

## Web-Based Radio Show

### Self esteem and Awareness:

*Discuss what true self esteem and true awareness is*


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Welcome to our show. Today's topic is self esteem and self awareness. This is a critical area for all individuals – those with special needs and those without challenges. The big question is, what is true self esteem and true self awareness? There are lots of pretenders to the throne of self esteem and self awareness but only a few legitimate heirs.

To understand what self esteem and self awareness is, let's look at a few examples. The first individual we will consider was always told everything he did was terrific. His parents believed that praise was important and that they could create positive self esteem by emphasizing how wonderful their child was in almost all things he did. When he discussed his upbringing as an adult he talked as though his parents really meant it. He never knew the difference between really being good at something and really feeling good about himself and just a kind of cosmetic "oh you're a wonderful person." As a consequence, he went around always seeking some reassurance. He would go to his friends and say, "Is this ok? Am I doing it right?" In class with teachers, he needed to go up and find out, "Do I understand this, do I really get it?" He never seemed assured of himself. He had the right words. In a sense, he was a parody of that TV character who looks in the mirror and says, "I'm a good person. Everybody likes me, etc." We all know that very funny bit that I think originated in the show Saturday Night Live.


Let's take the other extreme. Sally grew up in a family where nothing was good enough; always criticized. They believed in tough love in the school of hard knocks. She felt she could never please her father and she felt her mother wasn't critical enough, but wasn't accepting either. She didn't seek reassurance. She was just chronically depressed, feeling "I can't do anything right and I'll never be able to be successful and whatever I try won't go well." She was chronically negative about herself, a low level of



chronic kind of depression, low self esteem, and often avoided trying new things or trying things that were difficult.

Neither one of these extremes produced an individual with self confidence; with self acceptance or high self esteem. Many children with special needs have special challenges – language challenges, motor challenges, learning challenges, challenges in forming relationships. Can a child with special needs learn to feel really good about him or herself? Can they feel that positive self esteem and self regard? Can they develop self awareness where they can evaluate their own feelings? My experience is, as hard as this may be for some people to believe, that children with special needs can have enormously high self esteem, can have a high degree of self awareness, and a high degree of self acceptance. Some, as I indicated, may find this puzzling. How can someone with so many challenges feel so good about themselves? As we will see in a few minutes, the paradox is, the more challenges one has, sometimes the better one can feel about themselves. That is because the more there are challenges, the more there is to feel good about. After all, feeling good about yourself, in part, has to do with overcoming challenges; with meeting challenges; with making progress. And so, in a sense, the person who is given everything easily, where everything comes effortlessly, may not have the basis for as much self esteem as a person who has to climb the stairs; has to climb the mountain. Like the old saying, “Getting there is half the fun.” Well when it comes to self esteem and self acceptance, the trick for getting there is all the fun. It’s what it is all about.


Let’s look at the different steps or stages of self awareness and self esteem and self acceptance. It has to do with a broad range of capacities. It’s not as simple as it would sound, that it is just someone telling you that you’ve done a good job as we indicated earlier. It has to do with an awareness of one’s own body and feeling good about one’s own body. It has to do with basic attitudes about the world – a kind of can-do attitude and a sense of pride and accomplishment. It has to do with awareness of strengths and weaknesses and learning the differences; learning to accept weaknesses and working on them; learning to feel pride and strengths. It has to do with the ability to picture ourselves; have a self image, and think about ourselves and then view these pictures of ourselves and these thoughts about ourselves with positive feelings. It has to do with reasoning about ourselves and figuring out how we can feel more positive by tackling difficult things, by figuring out the right strategies, by focusing our energies on areas that we are likely to feel good about. It has to do with growing self awareness and



growing self reflection that enable us to solve problems better and figure out the kinds of relationships that will work for us; the kind of studies that will bring us some pride and pleasure and knowledge; the kind of work and activities that will be satisfying. And ultimately, it has to do with being able to form values and expectations and plan a strategy to meet those values and expectations; the ability to internalize a set of values, to know what we want to strive for and then guide ourselves on that path and judge ourselves on our progress. That is truly substantive self esteem and self regard. As you can see, that requires a fair amount of self awareness, and the two reinforce each other.

Let's take a look at these different components of self esteem, self awareness, and self regard. Let's take a look at these in a little more detail. First let's look at how we get to know our bodies and feel good about our bodies and develop our basic can-do attitude; that fundamental sense of feeling good about who we are at the very, very core. It starts off with the beginning of our journey as infants, just looking, listening, and turning towards sights and sounds as newborn babies. It is the beginning of a sense of mastery. It is the beginning of recognizing the external world. Do you think the baby feels good about himself when he finds mommy's face and sees it smiling and beaming back at him? Do you think he feels good about himself when he moves in rhythm with mother's voice? Do you think he feels good about himself when he sees daddy beaming with pride as he is able to give his first smile to daddy? Well, our little baby isn't experiencing all these feelings in the same way an adult does, with conscious awareness; with thoughts. But nor do we, as adults, experience these feelings of high self regard and self esteem with conscious awareness of thoughts all the time. Sometimes we just feel it in the core of our bodies; in the core of our being. This is likely what the new baby feels. He is developing that core sense of being related to the world and feeling the positive presence of pleasurable interactions with others. It is related to things he is doing – his looking, his turning – so he is in control a little bit of these first experiences of positive feeling. That is the key for self esteem, that he is doing something - he is turning, he is looking, he is listening, he is smirking, he is smiling, he is frowning. These are all bringing back positive responses, so this is his sense of "I can do something."


Now when a child has special needs – has trouble turning toward the sound, has trouble looking at interesting sights, has trouble or difficulty in imitating rhythmic movements and becoming synchronous almost as though to be in a dance with mother or father – these are hard for children with special needs because they may have motor



problems, they may have language and auditory processing problems, they may have trouble coordinating what they see with what they do, i.e., looking towards that interesting sight. But here is where the environment comes in. Here is where the first step of self esteem comes in with the child with special needs. If mommy and daddy can patiently work with little Johnny, give him some extra practice and extra time to turn toward their sound, keep encouraging him with even more vibrant emotional tones as they situate themselves just to his left and say, “Can you see mommy here? Here I am, here I am.” And finally when Johnny finds them, a minute or two later after looking left and right and up and down, and maybe after having more jerky than smooth movements that might be seen in another child, but when little Johnny finally finds them in spite of his motor problems and in spite of his auditory processing problems, that sense of delight and that smile and that joy is often deeper, even than in the child who didn’t have such a hard journey. My sense is that the journey can be even more rewarding, produce even more self esteem for the child with special needs because it is that much more meaningful when he experiences that joy and pleasure of the smiling face beaming back at him once he finds it.

So the key to this early sense of can-do is to couple a pleasurable experience of relatedness with an admiring and loving and joyful and intimate adult with some activity on the child’s part that helps bring it about. So it’s not simply handed to the child on a spoon where he doesn’t have to do anything and he’s just a passive reactor to a tickle. That’s fine too some of the time. But where he is actually working – by turning, by looking, by listening – to find that wonderful, beaming face. That’s the first lesson in self esteem. And it’s for all children, but maybe even more glorious for the child who has to work a little harder at it.


That leads to the sense of engagement, that warmth, that delight in others, which is the foundation for self esteem because self esteem is, after all, the bringing inside yourself that glow of positive regard that we feel in our loving relationships. We can’t have an inner voice, an inner sense that we are good people without feeling that in our earliest relationships. It doesn’t come from the blue, it doesn’t come from a genetic code. It comes from those earliest relationships. It has been alleged that some people are genetically more happy or more joyful than others. There may be some who are wired to smile a little bit more and some who even may be a tad bit more optimistic in terms of some of their nature, rather than some of their nurture. But these basic qualities, which may have some genetic components, can’t turn into intimacy. They



cannot turn into trust and cannot turn into self esteem unless they are coupled with that loving relationship; that warm glow of another; the ability to bask in the pride of another person's eyes as you accomplish something for yourself, as simple as looking and listening or as simple as a big smile.


Then this, by the end of the first year of life, is mobilizing itself into back-and-forth communications and interactions – reaching for a little toy on mommy's head, finding a little rattle hidden in her hand – this too leads to the same glow, that same positive feeling. Again, it is another cornerstone of self esteem.

When we come into the second year of life, when we get into shared social problem solving – taking mommy or daddy by the hand and walking them to the refrigerator or finding the hidden toy - here too, the pride, the sense of accomplishment, expands. It is now associated with problem solving, not simply looking or listening. In other words, the agenda gets more complicated with the child's abilities. The parent who is facilitating self esteem and self acceptance is challenging the child just a quarter of a step beyond what they can do and helping the child feel that pride of accomplishment. Again, it is the child stretching his ability and then realizing the payoff in the shared joy and the shared pride and the accomplishment of the task – getting the toy or figuring out how the blocks can be stacked up higher and higher. But it's doing it together with you and feeling the glory of your acceptance and your pride, coupled with real effort and coupled with the child's sense of internal mastery now for ever growing and ever complex problem solving and keeping with the child's ability. So our child who has special needs who doesn't have the motor abilities of the child who does not have special needs, might feel that same sense of pride from simply moving the car back-and-forth. The child with a little more motor capacity may be able to move the car up and down an incline or in the garage and out of the garage. Each one will feel the same pride; the same glory; the same sense of high self esteem if we are realistically pitching our pride with the child just an eighth or quarter of a step beyond what he can already do when he makes the next increment in his capacities. That is the key – knowing where your child is, pitching it just a quarter of a step or an eighth of a step beyond. If we are too far behind the child or we overprotect the child, we undermine his capacity to feel true pride. We may say, "You're wonderful, you're great, I love you" but there is nothing internal. It's not coupled with the child's sense of internal mastery. He doesn't own it because he can't control it. He gets it for nothing. He gets it without effort; without a sense of internal mastery; without a sense of internal accomplishment.



On the other hand, if the goals are too high – if we are setting the standards or bar three steps ahead of where the child is, the child is frustrated. He feels it is impossible to meet the goal of the task. He can't feel good about himself inside and it's impossible, therefore, to get the pride of mastery shared with you through the look in your eyes and through the proud sense of your voice, through the proud sense of your moving and changing body postures. And if a child can't do all that, can't sense that from his own mastery or from you, there is frustration. Often we see children regress when they feel frustrated. They get angry at themselves or at others. They may bang toys on the floor and throw the toys. They may hit themselves. They may bite or scratch you or a sibling. This is all a meltdown stemming from feeling enormously frustrated. We see this with older children in school when the task is too hard for them or when they aren't given the proper steps to master that task. Different children have different rates of learning, different steps they have to master. Our job is to put this step an eighth or a quarter beyond what the child can do and help them feel that sense of mastery in it. We see this in shared social problem solving, right in that first and second year of life, particularly in that second year of life.


Now when we get to the third year of life, we get to the two year old or the 18 month old heading into that third year. We see the child develop the capacity to create ideas. You see imagination and pretend play. Now the child can not only experience self esteem at the level of that basic feeling tone of his body and the basic activities of his body, the child can now experience it at the level of ideas. He can picture mommy smiling at him inside his own mind. He can play it out with his dolls giving each other high fives or a thank you or a big smile or hugging each other. He can also picture the kinds of things that will bring him pleasure, the kinds of activities he wants to do. He can rehearse them in his own mind, he can problem solve without having to carry out actions using his thoughts. Now his thoughts become a source of pride and glory and excitement. Having an interesting idea can be met with positive self esteem and self regard. But how does a child learn to value his ideas? Here too, it comes from those loving relationships. A mommy or daddy who gets down on the floor and plays with little Johnny or Susie, and values his creative productions is showing him that his ideas are important too, not just actions. A parent who is too busy to do that or is negative about what the child is doing, always worried that the child will break something or dirty something or soil something, is telling them that the child's activities and maybe even their ideas are scary or worrisome or won't bring pleasure and pride. So at the level of ideas we now have new abilities that can be valued. They are abilities that allow our



child to now picture positive things in the world, picture themselves in a positive way, begin forming a positive self image, and feel valued for having ideas in their own right. That's a critical step in not only self awareness but a critical step in the higher levels. Not the more basic levels – not the more critical levels – but the higher levels in a developmental sense of self esteem and self acceptance. Now there is the self esteem of ideas and the self acceptance at the level of self image or ideas.


The stages we were talking about before ideas become prominent, sometimes they are referred to as implicit knowledge. Sometimes it is called procedural learning; the kind of learning that occurs. This is because the child is learning about the world and learning about himself without the use of ideas or symbols or sometimes what is called representations. My view is that this implicit understanding is the foundation in the most basic sense we have about our own bodies and it's acceptance and the way our body functions in an intentional, purposeful manner. Obviously also here, our basic issues about the pleasuring one's own body - being able to regulate basic functions too, such as eating and eliminating and feeling the pleasure of touch and feeling the pleasure of movement. These are issues that I haven't underlined in these first couple of years, but they too contribute to the sense of well being in one's body in the sense of self esteem. The more and more these capacities become part of our ability to be purposeful and intentional, the more they become organized at higher and higher levels of self esteem and self awareness.

Now as a child progresses into the use of ideas, he learns to use ideas logically. Now he can say, "A leads to B and B leads to C. If I'm good, my parents will reward me. If I'm bad, I'll be punished." Now the child is learning a new level of self esteem and self acceptance. He is able to begin seeing the world in terms of lawful consequences, not just in terms of his behaviors but in terms of the ideas that go along with the behaviors. He is able to form abstract categories. "If I'm a good boy, which means I eat my dinner, I take my bath, I go to sleep – I get a big smile from mommy and she is happy with me. If I give her a hard time with all these things, mommy is frowning at me and annoyed with me." The child is now creating rules for his own internal self esteem. We often wonder why a child would elect to give his parents a hard time – be defiant, be negative, refuse to go to sleep, throw his food on the floor – when that is going to get a scowl rather than a positive self esteem. Why do adults operate in self defeating ways? Why do some children with special needs seem to sabotage the efforts of their therapies – throwing tantrums, hiding under the table, running out of the room? You may think




there is no answer to this kind of a perplexing question. But actually the answer often is remarkably simple – simple, and yet complex at the same time. The answer often is that we have gotten into a pattern with the child where we are not setting the bar an eighth or a quarter of a step beyond the child’s ability to help him feel the pride of new accomplishment. We are often setting the bar too high or too low, in which case there is over protectiveness and indulgence, or there is frustration and anger. As a consequence, the child then decides that love by irritation, as a well known colleague Reginald Lourie used to say, is far better than love through acceptance. In other words, if the child is angry and feels that they aren’t able to get the kind of self esteem or self regard that they intuitively would like, and so they adopt a different policy – love by irritation. It’s a kind of attention, it’s not the kind that we wish they would seek, but we have to look to the way we are creating the environment; the way we are creating the learning situations; the way we are honestly showing pride in them for their accomplishments and often go back to the basics. The basics often involve what I call Floortime, where you beat to the child’s drum and tune into their rhythms and you gradually challenge the child to master more and more of their basic functional emotional milestones of engagement, two-way communication, intentionality, shared social problem solving, and eventually using ideas and using ideas logically. If we go up the ladder in an organized way, each step of the way helping the child feel that positive regard, often we can help the child out of that negative cycle, back into a positive cycle where they experience positive self esteem. But the ability for logical thinking is a great boon to the child. It enables the child now to know what will bring him pleasure and high self regard from others and what will bring him the opposite. He can begin making deliberate conscious choices with his own ideas. That is a great advantage for the child, but again he can use it in many different ways depending on his environment.

Now if that goes well, we get to another stage, a higher level of self awareness where the child is not only planning what they are doing, but they are beginning to get a more complicated picture of themselves. They are seeing themselves as having many reasons for things and they can picture themselves not just in an all-or-nothing way – “If I’m good I’ll get candy or I’ll get a hug or if I’m bad I’ll get a punishment” – but instead they can see themselves as being a little bit good or a little bit bad or a little bit mischievous and yet a little bit exciting, a little bit exploratory, etc. As they learn to be a gray area thinker, they are getting a more fine-tuned picture of themselves. They are seeing themselves not in all-or-nothing terms but someone who is happy most of the time but not all the time; someone who can do a good job in some things but have a



harder time in other things. They are beginning to develop a more realistic sense of themselves. They don't have to be the best at everything – they would like to be – but they know they are good at throwing a ball but not so good at reading or great at reading but not so good at math or a good joke teller but not so good with magic tricks, etc., etc., etc. This stage, as we often call “Playground Politics,” children are learning to compare themselves to other children. Often the largest source of self esteem during this time, the early school years, is from how one pictures oneself in relationship to one's peers. The good part of this is that the ability to picture oneself in relationship to one's peers, the ability to assess and evaluate how you stack up, is a great intellectual and emotional and social accomplishment because a four year old doesn't do that. And many children with special needs won't do that until they develop this level of reflective thinking and this level of language where they can compare things in terms of shades of gray. So often parents of children with special needs worry, “Gee, how will little Johnny or Susie feel when they see that their friend Martha can do something that they can't do?” My comment often is when that happens, I will be very delighted because that will suggest a high level of self awareness and a high level of knowledge about the world and a high level of self reflection that will enable Johnny, even though he has special needs, to feel better about himself because we will be able to help Johnny see the things that are special about him. Part of seeing what is special about you is knowing what you are frustrated about, or what you wish you could do. You can't have pride in yourself without having wishes or without having aspirations. Whether those aspirations or even those feelings of jealousy about what someone else can do and you can't do, whether those turn into positive self esteem or negative self esteem, depends on how we work with the child. Again, if we show a child that they can constantly make progress and constantly move towards greater mastery, their internal sense of can-do and their internal sense of pride within their family, within the micro chasm of their loving relationships, continues to proceed even if many of their peers are doing things that they can't do. On the other hand, they could be the best baseball player, mathematician, and reader in their class and still feel very low self esteem if the learning relationships and the intimate relationships at home don't have this quality of real respect and real admiration based on real accomplishment that we are talking about.


So remember, self esteem is in the core, not always in the surface, and the ability to size yourself up can be an important step towards realistic self esteem where you understand your strengths and weaknesses and understand what you can work on and



then have the pride of knowledge that you can do things yourself to improve your capacities. That is a great step in true and in substantive self esteem.

Now if that goes well, we get to yet one more level, which we like to see for our adults. It is often accomplished in children in their early adolescent years and then gets further and further developed into the adult years. This is the ability to have a self image and have a sense of self awareness that moves beyond just a complicated picture of yourself but you can get better and better at evaluating yourself; evaluating your own feelings; evaluating your own thoughts; judging who you are. And here is the key part: doing this against an internal standard that you have created for yourself, an internal set of evolving values and goals and ideals of the kind of person you want to be. So we see our teenagers and young adults having an image of themselves as a loving person or a caring person, empathetic person, or a person who is striving to become a certain professional or a certain type of individual in terms of knowledge mastered, or a certain occupation or career. A person may have a goal to be a good person and learn to be an electrician, or a good person and learn to be a librarian, or a good person who is going to have a family of their own, or a person who is going to strive to help others, or a person who is just going to take care of their own grandmother. Whatever one's goals and aspirations are, or a person who is going to learn to use words more fully or a person who is going to learn to walk better, whatever one's goals and aspirations are, one can get to a point where one can internalize this as an internal set of values and then judge oneself against now your internal values, and not be so vulnerable to what the peers are saying or what your mommy or daddy are saying or what one's teachers are saying. This gets to a level of much more substantive self esteem, and here is where self esteem and self acceptance are coupled with self awareness, because it requires this high level of self awareness in order to be able to have this more internal and this more substantive and long term sense of self esteem and self acceptance.

This type of self esteem is not vulnerable to just a change from day to day of a bad grade or a teacher who is mad at you or a friend who is rejecting. Sure that would be depressing and make us feel bad, but our internal guide; our internal globe, comes from values we have created inside ourselves and how well we are progressing towards meeting those values. That is what it is all about in adults and that's what it is all about in our developing children. Children with special needs can develop this and children without special needs can develop this. The pathway for children with special needs may be much longer and take awhile. But if we are patient and we work through the



steps we have outlined, all children can develop more and more self esteem at higher and higher levels. The level each child achieves will depend on the child's own growth curves and their own progress. But remember, self esteem begins with the basics of the feeling in one's own body and then progresses to high levels of self awareness and internal set of values. At every point in that journey, one can learn to feel better and better at one's self with more self acceptance and more self esteem.

What I want to do now is turn to our questions for today. We will be returning to this issue of self esteem more in future shows. So we'll take our first question now. Hello?


Caller: Hello?

SG: Hi, Dr. Greenspan here.


Caller: Yes, hi Dr. Greenspan. I have a question that I had written in. And I would like to read it so I keep my thoughts together.

SG: Sure.

Caller: Your topic for the week has perfect timing for us. My four year old has started to develop self awareness, acceptance and esteem. To give you a little background, he was originally diagnosed at around 18 months to two years of age with PDDNOS by several well known clinicians. We went into a panic mode and worked very hard for the past two years with therapies such as speech and OT and always tons of Floortime which saved us. After recent follow-up testing with various clinicians, they have all agreed that the diagnosis no longer fits. However, because we were given the diagnoses so early and this is our first child, we coddled him even more than most parents with first children. We treated him as though he was fragile and gently hovered around him. We did a lot of things for him rather than letting him slip and fall and learn on his own. He developed slower than other children his chronological age, so we worried a lot, and I think he felt our worries somehow, and in a sense he lived up to our standards. We have since eased up on him so now he is doing things at his chronological age. At birthday parties he is following all the directions, he is playing reciprocal games with much more ease such as tag, and plays with his friends completely appropriately. He enjoys all the interaction and seeks it out. In fact, he comes home from school and wants to go right back. He loves it. The problem is that while we were teaching him basics in the beginning, we were teaching him things in a



way that a lot of other parents with typical children we know never taught their kids. Things that other kids sometimes pick up on their own and sometimes they didn't, like how to say "please" and "thank you" all the time when appropriate, and "excuse me" when they interrupt. We taught him how to be sensitive to other people's needs and how to share and not to hit at one time, among other things. So here is this wonderfully appropriate child who really caught up to himself, and doing the right things in a world where kids his age don't always do the right things. Like kids his age aren't great sharers and they hit and push and say mean things. So what do you do? How do you teach this? Here is my topic-related question. Recently I sent him home from school and said that another kid pushed him off his bike and my son cried. When I asked him to tell me the whole story, he was very detailed about how the other kid got in trouble and then he went to time-out. I asked him if he pushed him back and he said, "No." He said, "The other kid who pushed was much too big, he is at least 10 years old, he is stronger than me, and I'm not strong yet. When I'm 10, I will be strong enough to push him back, maybe." Aside from this explanation of his feelings completely blowing me away, it confused me. Is this poor self esteem or is this him realizing that he is not ready for this kind of confrontation or that he is weaker? Today, only a week after the other incident, at a birthday party a little boy that is his size and weight that he has known for a long time pushed him a couple of times. My husband saw this and told the kid to stop. This kid does this to a lot of other kids and when I asked my son what happened a few hours after the incident, he gave me the same explanation of the other day. He said, "Mommy, I didn't do anything back to him because he is stronger than me. I'm not strong yet. Maybe when I'm 5 or even 10, I'll be strong enough to push him back. Well, right now I'm not strong. You know that." This is exactly what he said. I told him that he is strong and that he should push him back, then I realized that by me telling him this, it doesn't give him the confidence to deal with it, I'm simply describing what he should be feeling that he obviously doesn't feel. Otherwise, he would have pushed him back. There is an element that is missing. Why does he feel so inferior? Did he come up with this on his own or is it possible that another kid is telling him this? What will give him the confidence? I did some Floortime after this with his rescue hero figures and I tried to be a little aggressive and push his guys a little. He fought back every time appropriately. I even named one of them the same name as the boy who pushed him today and pushed him back and told him to knock it off. Then he pushed him back and told him to knock it off. How can I address this in another way and how can I help him to feel more confident? I'm not even sure that I understand what he is really feeling. In



your opinion, how would you recognize this stage he is going through? Is this a self esteem issue? Self awareness issue? Is he looking at this as a positive or a negative thing, the fact that he isn't strong yet? Any advice would be appreciated.

SG: Well, that's a very good question. I know there are many parents who share your question. I'm delighted to hear that your youngster has done so well. It sounds like he is now not just a verbal and intelligent four year old who socially enjoys many friendships, but he sounds like he is very intuitive and almost intellectually gifted and verbally gifted. So he is really cooking very, very well so you should be very, very proud from what you are describing. The key is, and I obviously don't know your son so I'm just talking in general terms, many children who were diagnosed with special needs, even early on and then grow out of some of their special needs conditions, often have some of what we call motor planning with sequencing problems. This means that they are not very confident in their own bodies as a child who's motor system is working very, very well. So your child sounds a little bit more, and appropriately so, on the cautious side with the gross motor activities. He is not going to jump from high places or bang into people and things very readily.

Caller: Right. Exactly.

SG: And he may even be a little, again another fact that goes along with children with special needs, is many have little sensory over-reactivity or under-reactivity where they don't modulate the sensations as easy as they would like to. Is your son a little over-sensitive to things like touch or sound?

Caller: He goes both ways, actually.


SG: He's over- and under-sensitive?

Caller: Yes.

SG: The over-sensitivity tends to make you a little cautious if you're thoughtful about it because you don't want to be overwhelmed.

Caller: Right.


SG: So if you couple a motor planning problem with what we call a sensory modulation problem, you are a little over- and under-reactive, it's hard to control sensations coming in – sights and sounds and sometimes a menacing gesture from a



peer can seem overwhelming because you're sensory over-sensitive – and then they don't have the confidence in your body to handle it. So it's scary if somebody pushes you because you can fall more easily and you don't have the confidence in your balance, and you certainly don't have the confidence to push back or hold your own. So it's very important, when you think about self esteem, to always go back to the basics and not get caught up in what we or all parents do. I certainly did this when my kids were little and you'd not be unusual if you were doing this, but again I don't know if you are, but all of us tend to project ourselves onto our children. Our children may be quite happy to be solid pacifists and emulate some of our great heroes like Martin Luther King or Ghandi, but we are often unhappy. We want them to be tough little football players.

Caller: It hurts us more than it hurts them.

SG: We are projecting; we are actually experiencing more pain than they are. So what we have to do is pull in our projections, if we are doing that, and saying “what am I experiencing vs. what are they really experiencing?” If they formed a good pacifist adaptation given where they are at this point, then ask what this tells you about what they need to develop. If the child may be very gifted in language, you may not be working very much on his motor skills or on their basic abilities to process sensation and modulate sensation. So we may need to give them more experience in getting confident in their bodies. Then over a long period of time, they will become more confident and more assertive with their bodies. Some children require a little more occupational therapy, but for even children who don't require occupational therapy, I like to recommend two or three physical workouts at home with mommies or daddies, coupled with kind of Floortime play where assertiveness is challenged because children often who are sensory reactive or have poor modulation sensation and motor planning problems are a little more cautious on the whole assertive side, in imaginative play, but also in real activities – jumping, running, throwing, catching, kicking, hitting. So as you do three physical workouts a day - and for little boys, daddies have to come home early if there is a daddy at home, and they can't be workaholics - they have to be playing with their little guys every day and doing sports and dancing and dodge ball and pretend play on the floor. By doing three physical workouts a day and doing the sensory modulation exercises and doing a lot of Floortime like you described where the child is challenged to be assertive, over a period of years the child gets more confident in their bodies. Then they begin experimenting and they may experiment in different ways. They may just become more assertive and learn to raise their voice or go tell the teacher. Or they may



get even with the child, not by pushing back but by scoring a goal on the soccer field and showing the child just who is the chief out here. There is a variety of ways the child can cope with this. Leave the way to the child, help the child become competent in their motor skills and in their assertiveness, and the self esteem will then take care of itself.

Caller: What happens now, though, when he cries after?

SG: You let him talk about it, you comfort him, you problem solve as best you can in the circumstances in the reality of his life which could be getting the teacher more involved to make sure there is not pushing going on, it may be letting him feel more competent in alerting the teacher when someone is getting too rough, it may be learning how to anticipate someone is going to push him and stepping out of the way quickly. It can be a variety of strategies, but you problem solve together in the reality that he sizes up and the reality of his situation. You don't push a child to do things they are not ready to do because that only makes them feel more humiliated. And remember the parent always has to be cautious about pulling in those projections.


Caller: Yes, you don't always realize when you are being too demanding because you want to toughen them up in your mind.

SG: Well, you do, but just remember that nothing can happen too quickly. If you try to have it happen too quickly, if you listened to the talk today, if you try to build that self esteem overnight, you basically build a house of cards and you actually create more frustration and stress. So the worst thing for a child is if the child is having some challenges at school and then comes home and the parent says, "Well, go push him back." That's a little bit like the spouse coming in and saying, "Gee, my boss gave me a hard time today." And replying, "Well, don't let him do that, go tell him off." "If I do that, I'll lose my job." "Oh, you're being a sissy." So now instead of getting nurtured, what does the spouse really want? The spouse really wants someone to give him a hug and say, "Tell me about it, sweetheart and what do you think we can do together?" and problem solve together, not put more pressure on the person. The person is already feeling frustrated because they can't deal with the situation.

Caller: That is a good analogy.

SG: Alright?

Caller: Thank you so much.



SG: Take care, and good luck. In *The Child with Special Needs* book and in the book called, *The Challenging Child*, and the book called, *Building Healthy Minds*, there are a lot of good exercises for building that motor competency and building a solid foundation for being more comfortable with one's body and dealing with assertiveness better. Ok?

Caller: Ok, thank you.

SG: Thank you for your good question. Let's have our next caller, please. Hello?

Caller: Hi, Dr. Greenspan.

SG: Hello, how are you?

Caller: I'm fine, thank you. I have a question related to sort of trying to change or deter some self stimulation behaviors. I have a six year old autistic son. His sensory system is generally under-reactive, so he is sensory-seeking, of course. One of the ways he does that is to self-stimulate on his penis. Obviously that gets to be a problem if you are out in public. What we have done is dress him in overalls so at least he can't pull his pants down.

SG: How old is he now?

Caller: He is six.

SG: Six years old. How verbal is he?

Caller: Not at all.


SG: Ok. How organized is he in his behavior in terms of problem solving?

Caller: Not very good.

SG: So the most complicated thing he will do when he is interacting with you would be what?


Caller: He is starting to communicate with some hand tugging kind of things and using a few PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System). So he will take your hand and take you to the pantry if he wants something to eat.

SG: So little islands of purposeful behavior.



Caller: Exactly. And he is starting to use some PECS. So he is trying to communicate with us. So he has a lot of good attention and engagement though. Circles are not 50 or 60, but maybe 10 at the best.

SG: Let me give you some ideas about what to do. In general, what you want to do is always build the solution for a problem like self-stimulation of the genital area, or even if it is not there – just some other part of the body or just on some external object like looking at things – whatever the self-stimulatory behavior is, you want to build the solution for that into helping the child master the next stage in his functional emotional development. So what you are working on, it sounds like, is helping him get more into a continuous flow of back-and-forth purposeful interaction and using more and more symbolic tools in his communication such as the pictures or the hand gestures, etc. And that is a very good goal. That builds up, in terms of our DIR Model, it goes from the stage you are on now up to the next stage. Now as he becomes more purposeful and you get more back-and-forth interaction, and he becomes more communicative with gestures and then with different symbol systems, you'll see that his flexibility to handle his needs for stimulation will grow. He won't be left to just stimulate his body. He will be able to derive satisfaction and pleasure from all kinds of activities. He will become a better problem solver. So the more long term solution is to help him get to that next level so he can become a better problem solver. In the meantime, what you want to do is a lot of exercises with him that are proactive where he learns different ways to use his body so he is not just focusing on his genital area or one type of physical self stimulation. So for example, and you may be already doing some of this, but I'm thinking of 4-5 times a day proactively for about 20 minutes each time, so almost every hour and a half or so, running, jumping, spinning, deep tactile pressure. In other words, physical horsing around kinds of games and making them very purposeful in two ways. In other words, he can be an airplane and you can be spinning him around or daddy could be spinning him around and he can gesture faster or slower or move this way or move that way. That gives him another kind of excitement and stimulation, and it is part of two-way communication. Also, exploring different textures – giving him a massage on his body and his back and arms and legs with deep pressure even with brushing or with just physical massage that is firm and gentle, and yet reassuring to him. Movement – jumping on the trampoline, things involving joint compression, dancing together, a lot of rhythmic activity to music is very, very helpful. If he likes to kick, get big Nerf balls or push them – throwing and catching games. Do things where he is using his body in different ways, and you are using that activity for more purposeful two-way



communication and using gestures and if possible, some symbols like indicating fast or slow or up or down. As you do that, you are broadening his array of activities and that will take his attention away from just one type of self stimulation into a broad range of activities. That proactive is very important, as is getting to the next level. But also, when he is embarrassing you in public because he is beginning to slip his hands inside his overalls and have the genital type of self stimulation, there what you can do is gently distract him onto another activity. The more you have done these other activities, the easier it will be to distract him in public. So instead of saying, “No, no!” and making him feel bad about it, just start another activity which is even more fun for him. So show him you have something better for him to do. That will begin getting him involved in these other activities. Gradually you can convey to him the idea also that some kinds of touching are private that he can do in his own room or the bathroom, but until he has a little more language, this is going to be hard for him to understand.

Caller: Oh, yes.

SG: So in the meantime, I would just distract, but also do these other things I’m talking about.

Caller: Do you have any ideas about distracting in public?

SG: Get him involved in an activity in public of the kind we have been talking about. So if he starts in public, you can gently involve him in another activity, which means that if you are in public with him, you can’t simply be talking to your friend and letting him do his own thing. Someone will have to be interacting with him, but that person who is interacting with him, whether it’s you or his daddy or sibling or friend will need to get involved in some sort of distracting activity.

Caller: Ok.


SG: And to not make a big deal about it and not make him feel bad about it.

Caller: Oh yes. Certainly just telling him, “No, no, no!” has no effect.

SG: The rule of thumb is to give him something better to do.

Caller: Right. Can I ask one more question?

SG: Sure!



Caller: He does know how to swim and last summer he thoroughly enjoyed swimming.

SG: Which is great!

Caller: Absolutely! Except that this year, when we took him to the pool he started screaming like he was terrified.

SG: Well then go to a baby pool or start in the shallow end with one toe at a time and go in very gradually and let him get comfortable with it again.

Caller: Yes. He just seems to continue to scream no matter what we do.

SG: How about a baby pool or a wading pool?

Caller: He'll go in the baby pool.

SG: Ok, well start there until he gets more comfortable. Once he is more comfortable there, then if you have a backyard, get a little blow-up pool.

Caller: Right, we do.

SG: Yes, do that.

Caller: He'll get in there.

SG: Yes, and get more comfortable there and have fun there. That's just as good for him. Then once he is really comfortable there, and you get him really comfortable, you can try the very shallow end of a wading pool, or a real pool if he'll go into it. If not, keep enjoying the wading pool and the backyard pool.

Caller: Ok.

SG: The main thing is having fun and interaction, not whether he swims or not.

Caller: Oh, I know.

SG: It will be nice if he can get in, but keep relaxed with him and give him time.

Caller: Sure. I just wanted him to have some fun.

SG: He'll have fun if you don't push your luck.

Caller: Exactly. Don't push too fast. Thank you so much!

SG: Take care, bye bye. Ok, next caller please? Hello?

Caller: Hello.

SG: Hi, Dr. Greenspan here. How are you?

Caller: Good, thank you. Thanks for taking my call. I actually emailed in a question earlier.

SG: Ok, do you want to share with me?

Caller: I'm relatively new to the whole DIR concept. I have two kids with special needs. One is nine and has high functioning autism. My daughter is hearing impaired and otherwise you don't really know what is going on.


SG: How old is she?

Caller: She just turned 7 yesterday. She doesn't have much language and she has a lot of difficult, frustrating behaviors. She is very frustrating. My question is, when we are doing Floortime and gauging things with both of them, they are both very engaging and delightful and progressing. But when we are not, when we are doing other things around the house, everything just breaks loose. Lots of behavior problems – fighting.

SG: When you say you are doing other things, do you mean when they are left to their own devices?

Caller: Right. And so my question is, how can I structure home life so that I'm not losing the progress that we made during Floortime?

SG: Well, I think the key is that for children who are not yet very verbal, who are not yet able to play interactively with their siblings on their own, which is a big accomplishment and they will hopefully get there but it will take them awhile, you need to have an adult playing with them most of their waking time, unless you are having them do an activity like watching a video tape or something where they can get very absorbed, but so it's very hard to have a time where you or the daddy or a grandmother or a helper is not involved with them. What I often recommend is trying to hire some teenagers to come in so mommy or daddy can do what they need to do, whether it's cooking or just relaxing for a few minutes or shopping, so there is somebody else to interact and play with them. What you need to do is train these other individuals how



to do the kind of Floortime play that is getting them cooking. But it is a mistake to think that children who are at the level of development where they aren't yet fully verbal or aren't yet good problem solvers to be able to manage on their own. It's kind of like having very, very young children on their own. You wouldn't leave very young children playing on their own. So that is the key to not getting these regressions and to maintain the progress, is setting up the household so there is adequate help and it need not be expensive help. It could be some 12 or 13 year old teenagers – teenage girls make wonderful little playmates for younger children.

Caller: Yes. Do you have a way of measuring what, I imagine some downtime is good and appropriate...

SG: There may not be any downtime during their waking hours in the sense of downtime versus uptime. It's really whether somebody is with them and interacting with them. Let's say the child is tired and you want to give them some downtime. You can kind of lie together on the floor and rub their back and they can show you where they want their back rubbed. That's nice downtime; that's relaxing; but it's interactive.

Caller: Right.

SG: As opposed to just being alone where you do that for one minute and then you're up making trouble.

Caller: So you're saying that pretty much all of their waking hours at this stage, they ought to be engaged.

SG: With somebody who is a little older, but it can be very soothing. It need not be active or uptime.


Caller: Right.

SG: It can be downtime. It's just like you at the end of a hard day having your husband rub your feet. That's a little nicer than just lying in bed by yourself.

Caller: Yes. Ok. Alright.

SG: That's what it takes is getting some help and making sure there is always two of you around.

Caller: Yes. That's the tough part.



SG: Yes, that's why I'm saying to bring in some teenagers. They can be very, very helpful.

Caller: Ok. Alright. Well, thank you very much.

SG: Good. Good luck to you.

Caller: Thanks.

SG: Take care. Ok. Thank you, bye bye.

Well, I want to thank you all for today's show; for joining us. We had some very good questions. And as you recall we covered self esteem, self acceptance, and self awareness and how they go together. Next week we are going to talk about a very, very important subject - logical thinking. How we help children, all children, become more reality based and more and more logical. We're living in a world where children with special needs, but also children without special needs escape more and more into fantasy and often have a hard time staying logical and reality based. So how do we promote that from the beginning, and how do we maintain it? That is our subject for next week. Logical, reality-based thinking. Have a very good week and we'll speak to you next week at this time.