

**Initiative: A Floortime Essential and a Must for Children’s Emotional and Intellectual
Growth**

By

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Many children who I have the honor of seeing or hearing about in consultation are making good progress in a DIR/Floortime Approach, but they often require further strengthening of a key characteristic—their ability to initiate interactions with others and, as part of those interactions, initiate a range of ideas. Parents, educators, and therapists are often doing a wonderful job in fostering engagement and delight and intimacy, as well as interaction, problem-solving, and communication with gestures and often ideas. These gifted caregivers are tuning into the child’s interests, often following the child’s lead, to foster these vital capacities. The caregiver’s energy and enthusiasm, however, are often used to lead the child (once her interests have been identified), rather than challenge the child to take more initiative. While the child may be engaged in many back-and-forth interactions, including exchanging ideas, the caregivers are taking most of the initiative and the child is reacting rather than initiating.

Most parents, educators, and therapists tell me that unless they take the initiative “they will lose the child’s engagement”...that he or she “is not able to generate initiative.” How do we entice the child to surprise everyone and generate the initiative no one believes he has? Can the caregivers use their energy and enthusiasm, which is often auditory and considerable, in a slightly different way so that it ignites the child’s initiative?

Igniting the child’s initiative so that he is truly a 50/50 partner in the interaction will enable him to master that elusive goal of the “continuous flow”—a continuous back-and-forth

interaction, including conversation, where it's easy to follow his interests and where the caregivers are finding interactions easier, more fun, and often inspiring. Mastering the taking of initiative is essential for progressing to higher levels of social interaction and thinking. Taking initiative also enables a child to often overcome remaining self-stimulatory, perseverative, or compulsive tendencies, as well as master numerous sources of anxiety.

The key elements to enticing the child to take initiative include

- Helping him expand his world through expanding his experiences. In this way, there is greater awareness, more intentions, or ideas.
- Tuning into the child's world with admiration and respect for everything he does or says (as long as it's not hurting himself or others). For example, self-stimulatory or perseverative behaviors are responded to as wonderfully creative acts that the caregiver wants to participate in.
- Enticing the child to be more imaginative within the child's natural interests. For example, even staring at a light can turn into an imaginative activity if the child can manipulate the light to make different patterns.
- Creating an environment that takes into account the child's motor and sensory profile so that the child feels regulated and secure (rather than over- or under-whelmed).
- Checking oneself with the constant reminder to be playful and comforting (not demanding or annoyed).
- Whenever there is a momentary pause in the interaction, see what the child is doing next. Remember, she's always doing something, even if it's wandering around the room. Wandering may be the doorway to a new dance step, for example, or a new

musical symphony where the music changes with each step (the caregiver makes the music coming from their wonderful vocal cords contingent on how the child moves).

- When the child doesn't provide an opening, instead of taking the initiative for the child, use that high energy and enthusiasm to entice and present compelling choices.

The following brief vignettes will illustrate these principles. They are being presented to challenge the reader to add more examples to these. In fact, we are going to have an area on our ICDL website devoted to innovative examples of enticing children to take initiative and engage in a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction. This is an open invitation to contribute to this special section of the website.

Vignette 1: Christopher

Christopher is a little boy who is 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ years old with a diagnosis of mild ASD.

Christopher is very engaged, has delightful affect and has always been happy, but isn't taking as much initiative as we would like to see. We want to deepen and ripen that engagement by playing off his natural interests and having fun with him, not directing him and making it a chore.

Christopher is very available and can open and close circles and get into a continuous flow when he is challenged and enticed. We want to encourage lots of back and forth interaction and get the continuous flow going all the time with more and more initiative.

Christopher can answer some of the W questions, but is just getting the hang of it. If he is challenged, he can answer these questions, but has a hard time with word retrieval. Language-wise he's at the 2 to 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ year range. Christopher can even answer some why questions with multiple choice help. Why questions for boys come in at ages 3 or 4, so he's moving ahead with that nicely and it is a very good sign.

The big challenge for Christopher is taking more initiative, being more creative, and using more words and concepts in a continuous flow.

The key is in everything Christopher does where he takes the initiative is wonderful, unless he is hurting himself or others. We want to treasure each of these interactions and stretch out the interactions as much as possible, evening bringing dollies into the play and say, through the dolly, “Show me your new dance,” etc. When he is babbling or saying something that is not clear, interact as best you can if you think you have the gist of it; if not, play dumb and act confused and challenge him to make himself clear. We want that rhythm and interaction. Always try to keep the rhythm going without directing or passively waiting. Be very interactive and challenging and enticing. He’s capable of becoming very imaginative and expanding that language base.

We have to change our picture of what he is doing and when he is doing something different than other children and view it as something valuable and join him in it.

Again, the key for Christopher is to enter his world, whatever it is, value whatever he is doing as creative, and encourage initiation. The more initiative he takes, the better he will do and that will be the key. Do not lead or direct him. The goal should be more creativity and initiative and having fun.

Vignette 2: Allison

Allison is an 8-year-old girl who has been diagnosed with PDD, but she has always been very social. Allison can focus and attend, but when she is frustrated or overloaded with sensory input, she can become self-absorbed or begin to script. Everyone has been contributing to that by treating the lack focus and the absorption in her hands or scripts as a negative rather than as

another avenue of opportunity. Allison is warm, engaged, and problem-solving, but her strong social capacities, while still continuing, are not consistent because she's not initiating as much as we would like to see and we don't know how to help with the self-stimming and scripting. She is dependent on others providing the initiative and is not consistent in getting a continuous flow. Allison can use ideas and has a good vocabulary, but she hasn't gotten into pretend play. She can connect ideas together and sometimes answer why questions with multiple choice help.

The key for Allison is initiative, imagination, and entering her world of scripts and self-stimulation and making it a constructive, interactive initiative-taking experience. This is one of the most subtle and hard things for even the most experienced professionals to get – how to harness the child's initiative. We're intimidated by the self-stimulatory or perseverative behaviors. To help her take more initiative, we have to create settings where she's motivated to take initiative. Create a sensory environment with things she likes, but let her pick what she wants to do there. If she starts stimming, join her. Have a favorite stuffed animal stim with her, placing it in front of your face and talking for the animal. Be very playful with her. She should take the initiative two-thirds of the time. If she runs away, play a chase game. Whatever she does we interpret as her taking the initiative and join her in the activity. We don't want to frighten or make it painful for her; we want it very pleasurable and enjoyable.

Regarding stimming: Make different assumptions: Assume the child is doing this automatically and doesn't want to do it or that she loves to do it and it's a secret passion or the child loves to do it because it creates music or interesting sensory experiences that we can't understand. For a verbal child like Allison, what we want to do (and this may take a month or two to find out) is, using very positive affect and approval (use your natural curiosity), to move our hands with her and ask her what happens when we do that? What kind of experience she

does have? Give her multiple choice options. Eventually, we can get a full and rich description of this behavior and then she can tell us what the experience is like and maybe tell us “I need your help to stop doing it” or “I need you to do it with me” Enter her self-stimulatory world, make it interactive and sometimes distract her to something else and ask her if she liked it when you switch from hand games to reading or what would she rather do: look at her hands or read? Sometimes you can even start doing it before she does and say, “Look at me. Look at what I’m doing.” Turn the self stimming into interactive games. It’s kind of like daddy engaging mommy in her most peculiar habits. We all appreciate it when our loved ones indulge us in our idiosyncrasies.

Self stimming can become a basis for pretending. You can be orchestra leaders. Make this as imaginative as possible. It’s alright if Allison scripts—that can be the first line of a new drama. Once she says a line in a script, play off of her script. It’s OK as long as you don’t script back from the same drama. When she is scripting and it’s not relevant to what’s going on, join her in the script and begin pretending.

At school as Allison takes more initiative, the staff (in the sensory environment or wherever she is at her best) can start doing dress up using costumes and try to get into some imaginative dramas. Treat every behavior as an opportunity for some pretending and trying to discover what’s fun about her stimming activities.

The fear of losing Allison is the ticket to actually losing her. It undermines encouraging her to take initiative.

Vignette 3: Jack

Jack is a 12 year old boy, who is doing exceptionally well and is stronger in his attention and focus, engagement, two-way communication, shared social problem-solving, using ideas, and connecting ideas together. What's heartening is there is more use of ideas and exchanging ideas with longer sequences; he is also showing more receptive understanding. Jack is answering the W questions and emerging at the why level. However, Jack still shows poor judgment when he elopes, putting him at risk for being hurt and getting lost. His parents have expressed obvious concern about his being independent.

The challenge is to help Jack to take initiative in exercising better judgment. An important first step is to help him expand his picture of the world and improve his cause-and-effect thinking. In other words, he needs to become more aware of how the real world works. Then he would have a foundation for exercising constructive initiative, in particular for making sound judgments about everyday events. To help Jack continue to improve, we have to focus on two things:

1. We need to strengthen his causal thinking, gradually working toward the why level. Begin working on highly motivating things, like why he wants a particular food, for example, and give him multiple choice options (good choice first, silly one second). As we strengthen his causal thinking, he will develop better logical thinking and judgment. Right now he's still living in a magical, make believe world and doesn't understand dangers. Once he understands why questions and can give you many reasons (this normally comes in between the ages of 3 and 5 years), he can begin doing many more things on his own, but not before then.

2. We also have to expand Jack's "tunnel vision." To do this, we must work on helping him become more aware of his environment, to identify what's around him so that he's alert to the real world. As he does that and begins developing the capacity for causal thinking over the next year or so, we will also help him learn what's safe and what's dangerous in his environment. But first, he has to know what the street is and that there are cars in the street. So, expand his perception of his world so he's more aware and can verbalize what he's seeing, and as he is developing causal thinking and is solid at the why level ask what might happen when a bus might hit him (hurt or sad?). We are anxious for him to do more and more on his own, but it is a stepwise progression and each step in the process is important in building the strong foundation for moving to higher and higher levels of thinking and understanding.
3. Regarding limit setting for Jack, the consequence has to be something that he understands. I would reserve the consequences for the bigger league things, like starting to rip up a book or the elopement issue, not for things like not wanting to go for a walk when we want him to. Interrupt the activity, maybe give him a timeout in a chair and not being able to do his favorite activities or to have a favorite item for 10 minutes. Sit with him during the timeout, but make it serious with no fun going on. Start off selectively so you are not having power struggles. Begin at the level of a child of his verbal age and "pitch" it the same way you would set limits with a younger child—not as harsh as you would be with an older child. Be very consistent and follow through with the agreed upon consequences. When he is calm, you can explain it to him and he can respond with his device. He will get the understanding that there are rules that need to be followed.

In summary, work more on back and forth conversations with longer and longer sequences, introducing why questions for things he is strongly motivated about and give him choices. Go for lots of walks in the real world and help him identify what he's seeing, like the street, bus and cars. Don't worry about telling him that they are dangerous at the moment. Later on we will work on connecting these things. Also, enforcing simple rules that he can understand at school and at home. Don't rush the more abstract experiences, like getting hurt when a bus hits him.

Vignette 4: Eric

Eric is a 5 ½ year old little boy who has some capacities regarding focus and attention, engagement, two-way communication, and shared social problem-solving. However, he only shows little islands of capacity with using ideas and pretend play and connecting ideas together, including answering why questions. The big challenge is sustaining his focus and engagement, two-way communication, and shared social problem solving so he gets in to a continuous flow. A related challenge is his taking more initiative. Once he is doing that, we will get more connections.

The key now is for Eric to come up with his own ideas and take initiative around them. We have to examine our own behavior. We are inadvertently having him following directions and not having him get his own ideas. We are always directing him and telling him what to do and have a preconceived notion of what we want him to do. This is the key shift we have to make with Eric. We may get involved in all or nothing thinking with Eric, thinking he is manipulating us and getting his way, and we need to be focusing as much as possible on initiative and spontaneity.

Now, the big questions are how to help Eric with longer interactive sequences and creativity and to take more and more initiative. The key here is to challenge him and entice him to come up with that thought. We can't be too intimidated by his behaviors, but at the same time we need to give Eric that new skill set so he can become more flexible. Here are some concrete suggestions:

1. Always extend the conversations with Eric. Never say "No" until 10 minutes later and then redirect. If it's wanting to watch a DVD, ask questions up to the point of putting the disk in the machine, like "When?" and he might respond "Now," etc. Then begin negotiations to do it at a later time giving him more opportunity for back and forth negotiations. Use pictures to give him an idea of a time sequence. Have longer and longer conversations giving him multiple choices. If he becomes dysregulated, make sure he is calm before having those long conversations and try to redirect.
2. Challenge his initiative by working off his passions, like coloring and music and certain kinds of movement. Present him with the possibilities but don't tell him which one to choose. He may choose "color" and then give him more choices around that. Even if you do precede his initiation with a verbal prompt, he is still making choices and taking more initiative. It's still a chain with him making many more choices and taking initiative and it is closer to our goal. Eventually, we will play dumber and dumber. Having novel toys or objects in his environment is a terrific idea. Having obstacle courses with the reward of what he wants to do at the end, enticing him to go through to get what he wants to do is also a good idea.

At those moments where Eric does take initiative, take advantage of it. In the lunchroom before he cries because he can't color yet, ask him what he wants to do when

he is finished eating and let him choose. Then put the activity near him so he can do it right afterwards.

Have longer and longer conversations with Eric, having him take more initiative, etc. This will help Eric get to the next level and decrease his frustration.

In conclusion, enticing a child to take more initiative is a key goal for the DIR/Floortime Approach. Initiative sustains interactions and helps a child feel secure and confident. Most importantly, it enables a child to exercise influence in relationships and over his or her environment leading not only to better self-regulation, but to higher levels of interaction and thinking.

The most essential principle in fostering a child's initiative is the following: Respect everything the child does or says, including self-stimulatory, perseverative patterns. The only exceptions are behaviors that can hurt the child or others or that are disruptive in a particular setting. Treat everything the child initiates, even seemingly aimless wandering, as a creative act deserving of your engagement and interaction. Use the child's "initiatives" to create opportunities for more initiatives through your enticing, playful, loving, and respectful interactions with him or her.

The examples shown in the vignettes are only a few of the many possibilities that caregivers can harness to encourage initiative. Please think of other examples and send them into us.