

Web-Based Radio Show

Communication:

Learning to communicate starting at the pre verbal level


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Sarah: Good morning and welcome to the Floortime Foundation's Web Radio Program, "Infants, Children and Families," featuring Dr. Stanley Greenspan. This broadcast will begin now. Please welcome Dr. Stanley Greenspan.

SG: Welcome to our show. I'm pleased that you can join us this morning and for those who will be tuning in later, I'm pleased that you can join us at anytime. Today's program is a special treat for me because it focuses on a concept that is central to our work with children with special needs and learning challenges, and really all children – children without challenges as well. Today's topic builds on last week's topic. Today's topic is "Communication." As you recall, last week we talked about how to enter the child's world and bring him into a shared world with you so that you can teach him to relate and enjoy the warmth and comfort of a two-communication pattern and developing a relationship with you and with others.


Today we are going to focus on the next step. Once a child is engaged and a part of a shared world, it's very, very important for that child to learn to communicate. Often we think of communication as occurring at the verbal level – exchanging words or ideas; a child saying, "I'm hungry" or "Give me that toy" or "Go out." But communication begins at the preverbal level, before children talk with their gesturing, when they show you a toy they want, when they smile in response to your smile, when they make a sound in response to your sound. So it begins quite early in life with the first little head nods, smiles, smirks, gurgling sounds, and eventually takes off into a symphony of exchanging sounds, motor gestures, facial expressions and the like, all before words are used to any significant degree. Even as words are coming in during the second year of life, we see this symphony of gestures, back-and-forth signaling occurring at a much more complex rate and manner than the verbal interchanges. It will take awhile for the words to catch up and even after a child is very verbal, or those of us



who like to speak as adults, will notice that there is always that preverbal level or that gestural level going on at the same time. We are communicating with facial gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, body posture, movements, and the like. In fact most of us trust the preverbal level more than the verbal level. An example I like to use is if you are in a dark alley with a menacing-looking stranger, are you likely to trust what he says or his gestures? For example the menacing-looking stranger says, “I’m a nice guy, I just need to know the time – can you come over here, please?” But his tone of voice, his facial expressions, his body posture, and the context suggest danger. Most of us respond and run the other way. We don’t pay attention to the verbal part of it, we pay attention to the gestural part. When we assess political candidates, we are always looking at their tone of voice and their manner as well as what they say. So this becomes an important basic communication tool early in life and continues, therefore, throughout life.

Today we are going to focus on this pre-verbal level of communication, because as we will explain in a few minutes the verbal capacities we so long for our children build on this preverbal level. Unless we get the preverbal level cooking, as we like to put it, the words, if they are used, will be very, very rote or very scripted and won’t have true meaning. So for words to have meaning and for ideas to have the kind of impact we want them to have, and for children to really be able to talk and communicate, they need to master this preverbal level. They can do it even while they are speaking also. So just because a child has words doesn’t mean he can’t work on the preverbal and the verbal at the same time. But today we are going to focus on the preverbal and next week we’ll focus on the verbal and symbolic capacities of children and how to get those cooking.

Now why is it important to have mastery of this preverbal level; this gestural level of communication beyond its obvious importance in terms of two-way communication? Obviously we want our children to communicate, but why is communication, even at this level – this very basic level, so important beyond the obvious; beyond making all children communicators? Well, it’s also the key to social and emotional capacities. If a child can’t read and respond to social signals – the facial gestures, the hand gestures, the body posture – they have a hard time knowing what to do and when to do it. Way before a child speaks, for example, a caregiver lets a child know what is dangerous or what is safe by the look in their eyes; by their facial expression; by their body posture; by the tone of their voice; and by the way they point.




So a child who is about to put their hand in the socket will sense that that's a no-no not so much because they understand the word "no" but way before that they understand the tone of voice – the alarm in mommy's voice or the grimace in her face or the pointing away from the socket, "You better go away from here!" and finally being picked up and put in another place where they are not in danger. Similarly, warmth and acceptance and love are communicated through the tone of voice. A child who gives mommy a big smile and flirts and reaches out to be picked up and mommy gives him a big smile back and offers her arms out and says with warm tones, "I love you" but way before the word "love" is understood, those warm tones communicate love back to the child. So now we have the child learning about love or learning about limits, all through this preverbal system. So social and emotional capacities, eventually the ability to read other children's social signals on the playground – all are learned first through this gestural level of communication.

Now what about verbal language? How does the child learn what words mean? I gave the example of love – a child reaching up, being picked up by mommy, being hugged and kissed, being comforted when he is upset, making his boo-boo feel better. All that communicates love to the child and when the child finally learns the word "love" at age 2 ½ or 2, or earlier at 18 months, the child knows what it means because of all of these interactions that have gone on that the word "love" then comes to summarize. But without these loving interactions at this preverbal level, the child wouldn't know what "love" meant. He could have a textbook definition and memorize what the dictionary says, but it wouldn't be felt; it wouldn't be known to the child.

Similarly something as basic as knowing what an apple is – an apple is not just something that you again can learn from a dictionary definition that says it's round and red. That would lead to a very scripted kind of understanding of an apple. But the child who has eaten apples and thrown apples and played with apples, finally when he learns the word "apple" he knows all about an apple. He knows what it is and it has meaning for him.

So language and words from "apples" to "love" and everything in between is based on this gestural level. The word becomes the label for what we already know. And we know it based on this interaction with the world we have way before we can speak. Now again for children who haven't had that because of delays, who have been delayed in their gestural level of communication, they can get it later. They need lots of interaction with the world at the verbal and gestural level together often. So they get




this fundamental meaning that they can then use as they master words and apply the words too.

How about cognition and intelligence? Well, cognition and intelligence builds in part on language. So part of that is also based on gestural communication. But let's take some purely cognitive skills that don't require a lot of language. Piaget focused early in infancy on sensory motor-causality – the ability for a baby for example, to know that pulling a string can lead to ringing a bell. When you cut the string, the baby stops pulling on it because it doesn't ring the bell. So the baby is learning a fundamental cognitive principle: causality. But we have found out that way before the baby pulls the string, the baby pulls on the mommy's heartstrings with his smiles and smirks; with little emotional gestures. These emotional gestures – the back-and-forth of them – are the real first lesson in causality. So cognitive skills are also critical in terms of being an extension of this basic ability for gestural two-way communication. Without two-way communication, children wouldn't learn causality. They might learn it in a very limited way from experimenting with the physical world, but not in a social or verbal or meaningful way.

Also higher level cognitive skills – even those involving mathematics and science involve two-way communication with others. For example, a lot is more than you expect. A little is less than you expect. And that goes with negotiation with cookies and candies and all kinds of goodies. So many of our cognitive skills, and as we have argued elsewhere and I won't go into detail here, the whole structure of intelligence is built on this ability for two-way communication, first without words. Academic success also is based on this. So number and mathematical concepts having to do with quantity requires lots of this kind of back-and-forth negotiation around quantity occurring first without words. The meaning of words, so important in reading comprehension comes from this gestural level. It's hard to think of an academic skill that doesn't build on this gestural level. Paying attention and problem solving sequencing are all learned way before we use words. Therefore, our basic foundations require communication early in life. If it doesn't happen early in life because of developmental problems, we have to get two-way communication established as quickly as possible.


Now what we have found with many children with autistic spectrum disorders and other special needs conditions, because of their biological challenges in motor planning and sequencing and auditory processing and language and visual spatial processing, in sensory modulation – the ability not to be over- or under-reactive to



sensation – because of many of these kinds of biologically based problems, children have a hard time engaging in two-way back-and-forth communication. Therefore, the foundations for verbal language, for later cognitive and social skills, are temporarily derailed until, and this is key, we help the children get involved in their two-way back-and-forth communication. So one of the first things we do, even if it's a 4 year old or 5 year old or 8 year old, or as I have expressed many times, a 35 year old, one of the first things we do is to look at how well the individual engages with others. Are they a part of a shared world or are they in their own world? How well are they at conducting two-way communication? Can they gesture with facial expressions and emotions, with arm gestures and hand gestures? Can they show you, even if they can't tell you, about things? Can they get a continuous flow cooking of back-and-forth exchange of gestures to show and explore and negotiate even without words? And obviously, can they use words as well? That's even better. But we look at these things right away because if they aren't engaged or they aren't yet a two-way communicator, that becomes the emphasis of the work with the child or the adult. We know that unless we get that system going, all other progress will be hard. It doesn't mean that we can't be working on other things at the same time – as I mentioned we can be working on verbal skills and even some academic-type skills simultaneously with working on back-and-forth preverbal communication. But we can't ignore this fundamental level or else it'll slow down progress everywhere and the foundations of this house we're building won't be properly built.


Now what are the basic principles to establishing two-way communication? I mean, typically without developmental challenges we see this happening in that first year of life, particularly in the second half of the first year of life and moving more prominently into the second year of life. It's not surprising that many children with autistic spectrum disorders, when they are evaluated, parents are told that the child is at a less than 12 month old level in terms of basic communication and language skills. That's often because this preverbal system hasn't been well established. Some of these children may have isolated words, maybe they can identify some letters or shapes or words on a page, but don't have the fundamentals in place. It's never too late to work on these fundamentals, however.

What are the basic principles that help us? The first basic principle, and many of you who are conversing in our DIR Floortime Model are already aware of some of this but I'm going to elaborate a little more and hopefully make it even a little clearer. The



first basic principle is to follow the child's lead. In other words, tune in to the child's world. This means, paying attention to the child's own emotions or affects or goals. What is the child interested in? So when you follow the child's lead, you are really thinking to yourself, "What is my little baby, my little guy, my little gal, or my big 35 year old trying to do? What do they want? What's giving them pleasure? Is it aimlessly wandering around the room? Is it moving about in a rapid back-and-forth way running frantically from one side of the room to the other? Is it banging a box? Is it opening and closing a door? Is it rubbing a spot on the floor? Is it picking up the dollies and trying to do pretend play? What is going on and what does this tell me about this child's or this adult's goals and emotions and intentions, pleasures, excitement?" Now we have to know this because communication builds on intentionality. Sure we can coerce a child to communicate with us, but that's not coming from the child so it's not going to lead to very good two-way communication. It will lead to some memorized communicative scripts, but not real communication which starts with one's heart; starts with one's own intentions. The whole goal of communication is to get the child to not only communicate but to initiate and want to communicate because or else they won't communicate on their own. So we follow the child's lead, we harness the child's emotions and we pay attention to what the child wants. Now, then we build on that. But here is where we make a common mistake. When we build on the child's lead – let's say the child is opening and closing the door, we don't necessarily simply do what the child is doing or don't necessarily copy the child. So we don't just open and close the door with the child. We need to then say, "How do we challenge the child based on his interests, to interact with us?" The key here is getting the two-way communication cooking, not just with toys or with doors, but with another human being. The door, the toy, the object can be a helper so we don't take a child away from their objects, we incorporate the objects into the interaction with us.

But the next question is how do we harness this into real communication with us? So with our child who is opening and closing the door, for example, we might put a wedge under the door. Now the door is kind of stuck and the child can't move it. We'll say, "Can I help?" and we offer a gesture like, "Help? Help?" and we gesture like we'll push with him. Maybe the child, if we are lucky, might nod or might take our hand and put it to the door or might make some other gesture to indicate, "Help me" in which case we are in business. We are helping the child meet his own goal, and then we can put more pressure into the push and what do you know? The wedge gets dislodged and the child can now push the door. Then we'll put the wedge in again, hopefully without




the child seeing us, we can be tricky because it's in the child's interest. There's nothing wrong with being a little tricky. Again, we're helping the child reach his own goal and we're getting two-way communication with us cooking.

Another example of helping a child reach his own goal would be the child is fascinated with a little ball that he keeps bouncing. But it rolls under the chair. We can offer to help the child reach his goal again and seeing if that works for the child. Or if the child is dancing around the room, we can offer our hand and see if he'll take a hold of it and we can dance with him. Now it's a two-way dance, but he's again, voluntarily taking our hand. In other words, so something as simple as offering our hand to him but not actually grabbing his hand, putting it right next to his hand so he has to make that extra step. He has to do that one last inch to show intentionality and purpose that he is building on what we are doing because we have built on what he has done. So we call this opening and closing circles of communication. The child opens the circle of communication by his own purpose or intention, by doing what he wants to do. We then build on that by, in this first instance, helping him get towards his goal. And then he in turn closes the circle when he takes advantage of what we offered, takes our hand, gestures for us to push the door with him, and that's closing a circle. Then we try to get from one circle to another circle until we have multiple circles cooking.

Now we described many more examples in our book, The Child with Special Needs, but I want to give you a few more here. So a child may be also a child who enjoys horsey rides and daddy might get down on the floor and little Johnny may climb on his back. But now Johnny has to gesture to go or to stop or to move in this direction or that direction. Again, we're helping the child do what he wants to do, and we're a vehicle for it.

So the key is to help your child to his goals and get communication cooking. But become the object yourself of his interaction and use the things as a helper in that – the door or the toy or the object.


Now the other way of getting it cooking is to be playfully obstructive. Here, for example the child is playing with the ball and we might put our hand over the ball and he has to move our hand out of the way to get back to his ball. We might block the door and he has to say, "Go" or push us away to get the door opened and closed again. But in being playfully obstructive, there are two techniques so we don't get the child upset. One is to be very slow motion so he can block you before you even do it so he doesn't



have to get upset, like you slow motion put your hand over the ball so he can take your hand away even before you actually cover the ball so he doesn't have to get upset. Or you move towards the door as though you are going to block it and before you get there he may gesture for you to get away. Now as he does that, you let him feel the mastery of his own gestures. So he's the boss and the king as soon as he gestures purposefully. You've got your goal met, you don't really want to touch the ball or get in his way of the door. And so the slow motion, and then when he gestures you let him be the master. Now he's enjoying two-way purposeful communication.

Children also love to find things, so the hiding of things under your hand, putting it in your hand and letting him guess which hand it's in are all good examples of how to do this. Also, for the child who is more challenging, the child who is very aimless and just wandering around the room, we have a little game we call, "Building a Fence." We follow the child around and then we put our hands around him without actually touching him like it's a fence, but a fence that doesn't really restrain him, but now he wants to get out of our fence to move around the room so he's got to pick up our hand or say, "Let go" or motion in some other way. As soon as he does, obviously we follow his initiative. Also, for children who are very distracted by their own motor movements, are moving with such a pace and waving their arms and legs in what looks like self-stimulatory patterns and perseverative patterns that they are so distracted that they don't even pay attention to you, sometimes a very good technique is to gently hold their hand or both their hands and move it rhythmically with your vocal tones and with your voice. And this gets them into sometimes a rhythm with you and then within that they can gesture and communicate, sometimes even use a word or two. So that's rhythmic hand holding and moving with the child to help them settle down and so they aren't so distracted by their own motor movements. This is especially useful for children who have severe motor planning problems and lots of aimless and distracting motor activities. You're helping them kind of organize and regulate so they can engage, and then get into a two-way communication pattern.

Some children do better when they are elevated, for example, and being on a balance beam or being up on a bed or even a very, very low table because we don't want them to be up too high because it can be dangerous. It helps them orient themselves in space; helps them focus a bit. And then they need your help to get down and to negotiate. You can play all kinds of games as they are up on this wide balance beam. Some children do better when they are moving on a swing or jumping on a little



floor-based trampoline. So there are lots of ways of helping children use their different sensory capacities such as being a little uncertain in space to organize themselves, or moving in space such as trampoline or swing, to help two-way communication get cooking.

Now you'll find that there is a huge number of specific techniques that you can use. I have just given you a few examples. The goal is to open and close circles of communication and go from two or three circles to five circles, and then ten circles, and then twenty circles, and then thirty circles, and then get into what we call "a continuous flow." The continuous flow is our goal, and that's when you don't need to count circles anymore because the child can get into a back-and-forth rhythm with you as much as you are available to help the child do it. The key, though, is to entice the child to use their own initiative.


Now I want to cover a few basic principles that will organize all the innovative techniques that you and your colleagues and friends will come up with. And again, it is inexhaustible, the amount of different ways you can get two-way communication going from simple peek-a-boo games to hide-and-go-seek games to hide-the-objects, to playful obstruction, to rhythmic coordinated co-activities together. All these things are great examples and again, there are many more in [The Child with Special Needs](#) book and many of you will be exchanging ideas through internet work groups and internet communication groups. The key is to get a continuous flow going and harness the child's initiative.

Here are some other basic principles that will help you know that the specific techniques that you are using are working well. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Am I following my child's lead, which means not doing exactly what he is doing, but paying attention to his emotions and his interests.

2. Am I getting him to do to me rather than me doing to him? A lot of parents fall into the pattern of stimulating the child – pinching, verbalizing, vocalizing, etc. – but don't really get the child doing to them. The child has to take the initiative.

3. Is my voice showing expectation? Is my gesture showing expectation? Am I using a sing-song voice? Have I given up on expecting anything from my little Johnny or Susie or am I doing something and then my body posture and vocal tones showing expectation? So if you say, "You WANT the APPLE? LOOK! I'm hiding it! Here IT goes,




do you WANT it, do you WANT it?” That’s expectation. If you just say, “Do you want the apple do you want the apple do you want the apple?” there’s no expectation in your voice. So if you are hiding his favorite ball or his favorite apple or his favorite toy, “I GOT IT! I GOT IT! HERE! You want IT? Look!” So it’s got to have high expectation.

4. Are you tailoring your interactions to the child’s nervous system. If he is low muscle tone and under-reactive, are you energizing up? If he is very over-sensitive and over-reactive, are you being extra soothing? Are you using extra visual support for the child who is a better visual learner? Are you slowing down and emphasizing the sounds for the child who has auditory processing problems? In other words, are you tailoring to the child’s nervous system? But don’t so simplify your verbalizations or slow them down so they lose their emotional rhythm. In other words, the key is the expectation in your voice so you can say, “OOOOh, look! The DOOR! The DOOR! Look at the DOOR!” with a good rhythm and good expectation and good energy even though you’re slowing it down, the key is maintaining the rhythm. Use repetition, not making your speech monotone. It should never be, “the door the door” (spoken monotone). So have good expectation in your voice.

5. Involve as many senses as possible while you are tailoring to the child’s sensory profile. So be visual, be auditory and sound oriented, be touch oriented, be movement oriented. The child who likes gross motor movement, use that. The child who likes fine motor, use that. Get two-way communication cooking any way you can.


So the basic principles are follow the child’s lead but challenge the child, don’t just do what the child is doing. Get two-way communication cooking, opening and closing circles. Do it by tailoring to the child’s nervous system and cater to the child’s unique profile. Most importantly, get him to take the initiative and go from simple circles to multiple circles and get the continuous flow cooking.

Again, we have covered this very quickly, we covered why communication is important, what the basic principles are, some specific techniques, and more of this can be read about in [The Child with Special Needs](#). Most importantly, don’t be afraid to experiment. Experimentation is great, and what works, works. If the child is taking the initiative, you’re getting a continuous flow going, then you are doing it right. Practice. The only mistake you can make, there’s only one mistake and I keep repeating this, is not showing up. What I mean is getting discouraged and giving up. As long as you are in there working on it, you and your child will benefit.



Now we are going to move to taking some questions and the first question comes from a family, and then we are going to take some live questions in just a few minutes, but the first question is, *“I have a child with very low muscle tone who tends to be self-absorbed and when I energize up and use a loud voice with him to try to get him ‘cooking’ as you put it, he just seems to shut down more and retreats into his own world. I can get him to cuddle a little bit and get him to be sweet with me, but I don’t seem to be able to get two-way communication going. What are some things I can try?”*

Well, this is a very, very good question. It describes a child, and once again I don’t know this child so I can’t talk specifically, but it describes a child who is under-reactive and doesn’t register sound and sensation very well, and has low muscle tone so tends to not take a lot of initiative because it’s hard work for this child to initiate action because of the low muscle tone. It’s just hard work to even point or show or look or turn. So this is a child we do need to kind of challenge and energize up, but the way the mother describes the child, this child might also be over-reactive to being overloaded. So in other words, some children are both under-reactive to, for example, the registration of sound, but they may be over-reactive to certain frequencies of sound. So when you use a high-pitched voice it may overload them or certain types of touch. So for some children you have to walk a fine line. You have to find just the right tone of sound – low pitch or high pitch or something in between – the right energy level in terms of loudness, and the right intensity level in terms of expectation. What I would like to emphasize to parents is that energy in the voice and expectation in the voice is critical for a child like this, doesn’t have to be loud. So I can whisper almost and say, *“Hey, look! Look at this, wow!”* you know, with real energy in my voice or I can yell it, *“LOOK AT THIS LOOK AT THIS, WOW!!!!!!”* Now the loudness doesn’t convey necessarily the energy expectation. So for a child like this who you want to be softer and more regulating, you still want to have high energy and high expectation. And for a child like this, the key is to pay attention to what the child is doing. For example, one child who is very similar to the child being described by this mom, would as they were self-absorbed would play with their own fingers, would kind of hold their hand in one hand and the other hand and be rubbing their own fingers a little bit. They would do this type of self-stimulatory play. Well, once we noticed this, we had a ticket into the child’s world, and we could pull them into a shared world. So what we did was put our little finger in his little hand and got him to play with our finger and rub our finger. Then we pulled our finger away and flirted with his hand and he didn’t reach for it, so we then touched just the tip of his pinkie and then often he would move his hand to our hand and then we



would let him play with it and rub it a little bit, then we would move our hand away a little bit and touch his pointer finger and then he would grab it again. We had this little back-and-forth game where through his seeming perseverative self-absorbed activity, we generated a two-way communicative activity. This was the ticket to two-way interaction, and then we built on that. Then because he liked physical touch, and while he was tactilely sensitive to a certain kind of touch that had a little bit of firmness to it, not too firm, that he enjoyed, we then would touch his feet and he would move his feet closer and he would try to get our little fingers caught between his two feet and so forth and so on. Through this kind of a game we were able to get true two-way communication cooking. We brought him into a world of shared interactions and eventually we got not just 5 or 10 circles but 20+ circles and a continuous flow of back-and-forth interactions cooking.

I should add to my basic principles earlier, that once you get 20+ circles of back-and-forth communication going with the child taking the initiative, not where the parent is running the show, where the child is a 50/50 partner, then you are able to truly get into the continuous flow. The first 20 circles are a little harder but then after that it becomes easier. And the first 10 of those 20 are much harder, and the first 5 are the hardest. So after you get the first 5 you're really cooking, get to 10 and it gets easier, and then between 10 and 20 a lot easier, and then 20+ into the continuous flow is much, much easier.

We have a call. Just one second. Hello? Hi, Dr. Greenspan here. We welcome your call, let me hear your question.

Caller: May I please have my husband talk to you?

SG: Hello? Dr. Greenspan here.

Caller: How are you doing?


SG: Fine, fine. I understand you are calling from where?

Caller: Yes we just got the wrong number.

SG: What? Did you call the wrong number?

Caller: We got the right number finally.

SG: Are you trying to call for Dr. Greenspan?



Caller: Yes, we are using a handsfree phone.

SG: Where are you calling from?

Caller: Hong Kong.

SG: Yes, this is Dr. Greenspan, welcome to our show from Hong Kong.

Caller: Yes, thank you.

SG: Can you hear me?

Caller: Yes.

SG: It's a delight to have you call all the way from across the world in Hong Kong and I understand that you have a question.

Caller: How many questions can we ask? Only one?

SG: Yes, ask your first question and then if we have time we'll take another.

Caller: Ok, my son he loves to sing songs. We would like to explore how this type of activity can apply to Floortime.

SG: Ok, you son likes to sing songs and you want to know how to apply that to Floortime?

Caller: Yes.

SG: Ok, can you give me an example of a song he likes to sing.

Caller: (singing) Good night, good night, look out the window, the sun is bright...

SG: Ok, wonderful. Now what is his language like when he is not singing? Can he talk with you?

Caller: Yes, he can talk to us.

SG: What can he say to you?

Caller: One or two words.

SG: For example.



Caller: It's in Cantonese, not in English.

SG: Yes, what words would he say in Cantonese if you could translate it into English, what Cantonese word would he use?

Caller: He would say "I am happy." "I would like to have chocolate."

SG: Right, right. Now if you were talking to him in Cantonese, could he tell you which song in English he liked better? One song or another?

Caller: No.

SG: Would he understand the word in the English song that he is singing?

Caller: When we sing a song, he can point to the right pictures.

SG: Ok.

Caller: So we believe he understands the meaning of the vocabulary.

SG: The vocabulary; the word. Can he do that with English songs too?

Caller: He can do that with English songs.

SG: Terrific. The key thing is when he is singing the song and you're singing together...

Caller: No, he does not sing.

SG: You sing?

Caller: He will ask us to sing for him.

SG: Right.

Caller: But when we stop he follows.

SG: Right, but he himself does not sing the song.

Caller: He does not sing the song.

SG: So when you are singing the song to him, you should stop, have him point to the picture, or have him show whether he wants you to continue that song or a different song.



Caller: He will continue a different word like one or two.

SG: Then he will continue himself?

Caller: Then stop and wait for us to continue.

SG: Here's how you make it into Floortime. You make it into Floortime by having him do something purposeful or intentional around the singing. So for example let's say you have 3 or 4 pictures, ok? He can point to the picture and then you start singing the song that goes along with the picture, ok?

Caller: Yes.

SG: Then after a few lines of the song, you stop and you ask him to say either point back to that same picture to get you to continue or to point to a different picture to get you to sing a different song. The whole goal is to get him to communicate with you in a back-and-forth way and you use his pleasure in songs as a way to get him to communicate. So the whole goal is back-and-forth communication with you.

Caller: Ok.

SG: Ok? Now do you have another question?

Caller: Just a moment.

SG: It's a treat for us to have a call from Hong Kong.

Caller: Ok, my second question. How can we use Floortime to improve my son's concentration and eye contact with people?

SG: The question is, how can you use Floortime to improve concentration and eye contact with people?


Caller: Yes.

SG: The best way is to find things that he enjoys.

Caller: Enjoys?

SG: Yes, what does he like the best?

Caller: Singing.



SG: Singing, ok. In order to get you to sing to him, you put the picture of the song on top of your head.

Caller: On top of...

SG: Your head.

Caller: On top of his head?

SG: No, on top of your head. Right by your face. So in order to point to the picture, he's got to look at you. And then he can look at you and look at the picture at the same time and he's looking at you and getting you to sing. Ok? Now the other thing you can do is after he points to the picture, you can play a little game where he has to touch your nose to get you to open your mouth and sing.

Caller: Right.

SG: Now in touching your nose, where does he have to look?

Caller: I see.

SG: Where does he look to touch your nose?

Caller: Yes.

SG: He has to look at you, right?

Caller: Me, right.

SG: Exactly. So in this way you get him to want to look. You're not forcing him to look. You're getting him to love looking because by looking at you, he gets you to sing.

Caller: Great, great.

SG: Ok? So that's it. Now thank you very much for your calls.

Caller: Thank you for your advice.

SG: And again it's a delight to have you call from Hong Kong and we're very happy to be helpful.

Caller: Yes, thank you very much.

SG: Bye bye. Ok, next call please. Hello? Welcome to our show.

Caller: Hello, thank you Dr. Greenspan.

SG: Hi, welcome. Let me hear your question.

Caller: Ok, this is about my 5 year old and he is showing improvement in reasoning but it's still a challenge for him. So what I thought was that I could describe a typical sequence that happened recently and then I'll hear from you tips on how I can help him better.


SG: Sure, go ahead.

Caller: So to give you some background, last summer he didn't want to wear shorts. He will only wear long pants. But it's summer here and he should be wearing shorts and he became very excited about that. Then shorts became a topic during Floortime. So this is the sequence that happened, for example. He pretended that he was talking to a teddy bear. So he said, "I want to wear shorts." And then I would say, "Oh, why do you want to wear shorts?" And then he would say, "Because the shorts have a button."

SG: Because the shorts have a what?

Caller: Because the shorts have a button. Then I would say, "Oh, these long pants have a button too! Would you like to wear them?" And then he would say, "No, I want to wear shorts." And I would say, "Oh but why?" And he would say, "Oh, because my tummy is white." And I would say, "Oh, if you wore these long pants, your tummy would still be white." The conversation would continue like this for a long time and eventually he would either give up or he will say, "Poppy, give me the shorts!" and get mad, upset, and demand it. So I guess my challenge is to decide when to try to explain things to him or give him multiple choice questions. What I described is how I usually try to challenge him without letting him on, but that is not a good reason. But usually I try to not say that and I try to interact and describe. So I would like to hear from you what your comments are.

SG: This is a very, very good question because you are saying how much to challenge him to be logical, is really your question. When he says he wants to wear the shorts because his tummy is white, obviously is that logical or not logical?



Caller: That is not logical.

SG: Right, it's not logical. So the whole reason for the "why" questions is to help him learn to be logical. So if he doesn't give you a logical reason when you ask why, you need to challenge him until he's logical. Now how could you challenge him when he says he wants to wear the shorts because his tummy is white? What could you say that could challenge him to be more logical?

Caller: Well, what I was thinking was to describe, "If you wear long pants, your tummy will still be white."

SG: I know, but when you said that it didn't work.

Caller: It didn't work, yeah.

SG: So what else could you try since that doesn't work, to help him be more logical? What other thing could you try that might help him be more logical? You don't have to try just one thing. If you try something and it doesn't get him to be more logical, you try something else. So what else could you try?

Caller: I guess I don't know.

SG: Take a guess.

Caller: Ok, I would say, "Oh, if I give you long pants will your tummy become blue?"


SG: Ok, there you go. Now that has him think logically a little bit. He might say yes, he might say no.

Caller: Ok.

SG: And that's a good try. Or you could also say, now this may be too hard for him to say something like (and play dumb), "Gee, I'm confused. Why do the short pants give you a white tummy or what does a white tummy have to do with the short pants?" Kind of ask him to explain; just play dumb like you don't get it.

Caller: Ok.

SG: I don't know, say, "White tummy and pants, I don't get it." Sometimes children surprise us. I mean, again I don't know your child, but occasionally when you



do that with a child and you play dumb, and you challenge him to just explain it to you, the child will say something like, “Short pants, the pants are white and so they make the tummy look white.”

Caller: Ok.

SG: And maybe the short pants are colored white, I don’t know. You may have some logic in mind.

Caller: He might have some reason that we think is not logical but he thinks it’s logical.

SG: He may have some logic behind it, and that’s your goal – to figure out what his logic is. And he may be a sort of more basic level of logic where he says, “Well, the pants are white and my tummy is white.” Or maybe the pants are loose and they make his tummy feel good and when he says the tummy is white he really means the tummy feels good. So he may explain to you that in short pants my tummy feels better and maybe when it feels better it looks white to him. Who knows? But the idea is to be a detective and try to get him to explain to you his logic. Any questions that you could ask to help him do that is fine, but what you want to do is not just go on in a scripted way where he is not really being logical but just what we call “free associating” – saying the first thing that comes to mind. So sometimes children when they are learning to answer “why” questions, can do it some of the time like you say, “Why do you want to go outside?” – “Because I want to play.” But when you ask him something a little more complicated like “Why do you want to wear shorts?” or “Why do you like this food not that food?” they may give you a silly answer like “Because the sky is blue.” Then just saying the first idea that comes into their mind is not necessarily logical. So then if they have their own logic, you can find out by playing dumb. Say, “Well, I’m confused. Why? What does that have to do with that?” And just be very sweet and very playful and very confused until you get to the basis of his logic.

Caller: Ok, ok.

SG: Good! Well, thank you for that great question.

Caller: Oh, thank you very much.

SG: Thank you, bye bye. Do we have another question waiting? Ok, next question. Hello, Dr. Greenspan here.

Caller: Hi Dr. Greenspan. I just wanted to run something by you.

SG: Sure, welcome to our show and thank you for calling.

Caller: Thank you! I found out about you about three years ago through Jill Kale who has been listening to you for years, going to your conferences and she told me, "You're going to read The Child with Special Needs and then I will work with you" which was a great recommendation.

SG: Wonderful.

Caller: I have to tell you that she is extremely talented – it's amazing.


SG: I know Jill is wonderful.

Caller: She gets it from you. But I'll tell you, everything I have ever done for my five children have worked based on your knowledge, and I have to thank you. We are having a great time here. I have a set of triplets...

SG: Wow! Congratulations!

Caller: Thank you! They are five years old now. They are getting ready to go to kindergarten and I have a couple of issues with the other two. I won't bore you with that. There is one that is frail. She is developmentally delayed, doing wonderfully. She is going to go to regular Ed. They have offered me full day with the p.m. being Special Ed pulled out for her services and if I wanted it for the triplets, all of them, I could probably get it. My dilemma is this: I know that it has been recommended that my children should probably build their stamina, they are a young five, with a full day program.

SG: The answer is, before you even ask it, half a day kindergarten and wait until next year for the full day. And have her home with mommy doing Floortime and problem solving time and all the good things, but you can pick the part of the day so she gets her individual therapy and what you can do is sometimes have her go sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon or you could even have her go from 11:00-2:00 so she gets some of the free play and then some of the therapies. So you can kind of structure it. But try to structure it so it's around no more than a 2-3 hour block of time so she has plenty of time with her mommy.



Caller: Well, that's what we do now and like I said, people recommend that wow, you're not closing as many circles as when she's with her peers, but I don't want her to go to the provocative. She tends to, if there are kids in the class that are doing certain behaviors or whatever in the Special Ed class, she will pick that up. She imitates well and she has full language and she is doing wonderful.

SG: If she has full language, why would she be in with the Special Ed kids?

Caller: Right. That's what Jill says, "I'm telling you, don't put her in there. I've trained you." I'll tell you, we have a great time here. We do Floortime everyday. I enjoy my time with my children, they enjoy me, they enjoy each other, I don't want to deal with that until I have to. I don't want to let go of that and I didn't know really what's better at this point because she is so connected and she so loves the world because she is so verbal.

SG: Well, the question is, what is the basis for having her in a special needs class at all?


Caller: Well, because she still has some attention things, her processing is slower, and I don't know.

SG: What would the other children in the special needs class be like? Would they be like her or more...

Caller: Well, they told me it's mainly speech, however somebody told me that there are some more lower functioning children coming. I said, "I wouldn't mind it if you had 10 more typical kids. I wouldn't mind."

SG: Here's the thing. And again I don't know your youngster, but in general, children need communicative partners who are at their level or higher. This is true for all children with special needs. So it doesn't help any child with special needs to be in with a class totally of other children with special needs because then when they learn to communicate, unless the other children are making exactly the same progress, the other child may not respond in the way we want him to. So I recommend for all children with special needs, that they be in either integrated settings – 2 or 3 children with special needs in with 5 or 6 children without special needs or be with an aide in a regular class.

Caller: She has never even had an aide, Dr. Greenspan.



SG: Even better – she doesn't need an aide. So to just be in a regular class. Now the reason for that is children need to practice back-and-forth rapid communication. Now they also require one-on-one therapy, but the ticket to the one-on-one therapy should not be to reduce the opportunity for social communicative interaction.

Caller: That's the problem. If she gets regular Ed, it's only 2 ½ hours, I don't know how to go about telling them that I want the services to be after that.

SG: That's exactly the good game plan. So what you do is, in a situation like this, again not knowing your child so I'm recommending more generically and more generally, but in situations like this with highly verbal interactive children who are doing well, is to have them in a regular class with children who are very communicative or in an integrated class with children who are very communicative and then to try to obtain the services you need. Usually for a child who is fairly verbal but the processing speed is a little slow, just the interaction with peers and parents will help that along. That's the key, and that's all the therapeutic sessions do and it's what you do everyday that counts. So therapy is helpful, but it's not as critical. Often the occupational therapy and/or physical therapy is more critical for the child if they have motor planning and sequencing problems or fine and gross motor problems.

Caller: She does, yeah.


SG: So that part is more critical. So you can either obtain that sometimes privately, or you can just bring the child in for those sessions in the afternoon, on those days that they get one-on-one work. Now would that work for you guys?

Caller: That's what I mean, I don't know if the district would let me do that – have regular Ed and then services after. That's what I need to find out. That's what I want; I'm not looking for my children to be gone for 6 hours a day. I want them here with me. I'm very effective. She's doing great. But it's thanks to you!

SG: Well, I love your confidence and I would say to all parents...

Caller: Well, it's only because of what I have studied...

SG: I would say to all parents, trust your instincts and if you can be with your children and they are doing well and making progress, basically delay the full day until the first grade.



Caller: It's going to come eventually!

SG: Well, we have a lot of children, by the way, with special needs, who all through grade school, we have them all do a half a day of school. We have them do the other half at home with parents because it's impossible for us to have school do everything we want them to do given the limitations of the school environment and the staffing ratios, and for the time away from one-on-one work, a lot of children need 2-3 hours day of one-on-one work. And so all around the country we have families that are doing school for half a day with group and then we do one-on-one work with them in the afternoons at home. We've worked that out in a lot of school districts. So there is no substitute for perseverance and for fortitude and for making your case and arguing it to the school and some parents decide to Home School.

Caller: I know...

SG: But usually we have a lot of families that have worked out with their school systems so what I would say, in general what a lot of parents do, so try to get what you want. If push comes to shove, usually what you do everyday that counts and so it's not a good trade-off to have the child in a setting that you feel is not ideal for that child just have a few hours of therapy. It's better to provide a daily program for the child that is going to work for the child. So if there is a tradeoff, pay attention to what you feel is best for your child, also the peer interaction part needs to be developed. But that should be developed with daily play dates at home.

Caller: That's what we have too! We have time for that.


SG: You have daily play dates and that is often more helpful than the large group at school because a large group is a little tougher for the children to negotiate.

Caller: Well, I ran this by Jill and she said, "Stanley is going to tell you to come home and have play dates and be mommy."

SG: You got it! All right, she knows it.

Caller: Well you know what? You're wonderful for my typically developing also. We do problem solving for the older ones and we are on the right track and I thank you again.

SG: Well, thank you for calling.



Caller: Ok, bye bye.

SG: Ok? I'm sorry we have one more call that we are unable to get to this morning, but we'll take you first next week if you are willing to call back. I apologize that we couldn't get to your call. We had a little static on the line, but I think we're ok now. I want to thank you for joining us today. We had some good questions, we were treated with a question from Hong Kong, so that is exciting to see that the Web-Based Show on Children with Special Needs and as well as concerning typical children who don't have any challenges is reaching around the globe. So we welcome more calls from abroad. It's a little harder to coordinate time wise, but we'll work it out with you.

Again, today's show is on communication challenges and helping a child go from becoming a part of your shared world to learning to communicate in that shared world. We talked about the importance of pre-verbal or gestural communication as a foundation for later symbolic communication, verbal communication, and social skills, cognitive skills, academic skills, and the like. And remember the key is to follow the child's lead, get two-way communication going, and help the child get to a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction where the child takes the initiative. If you are doing it all, you are doing a piece of it but you aren't yet getting what we call a continuous flow where the child is taking the initiative. So challenge the child to do to you, not just you doing to the child and do it by following the child's lead and paying attention to how their nervous system works so you can tailor the interactions and the challenges to the child.

Thank you again for joining us today and next week we are going to talk about entering your child's world of symbols and words and helping them become a meaningful two-way symbolic and verbal communicator. I'm sure there is a shorter way we can say that and by next week we'll figure out a way to do that. But in the meantime, have a good week and we'll speak to you next week. Bye bye.