

Web-Based Radio Show

Symbolic World: How We Build Our Internal World of Thoughts, Ideas, and Feelings


How the child builds their internal world ideas and symbol so that it will lead to language development and communication with ideas as well as with gestures

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Welcome to our Web-Based Radio Show, “Infants, Children and Families.” We have a very exciting topic today. Today we are going to talk about how we build our symbolic world – our internal world of thoughts, of ideas, of feelings. As you recall, over the last few weeks we have talked about how we help a baby or a child – an older child become engaged and regulated and attentive; how we help that child exchange emotional gestures and signals and become purposeful, and we help that child become a continuous interacter in terms of a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction. We also talked about how we help children become problem solvers. Things like taking mommy or daddy by the hand and walking to the refrigerator and pointing to the food that they want. What we discovered is that if we can find ways to establish these healthy foundations, they not only create the basis for language skills, cognitive skills, and emotional and social skills, they also help children overcome some of the symptoms that are so worrisome, such as lining up of toys or becoming self-absorbed or using language in a scripted or echolalic or repetitive way. We know, for example, when a child becomes engaged and joyful, they are no longer wanting to be self-absorbed. They want to be part of a relationship. When a child learns to communicate meaningfully with their emotional signals, with gestures, they don’t use their gestures or their motor actions to line up toys or to do things repetitively. We know that if they can invest their emotions into their words saying things like, “I love you” or “I want that apple,” they don’t use their language in a scripted way or repetitive or echolalic way. So we looked at some of the foundations.


Today we are going to look at how the child builds their internal world - how they build their internal world of ideas and symbols because even though we are very happy with the child learning to gesture and learning to be intentional and learning to




be engaged, we all want this to lead to language development and communication with ideas as well as with gestures. How does this amazing transformation occur and how do we help children with special needs learn to use ideas in a meaningful way to create this internal world of symbols?

Now the first step in this process is actually a subtle one, but a very, very important one. We have to ask ourselves the question, “Why does a child go from just using communication such as a gesture, to meet basic needs to using communication in its own right?” Because in order to want to use ideas fully, to be able to share a description, for example, to be able to say, “Mommy look over at my car” or “Daddy, look at what I’m doing, I’m bouncing the ball.” To share information, to use ideas in conversation means that the child has to value and be inspired to go beyond just simply using words to say, “Me hungry” or “Give me that” or “Go out” or “Open door.” So to go beyond this sort of need-fulfilling way of using ideas, the child has to be able to embrace the idea or the concept of using their words or ideas to share information.

Now why would a child do that? Well, let’s look at how that occurs. That occurs in a very interesting way. As a child becomes a better and better signaler, as they open and close more circles of communication, as they go from two or three circles to 10-20 circles and 30-40 circles, so now they are taking their parents places, showing the parents things, smiling, smirking, head nods – a lot of back-and-forth emotional gestures to solve problems, as a child is doing this, they are learning something equally important as solving problems. They are learning they can be close to someone else through emotional signaling. They don’t have to be held or picked up or kissed or hugged to feel warmth and closeness and dependency. It can occur through back-and-forth signaling. This is similar to your feeling close as you talk to a relative on the telephone in California. Just hearing their voice is not quite as good as giving them a hug, but it’s almost as good. And the warmth of their voice can make you feel almost as warm as a nice hug can make you feel. Now this occurs because you have become what we call a “distal communicator.” You can communicate with gestures and eventually with words. But the first step in this is the gestures themselves, the back-and-forth communication comes to help you feel close to people, comes to help you feel part of a relationship, and it helps you actually negotiate that relationship and regulate that relationship. One gesture means “you are too close” and another gesture means “you are too far,” another gesture means “get over here” and another gesture means “get away,” etc.




So back-and-forth communication begins taking on a new meaning. It becomes another way to be close; another way to be part of a relationship. And as you do that, as a child does that, they value communication in its own right. Now communication is valued not just to get the cookie or not just to get the hug, but because communication itself feels as good as a cookie or as good as a hug. Just think of yourself again at a cocktail party with someone who is very empathetic and warm and understanding and nodding their head and his eyes are shining and glowing as you're talking, just valuing your every word. It's not just that you feel understood at the level of your new philosophy of life, you feel that primary sense of connectedness, that sense of belonging, that sense of being valued at a very core way, the same way a four month old baby feels when mommy gives him a big smile back when he gives mommy that big smile. So now communication is being valued in its own right. I can't overemphasize this point. Because it's this that provides the motivations for the child wanting to use their words and wanting to become what we call a "motor mouth" – wanting to start talking up a storm and telling you everything they see, "Mommy look at that" or "Oh Daddy look what I did," etc., etc. We know that with children without special needs, this stage pretty typically is thought to occur between ages of 2 and 4 – we see children become motor mouths. They want to tell you everything under the sun. In fact, many parents want to get their children a little quieter, want to say "Hey – give us a few minutes, we're talking to grandma on the telephone." What's amazing to us is we have been able to help children with special needs become motor mouths; become so excited about their newly discovered words and language that they want to talk to you about everything they are doing. But it's this first step of investing conversation itself; investing back-and-forth communication with the warmth and pleasure that being held or being cared for has. So that's the first step. And that occurs through lots of just back-and-forth emotional gesturing and communication. The more you do while you are working on the child's language skills, the more the child will invest communication in its own right because the child then sees he can use it to be close, to negotiate anger, to satisfy needs for curiosity. He realizes that back-and-forth communication serves many purposes for him. It serves many different emotional needs. And then communication becomes valued in its own right. It serves dependency, pleasure, curiosity, assertiveness, exploration, and coping with fear and anxieties. Communication begins carrying the message that has for most healthy adults. Now once the child has bought into that, he wants to use his words; he wants to copy what you are saying. So if we have a continuous flow communicator, a back-and-forth communicator, it's very easy to



help him imitate what you do because now he is opening and closing 30-40 circles of communication with you. If you try to teach communication through imitation first without establishing this foundation, it's much harder. It's as though you are trying to work on a specific tree and not construct the whole forest first. The idea is to bud or grow many little trees and get your forest cooking and then a few trees can pop out as bigger trees and those are your new words and your new concepts and your new phrases.

So now once we have this basic interest in communicating and therefore a basic interest in imitating because once a child learns to communicate, he wants to learn quickly so he's going to want to imitate what you say and do. Obviously if there are oral/motor problems, the child may not be able to pronounce certain sounds, but he'll certainly try and he may do the "b" sound with a "m" sound, he may do the "m" sound with a "g" sound. But you'll get the hang of it and he'll get the hang of it and for him to talk in his own little language or around certain sounds initially while you are working on his oral/motor skills is fine. You can be playing imitative games where you practice different sounds at the same time he's learning to imitate certain words.

So now through imitation we initially teach the child pretend play, you feed the doll and he feeds the doll. You are giving the doll a hug and he's giving the doll a hug or she's giving the doll a hug. You may have your doll give his doll a hug and the pretending will start taking off by the child copying you, you are copying the child what the child does spontaneously and pretty soon we are getting a back-and-forth where you're hugging the doll, he's hugging the doll, your doll is hugging his doll, you're feeding each other and so forth and so on. So pretending is a very, very important part of building this internal symbolic world. But then also you are trying to give the child the words for certain things he wants. He is pointing to the juice and saying, "uhh, uhh, uhh" and you're saying, "That's the juice, j, j, j" and the child can go "j, j" as he's pointing and grabbing for it, and now he not only will learn the word "juice" but he knows what juice means because he is learning it while he is interested in it and while he is touching it and soon, a moment later, he's going to taste it. So he's not labeling a picture of juice, he's labeling the real juice and going to taste that juice, understand the meaning of what juice is, and relating to all prior experiences of the juice, and now juice takes on a full fledged meaning as a meaningful symbol for that child. That's the way words should be. The child who wants and doesn't know the words for "daddy" and is reaching for daddy and mommy says, "Do you want daddy to pick you up or mommy? Daddy? D, D?"




Da, Da?” and the child points and you say, “Da Da?” and the child finally says, “D, D.” Ok, then dad picks him up. Now the child is associating the sound “Da Da” and eventually “Daddy” with being picked up by daddy but all other experiences with daddy because it’s learned on the spot. We want to teach the child the word “open” so we put his favorite toy outside the door and say, “op, op, op?” and the child copies “op, op” and gets his toy, so he knows what “open” is because it has led to his toy. So we teach words and language meaningfully this way.

We have developed a curriculum called the “Affect Based Language Curriculum” which is a systematic way of teaching language this way. But the key thing is that the symbolic world comes in through working on both new words and concepts by associating them with their meanings in real experiences in life which are invested with the child’s emotions and through pretend play which is also emotional with the themes of life like eating, hugging, and kissing – initially reality kinds of themes take shape and give symbolic meaning to the child’s inner world. Over time the child will get more imaginative and the pretend play will be a space ship going off to the moon or be a special deep sea monster who is scaring everyone or be a new ballerina who is impressing everyone. What ever form it takes will be more and more from the child’s imagination but it will start off initially with shared reality-based reproductions based on some imitation and some copy cat games with mommy or with daddy or with the nanny or with other caregivers or with therapists. So this is how it starts.


Now some lessons for the parent and then I’m going to give it over to my colleague, Serena Wieder, who we are fortunate is back from Israel and joining me today, and she is going to share with you some further ideas about how to build the internal world of symbols and ideas because this is an area that Serena has written a great deal about and been especially interested in. Many of you who have attended our workshops know Serena talks eloquently about building the internal world of symbols with children.

Just a few basic principles first, and then we’ll let Serena chat for a few minutes, then we’ll take your calls. To get it cooking, as we speak, the key is as your child begins imitating some pretending with you, join in. Join in their natural interests now in their symbolic world rather than just in the world of things. So the child is fascinated with a car. See if he’ll take your little dolly for a ride on the car. Say, “In your car? In your car?” But talk for your dolly, don’t talk for yourself. Don’t say, “Can you take my dolly in your car?” You become the dolly. You’re showing the child again how to enter the




pretend and make-believe world which is the world of ideas and symbols. With every pretend is a new symbolic construct for the child, it's a new idea for the child. So you become the dolly. "I want to ride in your car, can I go, can I go? Here I am, here I am. Can I go? If you don't say no, I'm going to come into your car" and you may pop yourself into the child's car. Then the child may take you for a ride. Then another dolly can be the policeman and say, "Where are you going? Where are you going? Are you going to grandma's house or going to school?" and point to the two buildings. The child may not even know what grandma's house or school is, but he can learn this way, and he may just point to one of the buildings and go "uhh, uhh." "There? Well, that's grandma's house." And you may even have a picture of grandma right there in the play area so he can relate it to the picture of grandma, etc. And through this way of entering the child's world, you get a back-and-forth exchange of symbols going. Your dolly talking to the child's dolly. Now you can also become the character itself. You can play dress-up. Children who are sensory craving and like to move around the room a lot may not sit and pick up the dolls and a lot of parents ask me, "What do I do for my child who doesn't pick up the dollies?" Well, you can become the dolly. You can become the child's favorite character from a book or from a TV show or a movie they have seen a little piece of. And your child could play dress-up too and now you're both the actors in the drama and make sounds at each other and exchange a few words and get it cooking.

Now if all that goes well, we then get to a second step of the symbolic world. As the child gets very creative, we try to build bridges between ideas; try to help the child not just create a symbolic world but actually make it logical so pretty soon one dolly is asking another dolly, "Why are you going to grandma's house?" "Because I like grandma's toys" or "Because she is fun" or in just regular conversation, "Why do you want to go outside?" But the "why" questions will come after the child is answering some "what" questions and some "where" questions and some "who" questions. And that can become embedded right into pretend play as well as in general conversation, "Where is the dolly going? Where are we going?" Again, always talk through the character. So basically you want to have a lot of reality conversations where you're asking the child about his favorite food or what he wants to do, chit-chatting all the time and a lot of shared pretend play. And through these two venues of regular conversations and pretend play, you want to be talking with the child all the time. Again, the only mistake you can make is not trying. There is no one way or good way or bad way to do it. The important principle is to follow your child's natural interests, create interaction, make sure you get a continuous flow of back-and-forth gesturing,




and then build words on that as best you can with the child using those words meaningfully in pretend play and in reality conversations, and just get it going. Now Serena is going to add on some ideas before we take some of your calls. So I'm going to give it over to Serena.

SW: Thank you. Nice to be back and as you just mentioned, this is one of my favorite areas of focus. You know, I think when we use the word “symbolic play” and “symbolic development” it sounds a little, what is it? What is this symbol? I just want to remind you all that we start to encourage symbolic development from the very start. Just think of what you put into your baby’s crib when you start out. You might provide a teddy bear with a blanket. This is really their first experience with symbols which represent your comfort, your soothing, someone to be with which represents you eventually, as they learn they can’t have you all the time so they are going to carry their blanket around all the time. Or make sure they have their teddy bear and begin to use transitional objects in place of the real thing. So when we use symbols, we’re talking about alternatives to the real thing. But it’s only when you’re there embedding these other symbols, whether they are words, roles, or toys, it’s all built on that wonderful back-and-forth interaction and the meaning of the relationship of the communication you are building from the very start in your care of your child and your love of your child. I think the other way to think about it is, when you think about what your child’s favorite toy is, what are they attaching to? We have children who choose symbols. Some might like the Teletubbies. Well, that is very appealing, they are gestural and you don’t need a lot of language to love Teletubbies. Or you might go for Sesame Street or Barney. But your world is surrounded with symbols all the time and before you know it, whether you encourage it or not, they are probably choosing symbols that have a lot of meaning for them. And those become really those first little dolls or toys that you play with. So we start out where all the interaction is with you in a way you are the toy, then we start moving into using other toys. One of the things we noticed is that children together with gestures really tell you what they are thinking when they pick up toys. And even before they can say they want to go in the car they may be pushing the car along or they may be feeding their baby doll or they may be picking up their animals and jumping or running or even feeding them with their bottles. But children are going to find symbols that are meaningful and as Dr. Greenspan was just saying, we want to join in. We want to give it a voice. And we start out by giving those areas that they choose that they are interested in the voice and the voice is what helps us get the gestures into language. So we do pretend. You are going to be the voice for the toy, you can talk for




Elmo or Barney or the tiger who is coming into the room and talk as you're the mommy or daddy or the caregiver who is encouraging the child to continue and play and provide some of the language and imitates. All of this with the back-and-forth will lead to some expansion; some elaboration. This is where we have to think about the child's capacity to sequence and motor plan and do actions because in real life, everything is a sequence. Whatever you want to do, you have to have a beginning, a middle and an end. You get up, you get out of bed, you get dressed, you eat breakfast, if you're reading a book you're reading a sequence of stories. Maybe this would be a good chance just to insert that books are obviously symbolic communication, and how important it really is to make sure the books you choose have sequences in them so that the child begins to connect things rather than reading catalog books and dictionary books. Read them stories, very simple stories where one page connects to another so that eventually your child begins to think about where things lead to and how you get there, one step after another. Every child loves to turn the pages of the book to see what happens next. And that's another form of learning to play or developing symbols. One of the things you'll want to see is how your child, you know what your child does with a toy. Do they expand or do they just push the car or do they take the car somewhere like to grandma's house? Does the car become a means to an end or is it just something that you have fun pushing back-and-forth and crashing and racing? You would expect to first see just the pushing back-and-forth – "wow I can go somewhere. I can go anywhere I want, in fact." To then saying, "Oh, I want to go somewhere because when I get there, I'll be able to do something." And that could be driving to the playground or to the pool or to the circus or to grandma. The symbol now becomes a vehicle for figuring out how you get what you want. When children have some challenges, you know, sequencing and figuring where they are going and picking their own destination in contrast to the kind of play where the destination is part of the toy, like a pop-up toy. You don't have to figure out where to go, it's just cause-and-effect or if it's a puzzle, the piece has to go into a certain spot. When you think symbolically and thinking, you are being driven by the idea of what you want to get or where you want to go or how you feel and finding that destination brings us back to experience and relationships. When children have some challenges with the manipulation of the toys and the organization and sequencing of the toys, or if they have a challenge knowing what direction to go in, or the visual spatial aspect of finding and discriminating that destination, you'll often find that they might prefer using puppets or dress-up because then they just have to move themselves and that's more familiar and they are used to



moving themselves, but being able to invest that in a toy might be a little bit more difficult, not so much because they lack the ideation, but it's because the organization of the sequence of the object and themselves and the visual spatial components may be more complex. Well, this is just kind of a start of how we know that toys are a language which bring us into the world of symbolic thinking and emotional thinking and we spent a lot of time doing this because in this way the child can become the active learner and can guide you in what they are thinking about or what they like to play with. So that's for a start. I think we have some questions now?

SG: Before we take our first question let me just summarize what Serena was saying and just summarize the earlier comments. What you want to do is remember three things about getting your child's internal world of ideas cooking; getting him to use language and thinking and skills. One is, make sure you're working on back-and-forth signaling with gestures because unless you get into many circles in a row, it's hard for the child to value communication in its own right. So that's a very important foundation. Also, this enables a child to learn to imitate. Then number two is imitate in mostly meaningful situations what you want the child to learn like the new word like "daddy" or "juice" or "open." But do it in emotionally meaningful situations so the child is associating the word with the emotional goal. In pretend play, make it stuff the child wants to play with like Serena was saying. If the child likes cars, do it off cars. If the child likes action figures, use those. If they like dolls, use those. Imitate the actions first and then make it more spontaneous and you enter the child's world and become the doll. You talk for the car. You talk for the doll. You talk for the action figure. And three, get the symbolic interaction down. The use of ideas into a back-and-forth communication you try to have it make sense. So if you say, "Where is the car going? To grandma's or school," and the child just says "Blue apple, blue apple." You say, "Oh, I know you like the blue apple, should we put the blue apple in grandma's house or school?" And then the child can get the blue apple there, "Where should we go?" and kind of repeat the question. Help the child be logical at the same time. So that's our goals. Interaction, continuous flow, imitation, join the child's world, and get a back-and-forth going now with exchanging ideas.

Will the first caller call back in? We lost you. We want to hear your question. We had our first caller calling in and we took another minute to complete our discussion and we may have lost the first caller. So if the first caller can call back in, and if not I'll read your question because your question is a terrific one so we'll give you another



minute to call back in. Let me just relate to a different question that has been raised by someone, oh, we got the first caller in? Ok. So we're back online with the first caller. Hello? Hello?

Caller: Hello?

SG: Hello, hi, welcome to our show, this is Stanley Greenspan, how are you.

Caller: I'm fine, hi Dr. Greenspan.

SG: Nice to hear your voice.

Caller: Yes.

SG: Can we hear your question?

Caller: Yes, well I sent it in this week and basically what its about is our son is 17 months old and was evaluated at 15 ½ months with a receptive speech delay.

SG: We're hearing some background noise too.

Caller: Huh.

SG: Talk into the phone and I won't hear the background noise. As you just went "huh" it was fine.

Caller: Ok, so you can hear me now.

SG: I know that you said your son is 17 months old, evaluated, but you are still worried that he may have some worrisome behaviors even though he was ok on the Bayley Scales and ok on the "Chat" Screen which looks at pointing and pretend play.

Caller: Basically we're just curious what it means.

SG: And you say here also that he's a very sweet boy, he's very active, often difficult to engage, and perseverative in unfamiliar situations when he's around other kids.

Caller: Right.

SG: And he's been in speech therapy and doing some Floortime work and seeing some progress, but you wanted to know how to help him stay on track.

Caller: Right.

SG: Ok. This an excellent question because it gets at the heart of what we all need to know and let there be hopefully many, many others who will have the same question you do. Here is the key. It's a big, big, big mistake to think in terms of "Is my child or is my child not on the autistic spectrum?" when you're dealing with a young child. That's much too limiting a question. It's also a mistake to rely on the Bayley Scales or the Chat or any other structured tool to answer that question, which is the wrong question to ask in the first place. The best question to ask is what you're asking and I wish all parents would ask this question, which is, "How do I make sure my child is moving ahead in a healthy way?" And to move ahead in a healthy way means just what you're saying in your question, "I want my child to be able to engage with real warmth and intimacy in all settings, even in new settings. I want him to be able to read and respond to emotional signals, and I want him to be able to have a back-and-forth with emotional signals as well as by 18 months begin to use some words and maybe begin some imitative pretend-like play." But the key thing is, the key of all these is that back-and-forth emotional signaling as opposed to, let's say perseveration or self-absorption or difficulty with engagement. So when we see these challenges, we shouldn't be thinking, "Does my child have ABC Syndrome" we should be thinking, "How do I get my child a little stronger in these areas?" That's the healthy question and the healthy course we want for our child. It's very easy at this age to do that. What we need to do is figure out how the child's nervous system works. Is he a little over sensitive to touch or sound or experiences?

Caller: I would say he's definitely under-reactive.

SG: Or is he under-reactive where it's a little harder to engage him? You're saying your child is under-reactive.

Caller: Right.

SG: But the child who is under-reactive, we want to energize up and pull him in. Unfamiliar situations may not be the best place to work on this, but eventually he'll learn to do this in unfamiliar if we do it in enough familiar situations. So throughout the day, 7 or 8 times a day for 20 minutes or more, work on Floortime where you energize up and you work on that long chains of interaction because the difficult to engage child often has difficulty at times sustaining the back-and-forth interaction.

Caller: Right.

SG: And sometimes we find that that's due to a very mild challenge in what we call "motor planning and sequencing" where the child doesn't sequence 10 actions in a row, they only sequence 2-3 actions in a row. But if we work on that by creating emotionally meaningful interactions with the child around things that he wants to do. Let's say he's an active child, so we are active with him. He's trying to get to the door to open the door, "Mommy's trying to open the door but she can't, can you get daddy?" so he has to go get daddy, but daddy can't do it so you have to get big brother or big sister or have to go get mommy to help and mommy and daddy have to pull together but the little guy has to help out too. He has to point and bang on the door a little bit and eventually say the word "open" or "open sesame" in or get the big bear doll to help us pull the door open. And eventually 5 minutes later and a hundred circles of communication later we have opened the door, right? And he gets to go outside. Now this is for the active child but we have now done practice on a hundred circles of communication. What I've seen time and time again, with little 17 or 18 month olds who are not quite cooking as much as mommy and daddy would like them to be in terms of the engagement and interaction, is by working on that as part of a continuous flow of signaling, your child gets cooking and then if he has any underlying processing challenges like motor planning and sequencing, that gets stronger also.

Caller: Really?

SG: Yes, because the back-and-forth interaction strengthens the action pattern, right?


Caller: Sure, sure.

SG: So now you have 5 minutes of purposeful action, right?

Caller: Right.

SG: So you are actually strengthening motor planning and sequencing and if the child is a little sluggish on remembering what they hear, they are strengthening that too because in a highly motivated situation they are listening to your sounds and your words. When you say, "Get daddy, get daddy" they are motivated to get daddy so they are listening carefully.

Caller: Right.



SG: So you are strengthening language and motor planning and sequencing and you are helping them be less under-reactive because you are energizing up and showing them that you can engage them in spite of it.

Caller: Right. That's what his therapist is definitely doing.

SG: Yes, so what you want to do is do that 6, 7, even 8 times a day for 15-20 minutes, and make sure daddy is doing it too if there is a daddy at home.

Caller: Yes, there is.

SG: And get him really cooking, and that way you don't sit around waiting, "Oh my God, does my child have a problem or not and I'll wait until he's three to find out" because that's a sure ticket to answering the question in the negative. The thing is, jump on it now, strengthen his capacities, and then you'll see him master this, hopefully in front of your eyes. And if he's not making progress – not mastering it – then you should seek consultation.


Caller: You know, actually he's doing so great.

SG: If he's doing great, then just keep up the good work.

Caller: He's amazing to see how much he's changed.

SG: Yes, and that's what will do it. So your question is a great one because I'll tell parents and I'll tell pediatrician colleagues and mental health colleagues and developmental specialist colleagues to please, please don't use structured tests to reach your conclusions. Use them as part of your evaluation, but start observing the child, then if you want to use the Bayley Scales or the Chat Screen or anything else, by all means do it but do it off your observations and try not to tell parents yes or no, he is or isn't on the spectrum. Instead, show them how to strengthen the child's capacities. Have a road map of normal, healthy development. Follow our Functional Emotional Developmental Milestones as a good description of that road map, and then you'll help every child because life is not in the "all or nothing" life is in the "gray area." You know, it's not a question of yes or no, it's a question of can you strengthen this a little more? Do we need more practice here? So keep up your good work.

Caller: You know it's interesting, I find that everybody wants to do structured tests – we haven't had any luck except with his wonderful speech pathologist.



SG: Excellent, and there are a lot of gifted speech pathologists and occupational therapists, and also child psychiatrists and pediatricians and social workers and other health and mental health professionals and educational professionals out there, but unfortunately it's such a long tradition of relying on structured tests that are not terribly revealing.

Caller: Right.

SG: And don't answer the gray area question. This is something that parents and professionals need to work on together so more and more people are following it.

Caller: Right.

SG: Thank you for your good question.

Caller: Ok, thank you.

SG: And keep up your good work.

Caller: Ok, good bye.

SG: Ok, bye bye. Ok, the next caller, you can call in now. As many of you know, we select some callers in advance we'd like to leave a few minutes for each call so we don't have too much over-lap so the next caller can call in. But in the meantime, I want to see if Serena wanted to add something further onto our first caller. If not, I have some written questions here I can take. Serena, do you want to add something to that first call?

SW: I think you got it all.

SG: Ok, then I'm going to ask the next question...oh wait, we have our next caller, I didn't have to go to the written question. Ok, next caller. Hello?


Caller: Yes?

SG: Hi, Dr. Greenspan here. Welcome to our show.

Caller: Hi, Dr. Greenspan.

SG: I see you have two great questions here.

Caller: Oh good, can I ask both of them?



SG: Please do, please do. They are both terrific ones, by the way.

Caller: Ok, well, Gavin is going to be 13 months next week, and we have been doing the Floortime approach with him now for a couple of months and we have seen great progress. One of the things that we are struggling with is that he loves balls and will bounce the ball over and over again, but yet he doesn't want to give us the ball or throw the ball to us, I'll say, "Throw the ball to mommy" and he'll look at me and smile and want me to chase him, which is interacting, but we're not really taking it to the next level and I feel like we're not really getting into any back-and-forth communication. If I take the ball away from him he has a tantrum. So I need help in what to do about this situation.

SG: Right, and he's how old now?

Caller: He's going to be 13 months on Monday.

SG: So let's take your first question first. Here's the key thing. You aren't expecting too much but you're expecting, as you put in your written question, but you're expecting the wrong thing.


Caller: Ok.

SG: You're expecting him to give up his cherished ball, and it's great to play with that concept – get him to smile at you and run away from you. What I would recommend in a situation like yours, again I don't know you or your child so I can't tell you exactly what to do but I can talk about situations like yours, you take advantage of what the child wants to do. He likes to smile and outsmart you and run away.

Caller: Mmm hmmm.

SG: So what you do is you make a gesture like I'm going to take that ball but you don't ever really even touch it, ok? So you don't precipitate the tantrum or any situation like it. As he looks at you and smiles and then turns to run, you are faster than he is, you move around fast (this is a good workout for the parent now) and you get around into his pathway where he is about to run. And have your arms out like he's going to run right into your arms, right? And say, "Oh, I didn't know you wanted to come give me a hug!"

Caller: Ok.



SG: And what is he likely to do then as you run around the other side of him and are waiting for him with your arms out? What is he likely to do?

Caller: What does he like to do?

SG: What would he do if you did that?

Caller: Oh, he loves it. We do that now. We play chase all the time.

SG: No, no, if you instead of chasing him, you ran around in front of him with your arms out...

Caller: He loves it and then he turns around and runs the other way.

SG: Ok, and then you run around and beat him again, what would he do now?

Caller: And then he'll run around the other way.

SG: Yes, and then you run...

Caller: Then he'll wait and then he'll run and then I'll stop to see what he'll do and he'll wait for me and look at me like, "hee hee hee"

SG: Right.

Caller: So I guess that is communication...


SG: That's more than communication. That's far more sophisticated than rolling a ball back-and-forth.

Caller: Ok. Because that's what I was concerned about. I'm like thinking that this is primitive compared to rolling a ball.

SG: No, quite to the opposite. This is not primitive. This is more advanced. You see when he waits for you to get around to the other side of him and then gives you a smile and a "hee hee" and outsmarting you, this is a very sophisticated visual spatial problem solving.

Caller: That's true.

SG: He's saying "I'm going in this direction, now that direction, ha ha ha, I'll wait for you in this direction..." and what you can do is keep making it more complicated and set up, since he likes movement, set up an obstacle course with all different places to



hide in the room. You know how you have these little things that you can hide in like these little tubes and things?

Caller: Yes, we have tunnels and things.

SG: Yes, tunnels and things you can climb on and things you can hide behind. Now sometimes have daddy in the room, is there a daddy at home too?

Caller: Yes.

SG: So as he turns to run away from you, there's daddy waiting for him with open arms. And then the two of you kind of corner him and see where he goes. Maybe let him hide in the tube, ok? And then one of you can go to one end of the tube and say, "I'm coming in to get you" and then he goes out the other end and who is waiting for him at the other end?

Caller: Ok.

SG: But daddy with a big giggle. Right? And then you can have a big pretend bear there who says, "I want to chase you too." Ok?

Caller: Ok.

SG: And the goal is many, many circles of communication in a row.


Caller: Ok.

SG: The more communication – and keep making the visual, if he likes moving in space, keep making the spatial challenge more and more difficult for him. You know what I mean? Like eventually what you can do is you can start getting the ball and he went the other way and then instead of chasing him, you can go hide behind something in his playroom and say, "Ahh, I bet you can't find me!"

Caller: Ok.

SG: And now you're not going to chase him, he's looking around and smiling and "Where's mommy?" Ok? Now he has to search for you, ok? And you have the doors closed so he can't get out of the room, he's not going to go wandering around the house, right?

Caller: Right.



SG: He's going to try to find you. Or you have a ball that's even better than his ball. He's bouncing a ball and you take another ball and you take it with you and you hide. You say, "I've got a better ball than you" and you start bouncing your ball. Pretty soon he's going to want to exchange balls, right. And if he exchanges ball, how is he going to exchange it?

Caller: By giving me his ball.

SG: Right, and how is he going to give you his ball?

Caller: How?

SG: Yes.

Caller: He'll reach out and give it to me.

SG: What if you're three feet away. What's going to happen?

Caller: Hopefully he'll throw it.

SG: Right! Then you've got your wish. He's rolling the ball, right.

Caller: Oh, good idea.


SG: Serena, did you want to add something? Hold on one second.

SW: Well no, I would just highlight that getting him to chase you back, some kids have difficulty with that notion, just become his partner and go get daddy. So you can actually join forces and pursue another very important person in his life and that way he'll kind of be able to do the back-and-forth to not only be chased but to reciprocate.

Caller: Yes, he just started chasing us. I'll pretend I'm a train, actually, and he gets a kick out of it.

SW: Talk about symbolic!

Caller: He'll chase me and I'll stop and he'll actually bump into the back of me. So I guess I should turn around right away.



SW: That's so nice because you're beginning to see he has entered the symbolic world, he can imagine you being the train, you are getting him into the stop and the go and the regulation. He can start giving you the orders and things are really cooking.

Caller: Ok.

SW: Sounds great.

SG: I see that you have another question here. It's a complicated question, I'm just going to highlight it and you tell me if I've got it right.

Caller: Ok.

SG: You recently took him to the developmental pediatrician at Kennedy Krieger for an evaluation, and the pediatrician felt he was doing ok although Dr. Rebecca Landa, in an earlier assessment at 6 months, put him at some risk. You feel he had some signs that he is losing words but gaining new words.

Caller: He has perseverative behavior.

SG: And he has some perseverative behavior. And did you hear my comment to the person just before you?

Caller: Yes, yes.

SG: It's very much the same principle. The idea is not to, again, get the focus on all-or-nothing, you know, is he in hot water or isn't he in hot water. But to say, ok if he does perseverate a little bit, we want to make his actions even more meaningful and more complex. We want to get longer chains of back-and-forth signaling, just like I was showing you how to do, right?

Caller: Right.

SG: And even getting him to throw the ball at you, right? And we want to have more fun at it. And also if he is gaining words and losing words, don't focus on the words. Focus on just gaining more and more ability to be more and more interactive, i.e., more and more circles in a row and more and more creatively with more fun. Then have him make sounds and words off of the interaction and don't worry so much about whether he's gaining or losing, as long as you make them emotionally meaningful. What you keep an eye on is: Is his relatedness to me becoming more joyful and more

expansive? Is he opening and closing more circles of communication? Are we getting more creativity like him searching for me in the tunnel? As that is happening, if all that is moving positively, then you just keep it cooking and do lots and lots of Floortime each day. If for some reason you feel he isn't making progress in this fundamental, then you should bring him in for an evaluation so we can figure out why. Is it motor planning? Is it an auditory processing problem? What's cooking here? But if the progress is going well, just enjoy it.


Now there's another book in addition to *The Child with Special Needs* which is really not appropriate for your child, there's a book I have called, *Building Healthy Minds: The Six Experiences That Create Intelligence and Emotional Growth in Babies and Young Children*, which is about just typical development. It gives you lots of examples of how to make the play more complex with more circles of communication and more creative use of problem solving, even for a toddler. Just follow the guidelines in the *Building Healthy Minds* book and see if he's getting stronger and stronger for what we look for in that second year of life. It sounds like you live in the Baltimore area?

Caller: No, actually I don't live in the Baltimore area, I live in the Pennsylvania area. I saw signs in him before 6 months because I have worked with autistic children and there was no one in the Pennsylvania area that was willing to even consider looking at him that early, so that's why I went to Dr. Rebecca Landa.

SG: I got you, that's why you went to Baltimore. Basically follow the guidelines in *Building Healthy Minds*, keep him cooking, and if he makes progress then things are going great. If he isn't, then try to have an evaluation done and we can suggest people to you near you if you drop us a note if you need that. But it sounds to me if what you're describing that in more likelihood you will not need that.

Caller: Yes, if we continue with the Floortime I hope that we don't. The only thing is that we were getting early intervention services and because he is not getting identified as being on the spectrum, they are going to start taking our services away from us. It's almost like a double... You don't want to label your child and I know that that's your philosophy as well, but it's almost like if you don't, then you don't get the support that you need.

SG: Exactly, but the question is, is the services needed in terms of what it provides and what you provide? In other words, are they doing anything that you can be doing at home?



Caller: I feel like he could use OT and speech. I'm not eligible for those right now because...

SG: Do you have an OT and a speech person working with him right now?

Caller: I had an OT person and they just cut back to once a month because he is doing so well. So it's hard.

SG: So you want more public support and more public funding to get some help. My general advice to parents everywhere is, it's great if you can get it. OT's are gifted and speech pathologists are gifted often, and they can be very helpful members of your team. But the cornerstone of what will make the difference is what you do everyday at home for hours a day.

Caller: That's true.

SG: And if you do 6 or 8 of these kinds of interactions a day, 20 minutes or more, that is 90% of the battle. So yes, by all means, try to get the services you need, but don't drain your energies there because we need your energies working with your little guy. That's 90% of the battle. So good luck in getting the services you want, but only let it drain 5% of your energy because we need 95% of it for Gavin.

Caller: Right. And I'm really grateful to you and your foundation because if it wasn't for the information you had, especially about early signs, I don't think I would have started working with him and I don't think he would be where he is today.

SG: Well, thank you for that feed back and good luck to you.


Caller: Thank you.

SG: Bye bye. Ok, do we have our next caller? Ok, next caller. Hello, hi, Dr. Greenspan here. How are you?

Caller: Wonderful. Thank you for taking my call, Dr. Greenspan.

SG: Good, well thank you for calling.

Caller: I'm calling from Dayton, Ohio. My son, Alex, turned three on March 7. He was diagnosed as being mildly autistic on January 26. Our issue is potty training. We tried when he was 2 ½ years old last summer before we knew he was autistic, with no success. Since then about 5 months ago he has gone potty a couple of times in the big



potty before bath time, which he thought was fun, he enjoyed the flushing and all of that. Then he decided he'd like to play in the water and he doesn't want to do it anymore. We want to try again this summer and we didn't know if you had any suggestions for us.

SG: What is his language level like now?

Caller: Excuse me?

SG: What are his language skills like?

Caller: He has some language but still not communicating consistently with more than three words.

SG: Can he answer "where" questions or "who" questions or "why" questions?

Caller: Not really.


SG: Ok. Is he able to get into a continuous flow of back-and-forth gesturing yet?

Caller: Yes.

SG: So he can get into many circles of communication, but only in short phrases.

Caller: Right.

SG: In general, I like to put the big push on toilet training and potty training when a child is able to answer "why" questions because then you can really reason with them and explain it to them. So for children with special needs, the potty training may come a little later than with children without special needs, because they may not achieve that "why" level until they are 4 years old or even 5 years old or sometimes older. But sometimes a child will do the potty training just if you show it to them because sometimes their visual spatial learning can be a little higher or quicker than their verbal learning or verbal language. Just showing them the ritual or routine and they'll kind of join in and showing them the benefits of it in the sense so they don't have the discomfort of a wet diaper, etc. Now how to do that is the key. But what I generally recommend is not putting a lot of emphasis on it until the child is able to understand verbally with the "why" question level, but to do a little bit of it in a fun way. The key thing is doing it very relaxed, very regulating, and step by step, and making it fun for the child. There are a variety of techniques people advocate, from having children going



around the house without diapers on for a few days and following them around with a toy potty.


Caller: He would love going around naked.

SG: Then you go around with the toy potty and every time he starts going you get him on the potty as this potty follows him around the house and they get the hang of it that way. Other times you get into people try to just get into patterns – after meals going into the bathroom and singing songs together and sitting on the potty and trying to get them to do it. Having doll play with potty training can also be helpful. So there are a variety of techniques. The key thing is to keep it very relaxed and very soothing and very regulating and not make a big push until the child can understand you. One can try these different strategies all as part of a calm, regulating, pleasurable, gradual approach. I'm going to let Serena add a few thoughts on this as well. Hold on just a second, here's Serena.

SW: Well, I agree. We want to be sure that children don't get too anxious and it doesn't turn into a power struggle. Then you get the complications of that. You do mention that you were thinking of working this summer, and that's a really good time to try to do some of this outside. For one, outside if you could see that he notices he's peeing or has to go...

Caller: He also knows, even when he has his diaper on, he notices that he has gone.

SW: Ok, so that might be after the fact. So it's a little hard to tell when those diapers are on and especially because they are so good at masking the wetness. So children aren't getting enough signals often. But do connect it to kind of being playful. Bring a potty outside, see if he notices and can catch it, or you could catch him. Connected with sprinklers and just little water pool and by making it more anxiety free and creating more chances of success, he may be able to feel, "Wow, maybe I can do this." It doesn't create the tension for you in worrying about whether he'll do it or not do it and will you catch it, and will there be a mess? But just the whole notion of providing the sensory support may give him a way of getting past with your noticing after he stopped with the novelty of it. Then as we mentioned before, I do think when the child can reason and just focusing on reasoning, "Look at his hands. Oh my goodness, they are dirty." But help him notice that they are dirty and that's why you're going to go wash them. Say, "Oh, you have to go, that's why we are going to go to the



potty.” Try to strengthen reasoning in the more general way so he begins to connect the things he does with the body and the reason for it and to where that happens. I think the important thing is as long as he is in the potty though, just try to keep it pretty soothing and just start changing him in the bathroom, it’s not just something you do anywhere. I think you’ll see that without too much pressure, he’s much more likely to succeed.


Caller: How about pictures? He uses a lot of picture cues at school. How about that for the process of when he starts getting interested in going potty?

SW: You know, I think you can use that as a signaling system; a cuing system in terms of the sequence of going to the potty. But you can also practice some of those skills in less tense issues. So if he’s learning to pull his pants down, did he get dressed? Now do some of those other steps and again I think the internal motivation is going to come when he wants to go do something. You might find that by him just getting more active and knowing the reason you do it in that way, he’s more likely to take the lead on it. So if he wants to go running through the sprinkler, what is he going to do? If he wants to play with water, what’s he going to do? You’ll see he will do those steps. But visual strategies can always be helpful and if they work for him, then I would definitely use them. It allows him to be a little bit more independent. He can check against that sequence if he doesn’t do it automatically. Ok.

Caller: Ok, thank you.

SW: Thank you for calling.

SG: Ok, I think he had some excellent questions and some wonderful callers. I just want to summarize and let you know about next week’s show. So today we focused on how to build that internal world of ideas and thoughts; how to begin using words to engage in pretend play and to express our feelings. We saw that the first goal is to help the child want to communicate; to share his world with you. That comes from a lot of back-and-forth emotional signaling where the child learns that communication or signaling or interacting in its own right can bring a lot of pleasure. That becomes the successor to just being hugged and kissed. We always want hugs and kisses but now we learn some of that same pleasure can be had just through communication as well as the pleasure of showing our curiosity and our assertiveness and our explorativeness and even getting help when we are scared. If we get that back-and-forth communication going and pleasure in communication, we then become easy imitators. Then we can



learn new words and learn how to do pretend play. Then if mommies and daddies and other caregivers join the world by becoming characters in our drama, we all interact together and we expand the world of make-believe. And by just having a lot of chit-chats like finding out why we want to go outside and why we want to do this or that or where we want to go, we expand our world of words. As we do that we learn not just to elaborate ideas and make-believe or reality, but we can also connect bridges between one idea and another and learn to distinguish things like reality and fantasy.

We had wonderful questions that actually were on these issues to some degree in the sense that we shouldn't be looking at just whether the child have or don't have problems, but how well they are doing in terms of mastering the fundamentals – the building blocks of relating, communication, and thinking, and how we can strengthen those. I find that whenever a parent has a question, there's a good reason for that question and there's usually some strengthening work that needs to be done. Just saying, "He's doing fine" or "He doesn't meet diagnostic criteria" doesn't answer the parents concern who senses that something isn't as strong as what they want to be. What really answers the parents concern is, "Here's how we can strengthen that thing you are concerned about and you don't need to be as worried as maybe you are about it."

Next week we are going to talk about the higher levels of using ideas; how to teach higher levels of thinking and reflective skills. We'll also talk about applying these basics to older children. So we'll talk about three stages of higher level abstract and reflective thinking and how to help children, even children with special needs and children on the autistic spectrum, master these higher levels. We'll also talk about how to work with older children and use the same principle we've been discussing for younger children with older children. All that next week. So the topic for next week is the higher levels of symbolic and reflective thinking and working with older children.

I look forward to speaking with you next week and until then, I hope you enjoy your Floortime and we looking forward also to your emailing us your questions and we'll select a few to be on the air with us for next week. Thank you very much.

