

Web-Based Radio Show

DIR®/Floortime™ Basics Part III


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Good morning and welcome to our Web-based Radio Show. Today is October 29, 2008. As those of you who have been tuning in or reading the transcripts are aware, we have been talking about the basics of Floortime or a Floortime Primer, and we have talked about following a child's lead as the first fundamental to build the foundation of both engagement and warmth and trust. What that does is it focuses in on the child's natural interests, the child's emotions or affects, where they want to go basically; what their inclinations are; that's an expression of their affects or their emotions. Once we tune into that, then we can enrich and deepen the engagement and also the shared attention. It also helps regulate the child, to feel tuned into and to feel a part of that relationship and that provides the foundation that if you are challenging the child to higher and higher levels of what we call functional, emotional development, which is basically the child's combined intellectual, social and emotional capacities, and we want to see how high up this ladder of development of emotional, social and intellectual abilities, the child can climb.

To do that we need to challenge the child at each level. And we have been going through those levels and last time we talked about using ideas and how both with the younger child pretend play or with an older child creating dramas or creating little novels or short stories or creative art productions and making up stories about them, or make believe computer games or designing new computer games. Anything that is creative or uses ideas creatively helps develop that and also just having long conversations; helping the child chit-chat, putting ideas into words, also using pictures or other symbols can be another way of expressing ideas. Typing and writing for children who are non-verbal but have good ideas and do a lot of thinking – we have more and more children like that nowadays.

Whether the child is developing without challenges or developing as an outgrowth of some special needs conditions including autism, this is the same principle to help the child elaborate and broaden their range of ideas. Another feature of broadening the range of ideas is to broaden the range of experiences the child has so they have more to think




about and more to put into ideas. For example, a child who has never explored nature or hasn't seen flowers doesn't have a reference point for using ideas to consider the different types of flowers; the smells, the colors, the shapes. The child who has never seen wonderful works of art, been to a museum; the child who has never engaged in dance or sports; the child who has not had the opportunity to take the subway or the bus; or the child who has never visited a swimming pool; the child who has not had the opportunity for exploring his neighborhood or her neighborhood. This is almost an endless possibility of experiences a child can have but the idea is to not overload the child – to slowly expand the child's opportunities for getting to experience their world. This gives them the basis for forming newer and newer ideas.

Also, one of the key features of exploring ideas is to have more and more emotional themes one can explore. And in pretend play with the younger child or the novels or short stories or dramas created by the older child, the idea is to challenge the child to consider themes having to do with love and warmth and trust, but also assertiveness and curiosity; also coping with anger and frustration and coping with loss and disappointment. As these themes become part of the interactive drama and pretend play, or part of the challenge of the story that's being created together, the child has the opportunity for broadening their emotional and social realms.

Also, the greater the social experiences of the child – regular play dates with other children – gives a child also the basis for considering all the different feelings and challenges that come up with other children, as well as the joys and pleasures of playing with other children.

So, the richer the child's experiences – and it's essential here that the child over a period of time which can be year – have the opportunity to explore the full range of emotions and social situations that are age appropriate. All of this provides for the child the opportunity for a rich array of ideas that are part of the child's experiences. So now the child can put his experiences into ideas.

Then we come to the next challenge which is challenging the child to connect ideas together; connect his or her ideas to the ideas of another person. This provides the basis for logical thinking whereas exploring ideas and just having ideas enriches the inner world of the child. The child now has a rich array of symbols or ideas to help build an internal sense of who they are as a person, who other people are, and what the world is all about and have a rich array of feelings that they can describe in terms of ideas. Now, the goal is to help the child connect his or her ideas to other people's ideas so that they can put this rich array of experiences that are organized in terms of ideas into a logical framework and they can begin separating reality from fantasy.




So now the goal and the challenge is to help the child connect the ideas of his or her own to the ideas of others. This is the beginning of logical thinking. In a child developing without challenges, this ordinarily is occurring between ages 2 ½ and four, as the child is answering the “W” questions like where – “Where is the car going?” Or, “Where do you want to go?” Or, “What do you want to do?” And particularly, the “Why” questions – “Why do you want to go outside?” “Because I want to play.” “Why don’t you want to play with this little boy?” “Because I don’t like him and he’s mean.” “Why do you like to play with this little boy or this little girl?” “Because she is fun to play with and because I like her.” “Why aren’t you talking to mommy?” “Because I’m mad at you because you didn’t play with me.”

So as the child reaches the “Why” level, it shows the child can do what we call causal thinking. They can see that a relationship between one idea and another idea in a fairly complex way; in a causal way. I.e., I’m sad because no one is playing with me or children at school were mean to me or I’m happy because it’s my birthday and I’m getting lots of attention or I love you because you’re so nice to me, mommy or I’m mad at you because you were mean to me. So now the child can explore not only feelings in a cause and effect way like I’ve just been illustrating, but also understand concepts such as why does it get dark at night? Well, you see the sun. The sun goes and hides at nighttime. See the sun is on the other side of where we live. It’s brightening up the day of our Asian brothers and sisters or colleagues or friends.

So now the child is becoming a causal thinker. And an interesting question is why is the ability for connecting ideas together not only the beginning of causal thinking and logical thinking, but also the beginning of developing a sense of reality? Well, think of it this way. Before the child can connect ideas together, the child has lots of ideas, but doesn’t necessarily separate their own ideas from the ideas of others. Now, the child is seeing the connection – the bridge between their own ideas and the ideas of another person. “Mommy I want to go outside” and mommy will say “Why?” and he’ll say, “Because I want to play” and mommy will say, “Okay well that’s alright. Let’s go outside. By the way, what are we going to play?” “Well, we’re gong to play on the swings.” “Well, that sounds like fun.” So now the child, in having that interactive dialogue, is constantly connecting his ideas to the ideas of someone outside of himself. That helps the child separate what’s inside themselves, their own ideas, their fantasies, their own feelings, from the ideas of others.


This is particularly relevant when the ideas have a lot of emotion behind them. This is when the sense of reality gets most firmly established. When the child really, really wants something and mom says, “Oh, yes, we can go out and go to the zoo today and by the way, what animals do you want to see there?” “Oh mommy, I want to see the



elephants.” So the child is now having a strong sense of pleasure and excitement and curiosity about the zoo and it’s connected in a discussion with the parent who is giving permission to do that. But it’s equally relevant to establishing a sense of reality when the parent has to say no. So the child says, “Gee I want to go outside and play, mommy!” and mommy says, “Why?” The child says, “Because it will be fun” and mommy says, “Look outside and put your hand outside” and the child feels the rain. The mother says, “It’s raining outside” and the child says, “Yes, but I want to play anyhow” and mommy says, “Why?” and the child says, “Because I don’t care if I get wet.” Mommy says, “Oh, but it will be uncomfortable” and the child says, “I don’t care. I want to go outside” and finally mommy has to say no and the child gets annoyed and may throw a mini tantrum and mommy has to set a limit and may comfort the child and point out there are things they can do inside the house and have fun, and whatever the child wants to do outside they can do inside and finally the child calms down and accepts the limit and if the child has just thrown a little tantrum with being upset and crying and not hit or bitten or pinched or pushed, no further limits may need to be set. There may not need to be any consequences or punishments if the child has not crossed the line, but in setting the limit and the child dealing with frustration and anger and annoyance, the child deals with a whole set of other emotions again connecting his feelings and his ideas which are to those emotions to the mom’s ideas which were basically saying, “not now, we have to do something indoors instead” and that too establishes firmly that sense of reality. Why, again, because it’s firming up that boundary between what’s inside the child – the desire to go outside – and the external opinion of the other person, here the mommy – it could be the teacher, it could be the daddy, it could be a babysitter who is setting a limit – and that difference between what’s inside me and what’s outside me, again, it’s the basis of having a sense of reality. The outside of me establishes the reality from the fantasy of what’s inside me.

Now the child may not agree as I said, or may be excited and get their needs or desires satisfied or realized. As a child does this for each emotional theme, that sense of reality around that emotional theme gets more permanently established so pleasure, curiosity, exploration, as well as limit setting, and frustration, and disappointment and loss, all these aspects of the boundary between what’s inside me and outside me get more firmly established.


We have all seen older children or even adults who feel very unrealistic in their sense of what they are entitled to when it comes to pleasure or excitement or who have no sense of having to respect any of reality around limits. This is a product of not having these boundaries firmly established. So connecting ideas together is very, very important for logical thinking and for establishing a sense of reality. And in just a moment, we will



talk about how one does this in every day life with a child without challenges, as well as a child with special needs, and sometimes children with special needs or processing problems are going to be developing this at older ages.

So the question now is how do we help a child establish this connection between his or her own ideas and the ideas of others? And it's actually for the most typically developing child without challenges, or the child with special needs or the older child with special needs who is establishing this for the first time or even the adult who is establishing this for the first time, it's the same basic procedure. It's illustrated by the very simple example of the child who says, "I want to go outside" and the caregiver or educator who says "Yes" or "No" which doesn't really establish a great connection between ideas because it's not a long dialogue between their ideas and the child's ideas, versus the caregiver who says, "Why? Why do you want to go outside?" and the child says, "Because I want to play." "Oh and what is it you want to play?" "I want to play on the swing. I want to do this. I want to do that." And this can be a twelve year old who is saying, "I want to go on the train" and the parent or caregiver or therapist or educator who says "Yes" or "No" versus that person who says, "Why?" and explores the child's reasons and feelings. Or, the child is looking lonely or sad and the caregiver says, "How do you feel?" and the child says, "I don't know." And the caregiver who says, "Are you feeling a little more (if the child looks sad) sad or a little bit more like you want to go to sleep?" – a good answer first and a silly answer second. And the child says, "Well, maybe a little bit sad." "What about, what happened?" "Oh, Johnnie was mean to me at school, or Sarah wouldn't play with me at school." Again, we're getting a back-and-forth dialogue using ideas. Now this could be in the form of written communication for a non-verbal child who can type or write. This can be in the form of a symbol board. This can be in the form of exchanging pictures back-and-forth. But the idea is for the other person in that child's life to be establishing the opportunity for long exchanges of ideas in whatever form it takes. Often, it's a verbal discussion. And the longer the conversation, the better. So that's one feature of the exchange of ideas – connecting one's ideas to someone else's ideas.

Another feature is to expand this exploration to include as many themes or different emotions as possible. So here's where anger, frustration, disappointment, loss, fears, as well as excitement, happiness, pleasure, exploration, curiosity, empathy, can all be part of the mix of exchange of ideas which will occur over a period of time. This exploration of ideas, back-and-forth between two individuals, really is a developing process. It goes on for many, many years into the future. We continue developing this capacity into our adult years as well as we explore new horizons and new themes. Here too, the broader the range of experiences the person, the more ideas they can exchange



with others, like we talked about before with just having ideas – a walk in the flower garden, a trip on the subway, different family situations, different social situations, friendship opportunities – all enrich the opportunity to connect ideas together in different emotional and social contexts.

A child developing without challenges often has this occurring quite naturally except the caregivers or educators or therapists who are not verbally exploring ideas with the child are going to provide less of this than the caregivers who provide more opportunity for exploration. And also the child's reaction to limits – helping the child talk about how they feel even while they're in a time out or even while they are losing TV or computer privileges or while they are having to do the clean up duty because they were naughty or crossed the line.


So these are all opportunities to foster the connection between ideas and different emotional and social contexts. So the challenge here is to follow the child's lead – let's say it's a three or four year old child in pretend play for example, and even in the pretend play now it's, "Well, I'm an alligator and I want to know why you're eating me up Mr. Hippopotamus? Why are you chasing me?" Or one truck to another truck, "Mr. Truck, why are you trying to crash me?" So whether it's in pretend play or whether it's in the reality of life, the child who wants to go out in the rain, "Well, why would you want to go out and get wet?" – It's the same basic issue. We're helping the child become a causal thinker, establish a sense of reality. And this is the beginning of the child having a sense of logical thinking in the world of ideas. Now they were already logical in the world of gestures, in the world of behavior – they have already learned the back-and-forth of gestures and behaviors. Now they are learning it in terms of using ideas.

And we can challenge a child to do this, or even an adult to do this or the older child to do this. We're making a huge leap in development. The child is coming into the real world – the world of reality. It enhances the child's coping capacities enormously. But we have to, as the partners, be very active interactive partners exchanging ideas. We have to love to chit chat, love to interact. Once a child can give one idea for something, like "Why do you want to go outside?" we want to get to the next level where they give you many ideas. "Well, can you think of additional ideas?"

So the best way to challenge the child to connecting his or her ideas to someone else's ideas, to establish this sense of logic, this sense of reality, this boundary between fantasy and reality, what's inside me and what's outside me, is simply to be a chit-chatter with the child. But, the key caveat is always asking yourself the question, "Is the child closing the circle of communication?" In other words, is the child beating to his or her own drummer – they are talking about ABC and we're talking about XYZ and we're kind

of inferring a connection, or is the child explicitly responding to what we're saying after we follow the child's lead? So the child in pretend play is interested in taking the rocket ship to the moon and we say, "Well, how is the rocket ship going to get there?" and the child instead of saying, "Well, if we use the secret rocket fuel" or "I don't know how it's going to get there but I'm sure somebody does," the child just goes off and takes the rocket ship and goes zoom, zoom and ignores our question and says, "The rocket ship is on the moon" and we say, "Well how did it get there? What got it from the earth to the moon?" and the child says, "Oh look, it's discovered a moon monster!" So we have a verbal, curious, creative child and we're impressed with the creativity but what has the child not done? The child has not connected his idea to your idea. So, at that point, we have to energize up and say, "Yeah, but how had the rocket ship gotten there? I still don't know. You haven't answered my question." and the child says, "Well, it's a silly question. I don't want to answer." Okay, now the child has basically responded. See, the child doesn't have to answer the way we want the child to or even give us a good answer to the question, the child just has to deal with the question we raise, has to deal with us as a person who has ideas outside the child's ideas and to say "I don't want to answer that question; it's a silly question, or it's a dumb question or mommy be quiet or daddy be quiet now. I don't like your questions." The child is dealing with it.

Now it doesn't have to be question. It can be a statement. In can be the child who has the alligator eating the hippopotamus, "I'm going to eat you up Mr. Hippopotamus!" and we say, "Why are you going to eat me up?" and the child may say, "You taste good" and then later on after he said we taste good, we may say, "Oh, yum, yum – looks like lots of things taste good to Mr. Alligator, that he likes to eat lots of things" and the child now who's going to connect his ideas to your ideas may say, "I like to eat everything." "Everything? You're one of the best eating alligator's I've ever seen." "Yes, because I eat hippopotamuses, and I eat horses, and I eat zebras. I'm a hungry alligator." So now the child in this example has responded to our ideas not with questions but just with statements. Our pretend character is making statements and his pretend character is making statements related to the statements of our pretend character. This should be compared to the child who when we say, "Mr. Alligator, you're a great eater! One of the best eaters I've ever seen" who then goes off and goes to the truck and has the truck ram into another truck. "Mr. Truck you love to ram into other trucks" and then the child goes off, turns away and has his favorite character, a little dolly, jump on a horse and ride somewhere. "Oh, what a rider you are" and the child then does something else. Each time, not connecting what they're doing to what we're doing or saying. So, with this child, we have to insert ourselves more into the play and put more energy into our question. "But why are you riding away from me, or why are you eating me." Or "I'm injured. Who's going to help me?" And we first increase the energy in our voice. If the



child still doesn't deal with us after we increase the energy in our voice, "Why, why, I gotta know?" – then we can get playfully obstructive – have our character block the other person's character. "Well, you can't ride my horse until you tell me why you left the car. Why did you leave the car? Then I'll let you have my horse." "I like the horse. Horse. No – don't like car, like horse." Okay, now the child has responded and answered and dealt with it but sometimes it takes two or three times.


If the child is a little stronger on the expressive side of language and little weaker on the receptive side, they may find it harder work to process or take in the ideas of others and may find it much easier just to deal with their own ideas. So here, we have to put more energy into our voice. We have to use the play situation or the interactive situation to motivate the child to put in the extra work to practice connecting their ideas to our ideas. Again we need to do this across the full range of human dramas to establish that logic, that reality. One of the hardest things for caregivers, whether it's parents or therapists or educators, is to put that extra energy in and to help the child get beyond beating to their own drummer and just talking about what's on their mind, and actually connecting their ideas to what you're doing and saying as well.

The challenge here for the Floortime helper or the Floortime caregiver is really to find a way to inspire, to ignite the desire for the child to connect their ideas to your ideas. So you follow the child's lead, you are beating to the child's drummer, but then the child has to also beat to your drummer and that's the challenge here. It's not an easy challenge, often, but there are lots of ways to do it and the main ways, they fall into three categories. First, be a chit chatter; always exploring the child's opinion – the "why" of life but before that, the "where" and the "who" and the "when" and the "what."

Number two – increase the energy in your voice and the expectation of getting a response. Many caregivers just assume the child won't and they kind of give up on it.

Number three – insert yourself into the child's actions more, including becoming what we call playfully obstructive so the child is motivated to deal with you and not just as a level of interacting and looking and smiling and engaging, but now at the level of exchanging ideas. And then this will lead to looking for more than one idea.

The next level, as we mentioned, is multi-causal thinking, where the child is giving many reasons for their feelings or their actions. This is basically the same approach as helping the child become a causal thinker. Now, when a child says, "I want to go outside" and we say, "Why?" "Oh, because I want to play" and we say, "What do you want to play?" and the child says, "I want to play on the swing." "What else – why else do you want to go outside?" "Oh, because it's a nice day and because I also want to play with the ball" or "Johnnie will be outside or Susie will be outside" if they're going




out into the neighborhood or the block. So the child is giving you many reasons for something. Or the child is feeling sad, we say, “Gee you look kind of sad. Why?” “Well, because Johnnie was mean to me.” “Well, are there other reasons too?” “Well Susie was mean to me too. It was just a bad day at school, Mom and I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Okay, now the child is giving you two or three reasons so the child is becoming a multi-causal thinker and this follows the same format. We try to expand this across the full range of emotional and social domains or themes so for happiness – giving five reasons why you’re happy but you don’t get explicit saying “Give me five reasons why you’re happy.” But you say, “Gee, you’re looking kind of happy today. Why are you so happy?” “Oh, because the teacher gave me an “A” or Susie invited me over to play.” “Gee, any other reasons why you’re so happy?” So you’re always trying to get more ideas in response to your ideas so the child is elaborating more and more.

Now we just further established the sense of reality. We further established the sense of logical thinking and a higher level of thinking. And we’re also enlarging our emotional and social coping that says we can consider many reasons for things. For example, we can consider three or four different reasons why little Susie might not have wanted to play with us today. One – she hates us which is a conclusion we often come to if we’re only a single causal thinker where we’re an all-or-nothing thinker. We go from one extreme to the other extreme versus considering many reasons. Well, maybe she doesn’t like us anymore or maybe she had a better offer today or maybe she has something else she has to do or maybe she’s just in a bad mood or maybe there is something I don’t know about. So for a multi-causal thinker, we can consider many possibilities and we don’t jump to conclusions as readily and we don’t get involved in all-or-nothing kind of thinking. So multi-causal thinking can be a big help in our social and emotional coping, as well as further establishing our sense of reality and our sense of logic.

And here too the challenge to the caregiver is a simple one. Follow the child’s natural interests – the child wants to talk about Stephanie at school not playing with her, or in a pretend play situation, but expand, expand – go after many reasons for the feeling or the words of the child.

We’re going to talk more about this next time as we get into the higher levels of thinking – multi-causal thinking, gray area, comparative thinking, and reflective thinking and how we challenge those capacities when the child is ready as part of our Floortime.

So again, always start with following the child’s lead but then we challenge, challenge, and challenge but in a fun way to help the child get to higher and higher levels of thinking. And we’ll also talk about how academics fit into this; how when we get to



be a multi-causal thinker or even a causal thinker; how it readies the child for more formal academic kind of learning so that will be for next time. Thank you for joining us this morning.