



Web-Based Radio Show

Learning to Attend, Regulate, Engage, and Become a Purposeful Communicator

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I want to welcome you to our Web-Based Radio Show. This is Stanley Greenspan. Thank you for joining us this morning. Today our topic is at the heart of the work with children with special needs and really at the heart of what all children require. Today's topic is "How we help children learn to attend, be calm and regulated, how we help them engage with others, and how we help them learn to be purposeful and begin the process of communication." In other words, how we help them learn to be purposeful communicators.

In the past in an earlier show, we talked in general terms about how we entered the child's world and helped the child become part of a shared world; helped the child join the world with us, and also part of that, help him learn to attend and also to communicate.

Today's show, for those who remember the earlier one in the spring, will be part two of this topic. We'll review the basics that we talked about in the spring for those who weren't able to be part of that show, but we'll go more into the more advanced techniques and more advanced strategies for helping even the most challenging children learn to attend, regulate, engage, and become purposeful two-way communicators. That means having back-and-forth communication.


Now before we get to the specifics, let's review and look at why this is so important. Why are these capacities for attending, regulating, engaging, and being purposeful at the foundation of all our work with children with special needs? Why does the establishment of these capacities have to be at the heart of education; at the heart of speech and language work; at the heart of occupational or physical therapy? Really it's at the heart of all we do for children with challenges. Why is it also at the heart of childcare for all children, whether at home or in daycare or in any other setting? We often hear reports of children in orphanages who have had derailed intellectual and emotional



development. What we learned is that the reason for their emotional and intellectual development being derailed is that these early processes of attention and regulation and engagement and purposeful communication weren't being facilitated. The early interactions that would promote these stages weren't there.

Now for children with special needs and learning challenges, if we are just thinking about this in the most basic and common sense way, we know that for a child to learn from his world and to be a part of that world, they have got to be able to pay attention to it. The first step is looking, listening, smelling, touching, and making sense of what you are sensing. You can't do this if you are overwhelmed and irritable and crying. And you can't do this very well if you are self absorbed and only tuning into your own sensations; your own gurgles or your own private thoughts. So it is clear that we have to have a child be calm and regulated and attentive or interested in the world to start that learning process; to start that process of relationships and any other type of related learning.


So the first step is very clear why it is so important. Now why is the second step important, of being engaged; of being emotionally invested in the human world? Most learning in the early years of life occurs through human interaction. For example, the child learns that causality and logic – that I can make things happen – occurs not first by pulling a string to ring a bell as Piaget thought. It occurs through the child smiling and getting a smile back from mommy, or the child making a funny face and getting a funny face back from mommy. So it is human emotional interaction that gives the child their first cognitive lessons. But to have this human interaction, the child has to be engaged. Also, the engagement helps the child feel trusting and intimate and warm, and it helps the child obviously with the first step in their social and emotional development. So both for intellectual reasons and social-emotional reasons, engagement is critical. Also, this early engagement seems very important even for the child's physical development. Babies who are deprived of early engagement, not always but often, failed to thrive. Many failed to grow or gain weight. So that early emotional relationship with a caregiver; that early engagement, seems to organize basic biological processes as well as set in motion intellectual and social and emotional processes. So we must have that early engagement. In children with special needs who are self absorbed or withdrawn, must be approached as the very, very first step to help them engage with the world – teaching them to look is not the same as teaching them to love. Teaching them to sit and be obedient is not the same as teaching them to want to be part of a relationship and interact with others. So first things first. Discipline to be sure is important, but a child with an inquiring mind who can understand why it's important to sit still in church or synagogue, or why they



have to listen to the teacher is going to be a far better learner than a child who is just doing that by conditioning or by rote learning. So engagement is vitally important.


Now why does communication – two-way communication – why is that so important? All communication – the use of words, the use of concepts – begins with something far more simple. It begins with a simple exchange of sounds or exchange of gestures like a movement of a hand and mommy or daddy moving his or her hand back. So we have two-way back-and-forth communication at the beginning of all communication including, later on, the use of words. Where this doesn't happen, we see children who use words sometimes, because they can memorize words from a book, but the words are scripted. So they just repeat what they hear. The words have no meaning. Instead of saying, "Mommy, I love you." They may just recite a story. They may recite nursery rhymes that are read to them, "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall..." but they won't say "Mommy, I love you." or "Give me the apple." or "Daddy, come play." Later on, they won't be able to say, "I like that book. Please read it to me." Or, "I know the meaning of that book. I know why Mark Twain wrote Huck Finn; what he was trying to tell the American public." All those meaningful words and meaningful concepts come from the child first being meaningful with his general communication – the ability to simply gesture; to get your attention; and interact with you. So being purposeful in your communication is not only the beginning of causality and the beginning of logical thinking, it is the beginning of giving meaning to communication and sets the foundation for when words do come in, to use those words meaningfully. In other words, the child who at 8 or 10 months is pointing to the apple and nodding their head, is already understanding what an apple is and is already telling mommy, "I want you to give me that red, shiny thing. I want to roll it or play with it." Later on when he learns the word "apple" he knows what an apple is already because of this early stage of communication. So this is why we need to promote attending, regulating, engagement, and simple purposeful communication as the first steps in our approach to children with special needs, learning challenges, and in our work with all children – even children who don't have challenges because it sets the stage as the first steps in human emotional and social development, communication, and thinking.

Now let's break down these capacities and focus on each one separately, even though often in working with a child, we will work on all these first three levels together. The first step is to take note of the baby's or child's individual sensory and motor profile. In other words, become aware of his or her unique style of hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, and moving. Then we harness all his or her senses and his or her motor capacities in an enjoyable sense of shared attention. In other words, we entice them into the world – a shared world – with us. Now how do we do this? How do we figure out



how a child uses his or her senses? Children differ considerably in the way they use their senses. It's been poorly understood and often not recognized that children with special needs differ enormously, and all children differ. So some children with autistic spectrum disorders, for example, are over-reactive to things like touch and sound. Some are under-reactive to touch and sound. Sometimes a child will have both – they will be over-reactive to high-pitched noises and under-reactive to the normal human voice. Same thing for touch – the child may be under-reactive to firm pressure and require a lot of it, and be over-reactive to light, tickly touch. So we have to look at how the child is reactive to different types of sensations, but not just to touch and sound, but also to smells. A strong perfume could lead a child to feel overwhelmed and pull away. The strong smell of certain foods may be aversive to children. So we have to help children be comfortable with sensations in their world, but to do that, we have to know what sensations help them calm and regulate and what overwhelms them, and which ones underwhelm them? Which ones don't pull them in enough? So to do that, there is no substitute for careful observation, whether it's a five or six year old or a 3 year old or a new baby – observe how the child responds to different types of touch - firm pressure, for example, light tickly touch. Observe to how they respond to different parts of their body – their arms, their abdomen, their legs, and their back. Observe different sounds – experiment with high-pitched noises, with a normal human voice, “loooooow” sounds – see which ones draw the child to pay attention more. Experiment with different degrees of loudness or softness. The child who is hyper-sensitive to sound may require a very soothing, energized but low-pitched sound. The child who is under-reactive may require a more energized, high-pitched sound, “HEY!!!!” Experiment and watch the child's reaction. What helps the child look in a calm and regulated way versus what helps the child turn away or look overwhelmed, or gives you the impression you are not reaching the child at all. So the first step is to check out the child's different ways of responding to sensations through careful observations and ordinary human interaction.


The next step is to look at how the child makes sense of different sensations. How do they comprehend sensations? How do they make sense of what they hear? For example, even before children are speaking, some children will respond to just vocalizations and babbling and will respond to the sound of your voice, look, as if to figure out what you are saying. Other children turn away as though they are overwhelmed and confused. In babies, we'll see some babies respond to a “bump-bada-bump-bump, bump-bump” – a complex rhythm, and other babies get confused by it but respond to a simpler rhythm like, “BUMP, bump, b u m p, BUMP, bump, b u m p.” Similarly, older children, some may respond to simple vocalizations, and others may respond to more complex vocalizations, i.e., just having the sounds even before they understand lots of words. Often children are understanding a few words, and some will



respond to using just a few key words, but in a rhythmic and normal speed of interaction, “Johnny – look, look here!” versus “Johnny, I want you to look here because there is something interesting for you to see.” But not just sound – also children differ in how they comprehend what they see. Some children will like complex designs so they will be able to respond to waving arms and a smiling face and a moving head all at the same time. Other children will become overwhelmed by that much movement and simply moving your face with big smiles and nice facial expressions and different vocalizations will draw them in. But if you are waving your arms and hands and moving your body too much, they’ll get confused by too much going on. Some children do well in a busy environment with lots of children around; other children are overwhelmed by all that movement and need to be in a corner of the room with one other child and an adult, or just the adult in order to be able to become part of shared attention and regulation. So we have to look at how the child comprehends and organizes what they see and what they hear, as well as how they respond to sensations.

Then there is one other capacity that will help the child get into that nice state of shared attention that we want to achieve at the very beginning. That is, how does the child organize what they do; their own actions? How do they organize their motor patterns? Here it is very, very important to look at how the baby or child or even adolescent organizes what they do. Are they a one-step action person or two-step action person or a three-step action person or a four- or five-step action person? The best way to observe this is to watch how they spontaneously – on their own while interacting with you – play. For example, if there is a favorite ball or car, are they more likely to just move the car back-and-forth, i.e., just repeat one step? Or do they take the car and move it to you and then move it towards the house and then move it towards another adult who is in the room? That’s a three- or four-step action sequence. If you have obstacle courses, do they seem to be able to take actions that require four or five steps to solve the obstacle course – go through one thing, around another thing, and over another thing? Or do they do the same one or two steps over and over again? If they do only one thing over and over, it’s a one-step action pattern. If they do two things like move the car back and then to you, it’s a two-step action pattern. But as you see, it could be a five-step action pattern for the child who goes upstairs, gets their favorite doll, brings it to you, gives you a big smile, and then gets up in your lap ready to play with it.


So you can really divide this into three categories: Is your child just beginning to learn to put actions together, i.e., a one- or two-step action child? Or is your child doing a little more complex action patterns – doing three or four steps in a row? Or is your child really a multi-step action person where they can do almost as many actions in a row as is needed to solve the problem at hand? Obviously there are many points in between,



but just getting a broad sense of whether they are a one- or two-step; a three- or four-step; or a five+ step action person gives you a sense of where they are beginning.

Now why is this important? In helping them come into a shared world with you, and helping them share their attention, it is very important to set up challenges where the two of you can work on things together. In other words, take something as simple as having a child in your lap and moving your head to the left or right. If you move your head to the left, and call your child's name and make funny faces, it only requires one action such as moving his or her head to the left to find you to get into a state of shared attention with you, and that's terrific and wonderful. On the other hand, if you are down on the floor and the child has a ball in his hand and you are saying, "Hey, hey, hey, put the ball in this basket here!" and you're pointing to the basket and making a big face and you're putting balls in the basket and asking the child to copy you, that requires a number of steps. That requires the child looking at you, that requires the child walking over to the basket, it requires picking up the ball and then putting the ball in the basket. That's four steps. So that's a four-step action plan. So the kind of activity you'll start doing to get into shared attention will very much depend on what you think your child is capable of. For example, if your child enjoys horsy rides and your child is capable of a multi-step plan, going to the other side of the room and you can get down on the floor and pretend to be a horsy and say, "Do you want a horsy ride?" and expect the child to come over, jump on your back, and pat you on the back to get you started. On the other hand, for the child is only capable of a one- or two-step action plan, daddy might be playing horsy on the floor, but mommy has to come pick him up and say, "I'm going to put you on daddy so you can have a horsy ride." And then daddy might just move when the child moves so the child only has to do one step such as move his feet to get daddy to move. So it's very important to also understand how many steps or how many actions the child can take in a row in order to get that nice state of shared attention cooking.

Once we tune into the baby's nervous system; once we figure out how that baby's nervous system works in terms of regulating sensations, whether they are hyper- or hypo-reactive, how they comprehend sights and sounds, and how they plan their actions, we can then move on to the next step of engaging the child with pleasure and warmth. I should just add before we move onto the next step, that there are other sensations I haven't mentioned that for completeness, we take these for granted often, but they should be mentioned. For example, children will differ not only in how they respond to sights or sounds but how they respond to movement in space. Some children are daredevils; liking being thrown up into the air. Other children are cautious only liking to be moved very slowly and securely through the air. So you can have two different kind of airplane games – with one child you are holding him very tightly in your arms and the other




person you have him up over your head moving him very quickly. Some children like slow movement patterns. Other children like fast movement patterns. So the rhythm of the interaction will change considerably. Some children love to jump and spin – it helps them organize and regulate. We use that in many therapies – occupational therapies have pioneered in using movement in space and working with the vestibular system and proprioception as part of helping the child get organized. But other children are so sensitive to movement in space that we have to do these movement patterns very soothingly and very, very gradually. So these too must be taken into account as we work with our children.

Now also, before moving onto engagement, as you are working with these differences, it's very important as we are working with these differences, to recognize that we are going to be helping the child also get stronger in these basic abilities that help them be calm and interested in the world. So our one-step action child, we are always working to help him be a two-step action child and then a three-step action child. Later on, it will become clear on how we do this. If the child is sensitive to certain kinds of sounds, we are always trying to help him be calm and regulated and expand the range of sounds he can use to attend to us. We are always trying to help the child comprehend more complex sights and sounds and enjoy different kinds of movement patterns and movement in space.

The key principle to expanding the child's, what we call "regulatory capacities" that help them regulate and be interested in the world, is the following: Help the child be secure and be calm and regulated by meeting the child where they are in terms of their existing sensory processing and motor capacities. Then out from that base of security, gradually expand. Anytime a child becomes withdrawn or over-excited and irritable, go back to the baseline and expand more slowly.

Also, as you are getting to our next steps – step two and step three as you are engaging the child and helping the child be a more purposeful interactor, as you do those two things, you can also gradually expand the child's ability to enjoy a range of sensations and understand a range of sensations and better and better plan actions. Again, the key principle is, as you are working with the child on being engaged and being a communicator, you can gradually expand their sensory and their motor world. The key is the word "gradual" and the key is always returning to the base of security whenever the child becomes too irritable or the child becomes a little too self-absorbed or withdrawn; not to rush the child. So it's taking the snail's approach to life; or the turtle's approach to life. Always do it very, very gradually. So the key thing is to be very slow and very, very, very gradual. If you do new challenges – do them very, very slowly but with a lot of joy and a lot of pleasure and a lot of excitement. Just to give you one quick example




before we move on to engagement, the child is a one-step action person and needs to be put on daddy's back to get the horsy ride. But after we do that a few times, mommy puts him right next to daddy and daddy gets down as a horsy and says, "Horsy ride? Horsy ride?" Pretty soon, with maybe mommy holding his hand, little Johnny will pat daddy on the back, indicating that he's ready to go up on the horsy. Then mommy puts him up on the horsy and then he'll move his legs to get the horse going. So we've made it now a two-step action plan with a lot of support and a lot help and a lot of compelling engagement, and even the beginning of communication.

Now let's go on to engagement. The key here of helping children become engaged, and often in our work with children we are doing regulation and interest in the world and engagement and simple purposeful communication all at the same time, and I'll come back to that in just a moment. But how do we help a child become engaged? Now we are talking about pleasure and joy and excitement. We're basically asking the question, "What makes our child happy?" Too long and too often, parents are told, mistakenly so, that the goals to get the child to do a specific behavior – to sit still or to put pegs in a board or to put this puzzle together or to repeat a certain sound or to imitate a certain word – but this is not the best advice. The best advice is, first and foremost, before you're trying to "teach your child specific skills" is help your child learn to fall in love with the world; to become engaged with you; to not just love his caregivers but be able to demonstrate that love by coming up and giving mommy a hug and a kiss; by wanting to be with his caregivers. That's going to help the child become a very good learner.

So first observe what kinds of interactions – silly sounds or kisses or tickles or favorite games – bring your child pleasure and joy and delight. So it always begins with observation first. Notice what you do spontaneously and what your child does spontaneously. Your child may like to be tickled on a certain part of his foot. Or he may like to jump on your tummy in a certain way. Or he may like to aimlessly wander around the room, but have you chase him where he can giggle as he avoids you and runs away from you. Notice what your child really enjoys and tune into your child's rhythms. When you are doing Step 1 – finding out what kind of sensory and motor experiences your child can attend to – you're also looking at what kind of sensory and motor experiences bring your child pleasure because when your child is calm and attentive, they are also often happy and enjoying the world.

Now there are a lot of different games that you can play that we play just with babies growing up; that we play with older children with special needs to pull them into that engagement. Many children, regardless of their challenges, love variations on the peek-a-boo game. So sometimes if you are making funny faces and silly sounds and your



child is looking at you, then you put a little napkin over your head, sometimes your child will just aimlessly wander away, and another time your child may come and take the napkin away to get a look at mommy or daddy's face. If a child is very avoidant – every time you approach, the child just seems to walk in the other direction – you've got to follow the child's lead and say, "Ok, walking away seems to be giving him pleasure – not a great deal of pleasure – but it's my opening." Remember, the principle of Floortime that we talked about last week is to follow the child's lead. Well, nowhere is it more important than in being engaged with a child than to follow the child's lead because in order to have pleasure and delight, you have to start with what the child is finding pleasurable, even if it doesn't seem very pleasurable. If the child is aimlessly wandering around the room or avoiding you, we follow the child around and we become aimless wanderers together. Or we can play our little fence game – we build a fence around the child and put our arms around the child without touching the child, and the child now has to duck under our arms or touch our arms to get us to open them up and now the child is being purposeful and actually interacting with us.


Sensory-based play is often something that many children love. For example, rhythmic holding or airplane rides or dancing together or jumping together; sometimes holding the child's hands and rhythmically moving them to the sound of your voice as the child is jumping on a mattress or jumping on a couch can get things cooking.

In general, the principles of engaging are:

1. Follow your child's lead
2. Assume that whatever he is doing is bringing him some pleasure
3. See if you can deepen and widen that pleasure and make it part of a human relationship


We have one example we like to show often where a little boy was aimlessly wandering around the room but took a fascination in a blanket. He had to carry his blanket around with him as he wandered around the room, so mommy began putting the blanket on her head and following with him. Then he began pulling the blanket. Then she would tug it a little back. Pretty soon he was giggling and smiling and playing a little tugging game with her. Pretty soon they are both hiding under the blanket together, giggling and laughing together.

A child who rubs a spot on the floor – you might rub with him and then get your hand stuck in his spot and then play a cat-and-mouse game with him. The goal on engagement is to entice the child to become engaged with you. Often parents tell me, "I don't have enough creativity, I can't figure out things to do." I always say the same thing: Don't try to figure out what to do. Just observe what your child is doing and join him. You can initially do something as simple as copying what he is doing, but then try



to insert yourself into what he is doing. So the key principle for engagement is to join your child in his or her world. That's how you pull your child into a shared world, whether it's rubbing his spot on the floor, being avoidant and running away from you, running around the house – you can be explorers together around the house – join him in his world, but then take one more step. Many parents say that nothing is happening – they are just chasing him or following him or he's banging and I'm banging, and that's true – nothing much will happen. So then you've got to go one more step. You join him in his world, but then you create a challenge where, as part of his world, he has to deal with you. So if the child is very, very difficult to engage, you get between him and what he is trying to do; or between her and what she is trying to do. So if it's aimlessly wandering, you are being a roadblock and they have to go around you. Or you're being this moving fence and they have to move your arms up or down. Or you are holding the blanket that they are holding with them. Or your hand is stuck on their spot on the floor or you are stuck in the door that they are opening and closing. We call this kind of activity being “playfully obstructive.” It's really getting between the child and what the child is trying to do so that you become a part of his world. You become a play object in the world.

Now the biggest obstacle to engaging children is often the parents feeling of “he doesn't want to engage with me and I'm making him unhappy; he's going ‘uhhhhhh’ or getting angry with me.” Well, a little protest is not really anger, so don't confuse the two. It's fine for the child to protest a little bit because he is used to interacting within his personal world, sometimes. He may be used to interacting only with things, so it's new for him to interact with you and that may get a little protest. I can guarantee one thing: I have never, never, never, and this is thousands and thousands of children that I have worked with, who didn't after a short period of time, enjoy the human world more than the inanimate world. In other words, didn't enjoy people more than things once we have inserted ourselves into his world. Invariably, even with the children with the most severe forms of special needs conditions and the most severe forms of autistic spectrum disorders, we haven't seen one who didn't begin to enjoy human interaction if we do it gradually, slowly, and with a light touch, and with pleasure. The key step is joining him in his world, but then getting between him and what he is trying to do and doing it gently, not precipitating a tantrum but a little annoyance is ok, and getting the child used to the fun of interacting with another human being. Sometimes that has to be learned, but once it's learned, it's so glorious and so natural to the child that they begin seeking it out more and more and more. So the first week or even month may be difficult, but then it gets considerably easier.



So the big obstacle here, often is the caregiver’s feeling of “I’m not wanted” or feeling rejected, and therefore wanting to stop the enterprise. We don’t want to be rejected. No one likes that feeling of not being liked and we feel that we are making our child miserable often. So here you’ve got to be persuaded that in the long haul, your child will come to love these interactions with you and do it with a light touch, don’t overdo it, if you find yourself getting annoyed that the child is rejecting you and not being easy – take a break for a few minutes, regroup, and try to be more impish, more silly, more fun-loving, and persist in your task of getting between the child and what he is trying to do so that you become the plaything in the child’s life. Even if initially he is treating you impersonally – only as a means to an end; a way to get to his juice bottle or a way to get to the toy that is up on the shelf – that’s fine. You are making yourself useful, as they say. It’s the first step in falling in love. Many spouses will tell their spouse that if only you made yourself a little more useful... So don’t mind that. The emotions will come shortly and gradually over a period of months you’ll see more deepening joy and pleasure.


Now the third step that we talked about is “purposeful communication.” How do we help our child be purposeful? We have now a child who is attending to us and calm and regulated, who is getting more and more engaged and pleasurable and showing more joy. In order to help the child be purposeful, what we do is we start with that same basic principle: observe and follow the child’s lead. Observe what the child is trying to do and follow his lead and help him do it. But, create a challenge where he has to be purposeful or intentional or logical in his actions and behaviors - we are not worried about words yet – to do it. If he is already speaking, we are combining actions and words together so he’s purposeful in his words and his actions, but we’ll talk about the language part a little later. So observe, follow his lead, but then create a challenge where he has to be purposeful. For example, the child who is difficult to engage, when we set up our little moving fence game and we put up our arms without actually touching him, if he moves our arms up or down or crawls under our arms or around us, he is being purposeful. If he wants his juice and we put it on our head and he has to reach our head for it, he’s engaging with us in getting our juice bottle off our head. If he has a favorite little blanket and we hold it and he yanks on it, he is being purposeful. So the basic principles of being purposeful are to insert yourself into the child’s actions; into his interests; into what makes him happy, and then set up a challenge where they have to be purposeful. You can either help him get what he wants like for example if there’s a toy up on the shelf and you point to it and he might gesture like “pick me up” or you might be playfully obstructive like we talked about before. Here are some specific principles:

1. In order to help your child be a purposeful communicator, first be very animated as you exchange just facial expressions with sounds and other

gestures because the more animated you are, the more your child will respond to your sounds or your facial expressions with something purposeful back.

2. Try to get that pleasure and excitement and joy; the gleam in your child's eye with your tone of voice, with your facial expressions.
3. As you are following your child's lead, always assume all of what your child does – even seemingly random behaviors – always assume that they have some purpose for the child. So aimless wandering, banging a ball over and over again, looking at a fan in a seemingly perseverative way, lining up toys, lining up cars – assume that for the child, all those are purposeful activities. You insert yourself into it and help them. Begin handing him cars to line up and if he takes it from you, he's being purposeful. Then you want to make it more complicated, and you can take one of the cars and say, "Does it go here or here?" and if he gets a little annoyed with you and shows you it goes where he put it in the first place, he's being even more purposeful. In this way, you help your child open and close circles of communication.

Now some of the sub-steps that you should do to help them with this, is help endear yourself with the child and get him involved in more purposeful activity by helping him do the things he wants to do by following his lead and making it a little easier. He's trying to get to something – put it a little closer to him. Make a little game out of it – maybe put your hand over it as you put it closer to him so he has to lift your hand to then get the object under your hand. Don't do things for your child but help him do the things he wants to do where he has to take initiative. In other words, don't do to him; get him to do to you. Often we get involved with tickling, swinging, and other activities that make the children happy, but we are doing to them and they are reacting to us. That's a good starting point, but watch what your child is doing, observe his natural interests, and challenge him to do to you. For example, let's say he wants to be tickled. So challenge him to show you where – on the tummy or on the back or on the arms – where he takes your hand and puts it on that part of his body where he wants to be tickled. So play dumb. He's taking initiative. Instead of picking him up and tickling him, you start like you're going to give him a tickle, but then you are confused as where to go. You're giving him that little "tickle look" in your face, you're beginning to move your hands closer to his body, and he's getting ready for that big tickle, and now he's got to show you where he wants the tickle. If he goes, "Uhhh, uhhh" you can point to two possibilities – tummy or legs. Any gesture that he shows you may be an indication of the direction he wants you to go in. Initially, accept the slightest, little communication as being purposeful. Don't do for him, challenge him to do to you. Always encourage your child's initiative. That's critical.




So the steps on being purposeful – I’m going to go more into this next week – are to start with observing your child, enter his world, challenge him to become part of a shared world, but then challenge him further to take initiative on you to do to you rather than just you do to him. You do this also, just like engagement, by getting between him and what he is trying to do, but also showing him that he can have more pleasure and excitement whether it’s being tickled or getting to his toy or getting that blanket that he wants, by communicating purposefully with you.

Next week we are going to talk about expanding two-way communicating into problem solving interactions, and how this gets us into the transition of using language and words and ideas. So next week we are going to go back and cover more about purposeful communication, but how we go from simple one-two step circles where the child is just showing you where they want to be tickled, or where the child is simply indicating whether they want to be swung or not, or where the child is simply lifting up your arms to get out of your “fence” and how we turn that into a 10 and 15 and 20-step problem solving interaction where the child is taking you to the refrigerator or to the toy area and pointing to the toys that they want and even using a few words to indicate what it is that they want you to do. So next week we are going to talk about how you go from two-way, simple, purposeful communication into complex problem-solving interactions.

But now I want to take a few minutes to go over some questions that have come in through email. Again, I want to tell everyone that we just now have the technology to accept your calls live, on air, so we don’t have to set up calls in advance but we are happy to schedule them. So if you email us, we can schedule some of you to be live callers and we can also take spontaneous calls during the show. The telephone number is on our website, www.floor-time.org and I’ll give it to you now too for those of you who want to write it down: 1-877-907-8889. So if you call that number, you’ll be live on air. We have a few minutes still today so those of you who are near a phone and want to call in, we welcome it. Again, we’ll be on every Thursday morning, east coast time from 10:30 am to 11:30 am and all these shows are archived so you can listen to them anytime.


Here is a question that came in through our email: *Dear Dr. Greenspan: I have two unrelated questions. One: Why is it such a prevalent belief that children with ASD diagnoses are emotionally detached, unwilling to be touched, unable to express emotion, or unable to respond to other’s emotions? In my experience mainly with Asperger’s, these children are more physically demonstrative, more emotional, and more responsive to other’s emotions than the majority of kids. Of course this doesn’t mean they are capable of asking appropriate emotionally-based questions like “Why are you sad?” etc., etc.*



The author of this question, I want to congratulate you and tell you that you are absolutely right. The prevalent belief is really a myth based on the original notion of autism, that there is a fundamental deficit in the child's ability to emotionally relate to his world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our newer studies show that what you are suggesting is absolutely the case – that the children are very emotional - children with special needs and children with autism - but many of the children get so overwhelmed by their emotions because they are hyper-sensitive to touch or sound that they go into fight-or-flight patterns. They become avoidant to control the emotional intensity that they feel. So far from being unemotional, in many respects they have trouble learning to regulate their emotions and that becomes the job of the intervention program. Other children are under-reactive, so they are emotional, but they are not yet emotional in relationships with us because they haven't been pulled into a relationship with us. Once we entice them and show them the joys and pleasures of relationships, the under-reactive children, for example a child with low muscle tone is very under-reactive to touch and sound, can become extremely joyful and warm and intimate and loving. So in my experience, children with autistic spectrum disorders can be and often are just as loving as any other child. They can be just as emotional as any other child. If we are successful in mastering all these stages that we have been describing up through the levels of higher level thinking, we've been able to help some of the children, and we have a sizable subgroup now who are asking these empathetic questions, "Gee, mommy, how do you feel and why do you feel that way?" So that's a matter of how far we have progressed up the developmental ladder. But all the children, even those with the most severe neurological problems are emotional and are capable of relationships. That's a myth that we should lay to rest. It's based on the original descriptions of autism, which unfortunately are still held onto by many.

The second part of her question: *My son has PDDNOS, is high functioning, and has recently improved his language skills significantly. Now I can see that his difficulty with issues related to time are not a matter of language but of comprehension. How can I help him grasp the difference between yesterday, last week, last year, or distinguish him on similar events that happened at different times, for example he'll describe a trip to the aquarium by putting together experiences that happened in three different places over the course of a year.*


This is also an excellent question. Now remember, the childhood experience of time and space – what is now and what is later; what is here and what is there – is very much tied to their emotions. For a new baby, for example, learning to wait, is highly variable of what they are waiting for. If they are waiting for a favorite juice or a favorite cookie, ten seconds can seem endless. If they are waiting for something they don't like to



do, time can be very, very different for them. So one way of teaching a child time, is to do it in emotionally meaningful contexts. For example, we had a child in the office who kept asking over and over again, “When are we going on the train? When are we going on the train?” because they wanted to go on the train and it was fun for them and they were ready to go back home from the first minute they got to the session. The parents were frustrated because this child had no sense of time. This was a verbal child. So we had a discussion of all the emotionally meaningful things they could do between the meeting and going back on the train at 5:00 that day, including going out for a hamburgers which the child loved, going to the zoo which the child loved, watching a favorite T.V. show which the child loved, and as they reviewed all the emotionally meaningful things the child could do, and actually drew pictures of the different events of the day, we actually drew a timeline showing how many minutes it would take this and that and finally until 5:00 where it was the train. So now the train was going to come after the zoo and after the hamburgers and after a few other fun activities, so the child’s sense of time began to take shape right before our eyes and he began understanding what comprised a day and that he would have lots of time to do all these things. He had a sense of how long it took to go to the zoo or eat a hamburger because he had been in those activities before. He couldn’t express it in terms of minutes or hours, but he did have a sense of it. So time has to be learned through emotionally relevant events that take time, and that’s the way you teach time. The time is an advanced concept, like space, and often children don’t really grasp it fully until they can answer “why” questions. So usually to master the concept of time, children need to be able to engage and relate, get into a continuous flow of back-and-forth communication, use ideas creatively and logically up to the level of at least answering questions like “Why do you want to go outside?” or “Why do you want to do this?” Then as they are at that level of language in conceptual development, they can begin comprehending verbally concepts of time. Obviously even before that, they can understand time in an intuitive level if they are helped to wait and delay and be patient at certain times.

So these are two very, very good questions. We have some more here that we weren’t able to get to this week, but that we will address next week for those of you who were kind enough to send in your questions. I apologize that we didn’t get to more of them today. I encourage those of you who sent in questions to call next week and we’ll call some of you to try to set up a live telephone call, but feel free to call in spontaneously. If you don’t call in, and if we aren’t able to reach you, then I’ll read your questions on air next week. So thank you for joining us today.

Next week the subject will be opening and closing many circles of communication, engaging in shared social problem solving, and the beginning of learning



to use ideas. So we are going to talk about the advanced strategies for being a purposeful communicator, being a multi-circled problem solver, and learning to use ideas. So it will be advanced strategies for problem solving communication and learning to use ideas. Thank you for joining us and we will speak to you again next week.