

Web-Based Radio Show

Basic Elements and the Hardest Part of the DIR®/Floortime™ Approach

Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.


Serena Wieder, Ph.D

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Good morning. This is Dr. Greenspan welcoming you to our web-based radio show. Thank you for joining us today. Today our topic is going to be related to one of the questions we get most frequently. It's about, really, the most basic elements of the Floortime approach – but it's the one that most readily gets confused – and the question comes this way: “How can I follow my child's lead,” which is one of the fundamental principles of Floortime, “and at the same time challenge my child to learn new skills or new abilities? (As we put it, climbing the developmental ladder). “In other words, can I do both at the same time? Can I be a good Floortimer, in terms of being a lead-follower, and can I be a good challenger, also? How do we do both?”

Now, the argument or the presentation offered you today is that following the child's lead and challenging the child are both sides of the same coin. They're fundamentally one and the same, but sometimes, just because all of us wish we could live in a simpler world that was less complex, we want to take only one half of the coin and not look at the whole coin – we only like to look at one side of the coin at a time and not turn it over and look at the other side of the coin. So, in doing the DIR/Floortime® approach we have to look at both sides of the coin at the same time, which is following the child's lead and challenging the child.

Before going into practical examples of how to do this, let me explain to you why both are so central to the fundamental DIR/Floortime® approach. Now, as you know, the DIR/Floortime® approach is based on the notion, which we feel now is pretty substantially proved, that affect or emotion is critical to the growth of both the mind and the brain. Early in life, even the simplest little problem-solving actions – like a baby turning to look at his mommy to see her smiling face, or turning to hear her wonderful sounds – that's not simply a sensory-motor action, where the baby hears and turns, but it's a sensory-affect-motor action. The baby hears, experiences pleasure, and turns to




the source of the pleasure – Mommy’s big smile or her wonderful voice. So, emotion or affect begins playing a role very early in life by connecting what we see or hear (our sensations) with what we do (our motor actions). It’s through our affect – our pleasure – because if a baby finds the voice aversive or unpleasant he doesn’t turn to the voice.

Similarly, by eight and nine months this basic sensory-affect- or sensory-emotion-motor response becomes more complicated and you get back-and-forth smiles and frowns and head nods and smirks, and all kinds of different emotions are expressing themselves in a back-and-forth way between caregivers and little babies. This is the beginning of what we call reciprocal interactions, or real two-way communication but, here, too, it’s the emotion that leads the way. When we get into shared problem solving – taking Mommy by the hand, helping her find a new toy – that, too, is emotion – the interest in the toy, the interest in getting Mommy’s help – leading the way. When the child starts using words, each new word has a meaning because it’s invested with emotion. When the child says, “love” or “Mommy,” that’s an emotionally meaningful word, as opposed to just mimicking or repeating what someone else says. Higher levels of thinking, we’ve shown, in our new book, *The First Idea: How Symbols, Language, and Intelligence Evolve from Our Early Primate Ancestors to Modern Humans* – as well as in earlier books – builds on emotional interaction.

Why is emotional interaction related to the quality of the child’s lead? Because when we follow the child’s lead, we are following the child’s emotions. We’re saying, “What is of interest to this little baby? Looking at Mommy’s smiling face? The rattle? The toy car? Daddy’s “horsy” ride? What really turns on little Johnny or Susie? What gives them pleasure? What heightens their pleasurable emotions?” So that’s what we mean by their lead, their interest. Their interest is our clue, our window, into what they’re feeling. So, we watch closely to follow their lead, to tune into their emotional world, and that’s why that’s the cornerstone of the Floortime approach. Once we figure out what they’re interested in – whether it’s Mommy’s smiling face or Daddy’s “horsy” ride, or the rattle – then we have to use that to help the little baby master each of his, what we call, “functional emotional developmental capacities,” which are really emotional milestones, in short – their ability to attend, to engage with warmth, to signal interactively with their emotions, to get involved in shared social problem solving, to use ideas meaningfully and to think logically.


So, we want to move them up this developmental ladder to master each of these core emotional and social and intellectual abilities that we call the functional emotional



milestones. To do that, we have to challenge them, and that brings us to the other side of the coin. In other words, if we simply follow a baby around – let’s say, pushing a car – and we push the car with the baby, that might be nice and we may even get a look or two from the baby or from the child, but not much is happening in terms of mobilizing that child’s mastery of each of these important milestones. On the other hand, if the child’s interested in the car and we take the car and put our hand over it, and the child takes our hand off and gets the car, now there’s an interaction between us and we’re mobilizing our third stage of emotional development or functional emotional development, i.e., two-way communication. If we take that little rattle the child is interested in and we put it on our head and the child gives us a big smile and reaches for it, we’re mobilizing engagement and two-way communication.

So, we build on the child’s interest as a vehicle for creating shared attention and engagement and two-way communication and shared social problem solving and using ideas creatively and logically. So, we go up this ladder to the highest level the child is capable of at the time and then we work on the next level. That requires not just following the child’s lead, but challenging the child. So, when we say, “follow the child’s lead,” we don’t mean simply copying the child or doing what the child is doing. We mean following the child’s lead to understand what is giving the child pleasure, what is the game the child wants to play. It may mean figuring out from a number of their behaviors what they are really interested in. It’s no different than a spouse sitting across the table and listening to his spouse or her best friend and saying, “What’s really on Johnny or Sue’s mind today?” It may not be simply the first words out of their mouth – you may have to listen for a minute or two. Similarly, with a child, as you’re interacting you may have to be watching what they’re doing and saying, “What is little Johnny or Susie interested in? Is the game really movement – moving around the room? What I’m interpreting as aimless wandering, is it really the pleasure of movement, but movement without any obvious direction?” Okay, how do we make that into a follow-the-lead and challenge at the same time? Well, we can be their companion, and then we can be a little doggie who gets stuck in front of their legs, so they have to go around us, and now we’re getting two-way communication. So, every interest of the child – even aimless wandering or just opening and closing a door repetitively where we get stuck behind the door – can be turned into an interaction and can be turned into a challenge that helps the child move up the developmental ladder.

So, following the child’s lead is part of the same coin as challenging the child because it’s what tells you the best way to challenge the child. In other words,




understanding the child's interests is your clue of how to challenge the child. If the child is interested, for example, in moving a car back and forth, and you say, "Okay, I want to challenge the child, so I'm going to have the child repeat words" or "I'm going to have the child put square blocks into a square hole and round blocks into a round hole." Well, that doesn't challenge the child in an area they're interested in, and what is likely to happen is you would hand him a square block and you'd point to the little hole and the child is likely just to throw it on the floor and ignore you. Or even if the child does it because he's been trained to be obedient or compliant, nothing much is happening between the two of you. On the other hand, if you say, "Okay, how do I challenge the child, following the child's lead?" If the child's moving a car back and forth and you take another car, and your car is coming at the child's car and they can't both be using that space at the same time, the child has to decide to go around you or crash into you or go over you, and now you're interacting.

So you create the challenge for the child to be purposeful and logical and interactive by the clue you get from the child's interests. If the child were playing with a square block, you could make a little cup with your hand and challenge the child to put it in your hand and say, "Oh! Mr. Hand wants the block!" and hold your hand up. If the child puts the block in your hand and gives you a smile, you're getting engagement, you're getting interaction and, eventually, you can make your hand round or square and he can learn to figure out which block to put in which hand – the round hand or the square hand. You can even hold the sorter in your hand and see if the child wants to play the game with you.

So you can teach a child almost anything if the child's natural interest gives you that door or window or that opportunity. The point is that understanding the child's lead and following the child's lead is your window into the child's emotions – into their pleasurable interests. That enables you to get the child's attention, to get the child's engagement, and to get the child's emotions activated and harnessed. Then, it provides the clue as to the other side of the coin: how to challenge the child, because we challenge the child off the child's lead, and that is the critical principle that we're talking about here.

So following the child's lead and challenging the child are both part of Floortime and, again, the "do" is to follow the child's lead and build on that to challenge the child.


The "don't" is don't simply repeat what the child is doing – you might do that for a minute or two just to kind of get your bearings, and let the child feel that you're in



tune with him, but that's not real Floortime. The other "don't" is don't invent something of your own out of left field that the child is not interested in, in order to challenge the child. You can, however, bring out toys or activities that you think the child might be interested in, and then they may show a natural interest in that. So, Daddy can get down on all fours, as an option, and the child may jump on his back and say, "go" to make the "horsy" go. So those are the basics that I wanted to emphasize. Also – and again I want to come back to the reason why this is so important – the way the child learns is by harnessing or heightening that child's affect. Remember to use the child's affect or emotion as part of engagement and attention and then interaction, and then problem solving, and then using ideas.

Remember I said at the beginning that even the simplest act of a baby looking at Mommy or listening to Mommy and turning is not a sensory-motor action – it's not just hearing and turning and looking. It's a sensory-affect- or sensory-emotion-motor action. The child listens or looks, feels pleasure, and then decides to turn. So, it's not just a reflex action even within the first few days of life. Now, why it's so important to mobilize this affect is that we have evidence to suggest that in children with autistic spectrum disorders and some related special needs conditions; one of the biologically based challenges is in the child's forming this sensory-affect-motor connection. In other words, they don't necessarily easily build the affect into the equation. So, ordinarily a newborn baby within days or minutes is finding pleasure in Mother's voice and turning to Mother because of the pleasure. But in a child with a biological challenge that may make a child vulnerable to autistic spectrum and related disorders, that connection between the emotion (the affect) and the sensation (the sound of Mother's voice) and the action (turning towards Mother) may not be forming. In other words, the child may hear Mother's voice, but the motor action of turning isn't automatic because the emotion – even if the child experiences it a little bit – doesn't connect to the motor action.


So we don't get the connection from the emotion to the motor plan that will satisfy that emotion, like looking at Mother or babbling back at Mother. That's what makes it, later, difficult for the child to have two-way communication because the child may enjoy your smiling at him and even enjoy the sound of your voice, but he can't connect the pleasure to the motor action of smiling back or vocalizing back. But, we also have evidence to suggest that this biologically-based problem, which we believe is how autism expresses itself biologically during development – we don't believe it happens all the sudden that a child at age three has a change in his brain where he become autistic,



but rather it's a gradual process of vulnerabilities, for at least most children, except from some children who do have acute regressions for a variety of reasons – that this pathway connecting the emotions to the motor pattern is not completely blocked. The main highways are blocked, but the side pathways are still available and still open. So, by increasing heightened affect states or heightened emotions, in other words by working off the child's lead so the child is really mentally and emotionally invested, we can develop these side pathways so the child can then learn to look to the mommy and the voice and turn to her smiling face and then interact in a back-and-forth way, exchanging emotional signals. We have evidence to suggest that children, through that method, can learn to understand other people's emotions and become very intimate, and even – in a subgroup – become very highly empathetic and also achieve high levels of language and reflective thinking. But this all hinges on following a child's lead in order to tune into his emotional state through your challenges, then – the other side of the coin – heightened emotional states that are pleasurable as a basis for mastering each of these milestones of attention, engagement, two-way interaction, shared social problem solving, using ideas creatively, and using ideas logically.

Now in just a minute we're going to walk through each of the six stages and give some examples of how to use this combined approach of following the child's lead and challenging the child at the same time to master each of the six basic milestones. But, first, I want to turn it over to my colleague, Serena Weider, to add on a few thoughts about this very important principle of combining following the child's lead with challenging the child. Serena?


Serena Weider: Hi, good morning, everyone. It's nice to be able to join you today. I think that we have always understood that following the child's lead, of course, makes it a lot easier in the sense that at least the child is showing us something that's meaningful to him, something that he cares about, something that she's interested in, something that gives her some pleasure. So, beginning interactions based on that is a lot easier than trying to figure out what it is that interests him or her. What we have to do is just observe and think about what we see this child moving towards all the time. The challenge will come from the parent or the caregiver or the teacher realizing that they can be the recipients of this interest. We often call it "you be the toy." I was thinking of the examples you gave, and what we want to do is we want to join the child, so we challenge him by becoming a human toy, or by being playfully obstructive, or by being the receptacle for a particular toy because the child wants a destination for it – he wants to put it somewhere. How do we insert ourselves to start that challenge going?



Since we're animate we can do that fine-tuning, so that we slowly give the child those nice cues they need without turning away or pushing them to do what we want them to do. We are really becoming part of their interest in a way that gives them either a problem to solve or a desire for more of the experience, or a gleam that makes them realize they can out trick you. Every child can undo what you've done in response to what he's done.

I really love the example of how what looks like an aimless kind of behavior is actually what the child can do. I think we always have to think about what the child does and treat it as if it's purposeful. So even a child who's just wants to walk in circles, or who can't quite focus in or pick up a toy, is at least showing us that he's using himself, and we join him by using ourselves in his path. That's where we can begin to connect to what they can do and treat it as if that is their intent – it's what they're initiating. This is where, I think, we can make such big changes. If the child is walking in circles, well, whether we walk away or whether we put up a fence, children are quite remarkable in their ability to want to do what they want to do. People worry they're going to get mad or they're going to reject them, but those are emotions, too, and that's how we can get in there. Where the child figures, "Wow, I can sneak under and get the toy," it's something purposeful. Or if the child gets mad and says, "Who's getting in my way?" and glares at you, we're beginning to get into that important flow of getting it interactive. So, I think there has been a lot of misunderstanding about following the lead or parents and caregivers just commenting on what the child is doing.


I do think it's very important to highlight, again, the "don't." Don't just walk along and stay behind the child as if you're following the leader in a marching game – you can follow the lead in front of the child. Also, don't change the topic. Really respect what the child can do. We have to start with that aspect as the foundation because every child can do something – whether it's avoidance or whether it's moving away – we can turn everything a child wants to do into an opening or an opportunity to connect. I think as we go through these stages, we'll see that there are strategies that we use that actually will be similar at each level but will appear different in relationship to what the child's processing needs are. So when a child is moving and trying to "rev" herself up or may be lying on the floor and moving his car back and forth and staring at something else, I think that a lot of parents just worry about, "Oh, no, they're doing that again? Do we follow the lead? Do we take the toy away?" I think it would be best to discuss this within each stage.



Dr. Greenspan: Okay, thank you, Serena. Let's go through the stages now. The first stage we called "shared attention." Here, one of the biggest challenges we see with children who are three, four, five, six, and even seven years of age is that often caregivers or therapists or educators are trying to interact with the child before they get the child's attention. Not only do we have to work on that as the first fundamental but, also, in an interaction with a child who is capable of, let's say, getting to shared social problem solving, even using some words and ideas, we often miss those opportunities because we don't get their attention first. So, typically, I see a situation where the caregiver is talking to the child, or trying to get the child to move a car back and forth, or trying to get the child to search for a hidden object, but the child is clearly looking around elsewhere – looking out the window, or just moving around the room aimlessly, or just preoccupied, or distracted by his own motor movements. In other words, he may be waving his arms and legs in that seemingly uncoordinated way and he's actually distracted because he's so active and moving around so much that he's not paying attention. The part I always emphasize is we've got to help little Johnny or Susie pay attention to us if we're going to get them engaged, and then get two-way communication, etc.


So, one always has to challenge the child starting with the foundations – starting with the beginning of our functional, emotional developmental level – the beginning of our "developmental ladder," as Serena has so nicely phrased it, often. That means in any interaction – it may take only seconds until we get it cooking – we've got to get the child's attention and get him engaged and get him in a back-and-forth rhythm before we can get to higher levels, even for the child who's capable of higher levels. Yet, so frequently, I see a parent talking to a child while tuning the child out completely and they're not working on the fundamentals.

So something as simple as – and often I do this in coaching with caregivers – something as simple as, "Sweetheart!" and getting in front of the child and raising your voice a little bit so there's more expectancy in your voice – "SWEETHEART! Are you going to listen to Mommy OR are you going to move that car around? SWEETHEART! Which is it? The car or Mommy?" Now, sometimes you have to then elevate a little bit and get your hands stuck on the car, so the child then looks at you like, "What are you doing," and then you say, "Do you want to look at ME or the CAR?" The child is probably shaking his head no and holding on to the car, but okay, now you've got his attention. Now you're involved in a two-way communication because he's finally let you know he prefers looking at the car to you, but that – ironically – has enabled him to attend to



you, because he couldn't make that communication to you. You've done that by raising your voice a little bit, increasing the expectancy in your voice, getting in front of him where he can clearly see you, and making his attention your first priority and – in this particular example – getting a little bit playfully obstructive, i.e., putting your hand gently over his car. When you do that, if you don't want a meltdown and you get a little playfully obstructive, you do it in very slow motion and very gently. Sometimes you get the child's attention as your hand is coming close to his car or as you're getting close to where the child is moving around the room and he'll look at you, like saying, "Don't invade my space," but that's fine because you've accomplished your mission – you now have his attention.

So, that first step is to very slowly and gently elicit the child's attention by challenging the child based on what the child is interested in. So it goes back to our first principle, but the biggest missing piece is often we don't get the child's attention. Now in getting the child's attention, you want to pay attention to yourself and what frequency of voice the child responds to. Does he not like a high-pitched voice? In that case, you might want to use a lower-pitched voice. Does he not like a lower-pitched voice? Does he like the higher-pitched voice? What rhythm or cadence does he prefer – talking fast versus talking slow? Some kids respond better to a faster rhythm, even though they have auditory processing problems, but the notion that they can't, therefore, process rapid presentation of different words is a mistake. They may need the fast rhythm. Just like it's hard for you, as an adult, to memorize words if I say, "Three. One. Four. Eight." It's much harder to remember than if I say, "Three-one-four-eight." Similarly, a child with auditory processing problems may need that rhythm. Because they don't process the sound, they may need you to repeat it. You may have to say, if you want them to memorize, for example, 3148, you may have to say it, "Three-one-four-eight. Okay, try it again: Three-one-four-eight. Three-one-four-eight." So each time it's in rhythm – you're continually talking, but you may run it by him three times, rather than one time, "Three. One. Four. Eight." The slowing down has the effect of taking out the emotion and taking out the rhythm. One of the first aspects of a child's emotionality early in life as a newborn baby is the emotion associated with their own rhythmic movement, their own sense of their own bodies. So proprioception, for example, is emotional or affective in the sense that it's a pleasurable sense of one's own body and one's own movement patterns. We can't forget that when we build to higher and higher levels. So, we have to take into account the child's reactivity or responsivity




to things like sound and sight and touch – what kind of touch will get the child’s attention?

Serena Weider: You know, I’d just like to give one example of where I think parents actually do this but don’t realize that they could do more of it or in different ways. This is when they’re trying to get the rhythm or cadence going, whether they’re going slow or fast, and the example is when you think of playing something like “Here I come. I’m-going-to-get-you!” where you move your body or move your fingers or use your voice, and that wonderful affect that you’re conveying through the fluctuation, through the rhythm is something you’ll notice children always recognize. That’s because it is connected to the pleasure, to that anticipation, to something they know they’re going to enjoy – whether it’s a tickle or a chase or swinging high or getting the toy or the cookie they want, “Here it is.” I think people usually do this, but they don’t realize that it could be done on a broader basis with many different interests the child can have.

Dr. Greenspan: I think you put your finger on the key element there, Serena, which is the anticipation, the expectancy in your voice. “Here I come,” even that is rhythmic, but it creates expectation in the rhythm – something’s about to happen. That, I think, is the key here to getting the child’s attention. Whether you do it to your rhythm through shifting the tone or the frequency to meet the child’s individual differences in how he reacts to sensation, like touch and sound. In terms of his motor planning and sequencing, sometimes the child is so distracted by his own movements that it’s helpful to hold his hands and move his arms in rhythm with your voice as you’re trying to get his attention and play a little game, where you keep shifting the movement patterns. Again, you’re following his lead if he’s interested in moving his arm, but you’re now shifting the rhythm with him to see if he’ll take the lead in the dance. You’re holding his hand and dancing with your arms to see if he’ll show you the rhythm he enjoys. You try to slow it down and he speeds it up, you try to speed it up, he may slow it down. Now you’re in rhythmic interaction with each other, rather than letting him just moving in a disorganized way on his own.

The same thing with some kids who enjoy movement in space – they will attend to you more when they’re in a swing and moving fast or moving slow. Some kids needs firm pressure, like being in a spandex swing that envelopes them to give them pressure on the back or on the “tush” or on the arms or legs; this way they feel the firm pressure and that helps them pay attention and focus. So, we pay attention to the child’s sensory




system. We find the right pattern, including the expectation in our voice, to help the child attend. This has got to be the first step, even with the child who's "already quite verbal," because I often find, again, parents and educators and clinicians talking to the children or interacting with the children when the children are totally elsewhere, and then the adult feels discouraged – "little Johnny's not paying attention" – rather than going back to the basics, saying, "I may have to work for five minutes to get him re-attending and re-engaged, and then we can get cooking again." So here you can see we follow the child's lead by noticing what sensations are going to get his attention, and then we challenge the child with those sensations, with those sensory experiences and affective experiences that will gain the child's attention.

Now the second level is engagement – having the child be pleurably related and engaged with the caregiver. Here, we follow the child's lead by noticing what gives the child pleasure. If it's a toy, for example, or a rattle or a car or a book – that's the source of pleasure. We don't compete with that; we don't say, "Look at me," and hold the child's chin and force the child to look at us because we want the child to want to look at us! Love doesn't come from being forced, and the goal isn't looking; the goal is loving. The goal is intimacy. The goal is enjoying relating, not going through the motions of relating by looking mechanically.

So, how do we help the child who's interested only in the rattle? Well, we put the rattle on our head. We join the child's object of desire so we and the object become one. If it's something we can put it in our mouths, I find that's very intriguing to most children, and they'll take it out of our mouths and we can play a little game with that.

If it's a book, we can now look at the book together and share some interest in some of the pictures. We can put the book on our head. We can hide the book in our shirt. We can sit on the book and the child has to push us over to get the book. So, we can use the child's interests to gain interaction. Again, the goal here is not to frustrate the child, although a little bit of frustration sometimes motivates the child to be interested, but we always stop short of a meltdown and real frustration if we're getting playfully obstructive. The idea is to harness the child's interest and pleasure, and what we're looking for is, really, the little grin, the little smile that says, "that's funny." I find, for example, with most children, that when you put something on your head or put something in your mouth, you get that little grin as if they're thinking, "that's kind of novel, cute, and amusing." Many children with language problems, even if they have severe autistic spectrum features, as well, or have even severe forms of autism, enjoy




visual novelty as long as, again, it's not a light that's too bright or colors that are too sharp if they tend to be overly reactive or overly sensitive to that. Sometimes they also enjoy, even with their auditory and processing challenges, as Serena was saying earlier, vocal rhythm novelty – the expectation in your voice, “Here I. Come!”

So the idea is, again, to note the child's interests, then challenge the child by joining those interests and helping the child engage with you. That means the child is doing to you something active. Again, the most common mistake we make is we do to the child – we tickle the child, we move the child's face, we get the child to react to us. But that's different from the child's initiating the engagement – smiling at you out of an inner pleasure and desire, not because you tickled him. So you have to woo the child, entice the child, and get the child to do to you rather than your doing to the child. So, when you put the rattle in your mouth or on your head and the child smiles at you and starts reaching for it, the child is doing to you or smiling at you because you've created a condition, i.e., the novel thing of the rattle being on your head or the book being on your head. That, then, brings pleasure to the child where the child now initiates and does to you. Serena, do you want to add some thoughts on that?

Serena Weider: I just want to comment that often parents worry about getting the children mad or that they'll give up or they'll disconnect if they make it too challenging, and that obviously could happen. So, it's really important to walk that line and to appreciate that even if the child is a little frustrated, if you back off and you say, “Oh, oh, oh, NO! Oh, that's not what you wanted!” You will find that if you just empathize, again, with your voice, it's not so much the words as showing that you care and that you understand. This will keep the child going even when he's frustrated, even if you cross that line and it turns from novelty and amusement to just being too hard and “who needs it.”

So, it's critical that while you're trying to interact with the child that you really keep watching his reactions and you can move back and forth and help a child feel successful, whether it's getting that rattle or something else, and not giving up. If you're sitting up and the rattle is too high, you can change your position and say, “Oh, now you can reach it!” But don't worry about changing your strategy in response to the child's cues or response to you. I know many parents will say, “But he gives up! Then what do I do?” The answer is not to give up, but to pursue the child, even to say, “Oh, you wanted the rattle? Here it is!” and to give way. We're trying to challenge the child, but we also want the child to feel he can win by his engagement and pleasure with you, or engaging




in two-way communication with you, so don't just stop. It's very important when you're moving towards engagement not to pause too, too long, but the child may not know what to do next, so you can give another cue. "Here I come again. I'm still coming!" But the key is asking yourself, "How am I going to help the child and give the child a little bit more time to take the next step, so that he's responding to that and then he's initiating and doing and has enough desire to persist?"

Dr. Greenspan: Okay, thank you, Serena. Now let's go to our next stage, which is two-way communication – opening and closing circles of communication. Here the goal is to help the child become a real purposeful interactor, where the child, for example, points to something or reaches for something, and then the child takes it and gives it back to you. So we have real back-and-forth going – we call this opening and closing circles of communication. We want to help the child achieve 30 or 40 of these in a row, until we get what we call a continuous flow of back-and-forth communication. Now the key of two-way communication, again, is helping the child take the initiative. It's not a real two-way communication if you just tickle a child ten times in a row and the child giggles ten times in a row. Two-way communication means each new circle is somewhat different from the prior circle and is not just repetitive. So, the child smiles and you smile back; you stick out your tongue and he makes a funny face; you make an even funnier face, and he then makes a big sound, and now you've got two-way back-and-forth communication with little facial expressions. Often this will occur with toys and moving cars, turning pages in a book and pointing at plenty of interesting pictures, playing with other toys, etc. The question is, "Are we getting the back-and-forth going?"

Here, just like with engagement, what is little Johnny or Susie interested in? What's the object of desire? Is it me? Is it a "horsy" ride? Is it the car? Is it the truck? Is it the little ballerina doll? Is it aimlessly wandering around the room? Is it making funny sounds and noises? Is it opening and closing a door repetitively? Is it playing with the light switch? Is it going to the bathroom and flushing the toilet? What's the pleasure here? Where's the emotion? Where's the affect? And then you're saying, "How do I turn this into a game where we have back-and-forth interaction, where little Johnny or Susie is doing to me and taking initiative in the activity where it's coming from their inner desire?"


So, let's take a simple example where a parent might ordinarily cut off a conversation – the child wants to go out the door. Probably one of the most frequent motivated interests I have in my office is the child wanting to leave the office – not so



much to get away from all the fun we're having, but kids love doors! In my office I have a door to the waiting room, which is actually just a double door, and I have another door that goes into my living room. So, invariably, the kids – even if they're very nonverbal – they will want to explore the room and they want to see where the doors go, and they almost always try to open the door to my living room. So, again, it's typical that the caregiver often will say just, "No! You can't do that" – end of the conversation. But, again, that misses the opportunity. The interest is in opening the door, so how do we turn that interest, that emotion, into 10 circles?

So, we never say, "no" unless it's something that requires an immediate "no" because it's dangerous to the child and he's about to hurt himself, in which case it's a "no" and we obviously restrain him, as needed. Otherwise, we try not to say "no." If the child is going towards the door, then Mommy or Daddy will get in front of the child, put their foot in front of the door so the door can't readily open, and "Oh! Sweetheart-" (if it's a verbal child) "can I help?" The child starts pulling and can't get the door open. Then, the parent offers the hand to a nonverbal child, and the child may take the parent's hand and put it on the door, may point to the door, and the parent may motion like "open door" and the child may nod his head, and now we're getting two-way communication going. The father opens his hand as if to say, "I can't do it" and points to Mommy, "Mommy help?" and the child may run over and grab Mommy and pull her to the door and get Mommy to come over to open the door. Now we've gotten six, eight, maybe 10 circles of communication, all trying to get the door open. Now, the end result might be just going out to the waiting room, and we'll let the child be successful, go out and maybe play in the waiting room for a few minutes. Then the child, himself, will want to come back to the main play area. Or, if we can't let the child go into the waiting room, for some reason, at that point we may need to try to distract the child with another toy or say gently, "No, no, we can't do it now, but maybe later." Yes, the child may have a tiny meltdown at that point, but we've gotten 10 circles of communication and we know what the child wants and the child's taken a lot of initiative and we've done the child a great service because the child's gotten the satisfaction of being an effective communicator – a two-way communicator. So, in this example – again – you follow the child's lead – the door – but we challenge the child to take initiative and open and close many circles of communication around the door. Serena, do you want to add something about this?


Serena Weider: Yes, I was thinking this also is such a great opportunity to add more gestures to it – knock on the door, pull and turn it as if it's stuck. If there's a key,



you can turn the key. I've always been amazed at how often parents are surprised that when the child is offered a key they actually know what to do with it. It's a nice way to think of lots of different solutions to the child's desire and will lead very well to what we call our shared problem solving. I do think what makes this work is that you're always conveying to the child that you understand his intent. Even though we're doing this kind of playful obstruction, children will recognize when you're really trying to help them do what they want to do, versus trying to stop them or acting disapproving or getting anxious. This goes a very long way because if you can help the child realize that you understand what they want you will be able to support their push in initiating and going to the next step. The way to do it would be through symbolic efforts, bringing other people in, and moving into problem solving.

Dr. Greenspan: Well, that gets us to the next stage, which is shared social problem solving, where the two-way communication needs to get more complicated so the child is actually solving problems. We actually got into that a little bit with opening the door, which is shared social problem solving and makes two-way communication more complex. Let's say the problem is getting to a toy that's up on a shelf. Here, too, in shared social problem solving we want to be solving a problem together and using a continuous flow of back-and-forth two-way communication with the child's taking initiative. So, let's say the child's interest is in a particular toy. Seeing that, we may play a game and when the child is looking out the window, we can put the toy up on the shelf. When he turns around to find his toy, you can say, "Where did it go?" and look surprised. The child may look back at us and then we might help the child if the child's not looking around the room systematically, by saying, "Huh! I think Mr. Toy ran up on the shelf!" and we might point up there. So the child can look and he might spot his toy. Then we might put our arms out and say, "Well, how are we going to get it?" Thirty circles later, hopefully, the child will have taken Mommy and gotten her to bring him a little step ladder or a chair over to where they can climb up to get to the toy. The more frustrated the child gets and the quicker the child gets frustrated, the easier we'll make the challenge. For a child who gets frustrated easily, we'll put the toy on a low shelf. For the child who can climb up pretty well on his own simply by to getting the "horsy" position, climbing on our back and standing on our back, we may put the toy on a higher shelf.


Whatever it is, we want the child set up in a situation where the child has to use us as part of solving a problem and as part of getting into a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction, again, where we build on the child's interest in the toy or in an activity



and we set up multiple barriers to the child's getting to his or her own goal – one that requires shared social problem solving. Or, as Serena was saying earlier, we simply help the child reach the destination the child wants to reach, like in the example of going out the door, but we need to help him open the door. If the child wants a “horsy” ride, we can be a willing “horsy,” but the “horsy” doesn't move until the child pats the “horsy” on the back and two pats mean go; one pat means stop. You can get into a signaling system with just touch, where the child learns to control this “horsy” who doesn't know what to do, and so forth and so on. So we begin turning the child's interest into a two-way communication and shared social problem solving. Serena?

Serena Weider: I think the important thing to remember when we use the word “problem” is that it has to be a problem for the child. It's not a question of just setting up a lot of little obstacles, but really pinning the child down to what he would see as a problem in terms of getting what he wants. If it's the child's problem, he has a desire to get or do something, and so he's motivated. We want children to encounter problems in their natural environment, so sometimes we can play dumb. Think about the things you know your child will often like. Even in day-to-day kinds of experiences we can trigger the affect by surprise. If you have their favorite box of cookies, well, it could be there, but what if the box is empty and there's none left? What will the child do? Or if they have to pack their backpack, well, are they thirsty or hungry? They'll do the work to solve that problem because their problem is, “How do I get to the pool as fast as I can go?” That, I think, is the critical piece – will it be experienced as a problem for them? Then again, you don't have to work so hard thinking, “How do I set this up?” as much as, “What will my child really want?” You can get the flow going off their intent.

Dr. Greenspan: Right, and the key here, as Serena was suggesting, is getting the child to take the initiative. Again, the biggest mistake I see – the biggest “no-no” – is doing to the child or telling the child what to do rather than challenging the child to take the initiative or to problem solve with you so he or she is learning to be a thinker. So, when the child's interacting and opening and closing many circles, we're challenging the child to be a thinker – to do to us and to the objects, to take the initiative. That's the key. That's often the missing piece, even in very verbal children who are still having a hard time with social interaction or with more typical problem solving or with judgment, even though they have lots of words, because they never really became an initiative-taking problem solver, which is the essential building block of later thinking. So we can't ignore that – even in children who are very, very verbal already.




That brings us to the next two stages – we only have a few minutes left today, so we can cover the next two stages together – which is creative thinking and logical thinking, where the child is learning to create ideas and connect ideas together logically – these are stages five and six. Here, too, the child’s interest tells us how to follow his lead or her lead, but then, again, we challenge the child. So, for example, in pretend play the child may have an interest in a little doll and may have an interest in feeding the doll. How do we turn that into a more elaborate drama? How do we challenge the child? Well, we join the drama and we talk for the little baby doll – we become the baby. We say, “Oh! I like that – give me more!” or “Oh, no, no, no, no! Don’t want the soup! I want the cookie! Give me the big cookie!” So the parent or the caregiver the therapist enters the pretend drama, through the other character, and doesn’t tell the child what to do or doesn’t say, “You be the Cookie Monster,” but rather talks for the other doll and thereby challenges the child to build and elaborate upon his or her pretend scenario.

At the same time as a child learning to connect ideas together, typically by ages two and a half to three and a half – but with a child with special needs this can be occurring at any age, even 12 or 13 years of age or at seven or eight years of age – we challenge the child to make sense. “Where’s the car going? Mr. Car, where are you going?” Give the child choices – “To the school or to sleep?” Always give a good choice first and a bad choice second so the child can’t just repeat the last thing he’s heard. Here the goal is to challenge the child to be creative and to think logically and to make sense. You do it by entering the child’s world as part of the pretend drama or the pretend partner.

Alternatively, if you’re just chitchatting with the child and asking what he wants for lunch or what he wants to watch on TV – and we recommend only about a half-hour a day of TV – whatever the discussion is, help the child be more elaborate, help the child talk more and become a “chatterbox,” and help the child make sense and be logical. So, play dumb, always get more words rather than fewer words; get more logic, more sense – but don’t do it for the child.

Many parents and therapists and educators who finish sentences for the child are more concerned with the child’s doing the perfect sentence, like, “I want the juice, please,” rather than the back-and-forth use of the communication. So, the goal here is – in terms of the challenge side – to facilitate the back-and-forth use of symbols and words. That helps the child be more creative and more logical. If you do that, I promise




you – it’s a 100-percent promise – your child will eventually use correct sentence structure and grammar. But if you do it the other way and model the grammar for the child, you won’t have a child who can use language properly – the child won’t have pragmatic language. In other words, the child may have this split that we see on a very structured language test, where they match the words with the pictures, or maybe a child who’s reading may be able to actually read passages and answer questions, but he can’t hold a conversation because he never learned to use language off thinking.

So, the key to that is focus on the back-and-forth use of language, whether single words or short phrases, and don’t worry about the correct grammar initially. Later on, the correct grammar will come in as the child’s conversations become more elaborate. Once the child is fully conversational and can hold a 15-minute spontaneous, creative, logical conversation that makes sense, then if you want to start correcting grammar – fine, you’re welcome to it. But, initially, challenge the child to tend simply to be a chatterbox, to be more imaginative, and to make sense. That’s the challenge part of following the child’s lead. Serena?

Serena Weider: I think we have a lot more to talk about here. That’s right – there are just very simple ways to encourage the back-and-forth, rather than thinking, “Okay, this child has a vocabulary of a thousand words but can’t carry on a conversation so we’re going to put him in a pragmatic speech group.” It really does start with this very basic piece of back-and-forth and you’re more likely talk about something you care about than not.

I like your focusing on one of the techniques that we use where the parent has to have these two voices, one for the toy and one that’s sort of a coach. For example, “The baby’s still hungry! Look! The baby’s crying! Look, she’s crying! She asked for more.” And you’re playing this little role. I think the important thing here is not to just play with your child as if you’re interviewing him. You don’t have to flood him with lots and lots of questions, but think of it as a drama where you are acting in one or two roles. You’ll see your children will be able to switch roles once they get into it; don’t do it just as a question-answer approach, but really using affect and different voices. This is when we use a lot of affect cuing that keeps the child engaged in something they’ve started so they can elaborate on it.

Dr. Greenspan: Serena, thank you very, very much. This brings us to the conclusion of today’s show. Next week we will not have a show, and then we will have a show the last Thursday in July. Then we’re going to take off for August so you can all



catch up on the archived shows you've missed listening to – we'll give you a chance to listen to all the shows of the past year that you may have missed or you may want to listen to again during August. So that'll be catch-up month. All the shows, as you know, are on the Floortime website, so you can listen to them, and most of them are also transcribed so you can also read them. So, we will resume here in two weeks and that will be our last show in July and then we'll resume right after Labor Day – the first Thursday after Labor Day – for our fall season.

So, thank you for joining us today. In two weeks we're going to continue taking some of the most pressing questions that you all have come up with, such as today's question about how to follow the child's lead and challenge the child. I think a subtitle for today's presentation would appropriately be, "Following the Child's Lead and Challenging the Child at the Same Time: The Hardest Part of Floortime." It really is the hardest part, but it can also be the most gratifying part.

Have a good week and we'll see you all in two weeks.

Serena Weider: Well, I won't be here in two weeks, but I will see you in September.

Dr. Greenspan: Thank you, Serena.

Serena Weider: Have a good summer, everyone. Bye.

Dr. Greenspan: Bye bye.