



Closing Circle – January 2011 DIR®/Floortime™ E-newsletter

The Developmental Approach to Family Functioning

By Stanley Greenspan, MD

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We've talked in the past about how to support our children, both those with special needs and without special needs, in terms of their fundamental developmental capacities, including how to attend, engage, interact, problem solve, and how to be creative thinkers and logical thinkers; and then how to be abstract and reflective thinkers. We've talked about how to create care giving environments. But we haven't talked as much or as in depth about how a whole family comes together and how families work. Since children spend a lot of their time with the family as whole group – not just in one-on-one interaction – how the family functions as a whole unit is vitally important. As you're looking at family functioning and you want to improve it, there are a few broad principles I've found very helpful, particularly for the adults in the family, but also for the children.

First, in order for family members to function as a group, and also for them to try to have an understanding of each member, we always want to try to secure the basics, to do what we call "give more and expect more." Always nurture and give more first. Always establish the basics of engagement and warmth and time and relatedness, particularly when there's stress or pressure. Always start off with reestablishing a good equilibrium of nurturing and support, because a lot of stress is due to the family's being too busy or worried and therefore losing the basics. Then the children start acting out, parents get tense, and then everything gets fragmented.

The second general principle that's very important is always to try to bring out the best in each other. Often, family members are working at cross purposes, trying to have the moral high ground, accusing the other, each one trying to be the good one. Think of what happens, particularly among the adults in the family, when they focus on how to bring out the best in their spouse, because that's the mother or father of their children. If they function well, the whole family functions well. So, we can say, "Even if I'm angry, for the family's sake I want to bring out the best in my spouse. How do I support her/him? How do I help her/him feel secure?" So even if we disagree, we still want to help the other person feel secure. We may want to talk in a calm way later in the evening about our disagreement, but we want to help them feel calm and secure, particularly in the heat of battle.

To do this you have to recognize there are many different ways of parenting and that children benefit from differences between their parents. Therefore, we don't need to micromanage each other, we just have to make sure that each one has his own way of supporting the basics. Not every parent has to do all the basics, but the first ones are the important ones: security and engagement and communication. After that it's nice to have all the higher levels, but if one parent is better at it than another, so be it. Don't micromanage; always bring out the best in the other; and always think of how you can help the other one feel more secure.

If you follow these general principles, knowing the individual idiosyncrasies and uniqueness of each family member, the family will benefit. Always give more in terms of the basics before you expect too much in terms of engagement and warmth and intimacy and sharing, and then always try to bring out the best in each other, adult to adult, but also adult to children. Children will reciprocate, eventually, and they'll become more empathetic.

Source: Extracted from Web-based radio program transcript entitled "The Developmental Approach to Family Functioning" by Dr. Stanley Greenspan – 7/18/07. To read full transcript:

<http://www.icdl.com/distance/webRadio/documents/RadioShow2007071807L.pdf>