

Web-Based Radio Show

How to Help Children Control Their Moods, Aggression, and Regulate Their Behavior:


How we understand the best ways of helping our children to regulate their moods and their behavior and become the kind of warm, empathetic, caring individuals that we all wish

Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

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I want to welcome you to this week's broadcast on children with special needs and learning challenges and also children who experience no challenges at all. Our show, "Infants Children and Families," as you know, has been going on now for a brief period of time and we are very pleased to introduce today's topic, which is "How to Help Children Control Their Moods, Aggression, and Regulate Their Behavior." Every parent and every professional wants their children to be sweet, kind, thoughtful, empathetic, and well-regulated. At the same time, we all want our children to be assertive, creative, curious, and leaders in the world – if not leaders, then certainly enjoy the world and master the challenges at hand. But many of us are confronted with daily struggles when children are moody or exceedingly sad or depressed or exceedingly negative. We are confronted with helping our children and even helping their peers when our children hit or push or bite or spit. Children with special needs often have special challenges in these areas, although probably no more so than children without special needs. There it's often harder when the child can't talk easily or communicate with symbols to figure out why they are being angry or why they are being impulsive or why they are being moody. It's frustrating for both the child and the parent.


How do we understand the best ways of helping our children to regulate their moods and their behavior and become the kind of warm, empathetic, caring individuals that we all wish? The key principle here, the absolute key is to not simply focus on changing the behavior alone. In other words, the temptation is to institute a whole program just to curb the impulsivity, just to curb the aggression, or just to curb the moodiness and negativism. But if we focus only on the behavior, the results aren't very good. We may successfully decrease some of the bad behavior, but like the water in the



dam it may pop up somewhere else. The child may stop pushing but might start biting or may go from being aggressive to being sad. We want our children to regulate their behavior and their moods. Most importantly, we want our children to build the foundations for healthy development. So the key goal is to always do two things at once. Help the child overcome the symptoms or the bad behavior. For sure we want to do that. But at the same time, we want to build healthy foundations for development. In other words, if we can on the one hand help the child stop being aggressive or impulsive – pushing and hitting – and also learn to respect others and empathize with others and care about others and read the signals of others so that they know when it's ok to be a little more assertive and a little more rambunctious or when it's necessary to be more cautious, if we can help them to do both things at once – build foundations for healthy regulation and curb their aggression, then we are really doing our job. Then we are really helping our child enormously because we are building the cornerstones of communicating, thinking and relating in a healthy way. How do we do that? That's a tall order to overcome the impulsive or aggressive behavior or moody behavior and at the same time to build healthy foundations. Even though it's not easy and even though it's a tall order, that's our task. To do one alone without the other leaves the job incomplete. It's like building a house without a healthy foundation. The first wind that blows may knock that house down.


Now in order to know how to work; how to accomplish these two goals at the same time, we need to understand how children, in ordinary development learn to regulate their behavior and their moods. How do they learn to control impulses? How do they learn to not be too sad or not be too excitable? Let's learn how a normal, typical baby developing learns these skills and we'll see how all children can learn these skills. When we say normal and typical, we just mean it may be a little easier. It doesn't mean it's impossible for children with special needs or special processing problems. In fact, I just found just the opposite to be the case. It's possible for all children to learn these basic skills. The pathways are a little different, though, depending on how the child's biology and nervous system operates. So let's look at how it happens ordinarily and then we'll look at the special challenges when there are special biologies or special differences in the nervous system.

Typically a child learns to regulate their mood and behavior, interestingly through their interactions and through their relationships. When a baby is very, very little, we see very global extreme patterns. The baby gets excited and cries or maybe




even gets a little bit aggressive or impulsive. Usually somewhere between around 5-10 months of age, we see our babies becoming more interactive. They are reading the facial expressions of mommies and daddies or other caregivers. And it's the back-and-forth reading of emotional signals – mommy smiles, baby smiles; mommy frowns, baby frowns. Now let's look at what happens at 9 months of age with this, when this interaction is getting complicated. The baby begins looking like they are angry and they begin going, "RRRRRR, RRRRRR," making angry sounds because they are hungry and they want to eat and they want to eat now. Let's say daddy sees that and instead of letting it escalate to a 4+ tantrum, daddy goes, "Ooooh! Is my little sweetheart upset?" and has a very soothing tone of voice that responds to the baby's "RRRRRR, RRRRRR" and also daddy says, "Maybe you want this" and offers the food or the toy the baby wants. The baby sees that, hears daddy's soothing voice and all of a sudden the baby's escalation from a "RRRRRR, RRRRRR" becomes a "Ah, ah," like okay! And the baby reaches and takes something, maybe has a big smile and daddy smiles back and there's that back-and-forth signaling. Or let's go on our 14 month old who is now crawling and walking and that 14 month old angrily is reaching for an object that they can't have, like one of mommy's favorite pieces of china. Mommy says, "no, no, no" and baby goes, "RRRRRR, RRRRRR" and escalates up as if they are going to have a tantrum. Mommy says, "How about this instead?" but in a calm, soothing voice and offers an alternative. And there is the back-and-forth negotiation with smiles and head nods and different sounds and different motor gestures where mommy is offering different alternatives. Most of the time, the baby modulates. In other words, doesn't escalate up to a 4+ tantrum because they are communicating their anger, mommy is communicating back like, "I can do something to make you feel better and there are other things you can have besides the china." Even where mommy or daddy have to set a limit without an alternative, they use that soothing tone of voice to counter regulate.

When the baby is escalating up, we do something we call "down regulating" which means we sooth the child with our tone of voice; with our facial expressions and our gestures. But this soothing has to occur as part of a back-and-forth rhythm of interaction. This is how a baby learns to regulate their anger and learns to regulate their moods. When a baby, for example, is feeling kind of sad and gloomy and is a little inward looking and a little kind of sluggish looking and there is no bounce or oomph or energy or big smiles, we tend to up-regulate. We may energize up with that baby, pull that baby in to a game of smiling and laughing and giggling. We may do it with sounds, with different types of touch, with different types of movement. Again, it's a back-and-



forth rhythm of interaction, though, where we get into what we call a “continuous flow of two-way emotional signaling.” So we can up-regulate when the baby is a little more sullen and we can down-regulate when the baby is getting excited or aggressive or too overloaded and so forth. Through this pattern of signaling, babies learn to regulate their moods.

For some children it's much harder to learn this. Let's take a child who is what we call very “sensory-craving” where the child seeks out sensation and runs after new sensory experiences. This is a child who likes to bang into everything, likes to touch everything, likes to grab everything and this child may motor around the room touching this, touching that, banging into this and likes the physical action of enhancing their access to sensation. They want to be involved in everything because they crave touch, sound, and sight. Often children with this pattern may be relatively impervious or unreactive to pain so when they fall they don't react very much – they get up and they are toddling around ready to bang into the next object or the next person. Now when you have a pattern of sensory craving which is just part of the way the child's nervous system works, many children are born with this pattern or some children develop it as they learn to crawl and walk, the job is a little harder because this child is seeking sensation; is so active. But here the parent has to interact with this signaling system and help contain the child and direct the child to constructive ways of interacting in a more energized way. So it's just a little harder than the child who is a little less active and a little less sensory-seeking. So here as the child is reaching for the favorite china, the child may not respond to a little “no, no, no” with a shake of the head. It might have to be a, “Oh no, buddy! NO, NO, NO!” and big pointing as if you were the corner policeman directing traffic. The child may object with a “RRRRRR, RRRRRR, RRRRRR,” a real big raising of the voice, but the same principles you would interact with your vocal tone; with your gestures – offer alternatives to help this little child find constructive ways of interacting. So for this child we might have a big bean bag they could jump in to or they could bang into. We might have toys that are soft and squishy that they can throw with us or move with us. They may not like a lot of gross motor activity but we do it in a regulated, coordinated way with a lot of back-and-forth interaction. As this child gets older we might play games where we go fast then slow then super-slow then very, very slow. We may make loud noises then soft noises then super soft noises. So we are teaching the child to regulate through interaction with noise, with movement, by modulating intensity all the time. When we do this with this sensory-seeking child, and it takes a lot of effort I agree, what happens is that the child becomes well regulated but




assertive. And we have a person who is a little bit of a risk taker, but in the same zone of risk taking who is assertive, often very popular with peers, and often as an adult seeks out careers that have to do with asserting oneself. So we can have our sensory-craving child be very assertive, very dynamic, very charismatic if we help that child modulate and regulate early on.

Now another type of biology that is hard is with a child who is overly sensitive and overly reactive to sensation. The child gets overloaded easily like with too much noise or too much touch, children next to him rubbing into him or banging into him. When the child gets overloaded he tends to push, tends to bite, tends to scream or throw a 4+ tantrum. It's a very different dynamic, though. Here same principle, but we're doing a lot more soothing and a lot more regulating. We give the child alternative ways other than pushing or shoving to express their overload. Once they can talk we can help them use their words but before then we can help them show with raising their hand or pointing at where the overload is coming from. This teaching occurs through a lot of back-and-forth interaction to helping a child become a good emotional signaler.

So in both cases, the sensory craving child or the child who is easily overloaded, the goal is to help the child become very regulated and very soothed through their interactions with us. That means a lot of back-and-forth communication. It means a continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional signaling.

Now where this doesn't occur, think again of our baby. Ordinarily in the first few months of life, the baby is an all-or-nothing reactor. They get upset and they are crying and screaming and flailing, and if they could be aggressive, they would be aggressive. Or they may retreat and become solemn and more withdrawn. But their reactions are all-or-nothing reactions. Then through their capacities for emotional signaling, for exchanging smiles and head nods and smirks and frowns, they learn to go from this all-or-nothing reaction to a fine tuned back-and-forth negotiation where they are communicating and negotiating everything from aggression to love and dependency. They can reach up and smile and flirt to get a hug. They can go "RRRRRR, RRRRRR, RRRRRR" and bang their fist to show they are angry. But they don't have to actually do an aggressive thing and they don't have to actually grab you when they want to be hugged. They can flirt with you. So they are learning to signal to express their needs. The way they learn this is through their back-and-forth interaction with us where we are a good signaler with them. This happens ordinarily from about 5-6 months to about 9-10 months, and it continues and really develops in that second year of life. So by the




time they develop their words, they already have this emotional signaling system pretty well mastered. The mastery of this system is what enables them to use symbols and use their words constructively. Then they can express and not just signal “I’m angry” or “I’m sad” or “I want this” or “I want that.”

So that’s why it’s so important to get involved with the signaling system. But if we don’t, we are left with what we call “catastrophic emotions and behaviors.” We are left with the earlier version where the child is an all-or-nothing reactor. As I mentioned, children who are overly sensitive to sensation or under-reactive may have a harder time learning this system. Also, children with motor planning or sequencing problems who can’t put together 5 or 6 actions in a row have a harder time learning how to signal emotionally because that involves many little actions – smiles, head nods, pointing – in a row. So that becomes harder too. They require more practice. Children who have auditory processing problems and language problems can’t hear as many sounds or can’t distinguish sounds as well. They can’t make as many sounds, and eventually can’t easily make their words. So that too interferes with this early signaling system and makes it harder to master. But the important point is, it doesn’t make it impossible to master, it just means more practice is needed. That is the key point – practice, practice, practice. The harder it is for the child because of their unique biology such as a motor planning problem or a sensory seeking pattern or a language problem, the more important it is to get extra practice in this early signaling system.


So the choice is a child left to these all-or-nothing catastrophic reactions or do they learn to signal and modulate and regulate. When they do, they regulate mood, they regulate aggression, they regulate anxiety levels – all kinds of constructive things happen in the way they are able to regulate their behavior.

Now what about a child with severe special needs conditions who is already older – a 3, 4, or 5 year old or even 8 year old who is behaving aggressively or who gets very moody and very sad? How do we help that child? How do we deal with the immediacy of the situation? If the child is behaving aggressively, something has to be done immediately while you are working on strengthening this emotional signaling system. Here is the approach. First you have to figure out why is the child being moody or being aggressive. Have they not mastered this capacity for two-way emotional signaling. And the way you observe that is to say, “In ordinary interactions with my child, or if you are an educator or therapist the child you are working with, can this child get into what we call a pattern of continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional




signaling?” In other words, regardless of whether the child is using words and even if they are using words, can they stay engaged and symbol with us in a continuing way where they have 50 or 60 circles of back-and-forth communication in a row. That’s a child who is engaged and just in gestural contact with us – moving, body posturing, changing facial expressions, changing vocal tones – in rhythm with us in a back-and-forth way while they are talking or while they are not talking just while they are playing. So the first question is can a child do this. Have they mastered this? Now about 95% of the time, I find that children who have impulse control problems have not fully mastered this stage, even if they are very verbal and even if they are very abstract in their thinking, and even if they are doing very well in school in certain academic subjects. They still often have not mastered this earlier stage so you can master this earlier stage partially and move on in development, but if it’s not mastered fully you may be left with a lot of impulse control problems and a lot of problems in mood regulation. So we have to see whether they have mastered it. If they haven’t, the first goal is to help strengthen this. This means a lot of Floortime interactions where we work on a continuous flow of emotional signaling and we can do this while we are talking, while we are playing make-believe with the child, or while we are just moving trucks and having fun with the child or when we are doing gross motor activities – running, jumping, spinning. The important thing is back-and-forth affect signaling to get that system strengthened.

Now at the same time, though, if the child is behaving aggressively or impulsively we may have to set limits. Here the key thing is to set limits in a way that is meaningful for the child. If the child is hypersensitive to touch or sound or overloaded easily, he’ll need very soothing, gentle limits. He may need a time-out but with a soothing tone of voice and us not getting angry, us not over-reacting to the child and we may need to sit with the child during the time-out. A child who is more sensory seeking and more rambunctious may need a firmer time-out with more energy. You may have to reinforce it. At times the child may need to be physically constrained. But the child has to know that you are going to be more persistent than the child and that you mean business and there will be consequences for when they cross the line. And the line means, usually, hitting or hurting or breaking things. You don’t want to make the line too severe for things like just raising your voice or not playing properly with a toy because then you are trying to control the child too much. So you set the line for things that are clearly, clearly something that is very, very difficult for the child. And you need to have those consistent, firm limits but they have to be gentle for the over-reactive child and very



firm and energetic for the sensory-seeking child and for the child with language problems you have to explain very clearly why the limits are being set and help the child respond. Always try to have a conversation with the child so they understand it. So for the child who is not verbal, you can show him pictures if the child is using pictures. If the child can't yet use symbolic pictures, you can use gestures to point to what the child broke or point to the place where they hit mommy and shake your head, "no, no" and use gestures so the child understands why it is that they are having to accept the limit which might be simply interrupting the activity they are doing and having them sit. I don't like isolating children, particularly children with special needs because they need that relationship thing just learning how to relate and isolation can be counterproductive. Generally you never want to use a punishment or sanction or limit that is counterproductive to the child's development. So learning to sit quietly or having a quiet discussion interrupting the activity can often be enough. Obviously earning points or checkmarks or stars that lead to special privileges is also a very good way for a child who understands those in forcing limits. So there are many specific ways of enforcing the limits and that needs to be done but at the same time you have to work on the fundamentals – strengthening that system.


Now another feature of the fundamentals that should be emphasized is that often parents when they are trying to get a continuous flow of back-and-forth communication going, do something very, very interesting. They get desperate in their voices and as they are trying to keep the child engaged in a back-and-forth rhythm, their voices become shrill and desperate and have a kind of "OOOOOOO" quality as opposed to a compelling quality. So there is a difference between an "OOOOOOO" on the parent's part or a "Oh boy, look at that." So a compelling energized voice is very different from a shrill desperate voice. To engage a child who is sensory seeking or is under-reactive and in his own world to get that continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional signaling going, you don't have to speak loudly. You don't overwhelm the child. You have to speak with affect. So your voice can be very compelling but very soft so you can be, "oh boy, look at this" and it can be done with intensity and affect and animation while being soft and soothing. Or it can be a monotone and be very shrill, "OHBLAHBLAHBLAH!!!!!!" and be shrill, monotone, and even though it's loud and may get the child's attention temporarily it doesn't pull the child in. So try to, as best as you can, be reflective and think about your own emotions inside as you are working with your child as a therapist, as an educator, as a parent, as a sibling – try to be relaxed and playful, and try to tailor your tones of voices and the way you interact with the child's



profile in terms of their sensory reactivity, their motor planning, their language and auditory processing skills, their ability to understand things they see, their visual spatial processing and so forth. So we want to tailor to the child's nervous system, create a continuous flow of back-and-forth signaling, and in that context teach the child how to control and regulate. And again for the sensory seeking child who is a typical child who has impulse control problems a lot of games where you are down-regulating and changing speed and direction and intensity, running fast then slow then super slow, talking loud then soft then super soft, banging the drums hard then soft then super soft so the child is learning to regulate but again that is part of a continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional signaling.

After all when you think about it, what makes a regulated individual is an individual who can respond to their environment. In the gym you can be rambunctious. In church or synagogue you need to be quiet and cautious. When grandma is visiting you need to be one way and when your friends are visiting you can be another way. But the ability to perceive your environment and take your clues from the environment means you have to be interactive with that environment. To do that you have to be a part of a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction because if you are self absorbed and then involved and then self absorbed, you're only sampling your world a little bit during the involved times. During the self absorbed times you're tuning out from the world. But to understand the world and figure out the rules you have to be able to tune in all the time. The way you do it is through a back-and-forth pattern of communication. So that is essential. As parents try different interventions and as they decide what intervention strategy they are going to use with their child, they have to remember that whatever specific techniques they are using, they have to have the child involved in a continuous flow of emotional signaling in order for that child to become reality-based.


Now why does that also help the child become empathetic and caring and very, very sweet and the kind of child all parents want as well as assertive? Because empathy comes from sensing the emotions of another person. The only way you sense the emotions of another person is through this back-and-forth emotional signaling. So that's the beginning of learning to empathize – the awareness of another person's emotions. Also, caring comes from being able to sense another person's emotions. So we have to have that for empathy and for caring. And to be assertive in a healthy way, you have to be able to sense what the environment is telling you – when it's appropriate to be extra rambunctious, when it's appropriate to be extra cautious – you have to get



feedback from your environment and read the emotional cues of others. To have successful peer relationships you have to see what they are willing to do and what they aren't willing to do at any moment in time. So many of the problems around playing with toys or peer problems as well as aggression comes from the lack of reading the emotional signals. You can't teach reading emotional signals from pictures of people's facial expressions. You can't memorize rules. This is doomed to failure, that kind of approach, because there are millions and millions of facial expressions and signals. The only way to learn that is to do it and do a lot of it and to have lots of interaction with parents or other caregivers and with therapists and educators and lots of back-and-forth interactions with siblings or peers, and then you'll learn to read those signals. Again, the harder it is, the more we have to practice it, not the less we have to practice it. So what we do is we are working on the immediacy of the situation with limits and with consequences and with clear understanding of why the limits and consequences are there as best we can through words or gestures or pictures, and at the same time we're working on this foundation piece, not with desperate type interactions but with soothing regulating interactions with the child, where we're exchanging lots of emotional signals.

So that's our approach to helping children regulate their mood and their impulses and their aggression. There's no substitute for this approach. There are many ways to implement this approach and we need, if there are both parents in a family, we need both parents involved, we need siblings involved, we need educators involved, and we need therapists involved. Everyone who is working with the child needs to work on this. This approach works on children with special needs, with circumscribed learning problems, with children with just behavioral problems who have no learning or language or communication problems, and for children without challenges just to help them become better regulated and more empathetic. So it works for all the children, the same approach. We have to develop that ability to read and respond to emotional signals by involving the child in a continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional signaling. The key ingredient here is the person who interacts with the child who shows up and who is available for long interactive sequences. That means lots and lots of Floortime. So whatever else you are doing, it means lots and lots of Floortime.

Now in our DIR Model which we have talked about over the past few weeks, you remember we have the functional developmental capacities, or we should say technically functional emotional developmental capacities. So that involves attention,




engagement, emotional signaling simple type, and this complex continuous flow of emotional signaling and then the creative and logical use of ideas so that Level 4, the continuous flow, is critical and that is what we are emphasizing today for regulating aggression and regulating mood as part of our DIR Model. Then the individual differences, the “I” part of our DIR Model is the differences in visual spatial processing, auditory processing, sensory modulation like the over-reactive or under-reactive child and so forth. Then the “R” part is the relationships at home, at school, on the playground with peers and siblings. And these learning relationships have to be geared to the child’s individual differences and have to facilitate these developmental capacities. The one we are focusing on today is the capacity for the continuous flow of affect or emotional signaling. So that, coupled with firm limits and firm understanding of why limits are so important, helps the child with impulse control and also helps the child with mood regulation problems.

What I would like to do now is go to a few questions. We have a wonderful number of emailed questions come in from you all this week, and some of them are right to the point. Then in a few minutes we’ll have some live callers as well.

Dear Dr. Greenspan:

I was thrilled when you said you would talk about aggression in your next show because my son is having rising problems in this area. My son is 4, been diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder and autistic spectrum disorder, he used to be called Gentle Ben because of his sweet, kind personality but when his little sister was born, he turned into a “little monster.” Not a day goes by when he doesn’t hit, push, or kick her. When I try to do Floortime with him and my daughter is included, we will be fine for a few minutes and then he does something to make my daughter cry. He often seems to get great pleasure out of this. My question is how do I change this situation around to make it a positive experience for all of us? What am I doing? Whatever I’m doing is not working.


Well, here is a good situation. Little Ben who is 4 was Gentle Ben, but the question is, was he Gentle Ben who was a continuous signaler with his emotions? Could he regulate and negotiate through emotional signaling? If he could, then our job is a little easier. If he didn’t, then we have to work on this core fundamental. Now when a new challenge comes up, like a new sibling in the world, the idea is to actually practice extra with the new sibling. So what you might do is work with Ben anticipating that he’s



going to get upset when his sister takes a toy and actually create situations, not when his sister is doing it, but where mommy or daddy are working on things that frustrate Ben and how he responds to it. So in regular Floortime, just one-on-one with Ben, one might work on the emotional signaling system and how it copes when Ben is a little frustrated, when a task he's doing is a little hard or daddy playfully hides a toy he wants to play with and says, "I'm not going to let you play with this, it's my turn!" And then as you see Ben getting a little annoyed or escalating up a little bit, be very soothing and very interactive. Say, "Well, could you play with that?" and stretch his ability to negotiate a little bit before he escalates to a push or shove. And do it very gradually and very gently and help him learn to use emotional signaling even when he is frustrated. Now obviously I can't tell you exactly what's cooking with Ben because I don't know Ben that well, but in general you need to figure out what's cooking, where the challenge is, how a child like Ben fits into the profile we're talking about – is he a sensory-seeking child? Is he an over-reactive child? Does he have strong language or weak language? How do we help him be a better affect signaler, particularly when he is feeling frustrated or threatened. Some children can signal with their emotions – they can negotiate and regulate when they are not feeling frustrated. As soon as they get a little frustrated, they regress to that pre-interactive level. We have to teach them to use interactions even when they are frustrated. We do this in little bits and pieces, first with us, then maybe pretending with a little dolly who can be the brother or sister, and then with real brother or sister but for brief periods of time, starting with a few minutes of combined play and then increasing it and increasing it and increasing it.

Now we have another question that is very good. *We have a 5 year old that is showing good progress. We have been doing Floortime with him for two years, however one of our challenges is that he enjoys seeing other kids cry and because of that he occasionally pushes his two-year-old brothers and sometimes his classmates to make them cry. Of course we try to prevent this but sometimes we can't catch him in time. We have played out in Floortime this scene. We are pretty sure that he understands he is making his brothers sad but he doesn't care. We would like to understand why this is happening.*

Well, what you are seeing in a situation like this is very, very interesting. The child doesn't have, necessarily, the same values that we do. The child doesn't necessarily believe as we do that you have to be nice to everyone; that you want to make people happy, that you want to bring out smiles in people. So the child has his



own belief system, so to speak, his own agenda. Here, too you've got to look at that emotional signaling system and look at the type of child. You also have to look at your atmosphere at home, the kind of level of empathy and warmth that characterizes the family environment. You've got to see if this child is angry a good deal of the time. So most importantly, you look at two things. You look at the overall atmosphere at home and you look at the degree to which this child is a good regulator of his emotions and for a child who seems to enjoy seeing other people unhappy or sad, you try to work on the emotional signaling around issues of dependency – cuddles, hugs, flirtatious glances, around warmth – and you have to explore how available are we as a family for the warm, tender side of life. Are we an icing on the cake kind of family where we do this once in a while, special vacations, on weekends, or are we a meat and potatoes kind of family where every day there's lots of back-and-forth emotional signaling and lots of back-and-forth warm interactions? So those are some of the questions we raise. We look at the emotional signaling system, particularly around nurturing, dependency, warmth, love, devotion, and we look at how the atmosphere is at home and we work on both those things as well as, obviously, setting limits.

Now we have a call coming in, and if you'll hold on a second I'll put my earphones on and we'll tune into our first caller. Hello? Welcome to our show.


Caller: Dr. Greenspan?

SG: Yes.

Caller: Hi. I'm calling with a question.

SG: Yes, sure, go ahead.

Caller: I have a child who is almost 9 who has been diagnosed with high functioning autism. He is in regular third grade classroom in a county public school in Baltimore, with additional adult support which is what they call the personal assistants in Baltimore County. The difficulty that we have with him is that his comprehension of complex directions is difficult. So it's both written and verbal directions that are difficult for him. This is affecting him now because they are getting into higher level thinking in third grade and they are doing math word problems and they are doing more complex reading exercises and he really struggles with skills that are interpretive vs. his rote skills which are very strong. I'm actually meeting with his teacher tomorrow to try to



brainstorm on how to help him because they don't know how to help him in the classroom; that he is struggling grade-wise in areas like math and reading.


SG: This is a very common problem for children who sometimes learn the rote skills and have good memory skills but they haven't been taught the foundations for more creative and more abstract thinking. The key is that in our functional emotional developmental milestones, each of the foundation pieces has to be strong, particularly what we are emphasizing today, the ability for co-regulated back-and-forth emotional signaling. Then the creative use of ideas through pretend play has to be strong, and then the logical use of ideas has to be very strong. Then we have to progress from just being logical to being a, what we call, "multi-causal thinker" – be able to answer many different reasons for why something is true or not true. Then we have to be a gray area thinker – be able to tell you the different degrees to which something is true or not true. Then we have to work on the different processing skills – visual spatial as well as verbal to promote abstract thinking as well as motor planning and sequencing. Now the problem we have often in educational settings, we don't assess all these foundation pieces so we don't necessarily develop a proper program to work with the child. Often we try to do more rote teaching and we try to teach a child to interpret stories that they are reading by being an even better memorizer. But the memory skills only take you to about the 2nd or 3rd grade and then you have to work on your thinking skills. Now we have a special program, where do you live?

Caller: In Owings Mills.

SG: Good, you're not far from here.

Caller: I'm actually on your waiting list.

SG: Ok, well call the office and just say you are interested in our DIR Support Program. We have a special program we are going to be starting this summer and it will continue throughout the year, to work on these foundation pieces in a comprehensive way where we will be working on all the building blocks for creative and abstract thinking as well as all the processing skills – language, visual spatial and motor planning – that supports abstract thinking. There will be two educators using curriculum I developed who will be working with children starting in June. So call the office and say you want to be on the DIR Support Program List and we'll call you back to set up an appointment.



Caller: Oh, ok.


SG: And I'll have a new book out actually, that will amplify what is in "The Child with Special Needs" just to address this problem in the not too distant future on helping children master their learning challenges. And it's just this issue you're raising, how to promote abstract thinking. For now I would say read a book I have called, "The Secure Child" which has the different levels of thinking and describes them, and a book called, "Playground Politics, The Emotional Life of the School Age Child" – both those books will be very helpful in focusing in on these different levels of thinking that you want to promote. The key idea here is, in every conversation with your child and every interaction for those who have children who are using rote skills but are not yet good abstract thinkers, work on creative abstract thinking. In other words, don't be asking questions like, "What color was the boy's jacket in that story?" but more questions such as, "Gee, what did you think about what the boy did? What would you do if you were in that story?" In other words, work on creative thinking and work on opinions of the child, not on facts. So if you know the answer to the question you are asking your child, that's a factual and you're just reinforcing rote knowledge. On the other hand, if you don't know the answer because it's an opinion like it's as simple as, "What did you like best at school today and why did you like that so well?" Now can you give a few examples while we are talking because your concerns are shared with thousands and thousands of others, give some examples of the kind of conversation you might have with your child now and I'll try to give you an example of the kind you might want to have.

Caller: Well, actually in one-on-one conversation, he can have, because we do ask him a lot of "why" questions specifically for this reason. I could say to him, "Why do you think the pile of snow on our lawn melted?" And he can answer something like that.

SG: What would he say?

Caller: He would say, "Because it got warm and the snow melted."

SG: See, but that's a right answer versus a wrong answer. That's a memorized answer. That's not a real thinking "why" question. Now can you think of a "why" question you have asked but you don't know the answer? See with the snow, you knew the answer; it was right or wrong. Think of a why question where it would be his opinion that counted.



Caller: Ok, actually on the spot I can't think of something like that. But I will ask him things that will relate to emotion and something for example, he said, "Are we going to snuggle tonight?" and I said, "Absolutely. Why do you think mommy likes to snuggle with you?" and he said, "Because you love me."

SG: Well, that's a good one because there you were getting an opinion. Because you could have said it was because I'm cute, because you love me, because daddy is not home and I'm second best. He could have said lots of things. So that wasn't memorized. But that is what you want to get at. If you know the answer, it's not an opinion, it's a fact such as "why does the snow melt." So just because it's a "why" question, it's not good enough. It has to be a "why" question where you can't predict his answer.

Caller: Ok.


SG: And you've got to go further than just accepting just, "Because you love me." "I do love you? Well, how do you think I love you? And who do I love more?" How many children do you have?

Caller: Two.

SG: "Who do you think I love more?" "I think you love me more." "Why?" "Because I'm cuter or I'm sweeter and I give better kisses." You don't have to confirm who you love more, but you're getting him thinking about it. It's good to think about that anyhow. Ok?

Caller: I think he's more apt to have this kind of sub process at home. I think sometimes at school that there's some anxiety that gets in the way.

SG: You're absolutely correct. But where anxiety gets in the way and we have this thought process at home because he is going to get so good at it, even anxiety won't disrupt it. In other words, think of walking. When you first are learning to walk, a little anxiety and you're going to fall and stumble, right? And you go to school and you're a little nervous and you're going to stumble. But once you become a good walker you can walk even when you're anxious. Now same thing here. Once you become a good abstract thinker, you become so good at it, you begin using it when you're anxious. In other words you use this as a coping strategy. So the kid who is a very good abstract thinker gets anxious at school, he starts arguing with the teacher by waving abstract



logic around her. “Well, I don’t think I should have to do that assignment because it’s very repetitive and I already know that math.” The child becomes a good arguer, right?

Caller: Yes, I have an 11 year old who has mastered that skill.

SG: Exactly, well, that’s what you want for your little guy.

Caller: Ok.

SG: But to do this, you’ve got to practice it at home. Ok?

Caller: Ok, that’s great advice.

SG: So take a look at those books, “The Secure Child” and also “Playground Politics, The Emotional Life of the School Age Child,” it should be in all your bookstores and also I’ll let you know about this DIR Support Program if you call the office. Ok?

Caller: Great. Thank you very much.

SG: Take care, bye bye. We have another caller. Hello?


Caller: Is this Dr. Greenspan?

SG: Yes!

Caller: Hi, I have a question to ask. My question is we know that children with these spectrum disorders have difficulty with all their sensory systems. We also know that many of these children have stomach-related issues; gut related issues. Because digestion is so important it’s almost as a way of understanding the world is it fair to say that the digestive system and how kids digest becomes another sensory system that these children struggle with?

SG: Yes, I’ll answer that question in a second, but can you give some examples for parents of children who may not have digestive problems or digestive differences how you perceived it in your own child or other children these digestive differences.

Caller: Well, for instance if a child has a significant lactose or perhaps he is allergic to milk, and that may have an impact on breast feeding or kind of initial connection parents make with their children in early feeding or during mealtimes when a child will only eat very, very limited foods, it makes that interaction so difficult. So in



some levels – and also even if a child, let's say, is queasy or nauseous or uncomfortable at times, it makes it more difficult for him to attend.

SG: Those are important consequences of G.I. problems, but what are some of the differences in the way children respond to food that you've noticed?

Caller: Well, you know I noticed that our son, for instance early in his years, certain foods would really set him off and would make him either very hyper or would make him less responsive, but I also wondered because of the interactive quality of feeding and the notion of nurturing, whether that really kind of impacts the nature of the relationships with others?

SG: Well, it definitely does, but to answer your first question first, I think it is a very interesting observation that you have made to say does the G.I. or the gut and the mucosa of the gut or the skin of the gut, is that like another sensory system? Does that respond just like our outer skin? In fact I think you can make a very good case for that analogy. I mean, all of these different surfaces of the gut, of your breathing passages, are all a little different; we all have differences if you look at the cells and the types of cells, but they all have certain similarities. They are all lined by cells that are reactive, these cells are innervated by the nervous system, for example the gut have both sympathetic and parasympathetic connections, especially strong parasympathetic areas. And so when the gut is sensing a food, that surface of the gut is responding through the nerves that innervate the gut and it connects up to our spinal chord and up to our brain. And so the gut is providing feedback to our brains just as hearing a sound does or a different smell or experiencing touch with your hands or your feet. So it's a very, very good insight and everybody's gut is quite different. So it's very, very interesting. And so these differences in the gut reactivity and the gut responsiveness, sometimes we call them food sensitivities or food allergies, but without getting into the controversies about whether food allergies are the same as allergies to pollen, it's very important to note that there are differences in the way in which the gut reacts and that has implications for the nervous system and then as you point out can point to implications of the way we interact. So it's very important for parents to observe how the child responds to different foods and to recognize their individual differences in the G.I. tract just like in touch and smell and sound and other systems. So thank you for this very good question.

Caller: All right, thank you Dr. Greenspan.

SG: We have another call waiting. Hello?

Caller: Hello?

SG: Yes, hi.

Caller: Yes, I'm trying to reach a call-in show for Dr. Greenspan.


SG: Yes, this is Dr. Greenspan. Let me hear your question.

Caller: I'm terribly sorry! Hi there. This is Lisa.

SG: Thank you for calling, Lisa.

Caller: The reason I was calling is I have a question. I have a little boy age 7 ½. He's a PDDNOS diagnoses. He has been having some aggression issues at school. We did an assessment and the teacher basically implemented what seems to be a very straightforward behavior modification approach with stickers, you know if you are good for an hour you get a sticker and if you're good all day you get a prize. And it seems to work. But it also seems to be very "un-DIR" and I was wondering what your thoughts were about that.

SG: Well, as we were just talking on the show, you need two components to a good program to help children with limits or to help them curb aggression or help them regulate their behavior better. On the one hand you deal with the immediacy of the situation and you need structure and limits and you need to be sensitive and firm and gear it to the individual child. The hypersensitive child needs to be more soothing, the more rambunctious sensory seeking child can have little more energized limits. And so having a token system where you are rewarded, this occurred way before DIR ever came into existence, way before conditioning or behavioral approaches came into existence. We can trace this back to the Greeks 2000 years ago. People knew that human beings needed structure and that rewards and punishments were an effective motivator for behavior. So that is part of setting limits and setting good guidance. We all have incentives. We can go out and work to earn money because we want nice things. We are all tied into a reward and consequence system more or less. Whole societies work with that. But for a child that is one piece of it. That can deal with the immediacy and provide general guidance. But it doesn't provide the infrastructure that allows a child to figure out how to earn those rewards or how to respond to a complex social situation. Here, as we were talking about earlier, the child has to be a good reader of emotional




signals. He has to be able to engage in a back-and-forth pattern of emotional signaling. So sometimes you can help a child in a particular situation with just firm, good limits and the child will memorize the rules of that situation but still won't read signals well and as soon as the child is in a new situation, will have trouble with limits and trouble with impulsive behavior. But if at the same time you are working with the fundamentals, reading and responding to emotional signaling, getting involved in a continuous flow of back-and-forth communication, understanding expectations through facial expressions and gestures because you are a continuous back-and-forth emotional signaler, now we are building the foundations for healthy development and at the same time we set firm limits through, let's say rewards and consequences in the environment. We have the best of both worlds. So we don't want to just do rewards and punishments but those are ok to deal with one part of the limits, then we have to build that infrastructure so the child is a good reader of signals and understands complex environments.

So thank you for your excellent question.

Caller: Thank you so very much.

SG: Ok, bye bye. We are just about at the end of our show for today and I wanted to thank all of you for tuning in. A lot of you have asked me about an upcoming training conference. Every spring I do a 4-day training conference as part what I call the Infancy and Early Childhood Training Course but actually cover older children and adolescents and adults as well. And it's in April, the 23rd, 24th, 25th, and 26th – Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. It's right here in the Washington DC area in McLean, Virginia. If you want more information about it, you can check my website, www.stanleygreenspan.com or call my office or contact the Floortime Foundation or the Interdisciplinary Council for Developmental Learning Disorders (www.icdl.com) and we will provide you the information on this upcoming training course in late April. In that training course we cover all the fundamentals and all the essentials of how to observe infants and children, how to do proper assessments, and how to work with infants and children in home settings, in school settings, and different therapeutic settings. We always have a series of special topics. Usually the first two days we cover the basics and the second two days we cover special topics and new developments so people who have been to prior training courses, the second two days are always new. You can come to all four days or any one of the days or two days if you wish. So people have been asking about it. Please contact us and I'll provide even more information.



For everyone, I want to thank you for tuning in today. Remember that we always want to do two things at once. We want to build the foundations for healthy development. In the case of regulating emotions and behavior, that means building the foundations for emotional signaling through lots of lots of back-and-forth practice in emotional signaling, getting to a continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional signaling. And we want to set firm limits in the environment. Most of the children with problems and challenges in these areas, I find about 95% who come to see me don't have a fully developed system of emotional signaling, even if they are very verbal and doing well in certain academic areas. So we have to look at that system and strengthen it and that's the basis for not only good regulation of mood and behavior but also empathy, warmth, and understanding. Remember we can only understand our world and our environment by being in a continuous relationship with it, that back-and-forth sampling of it through back-and-forth emotional signaling.

Thank you, and next week we will have a new topic, and also what I would love to hear from you about is through your emails additional questions for next week. We'll announce next week's topic in a few days on our website so you can check the website and tune in and see what next week's topic will be. Thank you again for tuning in and I'll look forward to a new show next week. Remember this is archived so you can tune in to this anytime. I'd love to speak to you again next week. Bye bye.