

Web-Based Radio Show

DIR®/Floortime™ Basics Part II


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October 24, 2008

Welcome to our Web-based Radio Show. Today is October 24, 2008. We are continuing our series on the Floortime Basics, and we were talking about the challenge phase. As you will recall, we were talking about the first step in Floortime which is following a child's lead; to harness their emotions or their interests which helps unify their nervous system, helps them get into a state of shared attention, helps them engage with another person – hopefully with you – and teaches them about relationships. Then the challenge is to teach them how to interact and communicate and think.

We talked about the preverbal challenges; helping them getting into a communicative pattern with gesturing back-and-forth, with facial expressions, learning to read and respond to emotions and initiate emotional interactions of their own, as well as the beginnings of problem solving and intellectual interactions and scientific thinking and with good things like pattern recognition when they get into their shared social problem solving.

We should amplify that, and today we will be talking about using ideas and challenging the child to use ideas. One of the components of shared problem solving that we didn't address – we talked about a number of things that I did address, for example, how it helps the toddler or the older child who is mastering this, regulate their emotions because they are now in a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction; helps them regulate their behavior; helps them towards scientific thinking like how to get to a toy and get the help of mommy or daddy through a series of gestures; and also helps them begin putting together the different parts of the picture of themselves and their caregivers because they're unifying the part of them that wants a hug, the part of them that gets angry, the part of them that gets curious and similarly with their caregivers because they are interacting over a long period of time with all these different feelings and all these different inclinations. They are learning to recognize the function of things; how things work; how the telephone works; how the little toy cars work; how the toys work; how mommy works; how daddy works; and how people work.




So they're becoming quite the little thinkers before they even use words to any significant degree. And also as part of this, it's implied, becoming pattern recognizers. How they see the whole, not the whole, whole picture, but they're beginning to see more of the picture; more of the pattern. What mommy does first, second, third and fourth at an intuitive level. And they are seeing themselves as they try to get to a toy, that they are taking a number of steps in a row. So they are becoming pattern recognizers.

They are also learning to improve their processing; their wholly-in-mind series of sounds as a pattern so they're just helping them recognize words because now they are again interacting in a back-and-forth way with many sounds in a row. So they are seeing a sequence of sounds and this helps them repeat and eventually understand the meaning of words – because what is the meaning of a word, other than a series of sounds that is connected to meeting some need or desire or some function, so when they say, “Mommy” or “juice” – now they are putting together a series of sounds that they have heard that they can sequence because they are again in a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction and they understand the meaning of it because they are getting their juice or they are getting a hug from mommy when they say, “Mommy hug.” So the meaning comes from the emotion that's being mobilized as part of an interaction that hopefully brings them some satisfaction or pleasure and that gets associated with a series of sounds.

So one can see that many, many different components of development are happening through challenging the child into longer and longer back-and-forth patterns of interaction and a wider range of shared social problem solving across a wider domain and different endeavors and different feelings and different emotions and different tasks that they are trying to solve.

And now we get to the next step which is using ideas and how the child learns to use ideas. How do we challenge the child to use their ideas? Then, how do we help the child amplify the use of ideas? That is part of the Challenge Phase of Floortime too. So you can see that they follow the child's lead and play with the child and letting the child have fun and creating an atmosphere of fun is only the beginning step that creates the first foundation. It makes all these other things possible. But the challenges then mobilize social, intellectual, and emotional development at higher and higher levels.

So now we're talking about how ideas get mobilized and how we challenge a child to move on to the world of ideas. Now, ironically or paradoxically or surprisingly, whatever word you like best, we're already doing that when we're interacting with a child using gestures. It may be surprising that when a caregiver smiles and makes sounds and responds to the child's sounds and we get these long interactions going through pointing and showing and moving and making sounds and different emotional




expressions where they are finding that hidden toy, it may be surprising that we're also helping the child get ready for the world of ideas. But we are and how are we doing this? Well, we're helping the child move from catastrophic reactions; all-or-nothing type reactions where an image like a picture of mommy is associated with either a tantrum where the child immediately flies into a rage because he's mad or she's mad or not getting something they want; or wanting a hug and a kiss and crying, used to not being picked up right away.

So early in life, early in the first year, the baby is involved in what we call "fixed reactions" where technically we call them "perceptual motor patterns," where it is see-and-do – they're tied together – or hear-and-do or smell-and-do. There's nothing in between. But as the gesturing occurs; as this negotiation occurs; this back-and-forth signaling with sound and facial expressions and different emotional expressions; there's more distance between the seeing and doing – now there's interaction. And as there is interaction, the image or the picture; the perception part, whether it's a sound or a visual image of something the child sees, gets separated from the action – it's no longer fixed. So now we have these free floating – if you can picture inside a balloon these free floating images or pictures, and they're multi-sensory pictures – pictures of sound or pictures from sight, or from smell or from touch, and these pictures inside one's mind can be associated with all kinds of interactions. So while mommy becomes not just someone who picks you up or someone who you yell at when you're upset, but mommy becomes someone who takes you places, finds things with you, makes you happy, makes you sad, surprises you, peaks your curiosity – so we have a very complex set of interactions and meanings associated with mommy, or the toy telephone, or the apple that is not just red and round but has a taste and it is something you can throw. It's something you can like or not like and so forth and so on.

So the world takes on meanings and these images, as they take on these meanings through interactions, all actually as you're in shared social problem solving, become the basis of symbols or ideas. So they have the beginning of ideas as we're just beginning to learn to put together a series of sounds to utter the word that conveys the idea. So by the time we say "mommy" or "mommy love you" or "juice" we know what juice means, we know what mommy is, and we know what love is. Not as fully as we'll know it five years later because these experiences; these interactions, keep acquiring more and more meaning through more and more interactions.

So we're actually forming ideas from the time we begin interacting with our world; with our caregivers; with others. But the significant step is when we have enough of a continuous flow of back-and-forth gesturing to separate the image; the perception, from the fixed action, the seeing or hearing from the fixed pattern of doing to a more




flexible pattern of doing, where we have many, many different options that it gives us a freestanding image that can become the symbol or the idea. Once we have ideas, then we can begin thinking and planning.

Now how do we help these ideas build up? Well before I get into that, let me say one more aspect of this getting ready for ideas. As we're getting ready for ideas, we are also amplifying or expanding all the different ways in which we process information and plan our actions, because in that continuous flow of interaction, it gets us ready for ideas. It really helps us move from the catastrophic all-or-nothing phase to fight-or-flight type reactions into using ideas because we can now negotiate. We are also using that same skill to learn how the world we see can be a part of the big picture. So through this pattern recognition, through many interactions, for example when we're searching for the toy, we are learning what the different parts of the room are like, not because we are interested in different parts of the room in itself, but we're interested because that toy has emotional value for us, so in the searching we are learning where the left corner and the right corner, and the middle and the side of the room is, even before we label the room. So our world of space is taking on more meaning.

As I mentioned before, we can plan a sequence of actions in terms of how to get to that toy we want. That helps us negotiate an obstacle course; helps us eventually figure out how to get downtown on the subway or on the bus, or figure out how to drive somewhere. We are learning also as I mentioned before the sequence of sounds that make words so we're getting the basis for language. And we are also learning how to modulate or control our emotions. So even if we're overly sensitive to certain sounds or touch, we're learning how to say, "Shhhhh!" or move to another part of the room which is a little quieter or to initiate some gestures that indicate to the other person that they're talking too loud for us, or that we're getting upset before we fly into a rage. So we're learning to modulate because we can now interact with our world.

If we're under reactive to sensations, we're learning that we need a little more activation so we can make a gesture that is basically saying, "Run that by me again or a little louder please" to indicate to our caregivers that we need more input. And if we're sensory seeking and we're active, we're learning to control our behavior a little better because we're interacting and getting feedback, so we're learning when we're going too far, when we're upsetting mommy or daddy or an educator or a friend, and we're learning how to not get in their face when they begin backing off so we're learning to judge distance a little bit better. We're learning that basically when we interact with the world just by reaching for things and finding things. So we're learning more about depth perception when we over reach, we don't get what we want. When we under reach, we don't quite touch it. So we're learning many, many, many aspects of a continuing




mastery of our different ways of processing information and planning actions but all occurring as part of the same set of interactions that are enabling us to form ideas.

Then when we form ideas, the reason why I mention this now, is because ideas are ideas not simply of things we see or things we hear. They are ideas involving how we understand what we see; ideas of what our whole room looks like; ideas of how a series of actions results in getting the toy; ideas of how a series of sounds make a word that will enable us to spell and read eventually; ideas of how to interact with the world without getting overwhelmed or underwhelmed or getting everyone mad at us and getting punished. So we're forming ideas in all the ways I just indicated that we take in information and we plan our actions. By the time we are saying the full sentences that suggest mastery of ideas, look at all we have accomplished.

Now how do we amplify our use of ideas once we have these, what we will call "rich ideas" that convey what we take in through all our senses and what we do, all orchestrated again by our emotional interests, where our emotions are the architect of these ideas. How do we amplify them? How do we build them up? How do we get to being a creative thinker and eventually a logical thinker?

As we talk about the challenge of mobilizing the child's ideas, it should be clear that when we're talking about shared social problem solving and all the good things that that does, getting us ready for using ideas and getting ideas mobilized, that just always involves challenge. If we're going to expand those back-and-forth gestures, we're looking for additional steps. If the child wants to go out the door, as we talked about before, we are seeing if daddy can help open the door, are we going to twist it to the left or to the right. The child is using more sounds and more facial expressions. So we're going from 10 circles to 20 circles to 50+ circles – the continuous flow. When we're searching for the hidden object, we're not so fast to find it around the room so the child is exploring more of the room. When we're negotiating the child's frustration to get something they want, we're not so quick to do it after two gestures but we're going for five or ten or fifteen or twenty – as much as we can before the child throws a tantrum. So we're challenging the child to expand to a more and more use of gestures. And this is critical because we're now no longer just following the child's lead and doing what the child wants; we're starting with that but we challenge a child towards more and more; and this is eventually what create these freestanding pictures in the mind; these multi-sensory pictures that become the basis of symbols and images.


And also the more complex our interactions are with the child, the more we come home and play with them and interact with them, the more we are challenging them to see us as complex individuals made up of many different emotions and see themselves as



complex individuals. So this always involves challenge from the point of view of often just having fun together so it's not a challenge in the sense of hard work challenge, and we'll find that it's almost always fun for the child unless they are getting a little frustrated but that's part of having fun sometimes, but it becomes more and more fun or the caregiver whether it's the therapist, or the parent, or the educator, as they do more and more and more of it. It's a new way of interacting with the child starting with the child's lead, starting with the child's interest, but then building on it in a spontaneous way and that seems like work because you don't know how to do it but as long as you are following the basic principle of helping the child have more back-and-forth interactions, it's that simple. There are a million ways of doing it.

Now, once we get to the world of ideas, the child is now beginning to use some of their words to show us they have ideas, but if they can't yet use words because of low muscle tone in the mouth so they are using pictures or they are using sounds that sound almost like the word, not quite the word, or using a single word even though we expect them to be using full sentences; but whatever, we can increase the use of ideas in a number of ways.


One is getting down on the floor and becoming a good Floortime partner in pretend play. That is when using of ideas often we see the beginning of imagination or creativity because now the child or the toddler becoming a preschooler can create their own ideas; their own images. They can combine different pictures in their mind. They can combine a picture of a monster that they saw in a book with a little boy who they just played with and create a monster boy; or take a car that they have – a toy car – and a picture of a monster in a book and combine them into a monster car. They'll say, all of a sudden, "Monster car eat you up!" and we'll say, "Where did that come from? How did the child do that?" Well, they have these freestanding images and they can combine them in different ways and this is a wonderful thing about having images and having ideas. It gives the child flexibility to be creative. But to help the child do that we have to challenge the child. The way we challenge the child is getting down on the floor and interacting in a pretend manner by becoming a part of their play. So whether we're playing dress-up and putting on hats that we saw on a TV show or in a book, or the dollies are feeding each other or putting each other to sleep or teaching dolly to scold a baby dolly; again we follow the child's lead; see where the child wants to take it. Does he want to create a bathroom scene? Or create a school scene? Or create a scene from a book or movie? But then we get innovative. We challenge the child to not just play out what they saw, what they have already done, or what has already been read to them, but we're always throwing in a new little curve balls. So that the child is a teacher saying, "You've been a bad boy or bad girl!" and we'll say, "Good girl. I good girl. I good girl.



What do bad? What do bad?” The child says, “You hit!” “Me hit? Who?” Okay, now we’re amplifying the drama; we’re a part of the play. If the child is the monster car, we might be the little baby running away, “Don’t eat me up monster car. Don’t eat me up!” “I’m going to eat you, eat you!” the child says, talking for the monster car. So we become part of the drama to amplify the drama. And the goal is to go from simple dramas – little soap operas – to the grand epic where eventually the characters have motives and feelings. This will occur over a period of a couple of years as the child goes from ages 18 months to 1 ½ to 2 years, up to four, five, six and seven, it will occur. But for many years, the dramas will become more complicated and have more subplots to the bigger plot – just like a great novel is different from a simple child’s story. That child won’t get to the great novel level as a child but our goal is to be a partner in the drama and interact with the child around the drama. And that’s how we’re challenging the child.

We’re also doing it with general conversation. Many caregivers, whether therapists, parents, or educators, often ask how to really become a pretend player with the child; that they didn’t have a lot of experience; they didn’t do it when they were kids. My advice is always the same. The only mistake you can make is not showing up; is not getting down on the floor and doing it. And really there are a couple of simple steps in terms of the technique. Observe what the child is taking an interest in and pay attention to it, whatever it is. The child could be banging the car. The child could be just moving the car. Simply try to build on what the child is doing. You can have a child who is moving the car and just have a dolly in the way saying, “Oops! Where are you going Mr. Car? Where are you going? You’re going to hit me! You’re going to hit me!” or “Mr. Car can I have a ride?” Just build on what the child is doing. Don’t try to come up with your own ideas. The biggest burden caregivers place on themselves is thinking that they have to have a zillion different ideas for the pretend play but that is putting the burden on the caregiver and then the child isn’t learning to be the creative one. So we want the idea to come from the child, and if we treat whatever the child is doing, even if we don’t think it’s a very good idea – the child is just banging the car – we could get our foot stuck under the car and say, “Oh, you banged my foot, you banged my foot!” or “You’re banging on my place. This is my garage.” Anything that gets it cooking; gets it going. Or, “Oh, Mr. Car, fix it. Oh, you banged the car. The wheel needs fixing. Fix your car.” Just anything that comes to mind is good, as long as it’s taking the cue or the lead from the child and you challenge a child to more elaborate pretending.

Now if it’s a child who is not using words, you can do this with pictures. You can do it with communication augmentation electronic device with a child that is using that to communicate. So the child’s expression of their idea can take many, many different forms – from pictures to words to anything in between. It can even convey through




complex movement where the child could be imitating the idea of a car; pretending to be the car themselves. So whatever the child's inclination is, whatever the child's other abilities are – the children who have no special needs and no challenges are usually verbal. Children with special needs or challenges, it may take on various non-verbal forms. But the idea is to get interaction of pretend going and cooking while using simple rules of observing what the child is doing.

Rule 2 is try to involve yourself in it and any way you do it will be fine as long as it's not taking over and it's your idea.

Rule 3 is to keep it cooking; keep it going as long as you can and when you run out of steam, don't think that you have to come up with the next idea. Observe again and see what the child is doing. Where is the child going? If the child gets up and moves to the other side of the room, give him or her a second or two to see what they're doing and then join them. Don't try to control the action. So observe, join in, interact, and expand, and then observe again. And those are the simple rules. And, the only mistake is, again, not showing up.

Now as we were alluding to, this could occur just in conversations also. And a simple idea here is to keep the conversations going; to keep them cooking; have as long conversations as you can. If the child says, "Juice" – play dumb. "Where's the juice? I forgot. Is it in the refrigerator or is it in the oven?" And give them a choice and they have to think and use one or two words and learn a new word at the same time. In other words, always be expanding a conversation. If a child wants to go outside, "Mommy go out and play!" "Oh, great! Play what?" They can't just say, "Uhhh, go out play." Then you give them choices of things you know they like to do – "Play on the swing, or the slide, or go sleep?" "Mommy, swing, swing!" You always give them a good choice first or a silly choice second or third but the last one should be a silly one like "go to sleep" and that way we expand vocabulary, we expand the child's ability to create these wonderful, wonderful ideas.


So we also want to expand our conversations where we are literally little chatter boxes and we're helping our preschoolers or toddlers to become chatterboxes too. The more they talk and we talk, the more we interact, the better. It doesn't have to be questions – it can just be comments. They can be saying, "Nice flower" and we can say, "Oh, wonderful flower. I like this one." And then child is maybe inspired and says, "I like this one." And mommy or the parents says, "I like the smell" and then touch it too, "I like to touch it, the way it feels" and the child may say, "I like to touch or feel" or they may come up with something new and then they try to put it in their mouth and say, "I like the way it tastes." But whatever the interaction is, even if we tell them, "Don't eat



that” the key is literally to be little chatterboxes with our little chatterboxes. The more we talk, the more they will talk. But the idea is to make the conversation interactive – not talk at them. Also, one of the key things; one of the key challenges is what happens when the child doesn’t respond to what you’re saying and the child is talking away, you’re talking away, but you’re talking almost in parallel with each other? The simplest thing to do is number one, energize up your voice a little bit – make it a little more compelling a little more interesting. So if you’re saying, “Oh, I like this flower. Which one do you like?” and the child doesn’t respond, say, if the child is looking at the flower, “Susie, which one do you like? Which one?” and hold the two up and use more energy. Even if the child still doesn’t respond, join the child’s actions – see what the child is doing and let’s say the child is by now playing with a rock, hold the rock the child is playing with and say, “What do you like? The rock or the flower? What do you want to play with?” and hold both in front and really get compelling – so join the action.

We like to use the term where we combine or conveys combining affect and action together and you can combine those in any way you want to. An action/affect in a word “AA” or “WAA” – word/affect/action; or you can even make it “AWA” – affect/word/action. So pick the favorite saying you have but affect, meaning your emotion, you’re being compelling – action; and the word or the picture as it may be. Get the interaction going – make sure it’s a two way back-and-forth communication. That becomes the key and that sets the stage for the next challenge which is helping the child combine ideas together; combine their ideas to your ideas like answer why they want to go outside. But the first is to expand that dialogue – have longer and longer conversations and not just longer conversations, but more elaborate pretend play and that way we expand the child’s world of ideas.

The rule is simple – show up, observe, follow the child’s lead, whether it’s in verbal conversation or pretend play, and expand and observe again when there is a break or transition or a brief silence. This often is combined with other activities – a child is building something, making a little town or is playing with different rooms of the house or playing with trucks. You will often find ideas now through the world of movement, of motor planning or actions, directly. Also the child is labeling what they see in exploring, so they are making sense of sights to now ideas. They can also describe when they feel overwhelmed – “Too loud mommy” “Too soft mommy” so they can interact and modulate and regulate themselves better. They can describe feelings rather than acting out feelings – “Mommy sad” “Mommy mad/angry” rather than bite or kick. So this world of ideas helps them enormously. And most importantly, they can create new ideas and become creative.



So it is their ability to create the idea; to create the idea from their own internal emotion that gives the idea meaning. Again, if they are just repeating from a book or repeating from a script, this isn't the true use of ideas. We want meaningful ideas. And we challenge them in the way we just described – by interacting with them. It's that simple – and that hard at the same time because we have to show up. We have to give it the time. So there's no substitute for time. There's no substitute for observing the child, for following the child's lead. And there's no substitute for challenging the child to expand, expand, expand and there's no wrong way to do it other than not to show up.

Next time, we are going to talk about combining ideas together and the challenge of combining ideas.