

Web-Based Radio Show

Learning Environments and How to Create Learning Environments at Home and at School:


How to create the learning environments at home and at school that will help our children master their functional capacities, to help them become related, communicative, thinking children who are warm and empathetic and caring

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I want to welcome everyone to our third show. Today's topic is "Learning Environments and How to Create Learning Environments at Home and at School." Before we get into today's topic, I just wanted to thank you all for joining us and also apologize to those of you who have been struggling to join us in prior weeks when we have had technical difficulties and been delayed a few minutes and there were some interruptions in the show last week, again, due to technical difficulties and I'm being told by our excellent group of helpers that we're "good to go" and we're solid this week and the glitches should be ironed out. Apparently like all new technologies, Web Based Radio is not yet a complete science – there is a lot of art involved in it, and we're still becoming better artists at bringing these broadcasts to you. They are archived and they are available on www.floortime.org so whenever you want to revisit or visit the earlier shows, please do so and tell your friends and colleagues likewise, that they are available all the time now.


Today's topic is "Learning Environments and How We to Create Learning Environments at Home and at School." Just as a background, you'll recall that in the last two radio shows, we covered the fundamentals of one, what kind of goals we should have for our children. And we introduced the concept of functional developmental capacities such as attending and relating and communicating without words, and then with words, and learning to think and learning to be reflective. But these were the goals we wanted for our children and within these goals come our academic skills and specific social skills including how to pay attention to discipline. But these sub-goals that we typically think about as our goals involving academics or discipline arise because children have judgment, because they can think, because they can figure things out,



because they are aware of their world. They don't just occur as rote learned skills. Now last week we looked at how each child is unique and we looked at the individual processing differences of children – how they take in sound and words and how they take in sights and make sense of what they see, how they plan their actions, how they filter or modulate the sensations so they're not over-reactive or under-reactive to touch and smell and other sensations. We showed how by tuning into each child's individual differences, we can help them master their functional developmental capacities such as the capacity to attend and engage and communicate and think. Now today we answer the third part of this question, "How do we do this?" How do we create the learning environments at home and at school that will help our children master their functional capacities, to help them become related, communicative, thinking children who are warm and empathetic and caring. Just what we want for all our children so all our children can become truly great children.

How we do this is not easy. We're faced with coming to grips with a long tradition that has tried to do this by teaching children rote skills or just surface behaviors as though they were someone we could program in the ways we want to without taking into account their own desire, their own will, their own inner life. But we have seen that approaches that are overly structured in this way, while helpful for some purposes aren't really the best ways to help children learn; particularly master new capacities and generalize those to all different settings. For example, recently there has been research that shows that when we help children learn with emotionally relevant highly emotionally salient learning experiences where they are basically involved, interested, and care about what they are learning, and want to learn. We do brain imaging studies while people are involved in those kinds of learning experiences, and what do you think happens? Well, their brain lights up in all the different areas and it shows that all the different parts of the brain are working together to master that experience. And those types of experiences, we have observed, tend to generalize. They are mastered and so if a child learns how to be social, for example, he could do it at school or at home and with grandparents as well as with peers, because it is generalizing all the different parts of his brain and using that experience.


On the other hand, when we have more rote types of learning experiences where we just ask children to memorize something or we scare them into learning something or we only reward them in a very narrow way with food treats for learning something, only one or two areas of the brain light up. And the skills don't generalize as




well. The children may learn it while they are sitting at the table but they don't learn it in broad settings and they can't apply it to peers, to family, to school, and later on most importantly, to their older age place settings and eventually educational work settings.

So the first lesson is, that learning environments have to be able to create highly meaningful, emotionally relevant learning experiences where children actually want to learn. They want to learn to speak, they want to learn to think, they want to learn to master their academic skills, they want to learn to master their social skills. How do we do that? It's not an easy order for a child who is withdrawn or for a child who is aimless or a child who runs away rather than towards people. It's not an easy task at all. The first step in that task is to go back to our basic model where we described the DIR Model – the Developmental Individual Difference Relationship-based model where we look at our functional developmental capacities. We say, “these are the capacities we want to teach for attention, for engagement, for two-way communication, for creative thinking, for logical thinking.” So one, we have to have our goals clear.

Then we have to create two conditions in the learning environment. One is we have to tailor interactions to the child's individual differences – how they take in sound and sight, how they move, how they react to sensations. Unless we do that, we can't create pleasurable, meaningful, emotional experiences. For example, if a child is over-reactive to touch and sound and we use a high-pitched voice and we have a noisy room with lots of kids for that child, the child will be overwhelmed. He can't have a pleasurable learning experience and a meaningful one in that setting. He is on panic mode, he is fragmented, he is frazzled, he's just barely trying keep from falling apart let alone learn. Similarly, if the child is very under-reactive to touch and sound, if we are very structured and very formal and don't energize up and pull that child in with lots of affect and lots of emotion, we're going to have a problem also because we can't generate any real pleasure or engagement or motivation in that child. So we have to tailor our learning interactions to the child's individual differences. Similarly, if the child is good with vision but very weak with what they take in through sound or word, if we use lots of words and don't provide a lot of visual support, that child won't be able to learn because they won't understand what we are conveying to them. They will feel confused, and that will make them anxious and they will either pull away or become fragmented and impulsive. So we have to tailor the learning interactions to the child's individual differences in the way they take in information. That's the individual differences in the nervous system, that's one condition.



The second condition is the one we have been coming to all along, which is we have to create pleasurable emotion in the child's desire so the child wants to learn. This is the hard one, because how do you do this when the child is aimless or withdrawn or very negative or runs away from you? How do you create that desire, that interest? Here is where we get frustrated and we say, "Ok, we'll force him to learn, we'll force him to look at me, we'll hold his head and we'll insist on it." Well that, as I have indicated before, even if we succeed, we don't succeed. It's a Pyrrhic victory, in a sense. We may scare the child into looking or hold his head so he has to look at us, but if he doesn't want to look he certainly won't look at Grandma unless we're there saying, "Better look!" How do we get him to want to look, to want to take in information, to want to interact and communicate? So here we have to build on his natural interests. What are his natural desires? That's where pleasurable emotion comes from. Now initially it may not be something we think of as pleasurable, for example the child is opening and closing the door and we don't see that as very much fun. He may not even look like he is very happy but for the moment, that is what his interest is. So if we get stuck behind the door and play a little game with him where he has to push us away and then after a few minutes he starts giggling and enjoying the game, now he's being purposeful and interactive with us on his own terms because we got stuck in his door. On the other hand, if he's aimlessly wandering around the room and we keep getting in front of him and he then avoids us and then one time when we get in front of him he fakes one way and then moves the other way, and gives a little grin like he outsmarted us, we know we're cooking because he is showing a lot of pleasure in relating and communicating with us but also being purposeful – faking one way and going the other way. And what do you know, he's also solving a problem – how to keep mommy or daddy from blocking my way. Similarly, sometimes we build a fence around a child who is aimlessly wandering around the room and then this fence we don't hold the child, we put our hands around the child, a kind of imaginative fence, and he has to pull up our arms or climb out of our arms and we let him win and succeed all the time. Again, usually within a few hours or sometimes days, he is smiling and giggling when he does this. And it leads to an impish little game where he is having fun. Now this may seem like silly play, but in fact he's learning the first lessons of our functional developmental capacities – he's learning to attend, to engage, and to be purposeful. Everything has to begin with purposeful, two-way communication and interaction. Then we may make it more complicated where he has to solve an obstacle course to get around us, and now he is problem solving. Pretty soon he's having to say, "Move." or "Go." and he's using




words and ideas. And within months he may be using ideas logically and say, “Mommy, go. Go away.” Then later we may say, “Why go away?” and he may say, “Because I want to move there.” So as we block his car, for example he may be saying, “Go away.” “Why?” “Because I go to house” or “I go to school.” Same thing when he’s trying to go out the door and we ask him why. So here the goal is to create motivation by focusing on the child’s natural interests. So what appears to be play and at times just fun, is actually challenging the child to use his critical functional capacities for attention, engagement, communication, and creative and logical thinking.

So these are the conditions of learning environments. They must, number one understand the child and understand his individual differences. Then they have to create learning interactions that build on the child’s profile of differences – how he takes in sound and sight and how he plans movement and how he modulates sensation. And then to do that, though, in a way that is going to generalize and light up all parts of his mind and brain, we need to do that in ways that are emotionally meaningful for him, that start with his interests, that build on his interests.

As I mentioned, very structured approaches which have a long history and tradition in special education don’t work as well as approaches that harness affect because they don’t generalize as well. They don’t help the whole mind integrate the experiences well. We need the child’s motivation. Now that’s harder, I will be the first to acknowledge it. This is harder to do. It requires more imagination on the parents and educators side. And many parents and educators will tell me, “That’s too hard, I can’t do it.” And we’ll take some questions from some who have indicated that. But I can tell you that I have never met a parent or educator who couldn’t do it and he couldn’t do it almost brilliantly after awhile because it is fun for the adult too. It’s much more fun, once they get the hang of it. But you’ve got to be willing to struggle with it a little bit in the beginning, to discover that it is possible to do. Then it is very systematic, it is very intensive, and is very, very helpful.


Now there was an Academy of Sciences report called, “Educating Young Children with Autism” that came out not long ago. They reviewed educational programs for children with autism and other special needs conditions that are similar and where children have spectrum-type problems or related conditions. What they found was that there were many approaches for which there was some evidence but there was not yet definitive evidence for one approach. And contrary to what some approaches claim, the Academies Review Group found that there was no definitive evidence for any one



approach and no real comparative studies of different approaches. But they cited ten models for which there was some evidence. And in those ten models, they included what they called “Developmental Relationship Based Models” including the DIR Floortime Model. But they cited a few other developmental relationship models too, which I think is excellent that we are developing a range of approaches that have these fundamental principles of building the foundations, teaching children their functional capacities, and using natural affect and natural interests of the child to learn. But they also reported something interesting. Even in very structured behavioral approaches, there was a shift away from the very structured approaches to using more naturalistic environments, more interest to the child, more naturalistic reinforcers. So there is a movement in general toward appreciating the importance of building on the child’s natural interests, paying attention to individual differences, and creating truly mastery-oriented learning opportunities. So the field seems to be moving in this way. And this is what I think we would characterize as the “Modern Approach.” It’s harder but it appears to be offering much, much more potential. Over the next few years as we do more research on these newer methods that are emerging, I think we’ll document further and further that it helps children generalize and develop the kinds of skills we all want for our children with special needs.

Now the question from a practical point of view, is “How are we going to set up these approaches in home settings and school settings?” In home settings we recommend that parents and other family members and helpers and volunteers create a few different kinds of learning experiences. One we call “spontaneous learning experiences” which we also call “Floortime” and here we strictly follow the child’s lead and we try to often recommend this be done 6 or 8 or even 10 times a day for 20-30 minutes at a time where we follow the child’s lead and we have lots of fun with the child and we build on the child’s natural interests. We harness the six fundamental levels of attending, engaging, relating, communicating, and thinking (both logically and creatively). So it’s not just play, but it’s following a child’s lead, tailoring his individual differences, and mobilizing these six capacities but off his natural interests.


Then we have what we call “semi-structured learning opportunities.” Here we still use the same principles of building on the child’s natural interests and desires and his individual differences, but we create the learning opportunities, we want to teach something specific. So we’ll take the child’s favorite toy, maybe put it outside the door as an opportunity to teach him to say, “Open, open.” as he is struggling to open the



door to get to his toy. Or put his favorite toy up on the shelf and teach him “up” versus “down” as he is reaching for those toys.

We also have a curriculum call the “Affect Base Language Curriculum” that you can learn about from our website, www.floorstime.org and that systemizes this semi-structured learning approach for language. We are developing curricula to do this for motor planning skills and for visual spatial thinking skills and a range of other skills, including academic skills. We also recommend as part of the home program that we offer lots of opportunities for peer play, particularly once children have gotten to the point where they can engage, interact with gestures in a back-and-forth way, and what we call a continuous flow – they can have many gestures in a row, and are beginning to use even little islands of words. We want the children to learn to use their words and gestures and relatedness with peers at the same time they are learning to do it with adults. If not, we have a problem later on when peers are tougher to relate to and interact with. So we want to introduce the peer interactions but the peers need to be interactive peers who can communicate with gestures and words as well. So we want peer play as part of the home environment. We also recommend lots of work on motor, sensory, and spatial skills as part of semi-structured problem solving at home, which is often a series of fun activities.


So this often constitutes the core of the home program. Then in the school environment, how do we set up a school program? Now that is a very important question because schools have a tradition of being very structured, having children sit in circle time, having lessons to be learned that don’t necessarily work on these fundamentals, and putting a high priority on compliance and limit setting, rather than engaging, interacting creatively, problem solving, and thinking creatively and logically. So how do we convert the school settings? Now some schools are very innovative and are already doing this, and we have a number of schools using our DIR Model very, very successfully. But how do we help convert schools that have taken models from older children, where you’re teaching specific skills like matching shapes or colors in a very structured way and help them teach those skills as part of these broader developmental goals, so a child learns to match shapes because he understands what the shapes are and what they mean rather than just in a rote way. Well, the schools need to use these same principles as the home environment. Create learning interactions tailored to the child’s individual differences that harness the child’s natural interests in spontaneous ways, and in semi-structured ways. Some of the same curricula we’re developing for



the home environment is very appropriate for the school like the language based affect based language curricula and some of the newer materials we are developing for visual spatial thinking and motor planning and other sensory and motor activities.

But schools, in addition to following these principles, need to also consider a number of other features that will help them. In schools we recommend that there be an emphasis on one-on-one and very small group learning opportunities. This can involve either an aide or a teacher and a small group should have no more than 2-4 children per adult. Now why is this so important? If children are in a group of 8 or 10 or 12 or 13, a lot of children have to be passive while one or two children talk. While it's good to teach compliance and respect for others and waiting your turn, it's not helpful to do that when a child is just trying to master how to engage with another person and how to be purposeful and part of a two-way back-and-forth communication. It's putting the cart before the horse. So you have to use the one-on-one and very small groups to mobilize interaction and also to get the child's interests out in front so we can use that to teach the child. So we have to create small groups or one-on-one. To do that, often, we need better ratios. That means volunteers from the community. Parents have to be invited into the classroom. Grandparents and other volunteers who can be trained to apply these methods of tailoring to individual differences, of mobilizing the child's learning curiosity and interests. Also we have to have better coordination between the home program and the school program so that we're working off the same page and we're working together. Educators have to watch how parents interact and parents have to watch how educators interact so we're benefiting and we're learning how to better figure out the child's individual differences, how to better follow their lead and their natural interests.

We also have to shift resources from guarding the door to understanding the unique needs of each child and family and planning their intervention. We spend a lot trying to make sure the child is two standard deviations below a certain norm on a test before they are let into special education services when we know that if we don't let a child in now who has some needs, we're going to have to let him in a year from now and the needs will be greater. So we must stop guarding the door. If a parent or pediatrician or an educator thinks a child has a challenge, 95% sure they have a challenge and it will get bigger. So let's pay attention to it now. Let's put our resources into figuring out a plan to help that child, not to guarding the door. When we guard the door, also the evaluations we do often never find their way into the intervention plan




because it's two separate teams doing it. So we have to shift from guarding the door to helping children.

Now also, the school program, as well as the home program needs to focus on the building blocks of academic and social skills, not the surface traits behaviors. That's the ability to attend, engage, interact purposefully, problem solve, think creatively, and think logically. We have got to work on those building blocks, because if not, the child can't generalize and the child doesn't really learn their basic skills. Then the academics and social skills are part of that understanding of the world. As I mentioned, small group and one-on-one learning, emphasis on use of volunteers, and also more flexible opportunities for bachelor level and other talented individuals in teaching positions, and school and family partnerships with the home programs complementing the school programs and the school programs complementing the home programs. Schools have to be heavily involved in the community and family and the governing structure of local schools so the programs truly reflect what parents want.

Now those are some of the characteristics we need for our school programs. But the key is the program must be guided by an understanding of each child's individual differences, the child functional developmental capacities – what the child has mastered and what they need to master, if they haven't mastered purposeful interaction, if they haven't mastered problem solving interactions, if they haven't mastered meaningful use of ideas or ideas are invested with emotion, then we must work on these basics, even while we are teaching specific skills. So we can be teaching ABC's and even numbers and letters while we are teaching the child to be purposeful, to be interactive, and to use ideas meaningfully.

So the basics are, therefore, learning interactions for home and school should be tailored to individual differences, should be emotionally meaningful, and should build systematically the capacities for attention, engagement, two-way communication, problem solving interactions, creative thinking, and logical thinking.


Now I'll leave with one last thought before we go to your questions, which is it's always gratifying to have a child use his first idea. We have a new book coming out this summer called, "The First Idea" in fact, and we traced how first ideas were developed during evolution and how they developed in the life of each child as they are learning. So we all want that first idea for the child particularly who is non-verbal. We want them to say, "mommy" or "daddy." We want their eyes to light up and we want them to give



us a big hug and kiss when they say “mommy.” It’s even better to say, “mommy I love you” or “daddy I love you.” And the teacher at school really wants the child to be able to say something meaningful with their first words whether it’s about a story, whether it’s something like “read me a book” or “I like Sally,” a child in the book or whether it’s just talking about a peer. Everyone wants meaningful use of ideas. But as we explore how first ideas get started, the question arose, “How does an idea form?” What is the critical ingredient of an idea? Is it just simply a word? Is simply saying “table” or “chair” an idea? No. An idea means investing an image such as a table or chair or mommy or daddy with some emotional meaning. And to have that emotional meaning you have to have the child’s emotions or affect harnessed and it has to invest the word. To do that you’ve got to create learning experiences, the kind we are describing here where we build on the child’s emotional interest. Then those emotional interests invest is use of ideas. So that becomes the first idea and that becomes the guiding principle for creating really, truly effective learning environments, both at home and at school.

Now we are going to go to your first question. While we are waiting for the first question, I’m going to give you over to Serena Wieder, my dear colleague, and see if she wants to add a thought or two while we’re waiting for the first caller to call in.

SW: Good morning everyone. This was so well stated. I just thought I would give a few examples of how children who are already play and children who love toys, how you might be able to make those more meaningful interactive experiences so that you think more creatively. So if your child likes to do puzzles, for example, well puzzles do develop certain skills. But why don’t you mix up two puzzles at a time? Have fun finding the right piece. Take a piece that he might need and put it in yours. The mission is by taking and starting at the point of your child’s interests, you can really take anything they are interested in, make it interactive, and turn it into problem solving opportunities if they are doing problem solving types of things. The important thing is how do you get in there and start this process of making it more meaningful. And everything else you think is important for your child to learn probably is. The question is how you would use it. If your child is interested in colors, well colors don’t change. But the point of knowing colors would be to give an opinion. To say what they prefer, to make choices as you and he or she might negotiate the things that they desire. I think the important thing is to think of toys, which is one of the ways people think children learn a lot, and how to first make that an opportunity to use that basic interest and become part of the play. Not sit by and comment, but interact with it.



SG: Thank you, Serena. I think we have our first caller. Hi, how are you?


Caller: I'm fine, how are you?

SG: Fine, fine, could you share with us your question?

Caller: Yes, please. And I'm so grateful for the opportunity to be with you this morning. I don't know what background you were given by my occupational therapist, he was the one who actually wrote in, but my son is almost 3. He has severe auditory processing difficulties. He certainly falls within the spectrum but we just don't know to what degree. He also has severe motor planning deficits and visual spatial issues. But my question is we are having difficulty with my son as far as transitions are concerned, he is having tantrums and banging his head. He is showing very negative and aggressive behavior. Sometimes we recognize that he wants attention and other times it is out of frustration and needing input in some form as far as his head banging is concerned. How can we handle his transitions more appropriately?


SG: Thank you. That is a very helpful question and one that you aren't alone with. Almost all parents of 3 year olds face this to some degree because children tend to be very challenging at this age, to say the least. But they are also enormously joyful at this age as well. The key is to always think of the problem as a window of opportunity for building strengths. So whenever a child is having trouble with something like transitions or tantrumming or banging their head or getting aggressive, we want to ask ourselves the question not just how do we change that behavior which is important, but what missing piece can we put into his foundations through proper learning interactions that will actually strengthen the child so they won't need to do that behavior. So for example, the child who can't transition well doesn't yet have flexibility to deal with rapid change in his environment. A child who is using head banging or impulsive behavior doesn't have the ability to communicate frustration verbally, often, or to regulate their behavior well through interactive soothing and comforting with others. So while I can't answer specifically about a particular child in any detail, I can give some general principles that may be helpful to all parents and clinicians who are listening.

One is to review when a child is having trouble with transitions what the missing foundation pieces are. Typically, for example, children who don't transition well have trouble with what I call a "continuous flow of back-and-forth gesturing" so they tend to be a little in-and-out in their pattern of relating rather than constant negotiating with others in their environment. So instead of pointing and taking and showing and doing



that continuously to negotiate a transition with you, they instead fall victim to the tantrum. So we often have to work on long chains of just back and forth interaction; more basic Floortime.

Secondly, often children who have difficulty with regulation so they may be sensory over-loaded or sensory under-reactive. They may have some motor planning and sequencing problems which you also stated your little guy has. And so it's hard for them to plan an action or cope with a rapid change. So here we have to help them anticipate the change way ahead of time. So if the child is verbal, we can play out the change before they actually do it. Let's say they are going to have to put on their pants, well we can be dressing the dolly first. And even if they aren't yet involved in pretend play or verbal interactions, we can show them the clothing and see if they want to play with their pants or socks a little bit. They can touch it or feel it. We can make a little game out of it and we can indicate with gesturing and pointing and maybe some visual cues that pretty soon we're going to want to put the socks on their little feet, one toe at a time. But it's a very gradual process where they are experiencing mastery as they are doing it. Now, of course this doesn't happen easily when you are in a rush in the morning, so often you have to leave plenty of time for this to happen. But every time you are helping a child anticipate and master transition by doing it very slowly, by doing it as part of back-and-forth gestural communication where they can communicate to you and tell you, "oops you're going too fast, slow down I need to touch that a little more" you're helping the child learn to communicate without tantrumming or without banging their heads. So we want to pay attention to the learning environment for the child and the things that are hardest for them, we want to take our time with and go slowest with and master what I call "interactive regulation" where they cue us as to what helps them feel more regulated. And in doing that we're helping them become more communicative and we're building a foundation piece where they don't have to tantrum or bang their heads. Also children who bang their heads, because of their motor problems, don't have the ability to assert themselves on their environments so they may need a lot of work with motor planning and sequencing where they are using their motor skills out of themselves rather than on themselves. So instead of banging their head we want them banging Bobo Dolls or punching bags or big nerf balls and throwing it. So we want to get their motor systems cooking so it's mastering the world rather than mastering them. Serena, do you want to add a piece to this?



SW: Yes, let me just point out that typically this kind of situation would bring the solution of having visual strategies like showing pictures, letting a child know that something is going to happen, putting visual schedules together, and I think these can all be very useful, but not without also considering the foundation aspects that Dr. Greenspan just mentioned. And for some children the visuals are meaningful but the frustration really comes from the fact that this is experienced in such an arbitrary way. You can't explain why you have to make the transition or why you have to make it now when you don't really have a sense of time. So you do also want to consider building a basic foundation, find out how the information for the transition and the reason for the transition can be conveyed effectively whether you use visual strategies, whether you point to different things, whether you use all modalities. And bring with it your interaction, your soothing, and your comfort so that if there is a need to change your child will also know when they can come back to what they were doing. Take into account their feelings at any level that they can.

SG: Thank you Serena, and now we'll take our next call. Hello, how are you? This is Stanley Greenspan here.


Caller: Hi, this is Nadine.

SG: Hi Nadine. Thank you for calling and can we have your question?

Caller: Well, I was at the park with my children – this is kind of awkward, I'm not in front of a computer screen, so will I still be able to hear your answer?

SG: I hope so, but if not you'll be able to hear it later. If you're hearing me, you'll be able to hear my answer.

Caller: Well, my question is, my son was in an ADA program. He's 4 now. He has moderate autism. And he learned a lot of new skills through that. He's mostly verbal to meet his needs, like what he wants to eat or play with. He has some spontaneous, like pointing things out in the environment, but he no longer, like if we ask him basic conversation questions he will no longer reply. If we ask him academic things like colors and shapes, although he knows them, he is much more hesitant to verbalize answers. I didn't know if he was losing skills because he isn't doing the ADA anymore or if his autism is getting worse – can that happen – is it a degenerative process where he will continue to lose skills as time goes on?



SG: So there were some things that he could answer that he's not answering now.

Caller: Yes.

SG: And when you interact with him, about how much time each day do you spend on spontaneous types of interactions where you follow his lead and just talk about whatever he's interested in talking about?

Caller: Well, now that's all I'm doing.

SG: Is there anything that he is interested in, that he'll talk about? I mean, it may not be colors or shapes.

Caller: He perseverates on the emotions of characters in books. He loves books. He is very visual. And so we talk a lot about, he's sad and why he's sad and he's happy and why he's happy – things like that. But right now he tends to get on one topic like that and just want to talk about that.

SG: Give me a concrete example.

Caller: Like he'll see Elmo in a book and say, "Elmo is sad" and then look at me.

SG: And what do you say?

Caller: And I'll say, "Why is he sad?"

SG: And what does he say?

Caller: Sometimes he can say it, and sometimes he says, "Because..." and then he waits for me to answer because he doesn't know.

SG: And what do you say?

Caller: I'll say, "yeah he is sad because of that."

SG: And what does he say?

Caller: That's the end.

SG: What happens next?

Caller: Then he'll point to another character in the book on a new page and he'll keep on like that through a whole book.

SG: Then if you hide his book, what does he do?

Caller: He'll say, "Where is the book?"


SG: And if you say, "Where do you think?" then what does he say?

Caller: I've never asked him that. He probably wouldn't respond. I don't know.

SG: And what if you said, "Where did I put it? Did you see me put it somewhere?"

Caller: Usually he'll get upset and say, "Where's the book? Where's the book?" then he'll start to look under me because a lot of times I'll put it under me.

SG: Basically, this is a very, very good question. When a child has learned something in very structured ways, the skills tend to have a hard time staying in the repertoire for the reasons I mentioned earlier because the skills don't generalize as well. I mentioned earlier that in brain imaging studies when children learn something spontaneously with high states of motivation with real emotional engagement, they tend to learn it with more areas of the brain working at the same time. When they learn things in a more rote way; a more structured way, we don't see as many areas of the brain lighting up on brain imaging studies. We find that from an observational point of view that the skills don't generalize as well. They aren't as stable. So the key thing with a child, particularly a child who has been in a very structured program, is to begin helping that child use their language and thinking skills in more and more flexible ways. This means we need to be a little impish and a little silly and a little more challenging. So the child may create the structure and create the routine of just labeling people in a book, and talking in a repetitive way about the same feelings, but we have to change the agenda a little bit. We have to do it very gradually and very skillfully where the book itself may become the issue like hiding the book and saying, "Well, where can it be? Can I help you find it Sweetheart? Could you show me where it might be?" And then he might think about it and show you and if he starts getting upset, make it easier for him, and say, "I think I see it over there, but I can't go get it. Who can go get it? Can Daddy? Can you get Daddy to help us get it?" So then the searching for the book becomes the issue, not so much the labeling the feelings in the book. Then we might go back to labeling feelings in the book a little bit, but again, if he can't do it, if he can't label the




feeling in the book, give him a multiple choice help, “Can it be this or that?” Never do the same thing twice. The key thing is never to join in the need for repetition because in order for him to learn to use language creatively, he has to use it creatively. In other words, you learn what you practice. So if you use things in a rote way, that’s how you’re learning it and that’s what you can do. So typically kids with autistic spectrum disorders do not lose skills unless we’re not challenging them in ways that help them learn. The key thing is tuning in to how the child learns. Have you read the book, “The Child With Special Needs”?

Caller: Yes.

SG: In there, there are a lot of examples of extending into more creative endeavors. So try to do a lot of 20 minute or more Floortime sessions with him, but keep always asking yourself the question, “How do I extend it into more creative endeavors?” And as a general principle, as the child is being converted from a more structured program into a more spontaneous program, the key is to keep it innovative, make the challenges in small steps so you’re not overwhelming the child with doing too much too soon, and keep it fun. But don’t fall into the trap of just repeating with the child. Stretch, stretch, stretch, stretch. Serena, do you want to add a comment? Ok, hold on, Serena is going to add a comment.

SW: I just want to, perhaps, suggest a few things for when you do get to the book part. As you can see, we’re just encouraging that flow of interaction - the identification of the feelings when he is feeling them, rather than from pictures - a lot of children have learned to identify feelings through pictures but not while they are feeling them. Not when the word really identifies this deep, important experience. So you’re going to want to work on the interaction to use the feeling when they are really happening, and respond to them. Then you do want to use the semi-structured approach because, let’s say, this is a favorite book and after he succeeds in getting it, then you may want to dramatize it a little bit. Again, to be able to convey the feeling with the emotional tone. You can talk to Elmo, “Oh no, Elmo, what happened?” and try to get away from the “why” if you’re getting the “because” and dropping the ball. You want to try to get to the thinking behind it, the reasoning. “Oh no, how come? What did he do? What if...” You can use the picture cues, but the use of the semi-structure is the follow-up to the real life thing. So what you really need to do is deepen the plot around the feelings when they’re really happening. Then when you’re also using the book, you’re bringing it to life with the dramatization. Stop using “why” so much. Go to



some other forms so you can pick up the cues in the picture, talk to the character and bring it to life so we get him more invested and involved in this very important thinking treasure because he's giving you a cue. He wants to understand feelings. This is his favorite book.

SG: Also, just in general, when a parent is worried about regression, the key to look for is how the child is doing in basic motor skill areas. Generally if the child is progressing in some areas, typically their motor skills, usually then the child is open for general progress. In conditions where there is a true change in the way the nervous system is working in terms of a child who has a progressive disorder rather than a static type of disorder like autistic spectrum disorders are, usually we see a change in a loss of critical motor skills.

Caller: This is very interesting because he does have severe motor issues. He is in physical therapy now but he is pretty stagnant in his motor skills.

SG: Does he show progress? A little bit?

Caller: For an entire year he has shown no detectable progress for me. And then he would start his physical therapy and he has shown a little progress.

SG: If you have seen a little progress, that's a very, very good sign. And the key, again, to motor skill progress is to do what I call three physical workouts a day where you do some running, jumping, spinning, deep pressure work, and then you do some work with big nerf balls, throwing, catching, kicking which involve perceptual motor activities, and then you do some spatial problem solving – search games and things. And then you do a lot of rhythmic activity to music. So if you do those kinds of activities three times a day, usually the motor skills pick up. But if you're not seeing clear loss of motor skills and even just a tiny bit of progress, that's a very, very good sign.

Caller: Yes, he falls more into that category.

SG: Good luck, and the key thing is to keep it creative. And very small steps.

Caller: Well, that's a very difficult thing to do!

SG: That's the hardest in the world, but if you do it more and more, you'll do it better and better.

Caller: Thanks a lot!



SG: Good luck, thank you.

We're going to take the next call now. Hello?

Caller: Hello.

SG: Thanks for calling in.

Caller: Hi Dr. Greenspan, how are you?


SG: Good, how are you?

Caller: Good, thanks for taking my call. I just wanted to tell you that you are a big hero in my world, and thanks for everything you do.

SG: Well, thank you for calling in and I'm glad we can be of some help.

Caller: I have a 26 month old boy and he has been diagnosed as moderately autistic. He has lots of sensory issues. There are a couple of running questions in our household. We try to live a Floortime lifestyle and make everything a Floortime world for our little guy, and my concerns are two: One is his love of video. He loves Sesame Street and Einstein videos and he's so happy when we play them so we give them to him in moderation, but I think a little bit too much, and I'm wondering if that is damaging. And the other thing, some of the toys in the house that he tends to focus on for helping him find his center, one being a trampoline which he just loves to jump on and the other being toys that have buttons, and when you hit the button it gives you some noise or some sound or music. And he tends to focus on these so much and we try to interact with him when he's playing with them to make them interactive, but it's hard to do that. He tends to turn away and so forth, so I'm wondering, first of all how damaging the videos are and whether or not the toys that he tends to focus on should be taken away or pulled away from time to time to get him to get him onto other things.

SG: Well, these are very, very good questions. One, in general, video tapes often teach children things. They may learn about characters, they may use that in pretend play, some videos can teach academic skills, but the problem with videos and TV and screen time in general whether it's computer or videos, is that it tends to not be as interactive as human relationships are. Children need those human learning relationships to really learn, which have that emotional component that only two human beings can have where there's that back-and-forth with smiles, smirks and head



nods. No matter how interactive a computer game is, for example, it can't be as lively and as subtly interactive as two human humans interacting with each other. It doesn't generate the same emotional involvement. So you should limit screen time to about a half hour a day of total screen time for children because we need all the child's waking time for back-and-forth interaction, for mastering the basics. That's hard in some families and what it means, often is having help in. You can have a babysitter in the afternoon to give mommy a break or daddy a break or having some older siblings help out or some relatives or some volunteers from the community.


Caller: We do have help in, and we also have a 4 month old girl too.

SG: Well, wonderful! Wonderful! The baby can be part of the pretend play by having her in an infant seat and enjoying in the drama. But the key is to limit the screen time – all types of screen time because the passivity of watching tends to be kind of infectious in a sense, and it's hard to then transition out of it. So limit that or not at all. So no screen time is great, but a half hour max.

Number two, when a child is gravitating to toys that don't allow a lot of creativity, that don't allow a lot of innovation, we have two choices. Either use those toys in an innovative way, what they weren't intended to do by making it kind of fun and by doing things the child doesn't expect with them, so by following the child's lead doesn't mean we don't challenge the child. So if the child does A we do B, then maybe that's a little unexpected and gets a little surprise from him – it gets some affect cooking. Or we can introduce other toys. And you don't want to just take away his favorite toys out of the blue, but you want to use toys that are easy for you to use too. So gradually you begin bringing in a new toy or two and gradually an old toy will have to go to the toy doctor to get fixed.

Caller: We tried to do all those things. For example with the trampoline, I'll bring over his Elmo and have Elmo bouncing with Sam. And he tends to turn away and circle away and sometimes we get him to interact with it.

SG: Don't worry about whether he interacts with it, make yourself the toy then. In other words, we don't care what a child is interested in. So you can have three or four possibilities and if he turns away, see what he does next. Then make yourself the toy and make that the fun interaction. So the key thing is to not worry about a particular toy but to say, Is he attending to me? Is he engaged with me? Are we getting back-and-forth purposeful interaction? Are we getting a continuous flow of back-and-




forth signaling with gestures? Are we using some ideas whether in pretending or just asking for things creatively? And is he beginning to connect ideas together, like answering some W questions for example as part of the play? And there you can put a little something on your head and make yourself into the pretend object, you can take his favorite thing and do something creative with it. So for example, if you join with the toy, if the child is using a toy repetitively and you join with that toy and make that toy a part of your body and you go into the little tent and you do some pretend snare, then the child may join you in that because they want their toy. But in doing that they are joining you. Serena, do you want to add anything?

SW: Well, just to reiterate, you parents can be the first toy and the most important one. That really goes a long way to get things going. The other thing is put out other things in novelty or start playing with it yourself first and see if your child will notice. So you want to kind of woo your child indirectly, and that's another strategy that often can help. But number one, you are the toy, bring those other things in, use them yourself, your child may not know what to do with them necessarily, really choose salient things, and even with the TV kind of thing, if it's something that you feel really will be helpful, put it on pause. Go over it. Try to pick things that really lend themselves to imitation, and some children really learn a lot by watching other children and sometimes a video can give them that opportunity to practice sequences and play songs and stuff like that.

Caller: We try all those things. He's just starting to work with us like he'll grab our hand and take us to what he wants. Which is a great thing. It's a new thing in his repertoire. But what he'll do is grab our hand and lead us right over to the television and say, "put on the video, put on the video."

SW: Well, again, you know, you go into the same issue. "Where is it?" "Which one?" And so forth. So you work along with what he wants, and when it's on you can also try to maneuver so that you go back, depending on the child, you know the child in this case don't think of it just as entertainment value but what can he learn from that. And how can you get in there and practice some of those things? And even make that half hour video time interactive at some level because it represents something important to him. With older children we will often put things on pause to make sure we have that little conversation you might have like when you're reading a book and a video can be used like a book. It just gets more affect and animation to it. It's very important to just really think that I come first in the play.




Caller: Yes, we do that.

SG: Well, thank you very much for your question. It's really terrific. And as Serena was saying just to conclude this part of the discussion although what you're opening up is always an ongoing discussion forever and ever because we can always improve. But whatever the child's interest, he leads you back to the TV or leads you back to a favorite toy that you don't want to play with, that's great because he is being purposeful, he's showing you what he wants, and what you do is you put more roadblocks between him and getting what he wants. If he wants that TV, well you don't know how to turn it on. Or you've done something to the dial and he has to problem solve there and get your help. But he doesn't know how to do it so he has to get mommy. Well where is mommy? Now you're on a search mission to find mommy around the house. And all of a sudden you're getting sentences and sentences and continuous flow of back-and-forth gesturing and a half hour later he finally figures out how to turn on the TV again, and then you watch TV for 10 minutes. That can be the icing on the cake. So you use everything the child is giving you as far as the spontaneous back-and-forth interaction. So thank you again for a wonderful question.

Caller: Thank you for the great advice.


SG: I want to take one more question that was written in by email, but it is such a great one, as our concluding question for today. *My son has been diagnosed with autism, I'm working hard to implement Floortime but we can't "get him engaged". If I hide something he walks away. If I'm too playfully obstructive he turns away and moves on. This cycle continues. He doesn't want to play; he just wants to be alone with his tantrums. When I push too hard he just has more tantrums. Help! Can you offer advice?* This is a very, very, very important question because there are some children who are very clever in their stubbornness to outsmart us when we try all our bags of tricks. What we have to do is recognize that within the child's seeming negativism or seeming unhappiness or seeming insistence on tantrumming or avoiding or turning away, there is a lot of clever problem solving involved. That child is basically saying, "Nothing you can do is going to outsmart me, buddy, and I'm going to outsmart you!" The key thing is to relax, to observe the child carefully and say, "What about this child's way of processing information, the way they respond to touch and sound, the way they comprehend what they hear and what they see, the way they move, the way I try to interact with them, what does it tell me about the child's nervous system? Does he get overwhelmed if I'm too loud? Do I need to energize up more to pull him in? What does



he seem to do on his own that is pleasurable?” And then the key thing is to try to be playfully obstructive. Or try to challenge him in a “gradual way.” I find that children who often tantrum very quickly or are very, very avoidant are very, very sensory over-reactive. They tend to know what you are going to do before you do it. And so you have to be very gradual. And you have to clearly show them what you are going to do before you do it so you may never actually want to block them, you may only make your first move and they are already turning away. So you make a move to the left and they are already turning to the right. Ok, well before you move two more steps and they tantrum, that’s now a purposeful interaction. Now you move to the right, they move to the left. Well, what do you know, you’re dancing together! So it’s got to be very slow and very gradual; you have to stop and figure out how the nervous system is working, and really be very pleased and happy with the smallest types of purposeful back-and-forth interaction. And then build on that. Look for a little impish grin. You have to go for the pleasure. You have to go for that impish smile in the corner of the child’s mouth. And when you see it, you know you’re really cooking.

Now sometimes when the child is very, very challenging, you want to have the benefit of two or three colleagues – other parents or professionals working together with you. And we have been hearing from many parents that they are having parent groups where parents are helping each other doing Floortime coaching. And it’s a very useful activity to do. Instead of parents chit chatting while children play, observe yourselves with other parents and have a little parent brainstorming group. To do that, you have to have an attitude of acceptance, that none of us do this well, we’re all going to get better so that you can all let your dirty laundry out and benefit from each other’s consultations.

The Floortime and DIR Model is a continuing saga in getting to know your child and the joy and pleasure of it is that by creating learning environments where you tune into your child’s natural interests, where you tailor your interactions to your child’s processing profile, how they process sound and sight and movement and touch and things like that, as you do that it’s always opening up new areas for discovery. It’s always learning how to negotiate a deeper and deeper level of involvement to your child. And through that your child is learning more and more about the world and wants to become more and more part of the world. And that is the key to creating healthy learning environments.



Thank you for joining us for our third show. And again, I'd like to apologize for all the glitches, technically, and I hope you'll be patient. All these shows are archived. They are up on the website now. Any technical glitches are being ironed out and will be ironed out and so keep checking the website for all those of you who have had difficulties. We'll be cooking here next Thursday at 10:30-11:30am and every Thursday thereafter. Send in your questions by email and we'll be selecting some of you for on-air discussions. Thanks again.