

Web-Based Radio Show

DIR®/Floortime™ Basics Part IV

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Good morning and welcome to our Web-based Radio Show. Today is October 31, 2008. As you know, we have been talking about a Floortime Primer or Floortime Basics and we have been talking about how following the child's lead helps tune into where the child is emotionally and where their affective or emotional interests are, and that gets things started because we have explained how the emotions organize the child's senses and motor skills, and most importantly, enables a child to learn to create symbols and think, and it facilitates language development.

We have also been talking about the challenge component of Floortime – how to follow the lead but then off of the child's lead or off of the child's interests we challenge the child to higher and higher levels of emotional, social, and intellectual development. We have talked about the different levels we try to challenge the child to master and we go from one level to the next level. Sometimes mastery at one level is not completed but we're working on multiple levels at once, transcending the child's engagement, for example, while we're working on emotional signaling and back-and-forth gesturing and even a little bit of use of ideas.

And we talked about elaborating ideas and being creative and how we get that cooking; and the importance of meaningful use of ideas as opposed to rote or structured use of ideas.

Last time we talked about logical thinking – how we help the child connect his or her ideas together so that the child has a sense of reality and can connect what's inside of him or her – his ideas or feelings expressed through ideas, with the ideas of the outer world usually represented through the caregiver. And, how strong emotions – happiness, glee or excitement or sad feelings or angry feelings are particularly important in strengthening that boundary. The back-and-forth interaction around these feelings, the negotiation establishes a "me" and a "you" rather than just a "me, me, me." And the "you" becomes a representative of the outer reality so that's why it's so important to have that back-and-forth interaction, particularly around strong emotional themes.




Also something we didn't mention last time, as we are establishing this sense of reality, as we're helping the child connect ideas together and the child is getting a sense of what's inside them and what's outside them, the child is also forming a sense of self now at a new level. Earlier the child formed a sense of who they were through interactive gesturing, through emotional signaling, even before they had words or ideas before they were two years old, particularly in the second year of life, that sense of who I am as a "me" becomes a little more organized as they recognize patterns and they see all the things that pertain to what they want and what they do and they see all the things that mommy or daddy wants and does, and they have a sense of who they are and other people are as people. Not conceptually, not with ideas, but just a kind of intuitive sense of that.

Now, this same capacity becomes established at the level of ideas so the child is now piecing together not only their ideas with the caregiver's ideas, but they are piecing together their own ideas with other ideas they have. So they are forming a sense of themselves as somebody who is happy sometimes, sad sometimes, someone who wants juice sometimes, other times wants a pizza, someone who wants to go out and slide or watch TV, somebody who likes this person and doesn't like that person, or who enjoys this at school or doesn't enjoy that at school – so they are getting a sense of themselves as little persons and also part of this is their gender. They are forming a sense of themselves as boys or girls at the level of ideas, although here too they have had an intuitive sense of this all along. And this is a gradual process. This doesn't happen magically all of sudden in one day when they answer the "why" question and are causal thinkers – it's a very gradual process. And when we divide it up into these steps, we are, in a sense, artificially describing something as though it were discreet or separate from one another when it's really a continuous progression up the developmental ladder.

So much is happening as a child is connecting ideas together. And it's a very, very important step in development and the big question is how does the caregiver challenge this? We talked a little bit about this last time and I'm going to elaborate a little bit more on it now as we get into what we call multi-causal thinking, or as we get into the next level where we look at many reasons for things. But it's important to talk about all the things that caregivers and educators and therapists do both with children who don't have challenges, as well as children who do, to facilitate, to enhance the ability to connect ideas together.


There are two essential principles that caregivers (could be parents, educators, extended family, therapists, others who interact with the child, including siblings) need to remember. Again, this is true for children developing without challenges, as well as those who have many challenges including autism. One principle is to help the child or



challenge the child to always connect his ideas or her ideas to your ideas. In other words, if you say “A”, the child’s “B” should be related to your “A”. So you start off following the child’s natural interests or lead. If it’s in pretend play, the child is having the mommy dolly feed the baby dolly and you start talking to the baby dolly and you say, “Oh, I don’t like that juice” or “I love that juice. I want more.” Then the child needs to either do something or say something that is connected. As I expressed last time, if the child goes off on a tangent and turns to the truck, you can say, “Oh, what about my juice? What about my juice? Are you going to give me my juice or play with your truck? What are you going to do? What are you going to do?” “I’m going to play with the truck.” “Well, Mr. Truck, Mr. Truck – I need juice. I need juice” and you challenge a child and finally a child may out of frustration say, “No juice. We’re going away on the truck” because the child, by this time, has the use of ideas and often has the use of some language. Again, the child doesn’t need to answer your question the way you want it to be answered or even respond to your statement, “I need juice, I need juice” but needs to respond to it in a way that shows the child is taking it into account so there is recognition that you’re making a statement and there is a connection between the two.

And the second general principle is, and it’s really simpler than the first one and may be this first one can be assumed under it, is challenge the child to make sense. When a child is connecting ideas together, even if it’s in pretend play, the sequence needs to make sense. “I want more juice” needs to be responded to with “No juice” or “No, juice now, truck” or “Okay, here’s some more juice” or “Out of juice – milk” – whatever – but the child’s statement has to make sense in relationship to your statement. Or your expression of ideas has to be connected to the child’s in such a way so that what the child expresses through a picture or through typing out on an electronic device an answer or a response, their elaboration has to make sense. If not, you’re like two parallel expressers of ideas – you are both expressing ideas, you may even be both chatting up a storm but there is no connection, and it doesn’t, therefore, make sense.

Also, it needs to make sense in another way that it needs to be logical. If you say to the child, “Why do you want to go outside?” and the child says, “I want to go outside to fly to the moon” that doesn’t necessarily make sense unless you’re doing pretend play, but the child is really wanting to go outside and trying to have a reality conversation. So then you have to clarify and say, “Well, is that really what you want to do or is that just make believe?” or “Is that just make believe or is that what you really want to do?” and if the child says, “It’s really what I want to do” say “Well, I’m confused because how would we get to the moon?” “A rocket.” “Well where’s the rocket?” and the child may point to some little doghouse outside, “That’s the rocket!” and the parent may then say again, “Okay, well let’s go out to the rocket” and the child goes into the doghouse and the parent




says, “Okay, what are we going to do now?” and the child says, “Well we press the button and we’re on the way to the moon.” Clearly, the child is involved in a fantasy and so the parent needs to then or the therapist or educator needs to help clarify, “Well, where are we now? Did we get there yet?” and the child may say, “Yes, we’re on the moon and now we’re going to go down the slide on the moon.” And then you may say to the child, “You know what this is called, this is called make believe” and then try to help the child establish what’s make believe and what’s reality.

Now if this is a child who is constantly confusing make believe and reality, keeps wanting things that are fantasy based, but treating it as reality, as real – “I want daddy here now” and daddy is at work and the child has no recognition of it or no recognition of other people’s needs or feelings or wants or desires and seems to blur what’s inside them and what’s outside them. If this is the case, then the child needs lots of work on back-and-forth interaction and also lots of basic nurturing, so lots of Floortime, lots of fantasy play and lots of reality based conversations. The way to help a child in such a situation is to take opportunities when the child has high motivation, high desire, or high interest in something real – he’s hungry, wants a cookie, or is really wanting to play with another child, or really wanting to go outside and do something – and play with this reality fantasy distinction at those moments. “Well, here’s a make believe cookie.” “No, no – want the one there.” “Oh, that’s the real cookie. Do you want to do real cookie or make believe cookie?” “Real cookie mom, real cookie, mom” and that helps the child create the intellectual understanding of real versus pretend because now they have high desire, they really want to have reality, but the greater nurturing, greater interaction between the parent and the child, the extra hang-out time or “Floortime” as we call it, with mom and dad or with others also helps the child establish this reality fantasy boundary because they are getting more interaction around what’s inside me and what’s not inside me. So when the child is confusing reality and fantasy, recognize this as a larger challenge in the establishment of this boundary between the "me" and "you" or what’s outside me, that’s not me. Me versus not me.

So really, in a general sense, it means more interaction; more Floortime for that child, and particularly around strong emotions. And also an examination of the family dynamics – is dad available if there is a dad in the family? Is there a mom available if there is there a mom in the family? Is the child being left to a nanny or a babysitter who is just watching TV or talking on the phone and letting the child play by themselves all the time in which case there is not an opportunity to establish this back-and-forth interaction and establish this boundary.

As the child is learning to connect ideas together, one also wants to make sure that about at least half the time is spent on reality conversations – friends, school; what you




want to do, what's going to be for dinner, play opportunities, what you want to play with outside – the “why” of all these situations.

So the general idea is we take high affect or strong emotional interest of the child and have both reality conversations around those as well as pretend or fantasy play. We also help establish in a sense of reality and the reality fantasy boundary and the ability to connect ideas together by having lots of peer play dates because with peers the child has to deal with their needs in comparison to a peer's needs and it is not only competition among who's toys we're going to play with or who's game we're going to play with first, or who is going to be the boss or who is going to be the follower, but there's an exchange of interest; an exchange of ideas. Even in a chase game, someone is chasing someone else – there's a logic to that. Peer play helps establish and further elaborate this sense of logic and sense of reality. It's hard for a child who is living in their own world only to have peer play and for a child who is having difficulty because they are living predominantly in their own world; you want more peer play dates. So for both the typically developing child and especially the child with special needs, we want to get up to at least four peer play dates a week. For the child who has a little bit of language, we want an interactive child who has a little bit more language at least to facilitate that play. Playing with siblings can be very helpful also.

Often an adult facilitator is necessary for a child with special needs. The adult facilitator creates games where the children are interacting together, exchanging their ideas, exchanging gestures, so the game might be that the two children need to hide together and the adult is going to find them but they have to hide in the same place. So they have to communicate with one another to hide. Or daddy is playing a wrestle game and they both have to jump on daddy's tummy, or one has to hold his arms while one holds the legs. Where children are in conflict with each other, often siblings, is a good opportunity, strong emotional interest, not just to say, “You sit here and you sit there” but to say, “Okay, Johnny or Susie – you get to talk first this time and next time Johnny gets to talk first. What do you want? What's your picture of why you guys are fighting?” and then hear from the other child, “Okay, now Johnny or Susie – what's your picture?” and then ask each one of them, “What should we do? You each want the truck now. We only have one truck or we only have one ballerina dolly – what should we do?” And get Johnny's opinion and get Susie's opinion. Or get Susie and James' opinion, depending on who the two children are. And then if the children can't come up with a reasonable plan that seems to satisfy both of them, you can say, “Well, what about this option?” that involves some sharing, or “What about this option?” and let each one again respond.


Best case scenario, you have a long conversation involving exchanges of ideas between both children directly or through you, better directly, and you resolve the



conflict as well. Worse case scenario is you have a long conversation and you don't resolve the conflict – maybe there are some meltdowns – but you have had a long conversation. You have had a long exchange of ideas between two children further establishing the ability to connect ideas together.

This ability to connect ideas together is so critically important because it establishes a sense of reality, helps the child form a sense of who they are as a little person, helps them form their sense of gender – whether they are a boy or a girl, and helps them now begin to explain to themselves and to others through the expression of ideas their different feelings, their different wants, their different desires. And they get to know themselves a little bit better. So these are all essential characteristics of building a healthy foundation for development and for moving on in school and moving on with peer relationships and moving on with the family and family responsibilities. So it's critically important. Again, the role of the caregiver or therapist or educator is to follow these two principles – always challenge a child to connect their idea to your idea in a way that, number two, makes sense, that's logical so it's making sense rather than not making sense. And divvying up the time between pretend and reality but where the pretend has to make sense too. If you're going to the moon, you need a rocket ship. “How are we going to get there?” – “Our magic carpet” so it need not be a fully “scientifically valid plan” for getting to the moon, but it needs to be one that makes sense within the context; within the framework of the child's fantasy play.

Now once we're cooking at the level of connecting ideas together where we're following these principles, and again before we move onto multi-causal thinking and using many ideas, the important other principle here for the caregiver is to show up – to be available enough as an interactive partner and this means also cutting down on alone time and screen time. The child who is playing alone or just in a large group in parallel play with other children is not getting a chance for the back-and-forth communication with others either with gestures or with ideas. So we're not getting this sense of reality, this sense of logic established in a child's life. So playing alone, playing in a large group where there's just parallel play, or too much screen time – computer games or TV – all of this fosters one way communication. You are not exchanging in a back-and-forth way ideas or gestures, so you have to have that back-and-forth communication. That means keeping screen time down to ½ hour, at most 40 minutes a day in short intervals and alone time similarly to 15-20 minutes here and there throughout the day – not two or three hours of just being in your room, playing by yourself or doing pretend play by yourself or watching TV alone because all that fosters communication but only between you and your best buddy, yourself – not between you and another person which is very important at this stage of development. Typically this occurs in the early years between




ages two and four but with a child with special needs or with delays, it may be at eight years old or at 18 years old or at 48 years old with the adult with special needs. So it's very, very important to have this back-and-forth exchange of ideas and the key role of the caregiver is to challenge this, challenge it, challenge it, challenge it, challenge it – until the growing child gets it. And the higher the affect, the higher the energy, and the more playful and the caregiver has to be very soothing as well as playful because if the caregiver gets angry or gets upset it will frighten the child and that will be counter-productive. It won't help the child establish this ability to connect ideas together. A fearful or very anxious child rather than a confident, soothed, nurtured child will have very different capacities to form this connection. And a child who has auditory processing or language problems will take much longer but they can get there. A child who is having trouble with making sense out of what they're seeing; gets lost in the trees and doesn't see the big picture, it will take longer to get there. There are additional things we will be doing as part of the child's intervention program. But the back-and-forth exchange of ideas begins to give the child the big picture; begins to give the child the sense of the larger world.

Now the next step is multi-causal thinking where the child can give many reasons, many ideas related to your idea. So the question, "Why do you want to go outside?" can be greeted with, "Because I want to play and you say, "What else?" "Well, I want to run around and I want to see my friend from across the street, etc., etc." So now the child is connecting many of his or her own ideas to your ideas and this just shows an elaboration of the ability for logical or reality based thinking. And as we explained last time, this helps the child begin to understand the world more fully because there may be many reasons why Jane can't play with you today or why Harold can't play with you today. There may be many reasons why the boy wants a bicycle in the story. There may be many reasons why daddy is coming home late or why mommy is in a good mood or bad mood or whether you're feeling sad, or feeling happy, and this enables a child to become even more reality based because reality doesn't exist in just one reason for things, often there are many reasons for things.

And as we began explaining last time, in both healthy development and in the development of children who have had challenges who are now building healthy foundations, so we want healthy development for everyone. We don't want development on a different path for children with special needs. We want the same path that all children go through because that is necessary for higher level emotional social and intellectual skills and capacities.

But as a child goes to multi-causal thinking, or giving many ideas in relationship to your idea, we see the ability to get beyond what we call polarized thinking – all-or-




nothing thinking. We are always somewhat surprised but also not surprised when we see adults who have very polarized thinking and we see how strong emotions lead to polarized thinking where it's "my way or the highway;" it's either the reds or the blues; it's either one way or another way and there are only two options – I either love you or I hate you. The child doesn't want to play with me – "She hates me mom" "Why?" "Because she wouldn't play with me today." "Well, sweetheart, there could be lots of different reasons why she wouldn't play with you today." "No, she hates me." So that's polarized thinking and we know many adults get stuck in polarized thinking.

Now the stronger the emotion that we have, particularly negative emotions, some that even cause emotions like excitement, the more likely we are to get locked into polarized thinking even if we are capable of higher levels of thinking. So even if we can give many reasons for something and consider different alternatives, if the emotion gets too strong, or too angry, or too fearful, or too excited, too excited in relationship to our own abilities to handle that level of intense emotion, we're likely to go back even if we have advanced to polarized thinking. And if we never advanced beyond polarized thinking; we tend to see the world as either good or evil, as either red or blue. We don't see the world as having many, many different aspects to it; many different components.

So multi-causal thinking is very, very important in establishing a closer sense of reality, or a fuller sense of reality, and very important in our social skills, understanding the possibilities of why and how others are doing what they are doing, and it's very important for our own intellectual progression because we can't understand the story and the reasons why the boy was mad at his friend unless we understand the multiple reasons for this. We're not going to be able to understand different things we're studying in school – the reasons why, for example, it gets dark at night and light during the day unless we can look at the multiple things that are happening, that the earth is rotating, the sun stays in one place, etc., etc.

Now, I mentioned before the way the caregiver establishes multi-causal thinking is basically the same principle as establishing the connection between ideas. It is to help the child make sense all the time, make sure the child is always connecting their ideas to your ideas – but add one more element to it – always go after more ideas. "What else?" What are other possibilities? "Oh surely you must have something else?" So always challenge for more than one reason, always have longer conversations, exchange more ideas on your part – so just elaborate more and challenge the child to elaborate more. If a child wants to go outside, "Okay, we can go outside. What are you going to do? And what else? And what else? Oh, nothing else? Is there anything else that we could do even though we're not going to do it today?" And that way you embellish, you elaborate, you help the child move beyond just giving you the one into the many.




So multi-causal thinking really goes along with causal thinking – it’s just a further elaboration of it. You really follow the same principles – you make sure you’re talking reality half the time and fantasy half the time; or pretend play – it doesn’t have to be half and half but at least half in reality if the child loves fantasy play. Some children like to “escape into fantasy” where you see them not wanting to talk about school or dealing with school but will only do their pretend and they don’t want to move beyond the make believe and here we have to help them. Again, take high interest, things that have high emotion attached to it and have reality conversations. Look at the family dynamics – is the child only close to mommy if daddy is a workaholic or is only close to daddy because mommy is a workaholic and therefore there is no other person to challenge the use of ideas and the child feels dependent on one person and therefore feels dependent on one or two ideas – doesn’t get into the stage of elaboration.

As a child is developing multi-causal thinking, they are seeing themselves also in a more complex way, having many different reasons for their feelings, many different feelings and one wants to, with both causal thinking and multi-causal thinking, help the child do this type of thinking across the full range of emotions – when they’re happy and excited, when they’re angry, when they’re sad, when they’re fearful, when they’re curious – so that they can become a complex thinker in relationship to all the different themes of life. We also want to do this in varying different intellectual endeavors – when they’re reading a passage – what are the possible reasons why the father took the son out fishing? Or what are the different feelings the boy may have had about getting a new bicycle, etc., etc. So we want them to cross the full spectrum, the full range, whether it’s a child without challenges or a child with many challenges, or an older child or a teenager who is acquiring this healthy foundation at a later age.

The best way to establish the multi-causal thinking is by far in strong emotional situations where the child has strong emotional interests as opposed to just purely, for example, impersonal kinds of experiences. So it’s useful to do it across the full range of experiences – the child is reading a passage in a book and what are the different reasons for the leaves turning green in the spring if it’s a book that’s about trees and leaves or flowers. Or what are the different reasons why the boy wanted a bicycle? But it’s even more important to do this when a child is feeling strongly – a friend has invited them over to the house and they’re excited. “How are you feeling?” “Excited.” “Any other feelings?” “Well, yeah, I’m going to get to play with his or her dolly or truck or special spaceship and that is going to be fun, etc.”

But even harder and even sometimes more important is when the child is feeling disappointed or dejected or sad or angry because someone won’t play with them or someone made fun of them at school. “How did that make you feel, sweetheart?” “Sad.”




“Any other feelings?” and you can help the child with multiple choice. “Angry or happy too?” “Well a little bit angry.” “Angry? What’s that feel like?” “It feels like I want to kick him in the head or it feels like I don’t want to play with him tomorrow when he asks me to play.” And the reason why it’s important to do this in these social and emotional situations where the child is feeling strongly, is because that’s where the rubber hits the road, so to speak. That’s where the child is learning to become a multi-causal thinker even when there are strong emotions. When the strong emotions actually stir, we’re looking at the world in a complex way; in a multi-causal way. That helps you become a more complex person – a person who considers many different angles of things. Your own sense of who you are – you’re not uni-dimensional; you’re not loving or hateful; you can have many different feelings – love, devotion, commitment, loyalty, hatred, annoyance, etc.

So becoming a multi-causal thinker allows you to develop as a more complex person, to see the world in a more complex way. And when you do it in these strong emotional situations that are often social and emotional in nature like peer play, you’re doing it where the affects are strong. It’s not as impersonal as just doing it in an academic sense. And when we do it, it also enables us to get into academics. Causal thinking and multi-causal thinking are necessary steps in developing our academic abilities and if we don’t develop this way of thinking, our academic abilities will be limited and this is usually not recognized that this is an important aspect of reading, writing, and doing math.

We will begin our discussion of why this is important for academic abilities and the steps in developing academic abilities and how this runs through causal thinking and multi-causal thinking and we will continue this on our next show as well because it’s such an important topic.

If we consider just the basics of reading, writing and math, and establishing literacy in these, one has to have mastery of all these areas that we challenge the child through our Floortime Basics, through following a child’s natural interests, then challenging the child to become an interactor, a pattern recognizer, a creator of ideas and a logical connector of ideas and a multi-causal connector of ideas.


Let’s take reading. Reading involves being able to connect what one hears, such as words, with a visual pattern. Seeing a series of shapes, making sense of the sequence of shapes and eventually just in sounding out the word, you’re actually sequencing some sounds together with some visual images, different kinds of shapes, so you can memorize A, B, C but you really have to understand the sequence and the sequence of sounds that goes along with it. You can memorize it or you can truly understand it, but to understand



it means you understand patterns and that's the challenge of having many back-and-forth interactions in a row, where you begin seeing the world in terms of patterns. That was the fourth type of challenge we talked about – after having a child pay attention or shared attention and being engaged and being an interactive communicator with gestures and sounds and then getting to be a child who can interact and what we call open and close many circles of communication in a row and beginning to understand how the world operates in terms of patterns. But beyond that to understand the meaning of the word, one has to have ideas because the meaning of the word occurs at the intuitive level but a word that your read is an idea. It's the same as a word expressed, so even if one has a problem with expressing oneself verbally because one can't make sounds, one can recognize the sound sequence as one sees it but one has to be able to form an idea and a meaningful idea at that, not just a memorized idea. So meaningful use of ideas is a prerequisite for understanding the words. And if one is going to understand the sentence where ideas are connected together – The boy went to the store – you have a boy and he's going somewhere and then he's going to the store – to understand the connection between ideas one has to be a causal thinker. One has to have the ability to connect ideas together and if one can become a multi-causal thinker then one can truly understand the meaning of the passage and elaborate on it and understand it to a greater extent rather than a lesser extent.

So just reading involves mastering all these levels. And, how about writing? Writing requires motor skills – making the shapes, but it involves all these same steps – understanding patterns, being able to create a word that is meaningful to you so you're writing not just gibberish but writing, “The boy went to the store” or “I want a new bicycle” or “I want a new computer game.” So writing involves the same steps as reading does and if one wants to have one's writing make sense, one has to be a causal thinker or have the ability to connect ideas together and if one wants to be a more elaborate writer, one has to be able to be a multi-causal thinker.

What about math? Well, math involves a sense of quantity. That, too, is a pattern more or less and often we teach math in terms of having a lot or a little or more or less. So this gets established often as we are becoming a pattern recognizer, having many interactive gestures in a row – one is getting a sense of three cookies versus two cookies even though one can't express it yet with words. But the 16 or 17 month old who doesn't have the words is always going to point to the six cookies rather than the three cookies and then when one does have ideas, one can label this. Say this is “five,” this is “two” but know what it means because one is already a pattern recognizer and one is already interacting with the world through many, many circles of communication. And if one is going to understand that $2 + 3 = 5$ one has to be able to connect ideas together. Three



apples plus one apple and you have four apples, so you're connecting the idea of three with the idea of one and you can picture it, you can play with it as you have blocks or real apples that you line up and count but you have to see now the connection between ideas and if you're going to go beyond that and get to higher levels of math, you have to become a multi-causal thinker if you're going to do any type of multiplication or any type of more complex addition and subtraction. Now you're looking at multiple relationships between ideas. And this requires being able to picture quantity; picture more or less or else we just learn math rules in a memory based way. It involves not just ideas at the verbal level, but ideas at what we call the visual spatial level.

Now we will talk more about this next time as we get into yet higher levels of thinking – gray area of thinking, comparative thinking, and reflective thinking and how we challenge those in Basic Floortime operations. So Floortime Basics will continue next time.