, but also as every parent will testify, all kids except for a rare few have difficulty with listening and obeying. And most parents want more compliance and more obedience. And so the real question is, and we'll start with special needs children but then talk about this for all children, how do we help children listen and obey and at the same time learn to be warm and creative and engaged children, not just fearful automatons who are going to obey because they are frightened and therefore won't be learning to use language creatively or won't be learning to solve problems constructively. Here is the key. Listening and eventually obeying or following the rules or a better way of putting it is learning to cooperate and being part of a team effort whether it's at school or home, comes first from the ability to notice what is happening in your world. The child has to be able to take into account what is happening outside their own body. That's the first step in listening and obeying. It's paying attention to the outer world. So we have to make sure our child is able to engage in what we call "shared attention," the first in our milestones.


The second component of listening and obeying is caring about what other people are saying. Why should you listen and obey unless you care about the wishes of another person. At school, unless you care about the other children, why shouldn't you just take their toys? Unless you care about the teacher, why shouldn't you just talk up when you feel like it, even when she's talking? Unless you care about what mommy and daddy are saying because you have respect for them or you have some basic love for them, why should you care if they want you to sit at the table or want you to go to sleep or want you to take your bath? Why not just do your own thing? So the second part of listening and obeying is having a desire to care about somebody else other than just yourself. That means being part of a relationship where needs are being met. That means engaging with your child.



The third step is two-way communication through gesturing and eventually through words. In order to listen and obey, you have to part of a communicative relationship because you have to be aware of what you are doing, see what the other person is doing, see what they want you to do and decide are you going to respond or not respond. So the ability to make the decision of whether to obey or to not obey requires that you be part of purposeful two-way communication. Or else, your behavior is just random and aimless. If your behavior is random and aimless, you can't obey because you don't know how to obey. So in order to know how to obey you have to be part of two-way back-and-forth intentional communication. Then you can say, "I'm doing this, daddy is doing that, he wants me to do yet this, I may or may not decide to do it." But at least you're able to make a decision. So you have to help your child be part of two-way back-and-forth communication and the only way your child can really be a child who makes a decision to obey as opposed to a child who just learns some rote things like "sit there and just look at the wall," is to be a part of a continuous flow of back-and-forth communication. That doesn't require words. It can be through gestures. We talked about the continuous flow of back-and-forth signaling, so the child who is pointing, showing, elaborating by walking you places, and the parent who is vocalizing back and pointing and showing back and there's a two-way back-and-forth communication, even without words, is getting that foundation for obeying and listening.


Then, if you can use that two-way communication for shared social problem solving, finding the toy together, finding the juice together, finding the apple, open that door, getting mommy to help open that door, now what we have the beginning of cooperation. Now that is what you want. When we talk about obeying and listening, you want a child who wants to be cooperative. The foundations for that is helping the child realize that social cooperation helps the child meet their own needs and their own goals. So joining with the child in solving their problems creates the basis for the child then wanting to solve your problems.

That is also the basis for empathy. Part of listening and obeying is caring about pleasing another person, and you have to understand the other person's needs and wishes. That also occurs through shared social problem solving. A child only knows empathy by experiencing empathy. It starts with them realizing that you understand them. They then want to understand you, so the shared social problem solving. But it also requires even before words to be on the same limits. So the child who you are




empathizing with and sharing problem solving with could still be a little dictator who says, “well, gee it’s great that they are understanding me and I want to have the world as my oyster and I’ll do it my way.” But you still have to do limits, so the child can’t touch the sockets where the electricity comes in because that could harm them, they can’t run out in the street, they can’t eat everything they want to eat, they can’t hit other children. There are firm limits, and depending on the child, those limits could be explored verbally or they could be explored through interrupting the child’s activity that the child likes to do. So the child senses that you are persistent and you are firm and you have structure and boundaries that the child can’t give. Frequently they’ll ask, “But my child doesn’t listen to me. He won’t follow my limits. What should I do?” And I’m saying to the parent, “Well, gee it must be a problem them because I’m sure your child is going into your living room and throwing water and food on the living room rug.” “Oh, no, he would never do that!” “Well, why not?” “Well, he just wouldn’t do that.” “Well, what does he do?” “He throws his food around in the kitchen.” “Why isn’t he going into the living room and doing it?” Here’s the key point: he’s not doing that. And the parent says he’s not doing that and their tone of voice always changes. So there’s an implicit rule in the house: You don’t go in the living room and throw your food and water on the living room rug, and the child obeys this rule. So the child has gotten it. When the parent sets the limit in the kitchen and says, “no, no don’t throw your food” it’s not done with the same degree of firmness so the child doesn’t get it.

Now the way to do it is gentle persistent firmness so the child feels you’ll outstay them. But the child has to also feel “what is the limit you really believe in?” like the no throwing food on the living room floor versus the one you kind of really don’t believe in like not throwing food in the kitchen, which you think you believe in but you may not fully believe in. And so you’ve got to reinforce your social problem solving with appropriate limits. Don’t try to set limits in everything, for a child who is not having enough limits begins gradually. Pick a few key things so the child realizes this structure. Then as you help your child learn to use ideas, that too occurs in an interchange, in a back-and-forth exchange of ideas. So as you do pretend play, it’s not just following your child’s lead, you’re throwing in your ideas too: “Where is the car going?” “Well, why can’t the car go to Grandma’s house too? Why only to school?” And now the child is digesting your ideas as part of a back-and-forth. That’s also part of limit setting and also part of obeying because you’ve got to understand what the other person is saying, to follow their limits.



If you get these six core milestones cooking: attention, engagement, two-way communication, shared social problem solving, and limits with shared social problem solving, then using ideas creatively and logically, you now have the basis for a child who is going to not just be able to listen to you, he'll be able to understand what you want. He'll want to please you. Not all the time, hopefully, but at least a lot of the time. That's the basis for limits. That's the basis for listening and obeying. So listening and obeying is actually at the top of a hierarchy of learning involving cooperation and thinking. If you approach it that way, you'll have a life-long partner who wants to be cooperative with you and will be able to rise to the occasion as there are more demands placed in school and more demands placed by the peer groups and more demands placed eventually in a work setting or when the child has his own family, as an adult. But if you just approach it as a type of rigid adherence: Do what I say, you may get a fearful child. You may even get a compliant child but not a thinking child who can adapt to new rules and new regulations and new limits as life changes. So I urge you whether it's children with special needs, children with learning disabilities, children with just learning differences, or children without challenges at all, to follow these steps. This is such an important question, because it opens up the door to something we all want but we haven't realized that this is a developmental pathway to learning about limits. Serena, do you want to add a few words?


SW: This is a big topic and there is a lot to say. Maybe I will just focus a little bit on what happens on how the child takes in the message and how we can facilitate that. As you just heard, the tone of voice – children really do figure out what is negotiable and not negotiable pretty quickly. Simply because of the way you say it, the consistency of it and because there really is an effect. Part of listening has to do with understanding cause and effect. So when I think of a 3 ½ year old when he is being asked to do things and doesn't quite understand the reasons for it, he is just beginning to reason, we have to appreciate how much to that child what you're asking him to do is very arbitrary. And it's only in the context of having that back-and-forth relationship that the child will give way and do it just because you're asking, but also becomes the opportunity to prepare the child for the reasons of the limit and to learn to figure out what's safe or not safe and to figure out how far you can push mom or dad. When children have specific sensory processing issues the other question is how you convey the message. Some children, you have to be really sure if there are auditory processing challenges that you get their attention first. You get in front of them, you really try to prepare them for the message so that they do listen. Otherwise you're repeating yourself ten



times and they only hear you the tenth time. Similarly if a child has weak understanding of the language, you may want to prepare them for the transition they have to make giving them notice, letting them know what comes next, use visual strategies, and that could be simply pointing, it could be showing them a picture, it could be going over the different changes that will be made that morning in advance so they are more prepared to give up what they like, or it could be just empathizing with what they are doing and letting them know that they might be able to do it again later. But do take into account how your child hears the message and in the context of the interactive relationship if they will be able to first understand and then understand the reasons for and then be able to perhaps negotiate. But if it's not negotiable, then we get that message through, and that's something that will override what ever ways the child can take the message in.

SG: Thank you Serena. We now just have a few more minutes and we can take two quick questions that I'll read to you. One is, *"My 11 year old grandson is in the 5th grade at a school based learning program. He has been having some difficulty with having continued conversations with himself. He is beginning puberty and is really very high functioning autistic. We are interested in learning how to help him when he does this self talking and options that might be available to our school when he is self talking."*

Now this is a very interesting question because it picks up on the individual biological differences that we were talking about before. Self talking is a form of not engaging with others. Now children, for example, who have a hard time processing what other people are saying, auditory processing, may find it easier to talk to themselves and have their own ideas than to take in the ideas of someone else because again, that inflow of information through what they hear is very hard for them. So there is a tendency for them to be self-absorbed and the self talking is just a kind of elaborate way of self thinking. So we all daydream when we are tuning out and the child tunes out and instead of daydreaming he daydreams out loud. So don't worry about self talking as being something different from daydreaming. It's a form of out-loud daydreaming. But the important point is that if there is stuff going on at school or people trying to play with the child while they are daydreaming rather than interacting with the other people. And here is where we need to know the child's profile. How do they take in what they hear? How do they take in what they see? How do they plan their actions? If they have trouble in any of those areas, or if they are very sensory




under-reactive for example, they are going to find it easier to talk to themselves. So we find out what their profile looks like by observing the child, interacting with the child, trying different things, and then for example, if it is a sensory under-reactive child who likes to self-absorb because they don't find the environment compelling enough and if it's a child with auditory processing problems it is easier to have their own ideas than to process your ideas. We have to energize up, talk in simple terms with high energy. So it's, "HEY WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! WHAT DO YOU LIKE?! LOOK AT THIS!" Keep it simple, keep it energized, keep it compelling and that child usually needs a lot more interaction. In a school setting, that child might need to operate in a small group of 2 or 3 children, the teacher, an aide or parent volunteer, or one-on-one learning to keep it as back-and-forth learning. Not until a child is a good back-and-forth communicator can a child learn in a large group. So the child who is still mastering two-way communication or small group communication, the large group won't work. So we need to use a small learning group or one-on-one learning, keep it energized if it is an under-reactive child, diagnose the child's individual differences, and help that child enjoy interactive relationships. That is the way you correct the self-talking.

The mistake is to correct self-talking simply as a bad behavior because that doesn't build the foundations. Throughout these radio shows you'll see we're always emphasizing turning the problem into building a healthy foundation, not into simply correcting a "bad behavior" because correcting a bad behavior – we have a million bad behaviors to correct and we're not building strengths or foundations. It's just like when teaching ice skating, you have to build the foundations of balance and coordination to have good ice skating, not just correct the bad habits.

We have a question, and this is the last question we'll take very briefly, "*At ten year old who has been home schooled and is having trouble with reading and phonics and the parents don't want to get him tested. What to do?*"

The key thing is to recognize is that reading involves auditory processing and visual spatial processing, i.e., that's the phonics part – decoding what you hear and connecting it to what you see, and then also interpreting meaning. But it also involves motor planning – you have follow the lines through the page. And you don't need to have your child tested in a traditional, formal sense because that doesn't often get at this enough. But what you need to do is to notice through observing your child and working with some gifted consultants or yourselves – make yourselves gifted consultants and experts. Notice where your child needs the most work. Is it in the




decoding of sounds? Is it in the decoding of what he sees? Is it the matching up of the sounds with what he sees? Is it in the meaning or is it in following words across the page? And then develop exercises, and you can find lots of good practice exercises in lots of manuals and on the internet that focus on these different components. But the idea is to work on these components that are hard for the child, and to package the whole thing into a program that is fun and exciting for your child so it's not always emphasizing what you can't do but emphasizing what you can to start with, then build up the strengths in auditory processing, in visual spatial processing, in following the lines across the page – motor planning, and in enjoying the meaning of what he reads by, for example, pretending out what you read, learning to picture what you read, and discuss what you read. That way you can turn a child who is having challenges into a child who begins to love reading.

We'll come back to this question next time because we've only scratched the surface and there may be other questions about building academic strengths in math, reading, writing, in oral discussions, in science, that builds on this basic model of individual differences.

So, in conclusion, I want to thank you for joining us today. Today we added a second piece of the puzzle. Last time we talked about learning goals for children, having to do with attention and engagement, communication, and thinking and creative use of ideas. Today we talked about the individual biological pattern of the child; the unique profile of the child in terms of auditory processing and visual spatial processing and sensory modulation and motor planning and sequencing and executive functioning. And we also talked about tailoring learning relationships to the children. Next week we're going to talk about the types of patterns we develop at home and at school. The ones we see ordinarily, and the ones we need to develop. In order to tune into each and every child and to mobilize their critical capacities for engaging, relating, communicating, and thinking. So next week we are going to talk about how to understand the child's environment and how to help that environment become a learning environment where the child progresses emotionally, socially, and intellectually.

Thank you very much and we look forward to seeing you next week or hearing you next week and talking with you. Please email in your questions. We're going to select some questions for discussion on air and some of you we'll invite to call in with those questions so we can have a live discussion on air. Be well and remember this is



archived so please listen during the week and they can also get the first show from last week. All the shows are continually archived and will be available all the time on www.floortime.org. Thank you very much, bye bye.