

Web-Based Radio Show

Floortime in Schools and Home: Formal Floortime and the Floortime Philosophy in All Interactions

Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

July 30, 2008


Welcome to our Web-Based Radio Show. Today we are going to focus on an issue that comes up frequently in terms of a question that both educators ask me and parents ask me and many different professional groups ask me. What is the difference between formal Floortime and Floortime in schools or Floortime in home settings where you are not actually devoting a full 20 or 30 minutes to really focusing on interacting with the child? So we are going to title this show, “Floortime in Schools and at Home: Formal Floortime and the Floortime Philosophy in All Interactions.”

Let’s start with the school setting because this is where it comes up most frequently. We are seeing more and more schools employing the DIR/Floortime® approach and the natural setting for the school is the classroom. In the classroom, gifted educators will often be working with children one-on-one or in small groups and they will try to keep the child focused and attentive to them and engaged with them and get a good back-and-forth exchange of gestures and smiles and different emotional expressions and try to get some of what we call shared social problem solving where they are doing things together and the child is leading them to where the paintbrushes are or showing them where some play materials are that they want to play with or showing them something else. And, they will try to get shared ideas – talking about whether the child wants to do this or that activity, what the child thinks about looking at this book or that book or whether the child wants to go faster or slower if they are pretending to be an alligator swimming in the water.

These have many of the elements of Floortime. In such a setting, a child may say, “I want to go to the swing in the sensory room or down in the gym” and the educator might ask, “Why?! Why?!” and help the child with multiple choice – “Because it is fun to swing or because you want to go to sleep?” giving a good choice first and a silly choice second. So this helps the child with mastering those fundamental first six stages and certainly practicing the Floortime philosophy or principles in interaction.

It can be applied to academics too. For example, “Which number do you like better?” for the child learning about numbers and “Do you want three of those blocks or one block?” or “Three cookies or one cookie?” or “How fast do you want to go? Do you want to go real, real fast or just a little tiny fast?” Here the child is learning a sense of degrees of things and getting a sense of quantity. One can be working on time, “Well, when should we go down on the swing?”

So many academic concepts will also have this Floortime philosophy embedded in the way we teach, and that is certainly what we recommend. So this is done all the time in the DIR/Floortime® classroom.




Now change the situation to home. Same thing – the child is in the kitchen while mommy is cooking. “Do you want to be mommy’s helper?” “Yes!” “Well, would you get me the salt? It’s over there.” The child may dutifully bring the salt. “Oh, which hand do you want to give it to mommy in? This one or that one?” and “What else do you want to get mommy?” The child might say, “Want juice! Want the juice!” or some other cooking ingredient and we might get a nice back-and-forth interaction verbally, or the child might just be looking at what mom is doing and mom is looking at the child and smiling and seeing if the child will help stir something and move the spoon around with mom and they’ll get some engagement going and some back-and-forth interaction about stirring whatever mommy is making together.

Out in the backyard or in the swimming pool we may get some wonderful interactions with an example in the swimming pool with splashing or with being tossed up in the air and some rough house play with dad and little Susie or little Johnnie, “Do you want to go higher and higher or faster or slower?” We can have lots of fun in this practicing the Floortime philosophy, which we recommend doing all the time at home or at school or even at the supermarket taking cans off the shelves together, picking out which cans you like. The main thing is enticing the child to do to the adult rather than visa versa and getting that back-and-forth interaction going and getting it into a continuous back-and-forth interaction with the child taking more and more initiative, and then getting to the highest level the child can using more complex gestures, using words and ideas, using logical thinking like answering “why” questions if possible, and even going to higher level thinking. So these are all examples of applying the Floortime principles to all situations. So it is Floortime, all the time, everywhere. This is how it occurs in the classroom and in the home settings.

The question is, how is this different from formal Floortime, or what we will call classical Floortime – either designation is fine. Now we were talking about the Floortime philosophy as it is applied in the classroom and the home setting, where you are interacting with the child and helping entice the child to be engaged and attentive and interactive and exchanging ideas if they can, all the time. Now we raised the question how that differs from more formal Floortime sessions. In more formal Floortime sessions, the first difference is we are devoting at least 20 minutes or more, it could be a half hour or 40 minutes counts for two, for really focusing on the child and following their natural interests. So for example if you are cooking and the child is being drawn into your interests, which is good Floortime philosophy time, or you are in the classroom and drawing the child into working on something in academics or a particular skill which is great as long as you are doing it interactively and helping the child take initiative, that is still not formal Floortime. In formal Floortime you are:

1. Focusing solely on the child
2. Focusing for 20 minutes or more
3. Focusing on the child’s natural interests or lead and you have in that setting things that the child is naturally interested in.

Now this could occur in the child’s playroom or play area at school. It could also occur, however, outdoors in the backyard where there are things the child enjoys. It could occur in the swimming pool as well. It could even occur in the supermarket. So it can occur in many settings where there are things the child might naturally be interested in. But the third criteria is, after focusing on the child for 20 minutes or more rather than 5 minutes here and there, is you are focusing on the child’s natural interests. You are focused on taking your lead from the child. That is your first step. That doesn’t mean you only do what your child wants to do or you don’t challenge the child because the fourth step in formal Floortime is to help the child master what you are doing in the Floortime philosophy, sort of applied approach that what we



discussed a few minutes ago as well, but you are helping the child develop and elaborate what they are interested in as much as possible. But in formal Floortime, there is more opportunity to do that because there aren't any distractions. There aren't other children around, you're not being called to do something else, and you have a full 20 minutes or more to help the child elaborate.

So in helping the child elaborate, for example, let's say the child is capable of pretend play and the child starts feeding the dolly. Well, you would have the opportunity because you are not going to be drawn to something else in a few minutes, to bring in another hungry dolly and say, "I'm hungry too! Can I have some of that waffle or pretend hamburger (that the child is feeding the dolly) or can I have some of that good milk?" The child might agree and give the other dolly some food and then the other dolly might ask as the child is feeding it, "I want something else! I don't want anymore milk!" and you might challenge the child to put them to sleep. You say, "I'm tired now. I want to go to bed." Or it might say, "I want to do something else rather than eat. What should I do? What should I do?" and the child has to come up with something else. The child could say, "Well, it's sleep time. I'm going to put you to sleep. How's that?" and the dolly might say, "No, I don't want to go to sleep. I want to do something else." And the child might say, "Well, do you want to play?" and the dolly would say, "Yes, I want to play." "What are we going to play?" and the child might come up with a game to play. Now we are elaborating. Now we are elaborating, we are challenging the child, the dolly is becoming a little provocative at times to get the child to come up with new ideas, but we are expanding the pretend play. We might get into the realm of feelings with the verbal child who is imaginative. The dolly might, after saying, "I don't want the milk" and the child turns away you say, "Oh, how are you feeling about the fact that I don't want your milk? Do you have feelings about that?" Then the child who has the dolly who is feeding might say, "I'm sad that you don't want my milk" etc. And we might get into the world of feelings.


The key is that we are helping the child elaborate over a longer period of time which means a deeper elaboration. Now if the child is not yet capable of pretend play, which is a very important milestone to reach, you're not going to be working on just a continuous flow of back-and-forth gesturing. But now the continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction and the amount of engagement we get as part of that back-and-forth interaction, we have a full 20 minutes or more to keep that cooking. So we are exchanging gestures with facial expressions, with different vocalizations, with the child taking you places and showing you things that they want, you are doing different activities together, but you are maintaining that engagement and that continuous back-and-forth interaction during all of those activities for a full 20 minutes or more. So you can elaborate the engagement; you can elaborate the back-and-forth interaction and what we call the problem solving together for a much longer period of time and it gets into greater depth.

This also can be applied to connecting ideas together – logical thinking. Now the formal Floortime is especially helpful when we get to the higher levels of thinking; we get to logical thinking like the "why" questions and then the multiple "why" questions or what we call multi-causal thinking where the child is giving you many reasons for something. Or, get into gray area and comparative thinking where the child is talking about different feelings and to what degree the dolly feels one way or another way; how angry, how sad – a little, a lot, a whole lot. Or we get into reflective thinking where the child can talk about how they are angrier than they thought they would be in this situation, or how so-and-so is mean to them at school and they weren't as angry as they usually had been and they must be getting better at not taking things personally.

Now those levels are also promoted with the more formal Floortime simply because there is more opportunity when you are devoting 20 minutes or more. In five minutes, it is hard to get into why you feel sad or why you feel happy. You are likely to get an answer from a child that is, "I don't know." Or, if you are talking about school and what you liked and what you didn't like, and helping the child compare experiences at school – "Well, I liked gym and recess but I didn't like math and reading." "Well, how come sweetheart? Why?" "Well, I like running around and playing with the different toys and playing with little Susie and Johnny and I don't like sitting at the desk and I don't like numbers." Or, "The teacher talks too fast and I can't figure out what she is saying." Now for a child to explain all of that to you, it will take awhile. He'll have to feel your patience and your interest. So if it is just on the run, "How was school today? What did you do? What did you like and what didn't you like?" and it is a five minute conversation, you're likely to get, "I don't know, it was okay" and then the child will try to go watch TV or play on the computer or do something else. On the other hand, if you are really sitting down with the child, taking an interest in what the child is doing, it might be drinking some milk and talking about how you like milk too and what would the child think if you had a glass of milk with him (or her) and you both drink milk together after school and you say, "Oh, and how was school today?" The child says, "Okay." You say, "Okay? Gee, you don't have a really big smile on your face when you say okay. Were there some good parts and not so great parts today?" "Well, it was really a lot of fun at lunch time because I got to sit next to Susie (or Johnnie)." "But it sounds like there were some parts that weren't so good." "Well, I didn't like reading today. I couldn't figure out what we were supposed to read and the teacher was in a grumpy mood." "Well how did that make you feel, sweetheart?" "Well, I felt like I was stupid." "Stupid? What did that feel like inside?" "Well, just like my brain doesn't work right sometimes." "Oh? What do you think happens when your brain isn't working right? What is it doing?" "Well, it is just thinking about other things like I'm not thinking about what the teacher wants us to think about." "Oh! What do you think about?" "Oh, I think about running around outside or getting out of there." "Oh! So you kind of like to make believe that you are doing something else!" "Yes! Yes!" etc., etc.

This conversation can go on. What you are doing here is following our rules. You are taking the cue from the child – he is drinking milk so you are going to drink some milk with him (or her); you are engaging the child, you are getting interaction going just simply by drinking milk together, and then you are getting into a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction, only now at the highest level of sharing ideas and sharing the child's day. But you are doing it in an in-depth way where the child feels your engagement and your patience and your interest in what they are interested in. And as the child feels your interest, they are much more likely to share with you what is on their minds, which, in this example, the child is doing. Now not every child will be quite this quick to do it and it may take many months of this activity before the child can talk to you openly or even find the words to talk to you openly about it, like their school day or how they feel, but it is more likely to happen with this sort of more formal Floortime approach where you are using Floortime principles, but again, you are focusing on the child, spending 20 minutes or more, and really following the child's natural interests, and helping the child elaborate and elaborate and elaborate.

We should come to one additional principle of the more formal Floortime. As you help the child elaborate, your goal is not to give the child formal advice. Your goal is not to put closure on what the child is doing. You can even leave it open for next time if you have been doing it for 20 minutes or more and you have to run to do a task. You can say, "Sweetheart, I need to run and check something. Can we continue this a little later?" So you are following the child's lead and continuing the elaboration as long as it goes on over days or even over months.




So in formal Floortime, we are helping the child elaborate, and elaborate, and elaborate at whatever level they are. It becomes especially important, obviously, when a child becomes capable of pretend play and using their creativity and imagination, and equally vitally important as the child enters into logical thinking – connecting ideas together if we want to get to higher and higher levels. But it is also very, very important to get that continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction going because that will promote the child then getting to imaginative play and creativity and logical thinking. So it is really important for all the levels to sustain the engagement, to help the child attend better, to get that continuous flow of interaction and more problem solving, which sets the stage for imagination and creativity and logical thinking.

The biggest challenge I often see is that as a child becomes more engaged and more interactive, we, meaning the adults who are working with the child whether we are professionals or parents or parents and professionals – sometimes it is the same person – or educator professionals, whatever our role is with the child, often as we help the child become more engaged and more interactive, we may become complacent. What I often hear from colleagues, whether they are mental health professionals, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, parents, educators, or developmental pediatricians, what I often hear is, “Well, we don’t do the formal Floortime so much anymore because we do it all the time. We are doing it all the time.” This means practicing the Floortime philosophy, which is great. But, that in itself, while being great, is not sufficient. We must do the formal Floortime too. Now we start off at eight sessions a day or often more with a child, and we may, as the child gets busier and has more peer play dates, which is often part of the program, and is more active in school and more verbal and initiating more, we may cut it down to six or even four formal Floortime sessions, depending on the goals for the child. Do we need to work on creative thinking? Do we need to work more on the higher levels of logical thinking? Where is the effort going to be? When we are doing Floortime, we are working on all of the levels at once, but some of the earlier levels like engagement and two-way back-and-forth interaction and shared social problem solving will happen naturally by themselves as the child has already mastered them. So we hardly even think about it. As soon as we sit down to talk to the child or play with the child, they are taking the initiative and doing those things, so we are focusing our attention on the elaboration of the imagination or the higher levels of logical thinking.

Often there is a let-up as the child is more interactive, particularly as the child becomes more verbal. What I see happening is, whether it is in school settings or home settings or both school and home settings, is that the child’s creativity and imagination is not being challenged to develop as much as it could. This then slows down the child’s opportunity for becoming a better and better abstract thinker which means higher levels of logical thinking, getting to the level where the child can say, “Gee, I’m angrier than I should be in this situation” or “Gee, I don’t know why I was so sensitive to what Johnny (or Susie) did at school today. I must have gotten up on a sensitive day.” It is not easy to imagine why creative thinking would facilitate that, but the imaginative and creative thinking opens the door to higher levels of logical and abstract thinking. It is through imagination and creativity that we become logical and abstract. That is a very, very important principle to remember. If we don’t do the more formal Floortime, if we don’t get as imaginative and creative as we can get, the child stays in simple soap operas rather than developing the grand epic. In just a moment, I’m going to explain why that is the case; why the imaginative thinking is so important.

Why is imagination so critical for abstract thinking, and for that matter, why is full mastery of shared social problem solving and the continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction so vital for higher levels of abstract thinking? Let’s go step-by-step because I think this is the answer to the question of why




formal Floortime is so important even when you are “doing it all the time” and practicing the Floortime philosophy.

When a child gets into a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction with others, they are aware of the world and reality of the world and taking in the world through you and interactions socially all the time. When they are kind of in and out – self-absorbed for one minute, interacting then for another few seconds, then self-absorbed a little bit, it is like they are sampling the world. They don’t have an appreciation of you as a person or their physical environment as a full comprehensive environment with many different elements; they may get stuck on a few trees and not see the forest, and if you lack a full appreciation of the other person, it is hard to understand their feelings and where they are coming from; if you lack a full appreciation of your environment, it is hard to see the big picture and know how your behavior is affecting that environment or affecting others in the environment or even just where things are. It is hard to get, in other words, a sense of space and quantity and do higher level math because you are sampling things – you are sampling a tree here and a tree there and not seeing the whole forest. So whether it is seeing the whole forest of people or seeing the whole forest of things or it’s both, you need that continuous flow to be fully interactive with your world. You learn by interacting with your world, not by simply looking or listening to your world periodically. So that is why these earlier stages of attention, engagement, back-and-forth interaction, and the continuous flow of problem solving is so vital.

When it comes to imagination, here is where you are letting your mind take off. Here is where you are challenging the child to expand their horizons. So now the child is learning to play with ideas; to take ideas and not just have mommy be mommy but mommy can become the magic queen or witch, or daddy can become the king or the evil knight. So you are playing with ideas. You can have action figures representing the ideas. This ability to represent a physical object with different ideas or a person through dress-up with different ideas expands the mind; expands the use of ideas. What is thinking, really, other than playing with ideas? With thinking, we are putting these ideas into a logical format. But what do you have to have before you can put ideas into a logical format like answering “why” questions? You have to have what? You have to have the ideas. So the child who says, “I can’t think of anything” or “I don’t know” or “I don’t know what I want” or “I don’t know how I feel” or “I don’t know how you feel” is a child who is not generating a lot of ideas. How does a child learn to generate ideas? Through imaginative play, through experimenting with ideas, and through playing with ideas. So you are generating a wealth of ideas – you are visiting foreign lands, you are creating new feelings and new scenarios and experimenting with anger and aggression and love and greed and curiosity, all through your pretend play. So you are covering the world of possible ideas and emotional ideas – what we call emotional thinking – through your pretend play. Then when you start combining these ideas in different logical ways – answering “why” questions and causal thinking and then going up to the higher levels of thinking – you have a lot to work with. So it is kind of like trying to build a house with a few materials – with just a few nails and a few pieces of wood – or having all the ingredients you need to build that house – having the wood, the nails, the glass, the sink, the stove – which is going to allow you to build a more elaborate house; having more materials to work with. So the pretend and the imagination gives you the materials to work with.

Then we need to practice the higher levels of thinking through these examples I gave you before – through engaging and following the child’s natural interests – because that motivates the child to get to higher and higher levels of thinking. So a child won’t become a causal thinker if you never ask him why he wants to go outside because no one has challenged that level of thinking. The child won’t give you many reasons unless you ask him, “Well, can you give me other reasons?” To become a comparative and gray area thinker, you have to ask the child about degrees of things – “Well, how angry do you feel?” or “How



sad do you feel?” To be reflective, the child needs to be challenged; to be asked, “Well how does this compare to the way you usually feel, the way you are feeling today?” to the child who says they are feeling sad or angry or happy.

So we are always challenging the other person to higher and higher levels. Now for some of us, this comes naturally. We just do this without thinking. This is just the way we talk to people. For others, we actually have to think through the steps. Regardless, in doing the formal Floortime, we have the chance to solidify and elaborate the different steps that will lead to where we want to go; to the highest level of abstract and reflective thinking.

So just to review then, we have Floortime all the time, everywhere, in classrooms, in school settings, at home, where we are following the Floortime philosophy. We are getting as much cooking as we can, incorporating as many levels as we can, taking into account the child’s natural interests but in the context of whatever we are doing – shopping or cooking or going to the swimming pool.

In formal Floortime, we are in a setting where there are things of natural interest to the child, whether it is the swimming pool or the play room or whether it is at school in a little corner of the classroom with some toys in it, we are following the child’s natural interests or lead – taking our cue from the child, we are challenging the child then to elaborate more – not just simply doing what the child is doing but challenging the child for further elaboration to extend their circles of communication or their pretend play or their logical thinking, and we are elaborating, and elaborating, and elaborating; always enticing and always challenging the child. We never stop elaborating. As we elaborate, we are always trying to promote higher and higher levels, always going to the next level, always trying to be a quarter step ahead of the child. We don’t keep closure. We allow the child to keep the elaboration cooking so it is an open-ended approach to the world. We do this from the point of view of the themes the child is talking about, whether it is anger or love or greed or curiosity, and we do this in terms of also the equipment the child brings – their eyes, their ears, their movement patterns. So it is verbal, it is visual, it is movement – it is all of these things together. So we are always elaborating, elaborating, elaborating with the child, enticing the child to take more and more initiative.

So in summary again, a second summary, there is a Floortime philosophy and there is formal Floortime. Both are great, both are important, both are necessary, but Floortime philosophy alone is necessary but not sufficient. Formal Floortime is necessary and sufficient in the sense that it compliments the Floortime philosophy and is the core and the engine that drives development. So we want to keep it cooking, even when the child is making great progress.

So to conclude, don’t look away from what got you there, keep it cooking, keep both the Floortime philosophy and the formal Floortime even as the child gets older and more skillful, you reduce the number of formal Floortime sessions.

Thank you for joining us today.