

## Web-Based Radio Show

### Overcoming Challenges and Dealing with new Experiences:

#### *How Children can best master New Experiences and New Challenges*


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I want to welcome you to our Web-based Radio Show. I want to thank you for joining us this morning. Today, as part of our focus on children with special needs and developmental challenges and various types of learning difficulties as well as children without challenges, we are going to be focusing on how children can best master new experiences and new challenges. One of the most frequent questions I get from both colleagues and parents is, “How do I help my little guy or gal learn to eat better?” or “How do I help my little guy or gal toilet train?” or “How do I help them get over perseveration or self stimulation and become more interactive?”


Overcoming challenges or dealing with new experiences such as eating more foods is not easy. Yet we’ve developed some basic principles that help for multiple challenges so that it’s not simply a magic bullet or a particular tactic to help a child learn to eat. It’s really a whole pattern of care that not only will help a child overcome challenges and embrace new experiences which we all want, but also help the child develop their fundamental capacities to relate, communicate, and think at the same time. So we get two for one! The first key principle is, don’t look for magic bullets, don’t look for all-or-nothing solutions – he does it my way or the highway. Remember a principle that life operates in the grey zone. By that, I mean it operates in the more-or-less; a little bit and a little bit more and a little bit more – progress is always in small steps and that is the best kind of progress. You’re building solid foundations.

Now here are the general principles, and then we are going to talk specifically first about feeding problems and eating problems and then about toilet training and then about some of these other challenges that are very common like perseveration and self stimulation. Let’s talk about the general principles first. The first principle is, you need to have a child feel calm, cooperative and in a problem solving mode if we are going to help that child become a master of new challenges. You can’t help the child




master new challenges unless that child is calm, cooperative, and problem solving. Now how do we achieve that calm, cooperative, problem solving state? We all know that we solve new problems better and master new experiences when we are in that kind of posture or that kind of mood. Consider it. If we are feeling overwhelmed, overloaded like someone is out to hurt us or make us do something we don't want to do, are we going to solve a new problem or embrace a new experience? No way! On the other hand, if someone is helping us and we feel cooperative and we feel calm and we feel reassured, we are going to work with that person. So the first goal is to help you little gal or guy become calm and regulated. Then help your little guy or gal become engaged in pleasurable activities so they want to please you. Then help them be assertive and purposeful because mastery of new experiences and mastery in general requires an assertive, purposeful attitude where you are operating on the whirl then help your little guy or gal get involved in a continuous flow of problem solving interactions. These can occur around anything, it doesn't have to be around a problem to be solved. Help your little guy or gal become a cooperative partner with you, whether you are doing to you rather than being done to. Also, if they can use ideas and words, help them use ideas and if possible do some pretending and describing including the situations they are going to have to master before it becomes real. So you can plan what they are going to need to do in reality. Also, if they are verbal and they can connect ideas together and answer "W" questions for example, like where, who, and why, help them comprehend the reasons for the new challenge – why it's important to be able to wear their big boy pants or their big girl dress and why it is important to eat more food so they can be big and strong. This can be part of your pretending and then part of the discussion about how it's nice to be like mommy and daddy or like the grown-ups. But just remember that if you have a terrified, fearful, anxious, overwhelmed child, that child is in a, what I call, a catastrophic mode where they are not going to be able to take on new experiences. Then the only thing we can do is calm them down.

Now these general principles of helping the child become calm, cooperative, and problem solving and using ideas, again these are the basic principles of promoting development in our DIR Floortime Model. Now to do this there are six steps that you can embrace. The six steps are firstly, Floortime. We always start with Floortime and make sure we are doing enough Floortime during the day. For many families this means 4 or 6 or 8 or 10 Floortime 20 minute sessions per day. And with Floortime, as you know, you're following the child's lead, you build circles of communication around pleasurable engagement, and you're helping the child climb the developmental ladder.



So in the Floortime you're working on the first all the goals we just mentioned together. Helping your guy be calm, regulated, engaged, assertive, purposeful, getting involved in cooperative continuous flow of back-and-forth interactions, and using ideas creatively and logically. So you're practicing all those skills as part of your Floortime in a non-anxious way.


The next step is Problem Solving. Here we are going to challenge our little guy or gal to be assertive. Let's take the example now, of eating problems. In the problem solving time for eating problems, we are going to have our little guy or gal actually take charge of the eating situation. They are going to choose foods that they want. If they are verbal, they will tell you why they like it. They may make piles of different foods, the foods they like and the foods they don't like as they are getting ready for lunch or dinner. And what do you know, we let them choose whatever they want as long as it's reasonably healthy and not harmful to them. So now they are asserting themselves and they are in charge of eating so we have detoxified it – we've taken it away from being a power struggle. Then we are going to empathize with the fact of how good it is to be in charge and have that particular carrot or that particular cookie or that particular favorite treat and we also empathize how hard it is to try something new. Maybe it's scary. Maybe it doesn't feel good to their mouth. Maybe it feels icky in their hands. So we are going to empathize whatever we think the child's experience is. Then we are going to go on a fourth step after we empathize which is, small steps to problem solving. And this is part of our cooperative problem solving. In the small steps we break down the new challenge into tiny little steps, always going towards mastery. And this will depend on the individual child. So for example, when it comes to eating, we may try for just one little bit of new food every two or three days. We may embed that food in something the child already likes, like mixing a tiny bit of vegetables into their hamburger or into their potatoes. You do it just a little bit at a time with a lot of encouragement, and then next week or for the next few days a little bit more or another type of taste. But the key is, each child has different small steps, depending on their individual differences. In the small steps component is where we take into account the fact that every child is unique in the way they react to sensations and process information and the way they plan their actions. So as we have talked before in earlier shows, we look at each child from the point of view of how they take in sounds, how they process language, how they take in sights, how they take in smells, how they respond to touch, and this includes their response to taste, for example when it comes to eating, and also how they plan and coordinate actions. How many actions in a row



can they do as part of solving a problem? Can they just bang repetitively or can they do three or four action steps like take a car and put it into the house and then take it and have it go to the school and then back to the house. Well, when it comes to eating, they have to also do steps. Can they hold their own spoon or fork? Can they pick up food in their hands and bring it to their mouth or do we need to help them? So we are thinking of the small steps you want to think about how they react to things like textures of new foods, smells of new foods, how they can cooperate in their actions with us and they may be their own airplane as the food is coming in or do we need to be the airplane for them?

So the small steps part means breaking down the new challenge into tiny steps, it means exposing them to new tastes very gradually. The more hypersensitive they are to tastes and smells, the slower we are and the more we embed it in existing textures. The less sensitive they are and the more this is just a fear of something new, perhaps, the more we can move a little more boldly, still use small steps but maybe the steps are a tiny bit bigger. But we have to take in account the child's individual differences. For example, a child who is very hypersensitive you need to do this very, very gradually. A child who is very distractible and sensory craving and loves to try new experiences but never stops long enough to try any new experience for a long period of time because they are jumping from one thing to another, requires a different approach. There we may have to embed feeding in more action oriented play with airplanes going up into space and as he has his mouth open looking at the airplane, what do you know – one of the airplanes says he needs to land, but where is he going to land? I'm going to land in your little mouth – open your mouth, open your mouth, buddy! And then in comes a new taste. And this guy may love the new taste particularly if it is a part of the airplane coming in and he's part of action oriented play. So it may not be the quiet type of play at your dinner table that you would like, although eventually as this little guy gets to be more interactive and more problem solving and learns to regulate his activity level, you may be able to help him learn to sit at the table and actually eat with the rest of the family. But again, too, that will be small steps and problem solving, and that is your ultimate goal.


Also, another component of our six steps is Limits. For most children, they need firm expectations and firm guidelines. They need limits. But they can't be punitive limits and they have to have positive consequences associated with the limits that if you do A you get B. So for example, if you have your little guy sitting at the table and he is



reluctant to try a new food but maybe is willing to try just a tiny bit, and if he does, he gets to get up from the chair and he gets to play with that wonderful new toy or he gets to try a dessert treat. So the limits are coupled with something positive that if he works with you, and there is going to be something positive at the other end. And he can see what that positive thing is. And you are patient. And he may moan and groan a little bit and be annoyed that you're making him work or try something new to get something he wants, but you have a firm, calm expectation that we'll just do a little bit, just a tiny, tiny bit and we'll compromise, and then he'll be able to do what he wants to do. Most kids will compromise a little bit if, and this is a big "if," IF you set the expectations well by creating that cooperative, calm, problem solving attitude in advance. In other words, if you are only involved in a power struggle, you're going to lose the ball game and you might as well wait for another time. So you have to establish the conditions through your Floortime, through your engagement and your warmth and your calming, through your attention to the child's individual differences, and then involve the child in the cooperative endeavor.

Now whenever you're doing lots of limits and challenging the child to tolerate a little more frustration or try something a little new that's hard, always add more Floortime. So you always want to have extra Floortime whenever you're setting extra limits or making a child work extra hard in trying something new.


Now then there are special tactics also that are part of the steps in mastering new challenges. This is where some of your magic bullets come in, but the magic bullets here are added on to your whole program. They are not instead of the program. For example, in helping children tolerate new tastes, sometimes it is helpful to expose them to firm pressure in their mouth and exercise different aspects of their oral motor capacities. Now here you should be guided by a very experienced speech pathologist who is knowledgeable about oral motor, or a very experienced occupational physical therapist who is very experienced with oral motor and also sensory responsivity or sensory reactivity in the oral area. So somebody who is experienced with the sensitivity to taste and smell and also oral motor patterns – chewing, tongue movements – can guide you on how to use techniques that can exercise some of the motor components of the mouth, some of the muscles of the mouth as well as help the child tolerate a wider range of sensation in the mouth area by some preparatory work having to do with different types of strategies, some involving aspects of massage, some involving aspects of exposure to certain types of tastes and smells. But here, for this special tactic, you



really want to be guided by somebody knowledgeable. This is not something for parents to try on their own without the guidance of a very experienced professional. Not all of our colleagues are equally experienced in oral motor and oral sensation. So you want someone who is particularly knowledgeable. These techniques, again, are part of this overall pattern, not to be done alone.

Also it's a very good strategy, as another special technique, to let the child get used to the different texture of a food from multiple sensory modalities. In other words, while we don't want children playing with food in general, for a child who is very sensory over-reactive to taste and smell and reluctant to touch or smell or taste or new textures, etc., let the child play with the food. Let him squish it up. Let him make it part of himself. He'll graduate to being neat and responsible eventually, but let him get used to it through his fingers. He doesn't have to experience it first on his tongue. Let him get it on his fingers and smell it a little bit, get used to it, and then he's more likely to want to go to the next step.


So therefore, the general principle is, we need a calm, cooperative, problem solving partner, and to do that we focus on Floortime to mobilize our six basic levels of calm engagement, assertive purposeful two-way communication, a continuous flow of problem solving interactions, pretend play if the child can do it, and using ideas both creatively and logically if the child is able to. We get up as high as we can through the Floortime, then we do problem solving where we help the child be assertive and in this case he's asserting himself in many ways but especially also around food and making choices and letting him know he's in charge, then empathizing with his pleasure at being in charge, but also with his new challenges, which is trying something new, then small steps with a lot of preparation including pretending it out and acting it out first, then trying that new thing with firm expectations and limits which includes a positive expectation of what will happen when you try that new little food – you get to play with your favorite toy. And we are firm and we help the child tolerate frustration even if he wants to squirm out of the chair, we kind of keep him in the chair and tell him that he first needs to try just a little bit of this. We establish goodwill so he'll go along with us. Remember the more limits and the more firmness we apply, the more Floortime we do to keep that cooperative attitude. When all is said and done, it's the child's desire to please you that will help him move to the next level of trying something new and we set that up in all these foundation building pieces. Then we use the special tactics, like



gradual exposure to new taste, firm pressure in the mouth guided by a speech pathologist or occupational therapist.

Now let's apply this to toilet training. We won't repeat all the basic principles because it's the same basic principles. Here, in the pretending part if we can do pretending or just play acting, we'll have the child having dolls go to the potty; sit on the potty. We'll have a toy potty for the child to use that is small and not scary for him. When we look at the individual differences for the child, we want to know if this child is very sensitive to touch in their backside or other parts of the body that makes sitting on the potty scary. Does the child feel comfort from the security of the diaper, the firm pressure against their backside? So we have to know the child's individual differences. Here too, we have to help the child be purposeful and problem solving while being engaged, getting used to playing with a potty. So we can have dolls sitting on his play potty, he could be flushing his play potty, we can have his play potty in the bathroom and he can play with the real potty in the bathroom, he can play with the sink – so he learns to enjoy the bathroom. Also we can relax him while in the bathroom and play music, have rhythmic activity in the bathroom. Then as we are getting into a pattern and ritual with him, which is let's say after he eats or she eats, going to the bathroom, we may, for the child who is very hypersensitive do it very gradually. They may be more comfortable, for example, sitting on their play potty with their diaper on at first. Then you can gradually loosen the diaper and eventually have the diaper inside the potty and then eventually taking the diaper away entirely. So it has to be a gradual process. Here too, positive expectations, positive consequences rather than punitive action. Remember, as soon as your child gets anxious or you get into a power struggle, you've lost the ballgame for that time. Regroup and get yourself calm again.


Now some parents reported a particular procedure here that works very well for some kids where the child walks around without any diapers and the house is set up in such a way that you don't mind if they make a sissy on the carpet a little bit, and their toy potty kind of follows them around. As soon as they begin having a bowel movement or urinating, they quickly get onto the potty. Some parents report progress in a few days of the child getting the hang of the idea that when they have to go to the bathroom, they need to use their potty. This is again, a special tactic – a special strategy that some parents found helpful. Some parents don't find this helpful and find it doesn't work or don't have the tolerance for following around their little guy or gal with a toy potty or getting the house set up where the child can do this.



So there are many different approaches. The important thing is to set up the foundations in the ways I said, where the child is not in a power struggle, the child is not anxious, the child is in a cooperative mode, we help the child be assertive, participate, in this case running the bathroom kind of things and being in charge of it, and then gradually we take the child's mastery of being in charge of something whether it's his own food or his own bathroom practices and then say, now let's stretch this a little bit. Let's cooperate with us and try something a little bit new and we show it to him.


Now for toilet training, it's much easier when a child can answer "why" questions. Typically we often help children toilet train between ages 2 ½ or 3 ½ or 4 because that's when they are learning to answer the "W" questions and getting more logical and they can understand the reasons for going to the bathroom, and they can also understand the positive consequences of being in big boy pants or a big girl dress and being like mommy and daddy. The challenge with children with special needs is, some of them obviously take a long time to answer "why" questions and they may not get there until they are 4 or 5 or even 6 or even sometimes older and so what do you do in the meantime? School is pressuring parents to have the children toilet trained. And yet the children, from a language point of view and from an intellectual point of view aren't quite ready yet. So here we have to work very hard on one, delaying the pressure from the schools and other places, not to overwhelm the child too early, but some children can learn to do this even before they can answer "why" questions if you follow the procedures that I'm outlining. So if you do it in a calm, supportive, problem solving way, some children get the hang of it before they even verbally understand it. As long as you don't put too much pressure on the child and make it into a power struggle, you can only gain, because in doing these procedures we're talking about, in doing the pretend play and in doing the calm cooperative problem solving, you're helping the child master their general developmental capacities. So we're getting two-for-one.

Now there are some other strategies too. Challenges that lend it well to these general principles. For example, perseveration is one of the biggest challenges where parents ask me frequently, "How do I help my child do new things rather than perseverate over the same old things?" And here the key thing is getting into the middle of your child's perseveration but also after you have done these steps we are talking about, and as part of these steps you get involved in a repetitive behavior and you extend because getting a child out of perseveration is just like trying a new food. It's trying something new. So the child is moving the car back-and-forth over and over




and we block the car and say, “Where can it go?” And the child may not like that and get mad at us. But if we establish goodwill and initially the child is in control of that car, we let the child do what he wants, then have our hand crawl in there gradually he just goes “uh uh” like get the hand out of there, well now it’s no longer just the same old perseverative pattern. Why? Because he had to go “uh uh” and now we move our hand away when he goes “uh uh” but what do you know – our hand goes back in and blocks the car again. He goes “uh” and we move it away. So we don’t wait until for a 4+ tantrum. We don’t wait for him to take the car and hit our hand with it. As soon as he gives us a dirty look we can respond to it. But what is happening now is, as we go back and block that car again and we take our car and say, “This is my highway” and he’s got to move his car around our car, as soon as he objects, we’re getting a two-way conversation. And we extend these into many circles of back-and-forth communication and we do it with a light touch – very flirtatious, very gradually, and again in small steps. And in that way we help a child who is opening and closing a door or moving a car back-and-forth or rubbing a spot on the floor become interactive and no longer perseverative. Same thing with a child who is self stimulatory – the child is jumping up and down or looking at a fan in a self stimulatory way and we help that child do that interactively. We take the fan and say, “Oh Mr. Fan is running away. Mr. Fan is moving – can we look over here? Can we look over there?” Now we have made it into interaction. The child who is self absorbed, we woo that child into a sense of relatedness, find out what the child likes, put a favorite toy on our head or in our mouth and bring the child in. For the child who is echolalic, we find something that the child is very interested in and he won’t be echolalic if he wants that cookie or wants that candy or wants that orange juice. For the child who is scripting, we join the script and we make it creative from the inside. If he can remember a whole script or a whole book, he could certainly respond to the fact that we are going to change the script. And again, as soon as he gets angry at us, “NO!” we say, “What’s the right thing?” and he has to tell us the right thing. Well, he’s no longer scripting because he’s now explaining to us how to join his script. So if he’s a verbal child and he can do that, that’s terrific.

Now I’m going to turn it over to Serena Wieder, my dear colleague who has been so patient making notes and writing down all the things I haven’t told you, and she’s going to add on a few ideas and then we’re going to take your calls. I know there are a few calls waiting, please be patient, and we are going to be with you in a few minutes.



SW: Well, I think these principles do apply to all these situations and of course you have to take the individual children into account. Let me just add a few ideas to what you have already said, to pick up on some details. I know we're heading into spring and good weather, and some of the opportunities some parents find helpful getting children out of diapers, for example, really works well outside when they are having fun and splashing in little pools and going through sprinkles. What you are really looking for is where the child registers in his sensory registration and awareness that he has to urinate or have a bowel movement. You want to look for those clues and signals and work with it. Things like the reasoning, really work well when you do things like a ritual like when you go to the tub you might want to try using the potty or the toilet because there is a good reason to go and have fun in the tub the next moment. I couldn't emphasize, though, enough is that it's the interaction that helps the child become more flexible. There is a strong tendency to want to do things in a very ritualized way and we know that we can get much more into the interaction by helping the child do what he wants to do. When you think about it as helping him do what he wants to do, you're going to find the child is much more willing to accept your participation. By giving the child more control over what you do which we get with the basic Floortime, we'll see more flexibility. But the notion that doing things in a very predictable and routine and putting things always in the same place can also sometimes backfire if you don't realize that you are reinforcing that tendency instead of really helping your child problem solve and do searching to get what they want to do and try something else that may solve the problem. By the soothing and comforting and interactive approach you can delay the anxiety that often gets triggered when a child is not sure something is going to work. I think we have some questions.

SG: In just a second we are going to take a question. Just to summarize what Serena was saying, and what also I've been trying to emphasize is the most important thing is don't get involved in a power struggle when you want your child to try please you and try something new. Just remember, the child is the boss of their own body, you're not the boss of their body and they know that and they will win every time when their body is involved. So if it's toilet training or eating, you can't do it by coercion and you can't do it by just sheer force. So when you're getting frustrated, count to ten, take a deep breath, relax, go back to these basic principles, establish a calm, cooperative attitude around things that your child is enjoying and then slowly, very slowly, bring in the new experience once you have established your calm, cooperative problem solving attitude. Just think of yourself. Who is going to make you try something new unless you



are in a cooperative mode and wanting to really work with that other person? So you have to be the trusted partner. Ok, now let's take our first call. Hello?

Caller: Hello. This is Jennifer calling. How are you?


SG: Hi Jennifer. Welcome to our show and thank you for being so patient. Sorry to keep you waiting.

Caller: No, that's no problem at all. Thank you so much for taking my call. I have a sort of basic question for you, sort of a chicken versus the egg question.

SG: Ok, great.

Caller: I'm working with my 37 month old son named Rob on setting up a home program, the ABLC based type of program. We're working on one of our Level A engagement goals of referencing the adult while interacting. We seem to be very good at this when we are actually doing a structured game. We look at each other and interact very well. But I guess my chicken versus the egg question is, should the eye contact and referencing naturally follow throughout the day if I have him effectively engaged or do I need to work on that eye contact first to get it at the effective engagement happening?

SG: Ok, the question is a very good one. Do you work on eye contact first or affect and pleasure and engaging first? And then let the eye contact follow? It's a very, very good question because it's one of the common mistakes we make and we have historically made when working with children with special needs. Remember, affect always comes first. So affect and emotion always comes first. The child needs to enjoy relationships, enjoy relating to mommy and daddy, enjoy relating to peers, enjoy relating to teachers, so we woo the child into that relationship. Now some children who are visually hypersensitive, for example to lights or just the animation in the human face is overwhelming to them because there is so much emotion, will be warmly engaged and be very loving and very caring and not look at you that much at first, until they learn to regulate their interactions a little bit better. Looking is not the desired goal. I don't know where the notion came that looking is so important. Looking is not the desired goal. There are many healthy adults who function very well who are married, have families and rear their children wonderfully who, when you meet them at a cocktail party you notice that for the first 15 minutes or so they don't look you straight in the eyes. They kind of look down, they look to the side, they are very cautious, they are



very shy, yet they are the warmest, sweetest people in the world, successful in their careers, successful mommies or daddies and do very well. So looking behavior has been oversold. Looking is not important. Loving is important. It's how you love, it's not how you look.

Caller: As we have learned more about Robert and observed him and worked with different people, our occupational therapist has told us she thinks he is somewhat visually sensitive to motion...

SG: Absolutely, and so don't make looking the behavior. No, it's never a focus on the behavior itself. Always focus on the underlying emotional state. What you want is pleasure in relating. And I can promise you, what happens is, when this pleasure in relating and then as you get a continuous flow of interaction cooking, back-and-forth, you know where you get 50+ circles in a row as part of shared problem solving, everything else gets better. The looking gets better, the cooperating gets better, because as the child gets more engaged and more pleasure relating and more back-and-forth in their signaling with their emotions, they can regulate their environment better and therefore they don't have to avoid looking, or don't have to avoid sharing, or don't have to avoid other things. They can become more of a cooperative, interactive partner. So focus on the underlying affective state, not on specific behaviors. But it's a very good question, thank you for asking it.


Caller: Well, thank you very much for your help, we greatly appreciate it.

SG: Thank you. Serena, do you want to add another thought onto that?

SW: No, I would just repeat it. I know there is a very strong tendency for people to turn a child's face and touch them and get them to look at it and I would agree, we usually find this very counterproductive. It's the best way to get a child not to want to look at you.

Caller: And I think that's what I've started to do with my son in emphasizing him looking at me, I see him getting angry and frustrated and he can't deal with it and when I go back to that engagement that you talked about and the interaction, he is much happier and looks at me naturally.

SG: That's what we want. Natural looking, we want looking out of love. It's just like, think of as an adult if your husband or your wife at the end of the day when you're



exhausted and just want a backrub from them, they say, “Look at me in the eye.” You say, “GET AWAY FROM ME! Just give me a back rub and shut up!”

Caller: Absolutely! Sounds like my house!

SG: Alright.

Caller: Well, thank you again so much.

SG: You’re welcome. Thank you.

Caller: Thank you.

SG: Ok, we have another caller. Hello?

Caller: Hello?

SG: Hi.

Caller: Is this Dr. Greenspan?

SG: Dr. Greenspan speaking, welcome to our show.

Caller: Yes, I have a question.


SG: Sure, go ahead.

Caller: My son, who is a little bit older, 6 ½, has been doing very well...

SG: Could you speak up a little more please?

Caller: Yes. He is doing quite well. He’s 6 ½ and he has been attending a kindergarten class and is doing better than I imagined he ever could. He’s talking well and mostly related when he speaks. But he is still having significant issues with learning problems like handwriting, sometimes attending, also things like visual spatial type problems so he is being pulled out by a resource teacher to work on these things and it’s being done in a very behavioral modification type of way which is a conflict so I decided to pull him out of school. I just wanted some advice on when the child who no longer has some of the issues that are key to being autistic but yet still have all these learning disabilities, what do you advise?


SG: Very, very good question. I have read your more detailed question in advance because you had emailed it, and I just wanted to add a few elements onto your



question. I understand from your written question that your child is very warm and related, very interactive, and can be creative and verbal and answer “W” questions and be logical. Now he has less problems with self absorption or perseveration and the challenges now are with the specific learning and processing challenges like the visual spatial and the motor planning, etc., not with the relating, communicating, and thinking skills – the foundation skills. Now we love how children graduate from the basic problems of relating, thinking, and communicating, to specific narrower challenges in particular processing domains like you described. That’s a sign of wonderful progress, in fact that’s what we define as progress – to master the fundamental relating, communicating, and thinking skills so then you can move on to working on your specific processing challenges which are much easier to work with, obviously because now you have a thinking, relating, and communicative child who can work with you. Now the problem is, just as you say, in many schools the child is still in a program for children with fundamental problems of relating, thinking, and communicating. That program may be working on surface behaviors rather than underlying processing capacities. It may be working with having a child be compliant and sitting at the desk and looking at the teacher, rather than their underlying visual spatial problems or their underlying motor planning or sequencing problems. Even worse, there may not be opportunities for the child to interact warmly and spontaneously and use their creativity and their relationship skills and their communication skills and their thinking skills. Yet if we put the child in a regular class at that time with 30 children, it may be too overwhelming if that child is sensory over-reactive or can’t process visual spatial experiences or plan and sequence actions.

Caller: That is my child to a T.


SG: So we have a real dilemma, but your child and hundreds of thousands of other children are in the same dilemma all around the country. Now there are two solutions. The quick solution, and what parents need to do, and I never tell specific parents what to do and I’m not going to tell you what to do, I’m just going to give you a general principle, but the general principles for the immediacy for the situation, because parents can’t wait for policy changes and the long term policy changes. The long term policy changes, first, is that schools need to have programs for children with specific processing challenges where there are small classes of 6-12 children, 2-3 teachers, children are all related, interactive, good communicators, and good thinkers, but they have these specific processing problems and the teachers are trained to work with the



foundations for these processing problems – how to improve visual spatial thinking, how to improve motor planning, how to improve auditory processing. That’s what we need across the country in every single school. So then there is a good option – the child graduates from the program that focuses on relating, thinking, and communicating into the program of more narrowly defined processing and learning challenges. Some school systems have this in place and it’s wonderful. But many do not, so the kids are caught betwixt and between and the parents are too. So that’s what we need from our policy point of view, and parents have to lobby for that in their own grass roots ways in their own areas so that school boards know this need exists and they do something about it. So there is power in the voters and we have to be those voters, and we have to write to our congressmen and write to our state legislators, etc., and our boards of education.

But also, in the immediate situation, I know from your note you were considering home schooling. That is often a good option to consider. Then you can tailor the curriculum to your child, you can bring in some tutors and some helpers as you need, but there the problem is that the child misses the peer relationships. So what we have some children doing is spending half the day in a regular classroom for the peer relationships and for some group activities and friendships, and the other half of the day in a home program, one-on-one work on basic reading, math, and working on the fundamental processing skills. For other children where the school system won’t allow that, we just try to arrange group activities for the child in a makeshift way that the parents arrange. So there are daily play dates with the child from school plus some group activity almost every day. Then the child has almost the best of both worlds – it’s not perfect. Obviously for parents who can find a private school if they can afford it, that has smaller class sizes and tailors to the individual processing capacities of the child. But often in many school systems we have done a combination where the child spends half the day in the school in a regular class so they get the interaction and then the real learning occurs one-on-one at home. Here is Dr. Wieder for some additional comments.

SW: I would only add to this that while your child is having to work so hard to master some of the basic processing issues, you want to take advantage of two things. You know one is that he learns in other ways. He just continues to enjoy learning to creative and thematic types of projects because the real mission is to learn. We don’t know how long it’s going to take to get for some of the more processing skills to take in. But by being persistent, you really also want to be sure you have the approach, whether



it's at home or at school, that really engages the child. He might want to learn about space or dinosaurs or animals in the jungles in a safari. Keep up the things that you can captivate the relating and the excitement and the affect about learning. So you want to keep that going because it can be done just verbally, it could be done through a lot of visual supports. Meanwhile you plug away and the underlying processing issues. So you don't have to read to be excited about learning in other ways. That's very important. If you want to explore the situation, the dilemma I find is that there is a big difference in the program that approaches a problem as a learning disability versus more of a special education setting. Here again, as Dr. Greenspan mentioned, we still want the children to relate, be with other children who also relate and communicate and to have fun in this process. So whether you can work it out at school or whether you do it on your own, you want your child interacting with other kids who can share this with him. That is going to become more and more important as he gets older.

Caller: Now with the processing difficulties, are these kind of life long...

SG: The processing difficulties will get better over time as you work on them, so just keep working on them and build the foundation.

Caller: Like learning to relate took time.

SG: Yes, exactly. It will get better gradually and follow our Clinical Practice Guidelines ([www.icdl.com](http://www.icdl.com)). There are good chapters on all these processing areas.

Caller: Ok.

SG: Great, thank you for your question. Next caller, please. Hello?

Caller: Hello.


SG: How are you, welcome to our show.

Caller: Dr. Greenspan?

SG: Yes.


Caller: I have a question. This is about my son who is about 5 years old.

SG: Could you please speak up into the phone?



Caller: Sure. Now the question is that when we ask him a question about an event or what he did on a play date, he takes a long time to respond and this could be from his auditory processing difficulties and also could be because he is trying to formulate a sentence in his head. He does have some echolalia but he usually will come up with non-echolalic responses if we give him the time. But our dilemma is that when we give him the time, that makes the rapid back-and-forth very hard if we give him a choice, that may not be the choice that he was thinking of.

SG: Ok, let me tell you what to do in that situation. The general principle is, a child who is very slow to process auditory information or very slow to process language or very slow to formulate their responses but is processing the information and is formulating response, so how do we give the child time and maintain the relatedness and maintain the back-and-forth rhythm at a reasonable pace? It's a very common challenge, and again thousands and thousands of children have this challenge. Let me first say that it's a very good sign that the child is a two-way communicator and is actually processing what you say and thinking through and formulating a response. The way to have your cake and eat it too, is to while the child is verbally slow to respond, maintain the rhythm of interaction through the gesturing. So remember you're always interacting at two levels at once. You're gesturing to your child with your little head nods, your little smiles, with your smirks, with your body movements, so there is a rhythm of interaction. Just think of two adults interacting, they are moving in rhythm with each other. Back and forth, hand gestures are very common for example as you are talking. So as the child is formulating a response, you're nodding your head in an expectant way like "yes, I'm listening and I'm hanging on your every word, I'm waiting" you know what I mean? You are in a very respectful way nodding your head and looking at the child, you may be moving your hand in a way that suggests something to come. So I'm moving my hand now, you can't see it, but in a kind of semicircle where I'm almost helping the words out of the person, you know what I mean? With your hands like you're an orchestra leader. So you use a lot of very animated body posture and what you'll find is that as you do that, the child begins moving in rhythm to your movement and it helps them actually formulate the response. It is as if you, as an adult, were talking to a very empathetic person. We all do this. If a person asks you a very difficult question like, "What is your philosophy of life?" or "What is your fundamental religious belief in one sentence?" You're going to have to think about that, right? You're not going to come up with a quick answer. As you're doing it, if the person is looking at you and nodding their head, moving their hands expectantly, it's going to



actually help you formulate a response and you'll be moving in rhythm with them even though your verbal answer is delayed a few seconds. And that is exactly that we do with the child who needs longer time to process the sounds and the words and to plan their verbal response, we maintain the rhythm gesturally by being very animated. Sometimes we can repeat the question again just to re-orient them using different terminology. But we give them the time and respect they need but maintain the flow of interaction the way I have been describing.

Caller: Ok. What if we give him time for a response and he cannot come up with an answer and he looks away.

SG: If he can't come up with an answer and you have given him time, then go to multiple choice and draw him back in and be empathetic and say, "Gee, that was a hard question, it's hard to think of the answer. Let me give you a couple choices." And then draw him back in or move to the side so he can see you again and give him two choices. Whenever you are giving choices, give him the good choice first and the bad choice second. In other words, let's say you're asking a child what is his favorite activity. And you know one of his activities is playing computer games, so you say, "Is it playing this computer game or is it going to sleep?" where you know he doesn't like going to sleep, so he can't just repeat the last thing.

Caller: Ok.


SG: Ok, Serena, do you want to add any thoughts to this?

SW: Well, just if this were a situation where you are actually using toys and had some props visual support to add to the gestures because you can do a little more cueing if it's in the context of playing with toys. Not so much for the manipulation as much as to help with the formulation or the retrieval and you can do some cueing through the toys especially once the child has shown some real interest that is his own interests versus our guiding that.

SG: Thank you for the very good question.


Caller: Thank you so much.

SG: Excellent question. Thank you. Now we have a few more questions that I'm going to read. These were questions that were emailed in during the week. Again, we invite all of you to email in your questions and we'll pick a few of these for live



discussions on air and then others we will be able to deal with a little more briefly as I am now and I'll read them. We will get to as many of your questions as we can, so please email in your questions as you have them. They are excellent questions. The questions that you have, remember there are thousands of parents who have similar questions so you are helping others as well as yourselves. Let me take this question, *I was wondering how to tell if my child who is 34 months old has mastered Milestone 4.* (Those that may remember, Milestone 4 is a continuous flow of back-and-forth purposeful interaction like a child taking you by the hand and walking you to the refrigerator or taking you to find a new toy and getting you to help him.) *At his best he is capable of this type of complex problem solving communication but doesn't demonstrate it all the time. He also likes to self stimulate a lot and is very sensory seeking but now is much more related. So if he doesn't demonstrate all the time, has he truly mastered the milestone? Thanks.*

Now that is a good question. Remember the principle that we talked about earlier in the show? Life is never in the extremes, life is always in the gray zone, meaning that you never think, "has my child truly mastered the milestone or not mastered the milestone" but you ask the question in this way, "to what degree has my child mastered the milestone?" Now you can master a milestone a little bit, you can master it a medium amount, or you can master it a whole lot. Now if you master the milestone sometimes, that is exactly what you have done. You have mastered the milestone some of the time. If you are doing it all the time, you have mastered the milestone all the time. If you haven't done it at all, you are not doing it at all. So for example a child who is walking a little bit then falls and stumbles and gets up is walking some of the time, not all the time. Similarly with running or any skill. Think of yourself as an adult who is playing tennis. You may hit good shots some of the time but not all the time. As you get better, you will do it all the time. Some children require a little more support to master a skill so they can do it when we challenge them but not do it where they take the initiative. So what you do is you don't look for an all-or-nothing answer, "has my child mastered the skill or not," but you try to describe in what way the child has mastered the skill – a little bit, a lot, with support, without support, some of the time, all of the time. Now the key for a child who is sensory seeking, who likes to move a lot and is getting more and more related and some of the time can open and close many circles of communication in a row and solve problems like take you by the hand and show you something, is to help the child do that more of the time. We do that by challenging the child and when they are active and seeking out sensation and




jumping from one activity to another where they are not opening and closing many circles in a row, we have to activate up with them, join them in their activity, and help them make transitions. If they are verbal and they switch from A to B, we say, “What happened? You were doing A and now you are doing B, which do you want to do?” And once the child can actually verbalize a choice and say, “I want to do B now, I’m tired of A,” they are no longer jumping and changing, now it’s an organized transition. If they are not yet verbal and they jump from one thing to another, we can hold the first toy and then the second toy and look puzzled and say, “Which one? Which one?” and if they push away the first one and go for the second one, again that is an organized choice which connects the circles so it’s no longer fragmentation or jumping from one set of circles to another but now the circles of communication are being connected from one activity to another activity.

So the idea is to challenge the child to go from a “sometimes” Level 4 child to an “all the time” complex, social, problem solving communicator. And that will occur over time as you work with the child and challenge the child more and more. Serena, do you want to add anything?

SW: Just in addition to the degree, you want to really think about what are the conditions where that happens most of the time. You do more of the practice in the right conditions. Say your child might be able to do more of that, let’s say, when he is doing something he really likes in sensory motor play or maybe in the bathtub where you have a captive audience, you get a lot more going that will then give the child the feeling of what it’s like to stay in that flow.


SG: We have another question. *One of my biggest problems with my son is he always tries to grab a small object like a spoon or pen and twist it. If you take it away from him, he’ll try to find another one then twist it again. How to deal with it? I will get my answer from your radio broadcast.* Ok, I hope I can give you a good answer! There are many favorite activities that children have like twisting things or touching things or spinning things, and it’s the same basic principle for all of these. First ask yourself the question, “What is the pleasure? Why do I think my little Johnny or Susie is doing that? What do they like about twisting? Is it the touch; is it the movement?” Then find more activities, not less, where they can twist things. Find other twisting toys that are more interactive where we twist it, they twist it, things where they need your help to twist it. Pretty soon we’re turning their interest in twisting it into interest in interacting with you. That’s the key. So don’t fight it. Use it. And that’s probably one of the most



important general principles is don't fight it, use it. Use it to promote higher levels of development. So instead of getting frustrated and trying to take something away from him, make it more interactive and more complex by discovering where the pleasure is. Also with some activities, for example a child who is jumping and shaking their hands all the time and seems to be self stimulating on motor activity, you can do it proactively. Put on some music 4 or 5 times a day and do jumping and spinning activities which is done cooperatively. So a lot of sensory integration exercises involve running, jumping, spinning, and deep pressure and if we do that 4 or 5 times a day as part of a motor and sensory workout, the child doesn't have the need at times when we're trying to play something else with him, to be involved in shaking their hands or spinning or doing these kinds of activities. So a lot of proactive motor and sensory play is very, very important. Serena, do you want to add a thought?

SW: Just that I have come to really respect what a child does as being the solution to what he can do. And if that's what he is doing, then we want to make it more complex. So in this case, the original question of spinning something or twisting something, by going into it and making it interactive and making it more complex, some of this can be turned into something more productive because he can twist open something and see what is inside. He can figure out how to build on that basic motion and see what other things you can bring to it that he could try and then move into more learning from it. But he's doing what he can do and it's a clue to you that doing other things are much harder and then we come to it with ways of supporting the motor planning so he can do other things as well, but try off of this. This is his solution and he is at least trying to do something and work off his intent.

SG: Ok, I'm going to take one last brief call for about 30 seconds because then we have to stop and then we're going to talk for a second about next week's show. The last question concerns children who like to get involved in routines and persevere a little bit and adults can pull them in to more complex interactions, but with peers, peers just give them a funny look. How do you get them to be more elaborate in their play with peers so they don't just do computer games or do things that are repetitive? The key thing is to help them with peers. Actually do Floortime with a peer where the adult stretches them and makes it interesting for them and the peer. In other words, don't just let them play with the peer on their own, particularly when they are tired or overwhelmed. The more peer play you have, the better the child will get involved in cooperative social play with peers. So the answer is more play and more involvement of



the adults at least in part of the peer play, particularly when the child is tired, but where the adult becomes the instigator to make it creative. And we'll come back to that question and give it a more elaborate answer because it is a good question, but we don't have time today.

Now next week the focus of our show is going to be on one of the most common problems and it's one of the most common questions I get, is "How do I deal with my child's moodiness and his aggression?" Lots of children hit or push, particularly when they get frustrated. And as they get older and bigger, it's a big, big problem for parents because they are harder to control. Many children are moody, getting upset, irritable, anxious, or depressed. How do we help them regulate their moods and regulate their impulsive or aggressive behavior? That is going to be our subject for next week. Thank you for joining us, and we look forward to discussing that with you and your additional questions next week.