

Web-Based Radio Show

Symbolic Development:

Symbolic play and how play leads to symbolic thinking


Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

September 29, 2005

Good morning, everyone. This is Serena Weider. I'm happy to be here to today to continue our discussions of how we support the development of our children across the range of children. Dr. Greenspan won't be able to join us today, but that gives me a chance to take one of my favorite topics, which will be focusing on symbolic play and how play leads to symbolic thinking. I definitely have to explain why symbolic thinking is so important and why we have to be able to think in symbols, and not just actions, and some of the forms symbols take – whether they're words or pictures or toys.

I'd like to start by thinking of how we can help children develop these symbolic capacities even when they have challenges, whether it's around processing auditory information or being able to visually-spatially move around toys and ideas, or whether they have difficulty with the initiation of an idea and what symbolic play does for children. We usually incorporate some symbolic play into Floortime. Where does it all start and what are the foundations? All of you who have listened to this program many, many times have heard us talk about the core capacities that we need: To be able to relate and communicate and think and act and play and do the work of early development. Here, of course, I have been referring to the different stages where we take into account the individual differences in children, whether it's their regulation or arousal level; whether it's the way they comprehend what they hear and find the language they need to express what they want or think or feel; whether it's their ability to organize and figure out how to execute plans – how to trade – what am I going to do with this? Where is it going to take me? How do I get there?

These individual differences, of course, have a big impact on your ability to play, to do this kind of work. But through different kinds of play we will be setting up and strengthening the core capacities. Also, we think that symbolic play is important because it helps address common complaints, such as , “My child doesn't play with toys” or “He just wants to build blocks,” or “He just wants to do puzzles,” or “He just




likes to run around and jump and wrestle,” or “He doesn’t read the book by himself; he just turns the pages and says, ‘No, no, no,’ if I try to read or pressure him,” or “He loves to scribble, but he’s not drawing yet.” There are different issues that might derail a child from developing these kinds of symbolic capacities where they have to use all their equipment to play. Yet, I really do think every child can be supported and encouraged to play this way, whether it’s with toys, whether it’s with drama and dress-up, whether it’s with puppets, whether it’s with drawings, or whether it’s with performance and action.

Where does it really begin? I’d like to focus on a couple of issues. One would be the meaning of “symbolic.” Where do we start encouraging children to be symbolic? I will also speak to a notion, which I think is very important, that when we look at the symbols that children prefer, they may give us a window into their emotional development.

So, why build a symbolic world? Well, symbolic play or conversation is the safe way to practice, to understand, and to learn about emotional ideas, experiences, and feelings because symbolic play will lead a child to more abstract and higher cognitive levels. So, what are symbols? Well, symbols mean we’re not dealing with the real thing! If we use a symbol, it’s representing the real thing; it’s not the real thing. What are the children’s earliest symbols? What are the kinds of things you do with every child in encouraging him to relate or recognize and attach to a symbol? Well, think of a newborn baby. That baby, when he comes home and is in his crib the very first day, he’s likely to find a teddy bear or another stuffed animal. What does that mean? Why are we putting the little teddy bear there, or why are we saying, “This is your special blanket.” This teddy bear or this “blankey” is the symbol, or will become the symbol, of comfort and reassurance that when Mommy’s not there, you can hug your teddy, or when you need to feel more secure, you can take your blanket. From the very start, we’re offering children a substitute for reality. Not that we don’t think they’re going to be really lonely later on, but we connect these symbols to the child to offer them something that will help them feel more secure later.


So, the symbol represents something good and reassuring. Let’s think of what else you’re about to offer your child. What are the next kinds of symbols that children often latch on to? In every culture it’s going to be different, but each culture has symbols that represent either comfort or feelings or learning or explanation. We have Barney. Barney’s our friendly dinosaur. We have Sesame Street figures. Why do children fall in love with Elmo? We have Winnie the Pooh kinds of figures. How do the children



get to know these symbols? Well, we buy the videos or they see the videos or they see the pictures when they go out into the world at the shopping mall. For the most part, they've been given these as gifts, and we're so enthralled when someone likes a certain symbol, inevitably he gets 20 versions of it. So, if you love Thomas, you're going to get a lot of Thomas trains. If you like Sesame Street, you're going to have a whole host of figures, and even those figures really convey there's a different character or personality, a different feeling. These symbols introduce the child to symbols of real life – they're doing things, problem solving, and recognizing certain feelings, such as what makes you happy and what makes you sad. We know the symbol based on which toy the child chooses. We can ask, "Why is this your favorite?" and really think about what your child has preferred or has enjoyed working with that toy and I think you'll get a clue, you'll get a window into something that's really important to him because the symbol means something and he will seek that symbol to convey that he feels a certain way before he can even talk about it.

So, we move from comfort and reassurance – we have the symbols of real life learning and experience – and then their role gets a little bigger, so we have other symbols. We have Dora, we have Blues Clues, who explore and think and problem solve. What is Diego going to do? I am using these symbols of our culture, but I think this is representative of all cultures and I'm sorry I cannot identify all of them for you, but I think everyone listening can think back to the equivalents in their own world. These are more of the commercial symbols that I think have been imposed very successfully in our culture, but there are more symbols. For example, what is one of the first songs children sing? "Old McDonald Had a Farm." Farm animals represent that animals are nice, they're friendly, they give us food, and we can pet them. It's more likely you're going to go to a petting zoo before you go to the jungle. So, farm animals represent those domestic animals that we're safe with and we care for and who give us things or help us. Children are usually very comfortable with them, so they love to play with farm animals. They learn so much about what the animals eat, what they do, and what they sound like – it's often the first imitation of sounds and language a child makes.


On a child's trip to the zoo, what happens? The child is now beginning to recognize the types of animals that are safe and not safe. So that we begin to see that animals begin to symbolize or represent safety and danger. When we see children playing with tigers or lions or snakes in the same way they're playing with cows and horses and chickens, they have not yet figured out the difference between the two, and this is a developmental process. By looking at how a child plays, we have a very good



idea of how he understands what it represents and what it means. When they begin to understand that a tiger is not a kitty cat, the child is now moving into the understanding that not every animal is safe, not every animal should be touched. Children are going to become aware, with your help, that the tiger or the lion is behind a moat and a fence in the zoo, whereas they can walk right up to the elephant and the giraffe. This is a time to say, “How come he’s so close?” or “What does he eat?” We’re not trying to teach the children; we help to build their awareness using experiences, and look for the signs or the cues that our children are picking up because that tiger might be stalking, rather than coming over to be petted. When we do Floortime we can experiment with what an animal represents to a child – what it symbolizes – by the way we also respond to that animals. Are you pointing out, “He has sharp teeth!” or “I wonder what he’s going to eat” and begin to get the child thinking about what the features of the animal are about, and that the tiger does look meaner than the cow or the other animals they’re more comfortable with.

So, in the course of these first few years, we see these symbols helping children learn more about emotion, learn more about how some things are friendly, others are not so friendly; in fact, they might be mean and dangerous. Some children might develop a love of animals. Very often children who have auditory processing challenges – one of the things I’ve noticed they’ll do – actually prefer to play with animals. Animals don’t talk and neither do they. They form an affinity and a comfort level with all of these wonderful features, which reduces the stress of having to actually talk. But in playing, animals talk – we give them voices. You will notice right away that the choice, if not the obsession, of the child’s symbol often has a lot of meaning. As the children fall in love with dinosaurs, what a child does with that dinosaur is opening a big window. These dinosaurs – they’re all the same – they’re just being lined up and they’re treated equally. But why are dinosaurs a wonderful symbol? They don’t exist, they’re not real in the sense they’re so big, and they’re a little safer to experiment and explore with. You can just see how universal the love of dinosaurs is – these amazing creatures that existed once. But as the children begin to differentiate a T-Rex from a Brachiosaurus and begin to understand and learn about these differences, they’re getting their first lesson in what’s safe and what’s dangerous and who are the “good” guys and who are the “bad” guys.

So, that is one avenue of symbolic support that we provide children and it will be through these types of toys and shows that they fall in love. There are other ways to learn about the meaning of symbols and this has to do with the books they read. Once




again, if you think about what those books convey – what is the symbolic meaning of the book – and why do children fall in love with it, we come to the same emotion that we can recognize the child is experiencing and learning to understand and mastering. So, take *Goodnight, Moon*. It's still the classic story about separation in a wonderful, gentle way, "Goodnight, Moon, and goodnight cow, and goodnight mittens" and slowly prepare the child for the inevitable, which is it's time for him to go to sleep and to separate. The rhythm and the soothing nature of it, the comfort of it, has made this one of the most beloved books, but it deals with feelings and symbolizes feelings. Many of us have relied on this book as a way of helping our child deal with separation and become aware of separation when he goes to bed. If you think about a book that your children love, you will be able to begin to connect to the feelings they are trying to deal with and that are developing, because that book becomes very meaningful to them.

Goldilocks and the Three Bears is really a story about getting lost, getting scared, not knowing what's going to happen next. It's a story about becoming a little bit more independent – what do you do if you're tired or hungry or sleepy? How do you know which to choose? It's an extraordinarily complex story! Children love this story because – at least most versions – have Goldilocks getting lost and solving this problem and helping herself. She's on her own and she's trying to take care of herself. Then these three bears show up and they befriend her. In another version she runs away. In either case, they're now broadening the kinds of feelings the children have, and they might actually start to worry once they accomplish a certain degree of separation and are beginning to individuate and become more independent and becoming, as toddlers, individuals who want to have their own way and do things for themselves.


What else? What is another favorite story children love? The Three Little Pigs. Well, at first it's "huff and puff" and the excitement and the running and the chase. These are the fun parts of the story and, of course, the little pigs win. The child identifies with them. Why do they want to hear it again and what is the great relief they feel that the wolf runs away or falls down into the chimney into the water? The meaning of this story will be very clear to you by just finding out what the child thinks is the reason for the wolf running away. You can be sure that children with a range of processing challenges still love this story and love the excitement about it, love the affect, love to see what happens and enact it. It's probably the most popular story that's enacted.

When you know if they really get it will be when they find out what the wolf wanted to do to the pigs. Remember, that's not mentioned in the story; that's why this book is so wonderful – because it lets children understand at the level they can reason



and that's where we leave them – we don't tell them what the wolf is going to do. You'll read the book the first time and many more times so the children understand what it means and what it's a symbol of – is it fear, is it danger, having to help yourself, how do you stay safe, how do you protect yourself, three do it better than one. There is an enormous amount of representation in this very simple story, beloved by so many children. One of the important things in reading books is picking stories that do have these dilemmas, that do have these emotions, because it's the place where they can practice understanding whether it's risky or safe. So poor little Corduroy lost his button and what will happen? They learn about feeling safe; they learn about being happy; they learn about being angry or being sad and the books will be matched to their developmental level and they'll choose it. If children are not ready for a book or are frightened by a book, you don't push it. You really find the level they're comfortable with that you can have the exchanges, which will deepen their understanding of the story, rather than challenging them in an area where they are not yet.

As you hear, there are so many ways we encourage symbols. I'll just mention one other set of symbols because, as you can see, I'm climbing the hierarchy of emotions talking about how the understanding of these emotions emerges. So even a young baby can feel happy or scared or angry and throw down his plate in protest, but the civilization of those feelings occurs over time, where they go from the real thing to the symbol of the thing. This happens over time in the course of early development over the first few years of life. So, we need to build the symbolic world because when we start dealing with more and more complex emotions, it can't be the real thing – it has to be the symbol of the real thing. You're not going to put children in real situations, hopefully – sometimes they happen where we've seen their fears and the danger in the recent hurricane, which is incredible, and the terrible impact this has had. I hope we will have a discussion of the impact of this kind of trauma and how to protect our children from that, perhaps in one of our next shows. But, the more equipped a child is with symbols, the more he can cope with the feelings when they happen in real life, as well. Often, I think about how children would develop symbols in our culture if it weren't for these Disney films. But, it's not just the Disney characters and the Disney movies or Disney borrowed classic stories, like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. You look to see that in one form or another and we are, through development, immersing children in a broader and broader range of symbols. Who are the good guys? Are they kings and knights or a princess? The wizard? We need the fairy godmother to come to the rescue and we will




see how an understanding of reality, and especially the reality of who you are and your sense of self, develops that you will choose different symbols.

The different symbols, again, are all related to the mastery of new emotions and some of the developmental anxieties with it. So, whether we're talking about just a common anxiety that every child usually experiences – recognizing a stranger, “you're not my mommy; where's my mommy?” and latching on to that little teddy bear while the child figures out, “Where is Mommy? When is Mommy coming back?” That leads us to, again, separation anxiety. Is it a good sign if a child shows this awareness? Well, of course it is! Is a child ready for separation? That is determined individually. Do we just drop the child off at a daycare or a little preschool, or do we do it slowly and stay with them? Children will cope with this in different ways.

What else do children have to master? The mastery comes with the development of their body and with the development of their processing abilities. Do they understand the words so we can talk or do they respond to your tone of voice and your hugging and your reassuring? If they fall down, what happens? Are we upset or not upset? If they really get hurt, you'd expect them to be upset. Otherwise, maybe you're seeing a child who's under reactive to pain. On the other hand, if they get hurt, they don't really necessarily think about it, “Oh my goodness! I can get hurt!” That's the kind of thing we see, fortunately, after they learn to walk. I often think how good it is that children learn to walk before they have awareness that their bodies can get hurt. And the person who gasping or worrying is not the child – it's the adult, who knows something can happen! Children usually will persist and get up and try again. If they can't crawl very well, they'll roll toward what they want. They keep moving.

When you begin to see emotions attached to their falling down you'll know that they have this awareness of their body and that's when we start the “boo-boos” and the kisses, “Oh, let me give it a kiss,” or we say, “Bad table – bad table, you shouldn't have bumped into Sammy!” We begin to introduce the concept of magic and magical thinking, and that is symbolic. Well, does a kiss really make a boo-boo better? No, but it reassures the child. The difference is that, too, all the boo-boos seem to be equal. We know that a child has a more secure sense of his body, what his body can do, and when his body is hurt, and what his own competencies are when you notice he's not asking for the kisses for the boo-boos and having to get the band-aid. He's asking himself, “Am I hurt or not hurt?” When you fall down, do you keep running because you want to catch up with your friends or play chase or you want to catch the ball, or do you retreat? Are




you afraid – are you more fearful? Do you not climb the biggest ladder? Here, the mastery will help determine how much support the child needs through the interaction, through the cuing and maybe through the magic. So this is where the symbol – the kiss or that band-aid – begins to affect the child’s ways of finding symbolic solutions to his problem – and not just the real solution – until he matures.

What are symbolic solutions? You have a tiger coming and he’s threatening. How are you going to trap him? Throw a cage on him. You’ll find that bringing a symbolic solution in your play interaction actually will help the child calm down – they’ll feel safe. As every child is learning these symbolic solutions, they are actually really afraid. To them, it’s still real – it is the real thing and they respond as if it’s a real thing. One of the reasons you’ll often find many adults saying, “It’s pretend! It’s pretend – it’s only pretend!” Sometimes that’s useful, but not always because parents want the child to figure out it’s pretend and let them decide.

So how does a child begin to climb this process? One of the ways you’ll see children becoming more symbolic in making this decision “is this real or not real – can I really do this or not” is when you see children trying to use toys for themselves. Have you ever seen a child try to go down on a little toy slide or put their feet into a little pool or try to put on the doll’s shoes? It’s just a wonderful opportunity to encourage a child to do what they wish for, saying, “Oh, I love going down the slide,” they really want to do it! If we tell them it’s a toy or pretend, we kind of rob them a little bit of that feeling, “Hey, I want to do this! I love slides.” Let them try. It won’t take long before they figure out that they’re too big. But, we encourage them to do it because in doing so we get them to think symbolically and “this only represents what I love doing – it really is too small. So maybe I can put this little doll down the slide, or my favorite teddy bear down the slide.”


This is a parallel process of where children will begin to experiment with what’s real and what’s symbolic early on. What are really the first symbolic things children really do? It used to be usually feeding the baby doll. How many of you have seen a child pick up a toy bottle and drink it themselves first? Do we tell them it’s not real or it’s the doll’s? Hopefully not – let them figure it out. When a child does that, “Oh, you’re thirsty! Here, look, my baby’s thirsty!” Let’s see if they’ll take the next step, which is to feed the baby doll. Feeding and using pretend themes is often the first set of symbolic toys that are just wonderful to have because they’ll lead to all kinds of complex scenarios – shopping, learning about where we get food and how much, distributing it, and so on



and so forth. It is part of your basic nurturing, part of what they do every single day. It's part of how you meet their dependency and make sure they're eating and fed well, and children love to play. They'll feed their animals and they'll pretend to be you and so forth. What I've noticed recently is I often see children prefer to play with phones and it's really no wonder because pretending to talk on the phone, of course, has great communication value, but I think children realize that these phones, especially now that we have so many cell phones, are amazing things. They're there, wherever you go, and you stop whatever you're doing, and they're the first things that always get attention. They pretend to talk on the phone. Later they become attached to the person on the phone – "Let's call Daddy!" We encourage children to talk on the phone in a real way and then they do it in a pretend way and, again, it becomes a symbol of here's someone I want to talk to – what will we tell them? When is Grandma coming?

As I was saying earlier, when we put that teddy bear into the crib, we are continuously encouraging these symbols and they are useful to every single child, no matter where they are in their stage of development. What makes it symbolic is essentially when they actually use it, even though it's not real. They continue to talk on the phone if they begin to use the pretend form, not for really just mouthing and experimenting. It will get more and more symbolic and they'll use it because they know it's not real, but it still can tell the story or represent what they're thinking about. When we watch children actually use these toys, which are symbolic, in this interactive way, we know that they are becoming more symbolic and that it is very powerful. So they're beginning to substitute reality through symbols or images. To build a symbolic world, our main goal is how do we learn to substitute reality through symbols. This is extremely important because you don't do everything for real. You don't want to do everything for real, and we need that symbol to expand our understanding of life and feelings and ideas.

So, the goal of encouraging symbolic life and symbolic thinking is to elevate the feelings and the impulses of ideas and to express them in words or play or drama, instead of just acting them out. We're not going to let children hit other children, and we don't want them to break real things, but we can do this with toys. We can do this in drama. We can help children get the distance they need from real life in order to practice these different feelings and understand things better, to experiment with being on either side of the fence and to show us what they're thinking or feeling through the choices they make and initiate in their play. We want to really be able to use the




symbols to then turn them into concepts, which reflect meaning. This is why a tiger's not a kitty cat, because it represents a whole different thing.

Let me pause for a moment and begin connect this, before we go on to more thematic ideas, to what's happened. How do you climb the symbolic ladder? How do you learn and become more aware and understanding of reality when maybe you don't have language – maybe you don't speak? Or maybe you have a lot of language and memory and memorized scripts and can recite books, yet don't really have the kind of receptive understanding, instead of retrieval, to have a conversation, so that you can't play, but you can reenact or memorize? What do you do when you pick something you're comfortable with and don't see the rest of the world and get either very self-absorbed or have few things you like to do or are obsessive about one set of toys you want to play with and you aren't broadening? Many children love to play with trains and cars and it can expand – maybe they won't go near the pirates or the knights or the dinosaurs because they don't understand what those symbols mean – or maybe they do understand, but find them a little scary.

How can we support children to become more symbolic even though they don't necessarily have language? This will bring us back to the basics. It'll bring us back to the core capacities we need to serve as the foundation for communication and relating. Do you really need words to communicate? Do you really need words to move the toys around? Obviously not. But what does matter is you're not playing if you don't have that shared attention established and you're not going to get very far if you're disregulated and jumping and can't focus or are getting uncomfortable and anxious. How can you play if you don't have the engagement and the connection? Certainly you want to build it first on a sense of pleasure and interaction versus “I'd rather play by myself” and have a two-way street. Here we see enormous amounts of individual variation.


Some children actually do play with the toys because the toys already are representing something meaningful to them. We'll see them doing things to the toys, but the dilemma is they don't let you play with them. Well, why don't they let you play with them? Maybe you talk too much! Maybe you take over their lead. Maybe you're going to ask them a question they can't answer. Maybe you're not paying attention to what they want to do with the toy and you have your own ideas about the toy. So, we're coming back now to the basics: Are you getting the shared attention? Are you following the child's lead in the use of the toy? We have to start out with your being the toy. We play with babies where we're the toys – we're making the silly faces and we're playing



peek-a-boo and hide and seek. Moving from the parent being the toy to an object being the toy is a big step. So, think about what is difficult. We don't have to overload the child with a lot of words. If it's children who have challenges comprehending language but they're able to hear, it really is a way we support their development of language. The toys are language and what children do with the toys tells you what they're thinking, tells you what they're doing and want to do, tells you what they like and don't like. But children who have the motor skills and the visual-spatial skills can find the toys they want, can set up the picnic table, create a road with their cars because they're driving to the airport or to the store. When children have those other processing areas working, when they can plan and sequence, discriminate, find what they need and organize, then we don't need many words. When the child moves an animal around, we can understand what they're thinking by watching them use the toy as another way of being able to join them.

So, we want to really have a good grasp of where the child is at the more basic levels because the toys are going to be very important until you get interaction with you going and getting that flow of interaction is part of that foundation. Using the toy can be a means to an end – if the child already has chosen his symbols and has favorites, we join him. But, watch how you play. Are you setting up the drama? Are you telling the child what to do? Are you a player or are you just asking a lot of questions. If you're just asking a lot of questions, then you're conducting an interview and that's not playing. It's very important when you play to be a player, and by that I mean that you have your own figure and use your puppet. If you're dramatizing, be a character. You can always be Mommy or Daddy or teacher or nanny or Floortime player at the same time because you can just shift your tone of voice and help the child do what he wants to do, help the child identify what the problem is, help the child express his protest, "You want him to stop, don't you?" Lend him the words or encourage him to respond to the players because our goal is to get that back-and-forth reciprocal interaction. As a player you have a chance to give those cues. It's very different when you say, "That's a tiger," versus, "There's a tiger coming!" Your affect is what will convey the meaning of the symbol and whether it's friendly or scary. Your tone of voice, the way you move the toy, the gestures, the words you say are going to really help children expand on the meaning of the symbol. We have to really follow the child's lead on this.


When the child protests, as many do – and this is one of those common questions we get, "My child doesn't want to play with me! My child tells me to go away. My child wants to read the book by himself," whether they say it in words or gestures or



just moving across the room or becoming avoidant or having a tantrum, there are reasons the child is feeling the stress of your joining him in his play and I think it's very important to take that into account because we want to reengage and help the child do what he wants to do and support what he's doing by getting close and more interactive and getting engaged before we even do the playing, so the child reaches a comfortable level. It could be fear – many children talk more when they're mad – that really gets this back and forth going.

One of the important things is to recognize that when a child is avoidant or is telling you “no,” or telling you to go away, we have to be the ones who acknowledge and empathize with what they're saying and show we understand, but persist in joining them. “No? Oh, well, can I just hold this one?” or, “Okay, okay, I'm sorry! But, here, you forgot this! I know – you want some pizza?” Just persist and gently pursue without overwhelming the child in engaging him and helping him learn that playing can be more fun together than alone. I think the other thing we want to understand is maybe we're not meeting them where they are. Maybe they're scared of what we want to do. Maybe their questions are just too hard. The one thing, I think, that's very important, though, is to see the balance between commenting on the child, i.e., describing what he's doing, and conversing with the child. Certainly our comments help provide language for the child, but our goal really is to be conversant, to have a conversation during play, encouraging the child to respond to each question by providing a lot of support. They may act as if they see what you're saying, but you need to make it a two-way conversation, asking a question instead of just commenting or describing. The questions can be little ones that children can successfully answer and that's very, very crucial. I often see the attempt to follow the child's lead just by commenting or I often see parents sound so excited about the child's being interested in the toys, they're telling them, “Let's do this,” or “Let's go here” and kind of changing the topic before even finding out what the child is thinking of.


I just want to focus on making sure you get the play interactive, and to get it interactive you've got to be engaged, you've got to have the environment that will support the use of symbols, an environment that is not too overloading. You have to have the kinds of toys that, of course, a child is already inclined to have, but also have the kinds of symbolic toys that might open the next doors that kids wonder about or get curious about and move through the steps that they lead us through, in expanding their use of toys and symbols.



So, what's better: the funny thing is we'll often see, just as I said, when we play symbolically, of course, that animals can talk. Do animals really talk? No. You can pretend to be what you're not – that's when you're symbolizing. And the more important issue here is finding out if the child is comfortable and feels secure with the symbol and is ready to move forward. Is he able to execute the actions he wants to with the symbol? Is he stuck using the same thing again and again? Where the temptation might be to use different toys or take away the trains or hide the thing, what works much more effectively is deepening the plot with the very toys that the children like, because when we make it more complex, when we create more problems and make it deeper, we will get more of the conversation flowing, which will prepare the child to actually broaden. The goal isn't to play with a lot of symbols; the goal is to play with symbols in which the child is already showing some interest.

One of the principles of symbolic play, just as it is in Floortime, is we want to make sure the child generates the idea. We want to have the toys and the dress-up box around, but we really want to follow the lead and have the child selecting the things that are interesting to him – his favorites, which is driven by affect. It's going to be the affect that drives the child to symbolic development. Children can borrow these ideas from books, videos, imitating others, seeing what other children play, or they can be driven by something that worries them – maybe something like separation or a bedtime challenge.


We'd like to create a symbolic world for every child and have an environment that encourages this range of symbols. I want, just for a moment before we end today, to talk about how to set up a symbolic world. When we think about how toys are usually arranged, think about what you do with your toys – do you have them all mixed up in buckets? Or are there different boxes for different things? Do you label? The point is that when you think about what nursery schools do to organize their play environments and make them safe so you have the kinds of toys that will open the door to the next level. If your child only has cars and trains and railroads and garages and maybe airports – the whole world of wonderful vehicles and transportation – but doesn't also have the figures and the tool kit and the doctor kit, if someone gets hurt or gets in a crash or something has to be repaired – where do you go? You don't have the zoo. You don't have the dinosaur or the castle or the house to put a schoolhouse. We help reach a child who has one interest to really use it in the way it's used in reality.



So your room has to be organized, I think, more around symbolic ideas than categorically into just different boxes for different things. I see that one of the challenges in playing is having children find the things that they need and being able to organize around an idea. You're symbolic when the toys represent an idea, rather than just being a toy. Earlier on, children love cause and effect toys – pop-up toys and shape sorters and musical instruments – things that make sounds. They might like building blocks. It becomes symbolic when those toys are used for some other purpose than to build a house or a store. It's very important to have that full range of toys. Some children are pretty good at organizing and have good enough visual-spatial processing so that if they have an idea that they're going to have a picnic, they can move around the room, find everything they want, plop a big cloth down on the floor, and they have their picnic. But for other children that's very hard to do and this has to do with their visual-spatial processing and sequencing issues, which we'll talk about in the future, and they will be more likely to play picnic if the picnic is put together already and they just have to initiate the idea, spread it out, and invite their guests. I really like to organize the play group around ideas so that the different parts of the room can have the ideas that the children are dealing with – just like they have a kitchen set, well, do you also have an area where you go to the zoo? Do you have an area where you go shopping? Do you have an area where you might be going – if you're still at the reality level – to the airport or the garage to pick up the broken car, or to the doctor when the baby's sick, to moving to more abstract kinds of set-ups which will involve pirate ships or knights or jungle animals or castles or superhero figures, and so on and so forth.

So, it's important for your child to be in an environment where he can explore and discover new ideas through the symbolic toys. You want to represent the world that you want your child to symbolize during Floortime so that you will have things that relate to different experiences and new experiences – the more abstract ones, like the castle and the pirates and superhero figures. This is where we lead the child more into imaginative play, the play that they will never hopefully experience in reality, like being in jail and fighting, where they're really now working in a more imaginative way.

For some children, we encourage discovering this because we have it sort of set up. Bring some novelty to it; don't always clean it up and leave it the same, but change where you place it. If you have a really interesting zoo set up in the middle of the pool and they tune in and they say, "Hey, what's that!" and you look and you ask, "Do you want to go?" Really move the child into expanding and going beyond the toys they've



already selected and played with repeatedly by having this mini-world for them full of symbolic ideas. I think you will find children will be more likely to explore and try things and see whether you're wearing a crown or a work hat, but it will begin to trigger the type of thinking and emotions that lead to that symbol.

To set up the symbolic world in your playgroup, think Playmobile versus buying individual toys. The reason I mention this is that I've always been impressed with how Playmobile figured out they're selling an idea rather than selling a toy. They package it all for you. They're not very good toys for children who have fine motor challenges because they get too caught up in manipulating and fixing the little things, so I actually don't like Playmobile for every child at all, but the concept of Playmobile is if you look at their packages, they're selling ideas. Other toy companies are also doing that, like Fisher Price, and so forth. You can put together your own ideas, but put it together and cluster those objects together, rather than just have it alone. I think you'll find you can support and facilitate the child's exploration of the symbolic world. We'll talk more about how we now are going to use the interaction and Floortime to think of the plot, get to the motives, and put ideas together and use play to work on our challenges.

So, set up the symbolic world and in future programs we will address some of the "do's" and the "don'ts" and what works better, given the variations of our children at the developmental level.

Thank you for listening. 'Bye everyone.