

Web-Based Radio Show

Helping Children and Families Cope with the Child's Growing Awareness of His Challenges and Helping the Child Overcome Compulsions and Fears


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Good morning. This is Dr. Greenspan. Welcome to our Web-based Radio Show. Today's topic is a very, very important one, and one that actually fits in with the beginning of school and the starting of what I always viewed as I was growing up as the "true" new year – the beginning of the fall. It's how to help children who are beginning to become aware of some of their challenges, understand and cope with that dawning awareness. Then if we have time today, we are going to get into a second topic, which is helping children overcome their compulsions and their fears. Many children, as you know, when they are anxious become compulsive and sometimes even ritualistic and this is especially true for many children with special needs. If we have time today, we will explore why that is the case – more with children with special needs than, let's say, in the general population, and how to help children overcome it.

First, how to help children with that dawning awareness that they have challenges, and the challenges may make them feel kind of different than other children. First, I'll share a little story to get us started that I just heard recently, about a 9-year old little boy who had been diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder, but has become verbal and made nice progress. He came home upset one day and shared with his mother that he couldn't do the things that some of his peers were doing. What he focused on was that he "falls when I run and try to kick the ball" and "kids look at me funny like something is wrong with me" and "I feel different." Mother felt somewhat mortified. This is almost her worst fear and nightmare coming true. It was a feeling she had hoped to protect her child from; one that she wished he would never have to face as all parents want for their children.

The first thing, though, we have to realize as we try to understand this situation and help children and families cope with it, is that while it looks like a cloud, there is a silver lining. The silver lining is a big, big, big silver lining. It is a very, very, very important one. The silver lining is this: That when a child reaches the point where they




have enough self-awareness to say, “I feel different” and “I feel bad” and “I feel sad” and “I can’t do some of the things that some of the other children are doing” – that awareness of themselves in relationship to others, and the ability to reflect and compare themselves to others and then describe how they feel about it, is a monumental accomplishment in children’s intellectual and emotional and social development.

So while I share the pain of any family and any child who is feeling sad, anguished, or feeling different, I am also overjoyed at the developmental accomplishment that that feeling signifies. If we consider the different developmental challenges children with special needs may have, reaching that level of self awareness is, in some instances, truly a wondrous event and one that needs to be celebrated. There should be secret joy behind the tears.

First before we talk about how to help the child cope with it, let’s talk a little bit about why this is such a monumental accomplishment – what it represents in the child’s intellectual and social capacities. As many of you recall who have been listening to the show, but for those who haven’t been, children progress through a number of stages of thinking. At the preverbal level, before they become verbal, they have to learn to look and attend, they have to learn to engage with others so that they are aware there is a world outside themselves of people, as well as things. They have to be purposeful and have two-way communication with gestures: reaching, showing, pointing, taking, exchanging. They have to be able to problem solve with others as their first way of understanding that life operates in patterns: taking mommy by the hand to find a toy they want or find the food they want in the refrigerator. Those are early preverbal steps in thinking, as well as in social skills.

Then we get to the verbal ones, where children learn to use ideas meaningfully: “Me hungry” or “Want a hug.” Then they learn to combine ideas together: “No, no go out, too cold” or “Want watch TV” where they make sense and they are logical. Then they progress to what we call multi-causal thinking where they give you many reasons for something: “I want to go out and play because I want to climb and I want to jump and I want to run and the sun is out.” Then they get into what we call gray area thinking and comparative thinking where they say things like, “I like Sally better than Stephanie because she is more fun to play with.” So here they are not only comparing two people, but telling you how one is better than the other because they are “more fun.” Then, if that goes well, they get into reflective thinking where they can actually evaluate their own feelings and thoughts: “Gee, I did a great essay and I feel good about it” or “Gee, I messed that one up and it wasn’t so good” or “Gee, I’m angrier than I normally am in this circumstance, I wonder why?” or “I shouldn’t have lost my head and gotten so overwhelmed or overloaded so easily.” So, the children can not only see shades of gray,




they can actually reflect on themselves in their own thinking. In other words, at this highest level, they begin having an awareness of who they are, how they relate to others, and how they compare to others. So, “I’m angrier than I should be” means they have a sense of the norm, of how one ordinarily behaves in this situation, and then they determine that they are outside that expectable range for them, what their own normal behavior is. So that is quite a high standard. We hope all adults have that standard. Sometimes we see friends or colleagues who don’t have that reflective ability and get impulsive or have tantrums and don’t take a step back and say, “Gee, I wonder why I did that” or “Gee, that wasn’t typical of me” etc.

So it is very, very important to reach that level of self reflection. You need that for essay writing in school where you are comparing two authors and you can then critique your own method of analysis. You need it for evaluating your own feelings. You need it for having an integrated sense of self – knowing who you are. That means taking a step back and being able to conceptualize what sort of person you are and what sort of person other people are.

Now we come back to our main point: The child who feels different. When a child actually verbalizes that – doesn’t just say “kids tease me” or “children were mean” but actually says, “I feel different because the children tease me” or “because I tripped when I was trying to kick the soccer ball” or “because I giggled when I wasn’t supposed to in the middle of the class” or “because my glasses are thicker” or “because I walk differently than the other kids” – when the child says it that way and talks about feeling different, they are showing the early signs of this high level of reflective thinking. This is what we call Level 9 in thinking, which really characterizes a very critical landmark that opens the door to true abstract reflective thinking.


Interestingly, children with autistic spectrum disorders, according to the older theory – not our DIR Floortime Model, but according to the older theory, weren’t supposed to be able to achieve this level. They weren’t supposed to, even at their best if they learned to be verbal, they weren’t supposed to be able to go beyond a very concrete level of more memorized types of scripts, and not to have this flexible, reflective type of thinking where they can make inferences and understand themselves and others. Sometimes people have described this kind of thinking in terms of theory of mind – being able to empathize with the feelings and wishes of another person; understand the other person’s perspective. Again, lots of research, children with autistic spectrum disorders are thought to have problems with theory of mind. Yet, we are seeing in our work using the DIR Floortime Model, we are seeing more and more children capable of theory of mind capacities, capable of empathy, capable of this high level of reflective thinking. So, when a child comes in and says to mommy, “Gee, I feel different because…” and lays out



the reasons, that's a monumental accomplishment, and a sign of this early level of reflective thinking. It reminds me of a statement that I think is attributed to Socrates when he pondered with one of his student's dilemmas which basically was, "Would you rather be wise and sad or not wise and a happy camper?" Obviously Socrates favored wisdom and sadness. Well, with wisdom or knowledge or intelligence goes realistic appraisal of the world and it means we can't have, often, false optimism. It means we need to appreciate the factors as they are, but it also, on the very positive side, gives us the skills to analyze the situation, to figure out new ways of coping, and to change the reality. So it doesn't mean we have to live in the reality that we are presented with, it gives us this ability to react to that reality, to have feelings about that reality, but then to alter that reality. In fact, that's the history of humankind. As human beings advanced in their thinking, they began to be able to change their worlds and that separates humans from other living beings in the world - the ability to change their environment. To varying degrees, different animals can do that too, but humans have done it to a much greater degree, obviously, and some would argue at times in a negative way, but nonetheless, the opportunity exists for positive change.


So first and foremost this is a monumental accomplishment. Now, since the child, however, now is capable of feeling sadness and feeling different, so while we are clapping secretly for his monumental social intellectual accomplishment, especially if he had been diagnosed as this child I mentioned earlier was with an autistic spectrum disorder originally, how do we help the child cope with his feelings?

The first answer, and the most important one is *we use his new ability*. We use his new skill, we go with the new strength. And, by doing that, we both strengthen this emerging ability, and we help him cope and deal with the feelings also. So the first thing we do is step one: *We Listen Empathetically*. "Sweetheart, tell me all about it. What happened?" Help him describe the event in detail – what he was doing, what the other children were doing, when he tripped, when he felt clumsy, what the other kids said. Then, after he has given you a visual portrait through his words, which as a sideline is helping him sequence his words, use language vividly, and if necessary you can have him draw it, and you should be very active in helping him find the words when he can't find the words or draw the picture or use his gestures or even play act it out with you. Always with communicating and all enhanced by his verbal description, sometimes enhanced by doing it and then describing it or drawing it and then describing it, all that will enhance his ability to retrieve words, to find the phrases, and he'll be practicing language while he is sharing with you his experiences, which is very reassuring as a first step, just like for an adult sharing their trauma of the day with a best friend or with their spouse or with a therapist. That first step makes you feel better already.



The second step is to *help him describe the feelings associated with the event*. It may start with sadness, but is his sadness the same as your sadness? So try to help him be a poet of his feelings. What does that sadness feel like? Where was it – in the tummy? In the heart? In the head? You know, help him be a better describer of that feeling. Maybe the feeling of sadness is really more like anger, even though he uses the label of sadness. Maybe it's more like embarrassment or humiliation. Or, maybe it's more like rage. Maybe it's more like self-hate, "I'm a bad person." What's the quality of what the child might be labeling as just "sad." So always go into the feelings and don't assume you know it just because the child is using a familiar term; one that you've used. That is very, very, very important.


As a third step, after the child has explored his feelings, and I should add, this conversation may occur over many days. It's not necessarily a one-time conversation so a little piece of it may occur today and another piece tomorrow, and it may be a week before the whole conversation unfolds. You can help re-open the door by saying, "Yesterday we were talking about this and we haven't finished and..." After you talk about their feelings, *get the child's ideas about what he routinely does in that circumstance*, when he feels that way, when someone says something mean and he feels sad, bad, embarrassed, or humiliated – what does he usually do? He may say he usually throws a tantrum, or runs to the teacher, or just walks away and stays by himself, or gets angry and yells and screams at the other child or hits the other child. What does he usually do? *Then, begin brainstorming together alternatives*. What would be an effective strategy for him? It might be short-term – what to do at the moment, where the best strategy may indeed be walking away from the situation or just finding some other children to play with. Or, talking to the teacher about it. But then there also may be a long-term strategy. The long-term strategy might be, let's say, for the child who may feel clumsy because they can't kick the ball – would they like to learn how to kick the ball better? Is that something they are interested in? Would that make them feel better on the playground and better with their peers, and also be something they might enjoy? In which case, daddy and little Richard can go out every day after daddy gets home from work or with mommy in the afternoon and they can play little games with Nerf balls or soccer balls, working on kicking. It's amazing what can happen if you do something everyday. You make it fun. You can set up little games – who can kick it here or there? Who can kick it to hit the other person's leg, and if you hit the other person, you get a point. So you make it interesting, you don't just practice or seem like you are doing soccer drills. You make little games with points and prizes and winning and so forth and so on, and you always try to set it up so the child wins 70% of the time. That keeps the child motivated. In making it using big enough balls and soft enough balls, and making it initially very easy for the child to be successful, and that may be another part of the



solution. So, there might be a short-term one, one that you do at the moment, a long term one, and another long term one. The child may need to cultivate some peers who are loyal to the child, who like that child. Sometimes children who are getting teased or getting negative feedback are selecting to try to be close to a group of kids who are, for a variety of reasons, mean spirited or rejecting. There may be other kids who are sweeter and softer and gentler and more accepting who the child hasn't made overtures to yet. So that may be a long term strategy in terms of figuring out who, in the class, one can be close to. The teacher can get involved here. It's often very helpful when a child reaches this level of self-awareness to pair the child with another child or a group of children on school projects that facilitate kids getting to know each other in a different way, not just on the playground or not just in the lunchroom or during recess, but around work situations where they need to get together on the weekends to do a fast project. Then it gets the kids to know each other in a different and closer way, and they come to appreciate one another. Sometimes if a child has motor problems or some language problems, there are children who want to be sweet and nurturing and protective. That's just the way they have been brought up, and they will especially enjoy being helpful. Any child who has reached this level of thinking will be able to reciprocate, even if they are little slow in retrieving their words or a little awkward on their motor movements.


So those are some of the long term strategies. So basically, the ways of helping the child cope is not to try to give them band aid and white wash the issue, but to help the child feel nurtured by your patient listening, helping the child become a poet of his feelings so they become aware of all their feelings, helping the child describe how they routinely feel and act, and helping the child explore alternative possibilities where they come up with the alternatives but with your help, with your raising questions. If they haven't considered certain ones, you can raise it in a multiple choice way. "Are there some other ones, such as... or ...? Do you think those would work?" Let the child reject them, "No this won't work because..."

Now think what has happened to the child's intellectual and social skills just in the conversation with you. In that conversation with you, you are helping the child describe an event, become a poet of his feelings, become a better expresser of feelings, as well as being more aware of his own inner feeling space – more self aware, a better reflective thinker, you're helping the child also become more reflective by describing how they routinely act – what is their own norm; and by talking about what they might do – helping the child anticipate the future; think constructively about how things can be different and think creatively, also in a very reflective way. You are helping the child do this about social situations, so you're giving the child a tremendous lesson in intellectual and social development, which is just wonderful, and you're helping the child feel better



at the same time because you are giving him the opportunity to develop some effective coping strategies. Eventually, we want individuals to be able to do this with themselves and with others, as they have close friendships, as they eventually when they are older move out of the family – the skills to describe events, to describe your feelings, to describe how you routinely cope, and to think about alternatives – is exactly the coping skill that enables young adults to effectively problem solve in the world. You are now instilling those very capacities in the child. So what we, therefore, see is that you have an opportunity to build on your child’s emerging strength, and help him begin to feel better. It doesn’t mean that he won’t come home tomorrow with the same feelings, or over the next three or four weeks. Each one of these provides an opportunity. As I mentioned, it’s not a bad idea, and a good idea depending on the school and depending on circumstances and the teacher and the guidance counselor, and the other helpers in the school. Sometimes you involve the school mental health professional – it could be a social worker, psychologist, guidance counselor, or the teacher, so the child might benefit from their input, such as being paired up with other kids who might be supportive in school projects. Or, be part of a social group with the school mental health professional. All of those can be very helpful experiences also.


Now we have time to go into our second topic for today. As you recall, our second topic is how to help children with their feelings that get repetitive or compulsive and/or when they are overwhelmed by fears, which often lead to compulsions or repetitive thoughts and actions. This is a common problem among children with special needs, where their thinking becomes very rigid, or their behaviors become rigid and repetitive. There can be many, many different reasons for it. But, the one I want to focus on today, among the many different reasons, is when anxiety or fear or worry leads a child to be more rigid and more compulsive. Often, we get focused on the behavior itself. The parent will complain to me, as one did recently, that little Johnny is always talking about cars, or only wants to talk baseball numbers, or only wants to talk about certain TV characters, or certain toys, or play over and over with the same toy again. This is a common worry of parents, and a common complaint. The natural tendency is, among the family members and also many professional colleagues, is to try to distract the child from the preoccupation or compulsive behavior, and get the child into other things. Basically, they try to discourage the child’s passion or interest and get him going elsewhere. So, it leads parents to hide the toys the child is preoccupied with, to impatiently change the topic quickly when the child is talking about a particular character or baseball numbers, etc. However, these approaches are often counterproductive. The child often only digs in further and becomes more attached to his favorite idea, toy, or numbers and the parents, professionals, and educators become more and more frustrated. If the child doesn’t grab onto the same toy or the same idea, he finds a new one if that one



is blocked and he holds onto that new one more tenaciously. So how do we help the child overcome this challenge without digging the hole deeper; without making the challenge more severe? If we rely on methods that just try to change the child's behavior, again to underline, we may just substitute one rigidity for another or make the original rigidity even more intense. Sometimes, paradoxically we will really structure the child's world in a very systematic and focused way, trying to "modify" the child's behaviors. But the very structure creates a new ritual; a new kind of rigidity, even if a child goes along with it and doesn't tantrum or get anxious. Sometimes I hear a story where the parents, teachers, or professionals involved in terms of the therapists will say, "Well, we did successfully get Johnny to stop playing with that one toy, but he is not as engaged as he used to be. He doesn't smile as much and doesn't seem as happy, but he is actually moving some of the other toys around." Then the parents are obviously, understandably concerned with that tradeoff, worth it, but it's not as though he is playing really creatively with the other toys. He is just kind of going through the motions and now is not a happy camper anymore and more importantly, is less engaged - the first step in social and intellectual skill-building. So have we gained or lost ground in such a circumstance?

A professional colleague was telling me that some of the children they were working with were so difficult that they resorted to more repetitive, structured activities to "get them ready for school" – to get them ready for preschool. She said, "The price was that the children became less engaged and less interactive, but they were learning to sit at a table and sort shapes." Well, was that a good trade-off? As I observed these children, their shape sorting was done very rigidly and mechanically – it was just a new compulsive ritual. It wasn't a foundation for higher level cognitive skills that I had hoped for, such as the ability to classify meaningfully, events in the world into categories. So when you would ask such a child about different categorizations to see if he understood the concept of categories like who is part of a family, who is not part of a family, he could only talk a little about squares and circles. "Square goes here, circle goes here." So it is just another compulsive pattern substituting the original one, but losing engagement and interaction, and not building a critical building block of cognition or thinking as had been hoped for.

So there is an illusion we have, often in the field, which is a worrisome one, which is if we can get children to perform a certain behavior which looks similar to a real cognitive building block, like it resembles classifying because it involves sorting shapes, we assume it really involves classifying, i.e., involves the real foundation piece for cognition. But, the evidence I see clinically is that it is more often not the case than it is the case.




So what is the alternative? How do we help children over their repetitive behaviors and over their compulsive rituals without resorting to simply another compulsion or another ritual that in the process reduces engagement and reduces interaction and reduces general zest for being part of the world?

Here are the steps:

1. To recognize that for every problem a child has, there are two sides to the problem. There is the problem side – these are the problem behaviors – repeating numbers or playing with the same toy over and over, but it also reveals a developmental capacity that hasn't been mastered. So for the child who is rigid and who has a narrow range of interests, such as only his cars or only his numbers, the developmental capacity that hasn't been mastered is developing a broad range of interests. That often relates to being able to experience and express a broad range of emotions. Your emotions kind of orchestrate your interests. If you are very expressive with a wide range of emotions, different textures of happiness and exploration and curiosity and assertiveness and pleasures in different types of mastery, that fuels interest in a wide range of activities. So often the problem is that the child isn't broad enough in his emotional range and in his range of interest in the world. Also, what often reveals the child who has not progressed to as high a level of what we call a functional emotional development as we would like. It may be a child who is working at the very beginning of the creative use of ideas, but not advanced to the latter steps of the creative use of ideas and not gotten into the logical use of ideas where they can combine ideas together. This would give them greater mastery of their world. So the best they can do is play with one car repetitively because they can't yet figure out how to have that car go to school and deliver the cookies to the school of children who will then eat these cookies for lunch and get engaged in a real pretend scenario.

So also, behind the restricted range of emotion the child may have, and behind the restricted interests the child may have, may be limitations in the way the child's nervous system works. If the child is very over reactive to sensations such as touch and sound, they may find lots of experiences noxious or unpleasant, and therefore are focusing on a few activities that feel comfortable to them. They may narrow, unnecessarily so, their range of activities because they are anxious about trying new things because of their sensory over reactivity. Or, if they are sensory under reactive, they may not get pleasure from many different sensations because the sensations aren't strong enough and so a few things that, by chance, have gotten their attention have become the preoccupation because other things haven't been presented to them with enough saliency or enough investment or interest. So we may have two reasons why, on the sensory side alone, a child's interests are restricted. They may be anxious or fearful of new experiences because they




are so over responsive, or they don't get involved in a big range of things because they are so under responsive. Or, if they are very sensory craving, they may flit from one thing to another and therefore don't learn to enjoy a range of interests or range of activities, and therefore also tend to get over involved with just a few thoughts or a few activities. If children have motor planning and sequencing problems – they can't carry out a series of actions or steps and so they get involved in very simple actions like moving a car back and forth, or they master a particular game or activity or picture book and that becomes familiar and it's easy to do because they can sequence that and then to try something new is a challenge and it's a little harder for them and creates anxiety. Why try something new when there is something old that you are already familiar with? How many of us go back to our old routines all the time, particularly when we are anxious? The more sensory over reactive we are, the more anxious we tend to be, because the world overwhelms us. With auditory processing and language problems, that too will restrict our creative thinking because we can't use words as creatively or reflectively as we would like to, or as our families would like us to.

So the child may have individual differences in the way they process their world – the way they take in sights and sounds, react to it, plan actions, the way they conceptualize what they see – all of which contribute to their rigidities and their compulsions. So here we see the other side of the coin. On the one hand, there are the preoccupations and the rigid behavior. On the other hand, there are the challenges that are not yet met to expand the range of emotions the child feels to increase the capacities of the child to react to sensations flexibly and to broaden the range of sensations the child can react to, to interest the child in more sensations, to improve the child's ability to plan and sequence actions, to improve the child's ability to comprehend what they see as well as what they hear.


So the approach to the rigid behavior is basically an approach to helping the child master the missing pieces in the development that the problem behavior reveals. So we always look at that second side of the coin – not just the problem behavior, but the developmental challenges not yet mastered that the problem behavior reveals. Then we spend the lion's share of our effort on helping the child expand that range of emotions and interests and strengthen their underlying processing capacities that will help them do that.

That is where our gradual approach using Floortime techniques comes in. We will often start with, at a very practical level, following the child's interests, playing with that car that he likes to play with, but then we bring in another car that is blocking his car. All of a sudden, there are two cars in this scene. And then there might be a third car. So we are expanding the play. If we, as a play partner, get involved with the child in his




world and we don't do the same activity over and over, the child has no choice but to begin experiencing a broader range of actual behaviors and associated feelings. Now a lot of parents then say, "Yes, but we've tried that, to begin expanding from the inside, but he gets mad because he doesn't want us to bring in the blue car, he only wants to play with the red car and play it in a certain way" or "He only wants to look at the numbers on the scorecards..." So there, we don't irritate the child or create a meltdown or tantrum. What we do is we negotiate. We anticipate with the child. If the child is verbal, we say, "I'm going to bring in the blue car, is that ok?" Rather than just bringing it in swiftly and the child has a meltdown and a tantrum. You say, "Can I bring it in?" We ask his permission. The child may shake his head, "No." Ok. But if he shakes his head "No," look what has happened. He's no longer just playing with the car, he's now negotiating with us. He's saying "No." Then we bring up the green car and say, "How about this one?" "No." So the child is the boss, he gets his way. If we want to start moving the green car or blue car, we do it in slow motion and the child puts up his hands and says "No" and this way you don't get a tantrum. It's only when you move quickly and overwhelm the child and he feels helpless that you get the tantrums. As long as he is in control and can say "No," you say, "Well, where can I put it?" and you've already moved it two inches closer to him. He shows you that you have to move it over on the other side of the room, so you're going over there. Then you move it an inch closer, "Well, can I put it here?" "No, over there." Well now you've just had five circles of communication with "No's" and "Yes's" and pointing and showing you to put things here and there and the next place. As you do that, you are actually negotiating. You are actually increasing flexibility. Remember, this is an approach where you are making games by inches. We're not looking for magic. We're not looking for the child all of a sudden becoming flexible, we're looking for little gains each day. You're introducing flexibility in his system.

At the same time, while you're doing the simple thing of negotiating about bringing an extra car, or the child who is over-focused on numbers will be talking about how you like this player better than that player because you think there is something, in addition to the numbers, that determine the baseball player, that having to do with his leadership on the team. The child is struggling with that challenge that you've made him, again, you're getting increased flexibility not only in the behavior, but also the feelings. The child is experimenting with annoyance with you, asserting himself, you're also getting increased flexibility in terms of sequencing – the child is having to sequence new information, new actions. You're also helping the child deal with maybe with a slightly larger range of sensory experience, etc., etc., etc. So you're mindful of all the ways in which you're helping the child become more flexible. That, by in large, is the approach we want to take.



So the approach to take for the child who gets involved in fears and compulsions is to help that child become more flexible by focusing on the developmental tasks that are yet unmet. Now the special case for this is, and a very important special case for this, is the very verbal child who is capable of having a two-way conversation, but tends to get involved in compulsives, rituals, and is very fearful, and is very anxious, and where we can clearly see that the anxiety drives the fears. Here it is very valuable to deal with those anxieties. The best way to deal with those anxieties is in the play with the child, see where the anxiety comes up. So you get involved in a lot of imaginative play, or just free discussions or conversations that don't have any particular agenda to them, or help the child describe situations where they feel anxious. So typically, children with special needs, especially children with autistic spectrum disorders but others too, basically all children with motor planning and sequencing problems as well as children who get overloaded sensory-wise, tend to have challenges with assertiveness and aggression, as well as with loss, and with good reason. If a child is not confident in their body because of the motor planning problems, it's hard to be confident in handling a feeling as strong as aggression or anger. So even though the child may have tantrums, they are still uncomfortable with that feeling and it may make them anxious. Also, loss and separation are scary because the child, by definition, if they are not confident in their bodies, they don't feel as able to take care of themselves. So, they feel more dependent on others, so loss or separation may be scary, even if the child seems indifferent to who people are, or where they are, or whether they are there or not there. That doesn't mean that deep down they don't still have fears of this kind. They might not even be aware of these fears and they may not be expressed in their own minds symbolically or verbally, but could be expressed in a much more basic way, just in terms of the physiology of fear and anxiety, which leads, paradoxically, some people to shut down, become so fearful and so anxious that they shut down and become immobilized. It looks like they are indifferent to the world when, in fact, they are too scared to show the fact that they care.


So we need to help the child who is verbal, who is a special case in this instance, actually explore their anxieties and their worries and experiment with the feelings that are kind of scary for them. Again, one way of doing this is in pretend play. There is one little boy who I worked with years ago who drew pictures, starting off with submarines and he would have me be the attacking airplanes and his submarines would be defending with all kinds of special gizmos and gizmos and counter radar strategies to avoid detection and escape my attack. But, over many months, gradually his submarines started getting torpedoes and weapons of their own in counterattacking, and then they got to the surface of the water, and then he shifted from submarines and he became battleships. Then he became battleships with bigger and bigger guns and higher and higher smokestacks, until he seemed comfortable in being the dominant person and assertive



person, not just a defensive person. It was all done through the play – there was never a mention of how he felt personally. But as he did this, he became more comfortable, less repetitive, less compulsive, and much more flexible and much more comfortable asserting his feelings and expressing a wide range of feelings in reality, when he was negotiating things with his parents or with his peers.

So often children will need play opportunities either with parents or with therapists or with educators where they can play out their themes that concern them, and experiment with assertiveness and experiment with flexing their muscles, and maybe play out the scenes of separation and so indirectly deal with the anxieties. Also, very verbal children and children who are a little reflective, can talk directly about some of their anxieties – what worries them. There the four steps we mentioned earlier: *empathizing, listing carefully, helping the child become a poet of his feelings, exploring what they routinely do and exploring alternatives* is a good way to help the child who wants to approach it or can approach it logically the same time they approach it through fantasy and through play.

So what parents, educators, and therapists need to be aware of, is that when children are showing compulsive rituals, often anxieties are factor, and we have to help the children deal with the anxiety that is behind the compulsions. We have to help them in two ways: we have to help them strengthen the abilities that are preventing them from moving forward in development and would help them move to a higher level where they broaden their emotional range and broaden their range of interest and broaden their reflective abilities, and for some of the children as they become able to, help them play out and help them talk out their anxieties, fears, and worries as well as begin experimenting through play and through talk with the feelings that are scary for them. So, it's not enough to just talk about what makes you scared, you've got to also experiment with the feelings that will make you "unscared" – i.e., the assertiveness, the muscle flexing, etc. Now for each child, there may be a different set of feelings and a different set of issues. In many families, there will be specific family circumstances that the child will need to deal with and talk about. As much as parents can help in this and as much as parents can be available to hear what the child is saying and not feel defensive, even if the child is mad at them for some reason, but to listen and to empathize, and always get the child's full prospective. If you feel you are being unfairly accused, you can deal with that later. First get the full story and find out why the child feels the way they do, and then you can see if the child can look at it from multiple perspectives. The best way is not to say, "Well, this is the way it is and this is why I didn't let you play yesterday because you were being punished," but to have the child reason it out. "Well,



can you think of any reasons why I might have kept you from playing with your friend yesterday?" Be more Socratic about it.

Well, this wraps up our show for today.