

Web-Based Radio Show

Coping with Feelings:


How we help children not only become aware of their feelings but learn to deal with feelings in a constructive and helpful way

Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

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I want to welcome you to our Web-Based Radio Show, “Infants Children and Families.” This is Stanley Greenspan and I want to thank you for joining us today. Today’s topic is, “Coping with Feelings,” especially strong feelings. How do we help children not only become aware of their feelings but learn to deal with feelings in a constructive and helpful way? Last week we talked about helping children regulate their moods and behavior including behavior such as aggression. We emphasized the importance during the early years of life in typical development and during anytime with children who have challenges, of creating regulating relationships where children can signal with their emotions and learn to negotiate even without words, pre-verbally, their different feelings, their different behaviors, and their different relationship patterns. This week we are going to build on last week’s discussion and talk about making use of feelings in a constructive way.


Now there are a number of steps to becoming more familiar with your own feelings, being able to label and identify them, being able to discuss them, and most importantly, being able to use feelings as a tool in social interaction such as reading and responding to other people’s feelings, rather than getting overwhelmed by feelings and acting out feelings, such as acting out anger or becoming so overwhelmed with sadness or despair that it affects one’s daily life where one can’t participate with peers or enjoy school or enjoy activities. Worries and fears are also other intense feelings that are very hard for children. These too, benefit from understanding and from useful and constructive ways of coping. Let’s begin our journey into the world of feelings and understand where they come from, how children learn about them, and how they learn to become constructive and productive in the way they handle their feelings.




It begins as children are learning to have feelings. You can't cope with feelings unless you have a deep and rich variety of feelings. So in typical development early in life, in the first few months, we see children learning to enjoy pleasure as they smile deeply at their mommies and daddies. They are learning to experience dependency and comfort with closeness. But even in the first year of life they are learning to experiment with assertiveness or aggression as they say, "RRRRRR, RRRRRR, RRRRRR" by 8 months. Or they raise their hand as though to indicate or signal that they are outraged. In these first signals of feelings - raising of the hand, raising of the voice, a big warm smile – there where the child is showing not only their experience of feelings but the first signs that the child is coping with feelings because now they are signaling happiness with a smile or signaling anger with an angry growl or raised arm, rather than biting or screaming or just clinging for dear life. We see this with our children with challenges and with special needs and with autistic spectrum disorders. We see some 2 year olds who when they want to be close can only come up and hug where others can flirt and give you a little smile and make cute little sounds and woo you into them. Some 2 year olds or 3 year olds when they are angry can only hit or bite while others can indicate their anger with a stern voice or a hand gesture. They can negotiate by pointing to what they want and making angry movements indicating that they better get it now. You can negotiate back indicating that they have to wait a little bit.

Now last week when we talked about regulating mood and behavior, we talked about the importance of co-regulated reciprocal interactions. That's a technical term, but it simply means back-and-forth negotiation with emotions. It means the child shows a feeling and the parent communicates something back and the child responds in turn. When you get these circles of communication; this back-and-forth series of smiles or head nods or frowns or annoyed voices or curious looks, that negotiation is the child showing that they have graduated from all-or-nothing expression of feeling into using feelings and emotions as signals. So the first step in actually coping with feelings is to be able to use feelings as signals rather than just expressing them as kind of catastrophic and overwhelming events where they take over one's whole body and where they are shown an experience in an all-or-nothing way like with biting or hitting or self absorption and withdrawal.

Now once we have helped the child master this first stage of regulating feelings through these co-regulated or these back-and-forth signaling interactions, we then are ready for a second stage in the understanding and coping with feelings. This has to do




with using feelings in pretend play or in imagination so that children with special needs or in children developing typically, once the child is able to do pretend play or use a few words are able to apply a symbol, a word, or a pretend sequence to the feeling. So the dolls can be angry with each other and hitting or the dolls can be hugging or the mommy doll can be asking the baby doll, “Why so mad?” or “What made you mad?” or “What do you want?” Now as the child learns to express their feeling in pretend or use a word like “Me mad.” they are no longer simply able to just express their feeling with behavior or even signal with feeling through a gesture. Now they can use a word or a pretend sequence as well, and this is wonderful because now they have a higher level way of expressing and coping with the feeling. For example, they can satisfy some of their angry feelings by having the dolly pretend out the angry sequence. The dolly, instead of hitting the other child, can actually pretend to be hitting another child because one dolly represents the child and the other dolly represents the other child. So a child can actually practice how to share toys through the doll play or can practice other things through the doll play. But helping children develop their imaginations through pretending and through using their words gives them a new tool to describe a feeling – “Me mad”, “Me sad”, “Me happy” – and to cope with the feeling because once you can put it into words, you don’t have to act it out as much. So we go from the all-or-nothing expression of the feeling to the signaling with the feeling – the back-and-forth negotiation to the using the word or the pretend and a lot of parents worry with their children with special needs or children without special needs that if they pretend the sequence of the feeling, if they pretend with their children, let’s say around aggression, the child will want to do more things aggressively. In other words, they feel that the pretending will actually encourage the aggression. Now nothing could be further from the truth. Basically, if you don’t help the child use imagination or words to express the feeling, the child is left only to behave out the feeling. In other words, the feeling is there. Anger is part of life just like love is part of life. Curiosity is part of life. Fear is part of life. Warm feelings are part of life. All of these things are part of life. Now when the child can elevate these feelings through the world of ideas through pretending and using words, he doesn’t have to be left only to expressing it in behavior or inhibiting it through being tense and anxious or compulsive. So elevating it is very, very helpful. Now in elevating it to make-believe play, for example though, there is a difference between the child who takes the doll and just repetitively bangs it and hits it and breaks the legs and the arms off and just uses it for destructive action and the child who has a pretend scenario where the dolly is angry because they didn’t get their milk



or because some other dolly took their toy. The difference is this: When the child is just hitting the dolly or breaking the dolly, the child isn't really doing pretend. The child is just using the dolly in an action-oriented way just like they were hitting another person or breaking a glass or breaking a plate. So breaking the dolly is no different than breaking a plate. It is a direct expression of the aggression. It shows the child is still operating in this all-or-nothing mode, maybe even hasn't mastered the signaling with the anger yet, let alone real pretend play.


Real pretend play means that the child is able to develop a plot or a theme or a story together with your help that embraces and expresses that feeling. So the drama of aggression might be a drama where someone takes your toy and you are angry but then you make up. Or a drama where mommy isn't paying attention to you, the mommy doll isn't paying attention to the baby doll and you get mad and then you perhaps make up or something else happens. But it's a story which has growing depth to it and growing detail to it. So whenever you are doing pretend playing with the child and the child is only repetitively acting out a feeling, help him develop more depth. In other words, make it go from a soap opera to a grand epic novel. In other words, give the characters reasons for what they do. Have the story be more complicated and deeper. You don't have to worry about making the story nice-nice. You don't have to take a child who is playing out a scene where two warriors are battling or where two ballerinas are arguing – don't change the content, but deepen the content. Why are they arguing? What happens next? Invariably if you do that, if you do it empathetically, the child will eventually come around where they play out other feelings besides the anger. They will play out warm feelings or loving feelings or cooperative feelings too. If you just try to change it and say, "Well, aren't they going to be nice to each other?" or "Should they also be nice now?" or "Let's fix the little boy who's doll has broken his leg." then you are controlling the drama and it's not coming from the child. So true pretend play means you are following the child's lead but you deepen and thicken the plot and the child will eventually create balance and range.

Now even after the child learns to pretend, though, there are yet additional ways we can help children express and cope with feelings. Another one is what we call "reality-based conversations." We also call this "problem solving time." As you recall, Floortime is where we get down on the floor and just play with our children, first with emotional signaling and then with pretend or imagination. But then we can have, once the child gets to be the level where they can answer "why" questions for example, and




hold logical conversation, we can have reality-based conversations, “How was school?” or “What happened today?” or “How is your friend Johnny?” or “How is your friend Sally?” And in these conversations we can explore feelings and help children label their feelings. “Gee, when Sally came over to play with you, I wonder how you felt?” or “When Mary took your toy, how did you feel?” and then the child will share that they felt happy or they felt angry. “And gee, what did you do when you felt so angry?” or “What did you guys do after you were so happy that she joined you in the play? What did you guys play out?” So the child can describe the feeling and describe what they do when they have that feeling and that’s helping the child connect their own understanding of their feelings with the behaviors that follow it. So just simply being an interested mommy or daddy or an interested therapist or an interested teacher or big brother or sister and being curious about the person’s day and the person’s life and their feelings and their behaviors and their relationships will be enormously helpful in the child developing the ability to express their feelings and cope with feelings. We often overlook the value of simple chit chat. This can occur in the car, this can occur in the bathtub, during dinner, and children love to chit chat if you’re not opinionated and if you aren’t controlling the chit chat and you’re not asking factual questions about schoolwork because you are interested in their life, the same way an adult enjoys a conversation with his best friend who is interested in their life.

Now if that goes well and children can hold reality conversations, then we can get to a yet higher level of expressing and coping with feelings. That’s where we play a little game that I call, “Thinking about Tomorrow.” In this game, we actually anticipate feelings that are going to occur later in the day or occur tomorrow. Now this is great because now we are getting ourselves ready for what’s going to happen so we’re not surprised by it. And this is a great technique for children who are having trouble with certain feelings, who maybe tend to get sad at school or behave aggressively at school or get too excited and shout out answers before other children or who push or shove other children in their excitement. And the way we do this Thinking about Tomorrow game is we extend our reality based or problem solving conversation and we say to our children, “Gee, let’s think about what’s going to happen tomorrow. Can you tell me about some good things that are going to happen, or fun things or things that you are going to like?” See if there is anything at school or at home, and it could be things later in the day that you’re talking about, not necessarily only tomorrow. And let the child talk about something enjoyable and then insert, “Gee, is there anything that is going to happen later today or tomorrow that might be hard; that might be something that you



wish weren't going to happen?" And maybe the child will say that he hopes that little Robert won't take his toy or won't push him or won't bully him, or that the teacher won't give a test or that the noise won't be too loud in the class. So here, and if the child can't come up with something, we might throw out some ideas. Say, "Yesterday you told me about the situation where the teacher didn't give you enough of a snack during snack time. Do you think that will happen again?" or "Yesterday you told me about this other child on the playground who wouldn't let you play with his ball." etc. So you can suggest possibilities. And the goal is to help the child anticipate a situation that will be challenging. Once you do, and the child can describe that a little bit, even with your help, then see if the child can actually picture it like it's a TV show. Sometimes children need to close their eyes to do this, other times they can do it with their eyes open. Some children want to draw it with crayons or with pencils and pens. Other children want to pretend and play-act it out like its a little make-believe drama. But whatever the vehicle, whether it's just a verbal description or a drawing or pretending it out in a play-act drama, help the child articulate the challenge and then have the child describe how he feels in that situation when the other children are being mean or when the teacher isn't giving him what he wants or when he has an answer and he can't wait to say it. Describe the feeling, and this is the most important part – as you're helping the child describe the feeling, see if you can help him actually become a poet of his feelings. And what we mean by a poet of his feelings is help him describe his feelings in more and more detail and depth. So if the child says, "Well, I was just mad." Then you say, "Well, what did that feel like, that mad feeling?" And use the child's exact words – don't translate it into "anger" or something else. Say, "What did that mad feeling feel like inside?" "Well, I just got mad." "Well, describe it. We all get mad in different ways, what did that feel like?" And eventually the child might say, "Well, my muscles were tense." or "I felt like I wanted to hit." or "I felt like I was going to bite." or "My stomach was churning." In other words, help the child be a richer and richer descriptor. "I felt like I was going to explode." or "I felt like if I had a bomb I wanted to set off a thousand bombs." Help the child be a rich descriptor so that they get to be a poet of their feelings, whether it's angry feelings, loving feelings, or curious feelings. The better and the richer the descriptions, the more the child is learning to use his words to describe the feeling and the better understanding he's getting of his own feelings. Some children, you will find, describe feelings in only action words like, "I wanted to hit." or "I wanted to kick." Other children will describe it in terms of the quality of the feeling, "Well I was just very, very, very angry. It felt like, you know, mad and like you just




feeling so, so enormously enraged.” And they’ll use different words to describe the anger but don’t actually describe the actions as much. Other children may describe the consequences or the scene that is going to happen around their feeling. Don’t worry about how the child describes it, just get them to be a richer and richer describer of it. That’s a very, very important step.


Also help the child describe how he thinks or she thinks the other child feels or will feel in that situation. Let’s say they are having a conflict over who is going to get to play with the toy first. “Well, what is little Sally feeling, do you think at that time?” And see if the child can learn to describe someone else’s feelings. That’s the beginning of really teaching a child to be empathetic. The first step is realizing the other child has a feeling too and if you can project yourself or put yourself in the other person’s shoes, you can eventually empathize with the other person, to see the world from their prospective. That might not come in until a little later fully, but this is the beginning steps of it. So find out how the other person feels too. The child may be describing a situation where they are mad at mommy and they describe their feelings, and you can say, “Well, how do you think mommy feels in that situation where you want her to pay attention to you but she’s also paying attention to your little brother?” And don’t say how mommy really feels, just find out how they think mommy feels. And you can ask Socratic kinds of questions, “Well, is that the only way you think mommy might feel? What about other possibilities?”

Now once you have the child describe their own feelings and the other person’s feelings, have them then describe what do they usually do in that situation when they have those feelings? They may say they push, shove, grab, get sad, run away, go off by themselves. Have them describe their typical behaviors with that feeling. Then see if you can help them explore why they tend to do that – why they might run off because they don’t want to fight or they may tend to push and shove because they “don’t want anybody to take advantage of me or get the best of me.” Find out the “why” of it if you can.

Then the next step is, what else could we consider doing in that situation? What are the other possibilities? Here you want to help the child describe additional ways of coping with that feeling. When they are feeling sad, when they are feeling angry, when they are feeling worried or scared, what else could they do? So have them describe the feeling in the situation, they describe how the other person feels if there is another person involved, and then they describe what they routinely do – run away, withdraw,




get cautious, get too excitable, and too bold, and then what else would they consider doing? You don't have to get them to say they'll do it. And we don't want children to just script. I have too many children come in and say to me, "I know I should use my words." but they aren't really convinced that they should use their words instead of hitting and they just say it because that's what they've been told to say. Then they go back the next day and go hit another child. So have the child consider what they think might be other alternatives that would work for them. Often the child will, for example, say to me "Well, on the playground when Johnny is mean to me I know I should just walk away." Then I say to the child who is has a mischievous grin on his face, "Well, you don't seem convinced that that's the best thing to do. Then the child will say, "Well, no, in fact if I do that I'll be considered a wimp and the children will make fun of me so I can't do that. But that's what my parents want me to say so that's why I say it." See, that's not really helping the child. You have to help the child describe what they think they can do given their picture of the social context and if the child can describe what they think the other alternatives are and you are beginning to brainstorm. Now if they don't come up with any alternatives that you consider good ones, that they are all what you feel misted ones or aggressive ones, be Socratic with the child. Ask them for more. Say, "What else could you do? There must be something you can do that won't get you into hot water or that will not force you to leave the situation." Keep brainstorming until the two of you come up with something, but it has to come from them that it seems workable. And then you can say, "That sounds like a good idea." Now the child won't implement that idea right away the first time, but just raising it as a possibility gets it in the child's mind. And if it's a child who is having a particularly difficult time and needs more limits and needs more rewards and punishments for their good behavior and bad behavior, and it's fine to add on sanctions or incentives to children because children learn through incentives – we all do. But if that comes after these lengthy discussions where the child understands their feelings, understands their routine behaviors, and has already pictured alternatives, then you could guide the child by offering some positive consequences for electing to use one of the good alternatives rather than one of the alternatives that gets the child into hot water. For example if it's aggressive behavior, if it's not aggressive behavior and just where the child needs better coping strategies for dealing with fears or anxieties or better coping strategies for dealing with sadness, again the behavior itself, the alternative may be it's own reward for the child. For example a child who gets fearful and anxious, identify some children who don't make them scared. Or identify a teacher or helper at school who they can



feel soothed and comforted with. Or figure out a way to come to mommy and daddy when they are scared that gets help for them. All of those can be very helpful ways of learning to self-calm and to soothe. Also working on ways of calming down when you're scared – activities you can do to make you feel a little more secure can also be very helpful. Same thing with sad feelings – learning to identify what's making you sad and what steps you can take to feel better. For example, maybe little Johnny feels sad when mommy and daddy doesn't have any time for him. How can little Johnny let mommy and daddy know that, that he wants some time? Maybe mommy and daddy tend to be very busy and Johnny has to communicate a little more forcefully that they need to look up from the computer or look up from the newspaper. Now while we all want our parents to recognize when we're sad and when we need a little more nurturing, it's very helpful for children to learn to assert themselves and express their needs and that will help them do that in life and particularly if the parents respond when the child is a little more assertive, then the child really feels that they can do something about their sad feelings – they don't have to feel quite so helpless and then get sadder and sadder and sadder. So learning to cope by considering alternatives once you've described your feeling can be very, very, very helpful.


Now as we play this little game, Thinking about Tomorrow, which helps build on the ability to regulate your emotions, to pretend your emotions out, talk about them realistically, and then to do our Thinking about Tomorrow game, as we think about this it's important to realize, which is obvious I think to many families who have children with special needs, that these exercises also, while teaching children to cope with feelings, are also helping children develop their language, their cognitive skills, and their social skills. As you progress to these new abilities, you're developing more and more language. You're also developing more and more intellectual cognitive skills - for example, talking about a problem. And you're also developing the capacity to use social relationships and interactions with family members and with peers in healthier and healthier ways. Now obviously for children who have severe language and communication problems and relationship problems, making these steps from learning to interact with emotional signals to using pretend play, to having reality conversations, to having the Thinking about Tomorrow game, represents an enormous progression and enormous progress. It may take many, many, many years to progress up the ladder. But if you have in mind this sequence that I've been describing, you'll find that it's possible to help children gradually cope with feelings and express feelings better and better and better as they develop more and more language, cognitive, and social skills.



Then it becomes a reinforcing process. The coping with feelings supports language, cognitive, and social skills. And the growing language, cognitive and social skills supports coping with feelings. So it won't happen overnight, it may not even happen quickly, it may happen over many, many, many years, but this is the kind of progression we want to encourage.

Also, using pictures or non-verbal symbols can help children express feelings. Many of the computer-based communication systems and many of the augmentative communication strategies can be very, very helpful in promoting children's abilities to use their feelings in constructive ways to support language and cognitive and social skills. Here what is important is, when we use augmentative communication modalities, the key idea is not to simply make it an all-or-nothing label. Describe the quality of the feeling through the augmentative communication - how angry are you? How sad are you? How excited are you? And make it a part of a natural discussion in context. So don't make it just an exercise where you're sitting at a table but help the child use the picture or the symbol or the electronic device to express their feeling when they are actually having the feeling. Then that's just like using the word for the child. And very importantly, though, as the child is doing that, also help them through your own expressiveness, through your own emotional expressions through the way you look and your facial expressions and your body posture, help them express the quality of the emotion through their body postures, through their tone of voice, even if they aren't saying a word and using the electronic devices to say the word, they can use their facial expression to do it. Just like with individuals who have hearing loss who use signing. There is great emotion in the sign. I mean, the sign of "I'm annoyed" can be done gently like I'm a little annoyed or it can be done with the hand moving very, very angrily, like I'm really annoyed. So individuals who sign show great emotional expressiveness in their signs. Similarly here, even when we are using augmentative modes, help the child be expressive in their body posture, tone of sound they use, facial expression and the like. The best way to do that is you be animated with the child in your counter-reaction. And then the child gets the hang of it.

Now before we go to our calls for today, I want to also share with you something else that will be happening. As you walk up this developmental ladder of expressing and coping with feelings and learning to use feelings constructively you'll be helping your child move through a number of stages of development. And you'll be helping your child progress through what we call "Reality-Based Thinking" where they can answer



“why” questions, to what we call “Multi-Causal Thinking” where they can give you many reasons for why they are angry or why they are sad. Then they’ll progress to something we call, “Gray-Area Thinking” where they can tell you the degree to which they are angry. They are a little angry, they are very angry. And if they have two reasons for being happy, they can tell you which reason is more important – that they are mostly happy because you are giving them their favorite toy but they are also happy to a lesser degree because you are letting them play with it for a long period of time. So they can compare feelings, talk about different degrees and shades of feelings. And eventually they get a point, a third level in this elaboration of their feelings which is actually an elaboration of high levels thinking where they can do something we call “Thinking about themselves” and “Thinking about their own feelings” – we call “Thinking off a sense of self or an internal standard.” Here is where they can say something like, “Gee, I’m angrier than I should be in this situation.” or “Gee, I don’t know why I’m so excited today, I’m not usually so excited.” They can also compare their own feelings to the feelings of an author in a story they read. If they get to this level where they can actually evaluate and comment or reflect on their own feelings, then they’ve really achieved a new level and a new milestone that many adults who have never had developmental problems don’t achieve. But we are finding that children with even severe developmental problems can often progress to not only reality-based conversations but gray-area thinking where they talk about shades of gray and comparative thinking where they compare two things and thinking off an internal standard and sense of self where they actually evaluate their own feelings. So as you are doing your Thinking about Tomorrow game, you’ll notice that you are also encouraging these higher levels of reflective thinking.

Ok, so now in just a second we’ll go to our first call, but just in summary, today we discussed how we express and cope with feelings where we are able to first regulate the feelings through using them as signals and then play them out and pretend and apply words to them so we can describe them, then to have reality conversations about how you had this or that feeling at school, and then to actually do our Thinking about Tomorrow game. In that game, as well as just general conversations we can encourage multi-causal thinking, gray-area thinking, and where we can help the child actually evaluate their own behavior and feelings.

Now let’s go to our first caller. Hello? Hello? Do we have a caller on the line?
Ok, I think we’ll go to our first caller.

Caller: Hello Dr. Greenspan?

SG: Yes, hi, how are you?

Caller: Good, how are you?


SG: Welcome to our show.

Caller: Thank you. I have a question regarding my 5 year old son. It's related to the topic you are discussing today.

SG: Ok, great. Tell me.

Caller: So he has a very hard time dealing with emotions, in particular, sadness. So for example, if he starts crying, he gets very upset about it and sometimes he says, "I don't want to cry" or "I don't want to be sad" or he says, "I don't want water in my eyes" and for example if he gets hurt and I ask him, "Oh, are you ok, are you hurt?" he says, "NO! I'm not hurt!" even though he might be holding his leg and he's clearly in pain. So he has a very hard time with that. And also he doesn't want some other people to get sad including me or his mother. So there is a way he might get sad and crying due to some favorite character of his, something bad happened in pretend play or if we can't find every toy or a toy gets broken or something like that. The way we try to deal with is, is trying to follow your philosophy as best we understand it. So we try to stay connected with him and talk to him and he does respond. He's very connected. He relies on the relationship to help him. We try not to find a solution right away, although sometimes he's so sad that it is difficult for us to try to help him figure out his own solution so we provide a solution because he is so sad so it's tough for us to deal with that. My question is, what are we doing. If his toy breaks, we say "Oh I'm so sorry your toy broke and it's making you feel bad, what can we do?" and he might say, "Fix it." or "Buy me a new toy." and usually he doesn't stay sad for a long time. He comes out of it. But my question is, do you have any more insight on how we can help him better and what kind of emotional topics we should try to touch doing Floortime?

SG: Well, thank you very much. This is really a truly excellent question and it's perfect for the topic today. Let me see if I can comment very broadly on it. Obviously, all these questions we can't say what to do for a specific child, but when you talk about general principles that may be helpful for all children with these similar characteristics. A child, such as the one you are describing, and many children, tend to be scared of feelings. In other words when they cry or get sad, they don't want to have that feeling



because it feels overwhelming to them. It feels like it's taking over their body or they feel embarrassed by having it. So the first step is to help the child feel very soothed and relaxed and accepted for his feelings. So by staying engaged as this daddy so beautifully describes and being soothing and being warm is the first step. Over time the child learns to relax a little bit more with feelings. The second step is to always help the child describe the feelings in more detail. So the goal isn't so much to reassure the child and say "I'll make you feel better." or "Gee I'm so sorry you feel sad." but your dolly in pretend play could help the other dolly describe what the sadness feels like. So the child says, "Oh, I don't want to be sad." or "I don't want to cry." "You don't? Well what does it feel like when you don't want to cry? Oh, it must be hard to try to stop crying." In other words, empathize with the child's attempt to contain the feeling because that is what the child is really feeling. The child isn't feeling so much the sadness or the crying, the child is feeling, "I don't want to cry." So it's the feeling of "I don't like my feeling." It's just like the child who is angry at another child and says, "I don't like little Tommy or Suzie." So here, empathize with, "Gee, you don't want to cry. What's that like? It must be hard to not want to cry when your body is telling you to cry." Empathize with a conflict. Help the child become a better and better descriptor of the conflict that they are having.

Now as you are doing that, make sure through all of this that you are continuing to regulate and soothe the child and stay in emotional contact through back-and-forth signaling. So you're mindful as you are doing this with the child of the back-and-forth smiles, head nods, sad looks that you're sharing together, the child feels empathized with and then the child feels in back-and-forth contact with you, not just in warm contact with you.

Now then the next step is, and this is a critical one, helping the child be comfortable with the assertive side of life. Many children who are overwhelmed with their feelings and say they don't want to cry or don't want to be sad, haven't yet gotten comfortable with the whole assertive side of life which also includes coping with aggression and coping with anger. So as your child is saying, "Gee I don't want to cry and I feel so bad." instead of saying "I'll make you feel better," help the child participate in the constructive actions. "Gee, what can we do to feel better?" So you're in there with him. You aren't saying "What are you going to do to feel better?" but "What can we do?" Get ideas from the child. Help the child assert himself.



Also, look for opportunities in the pretend play with the child who is overly scared and afraid of feelings, look for opportunities to express and cope with angry and aggressive feelings. Often children who have a history of developmental challenges are particularly scared of the aggressive side of life because if they have motor challenges, for example, then they can't move as well as they would like to, or if they have language challenges then they can't express everything they'd like to, then they are a little less confident in their bodies. When they are less confident in their bodies, they are less confident that they can control and regulate their anger or aggression, so many of them want to run away from it. Some of them just give voice to it and express it too readily. We get both patterns. So when a child is showing fears and anxieties, in many children often there is a difficulty in coping with the angry aggressive side of life and it comes out in terms of their fears. Even the fear of crying or the fear of showing feelings can be their deeper fear of angry feelings that will get out of control. So in the pretend play when the dolly is frustrated, see how the dolly feels and does the dolly ever feel angry, for example. Don't suggest the word, but help the child express it. If so, if the child indicates that the dolly is angry, well what do they feel like doing? Help the child play out the angry side of life. In other words, there is a difference between behaving angrily where you hit and pinch, versus simply pretend play it out or using words to describe it. So help the child be a good describer or a good pretender of the anger and help them use an angry voice. Also, pay attention at home if in normal conversation when the child gets a little assertive or a little annoyed in his voice, do we tend to squash it by getting annoyed back at him so our house is very containing of feelings and doesn't allow a lot of expression of the assertive side? Or do we welcome debate where the child can be demanding and express their opinions in strong, vocal tones and we don't squash it, in fact we are proud of the assertiveness of the child and say things like, "Gee, you made a good point." But we don't comment on, "Don't speak so loud." or "Talk nicely to your mommy and daddy." In other words we don't want the child to use bad words and we don't want the child to be disrespectful, but good healthy debate and good healthy assertiveness of the voice is part of a good healthy debate.

So those are some of the things we may want to consider for children who are scared of their feelings. Be soothing, be interactive – help the child describe their feelings more, empathize with the conflict – "Gee how hard it is to try to contain that feeling." or "Gee how hard it is to keep from being sad." and then help the child with that assertive side of life and eventually cope with aggressive feelings more fully. And that's good general principles and each child again will be quite unique. But this was an

excellent question and I hope these ideas are helpful. We're going to have another caller now. Hello?

Caller: Hi, Dr. Greenspan.

SG: Hi, welcome to our show.


Caller: Thank you. Yes, I have a question. It's somewhat related to the topic. I have a 2 year old with an autism spectrum disorder. He is currently in a lot of therapy. He has 32 hours a week of therapy, 30 hours of ABA and 1 hour of speech language therapy and 1 hour of occupational therapy. What I'm wondering, because I was really inspired by Patricia Stacy's book about Walker and the work that you did with them to help Walker develop his emotional side, and I'm just wondering if during the down times, you know I don't want to focus so much on just the behavioral therapy with him. I'm just wondering what my husband and I can do during those off hours with him that will really help peak his emotional side.

SG: Describe your child a little more fully if you can.

Caller: He's non-verbal at this point. He does make sounds and he's babbling again and I have to say we have him on a gluten and casein-free diet and that has really helped him with eye contact and more interactions and in his world he seems more engaged like the fog has lifted somewhat. We're using a variety of approaches. But we don't want to hone in too much on one thing and realize that it's so important to have him engaged and become more interested in people. He really seems to have improved with these therapies, but we just feel we need to do more with him to really peak his interest in people. He definitely loves us as parents. He's very engaged with us.

SG: How does he tend to interact with you guys?

Caller: He, you know just recently which we are very excited about, he will bring toys over to us. If his toy, if something happens with a toy, the wheel comes off of a car, for example, he'll come bring that. Now he never used to do that before. Or if he wants us to blow on a whistle, he'll bring that to us. These are all new things. We have a 9 month old and he never used to pay attention to him at all and now he loves him. He'll want to feed him his bottle or even his baby food, so we're really excited about that. He loves rough-house play with my husband. He is even now into peek-a-boo under the blanket, he never used to do these kinds of things before so we're really happy and excited about that. But wanting to do more on the floor, you know, just wondering if



there is more we can do and I guess my fear is that I'm focusing too much on ABA alone and I don't want to do that although that seems to really help with the beginning stages for imitation and that kind of thing for him.

SG: Is he learning to imitate now?

Caller: He is. It's only been a couple of weeks that he has had this 30 hour program in place, but he is starting to touch his head – he's not clapping or doing things like that, but he's looking more at the therapist. He is definitely looking – the eye contact.

SG: How many back-and-forth interactions can you have in a row with him, you know what we call "circles of communication" during play?

Caller: Yes, that varies.

SG: At the very best.

Caller: Probably 3.

SG: Three back-and-forths?

Caller: Right.

SG: And he's two years old, you say?

Caller: He's two. He turned two at the end of November.

SG: Ok. Well it sounds like he's got many strengths, and it sounds like you're describing before that he had a regression and he had some capacities and lost them? You mentioned the fog.


Caller: Yes.

SG: When did he begin losing abilities?

Caller: Around 15 months.

SG: What was he able to do just before that?

Caller: He was more engaged and in tune with us and his surroundings. He was not talking. He was babbling though, a lot.



SG: He was more involved and interactive and more babbling?

Caller: Definitely.

SG: And what happened at 15 months?

Caller: He seemed to really withdraw in his own world. And this was around the time I had my younger son and we attributed it to that, initially. We weren't sure, him being our first, we thought maybe he's feeling bad because he has a new little brother in the house.

SG: Was there a change in your availability or daddy's availability or in anything else in the household?

Caller: I think so. With a newborn and unfortunately I became ill and to be hospitalized shortly thereafter, yes, there was a lot going on that definitely affected him emotionally. But then we really became concerned as time went on because he just really withdrew.

SG: Was anything physical going on at that time – any new medications or anything physically changing in his world in terms of things that would affect him biologically?

Caller: No, we recently did find out that he's allergic to milk and a lot of other products that we had been giving him.

SG: You were giving him that?

Caller: Yes.


SG: Now did that diet change around 15 months? Did you go on to whole milk for example or ...

Caller: Yes, he was on a soy-based diet but we thought, the pediatrician said that he could go back on milk.

SG: At what age did you put him back on milk?

Caller: Probably around 18 months or so.

SG: So that was after the regression.



Caller: Right. But it became worse.

SG: So the main thing that changed was his little brother coming in to the world and less availability from mommy and was daddy less available too or was daddy...

Caller: I'd have to say dad travels every other week.

SG: So he wasn't that available to begin with.

Caller: Right. I mean, he's actually trying right now to find another position, especially in light of...


SG: So he's a little more available.

Caller: Definitely.

SG: Let me share a few ideas with you to consider. And these may be helpful for other listeners as well who are in a similar situation that you are. I think many listeners are. Basically, you have to think of what your goals are in your work with your child. For different goals, you may find that different approaches are helpful. Your questions is you are worried about overdoing one kind of approach, you know a behavioral approach, is a good question because you have to say, "What is each type of approach going to help my child learn or master?" Now the more structured approaches, which include behavioral and ABA, can be helpful for very specific and concrete goals, like learning to imitate or learning to make certain movements or make certain sounds. But they are not as good, we find, for helping children enjoy relationships or wanting to fall back in love if they have fallen out of love a little bit or become more involved in their own world and learn to express their love a little better, because that comes from the heart; that comes from the inside. You can't control that by external reinforcers.

Caller: Right.


SG: Now the same thing has to do with we call "meaningful communication" and there are two ways to meaningfully communicate. One is gestures, like head nods or smiles or smirks or pointing or taking a person to show you things. That also has to come from the inside because you have to want to show mommy something. If they want to take mommy to the door and point like "open the door" or you have to want to share your happiness with mommy and excitedly point to a new toy and smile and bring her over there. That comes from the heart also. So meaningful communication with



gestures or words also has to come from inside and the heart. So you have to say, “Where are we with our child and what are our primary goals now? And how much are we placing on each goal?” Because you intend to get what you practice. So if you practice the more structured goals like imitating or making sounds or reducing a certain perseverative activity, you may make gains in those areas but that’s what you’ll get and you won’t get as much of the warmth or love or spontaneous communication or meaningful communication. On the other hand, if you work more on the meaningful communication and warmth and love, you’ll get more of that. So the question is for each child, how to create the balance. Now with some children what we find, when we work more on emotional goals, and you mentioned Pat Stacy and her book, “The Boy Who Loves Windows”, and I should mention to our listeners that that’s a very beautiful description of a mother’s journey with her child and the whole family’s journey with a child where they began working very early with this child and they use mostly Floortime and DIR approaches and it’s just a wonderful description of this family’s journey and Pat Stacy is a beautiful writer.

Caller: Definitely, and the hard work it takes.

SG: And the hard work it takes, but she portrays it so beautifully. So everyone may want to be aware of that. In that situation she describes using mostly a Floortime DIR approach. We designed it for a group of children that really take off with working on the emotions and the interactions. So in the Floortime DIR model, we follow the child’s lead, we develop what we call the learning relationships. And in these learning relationships we work on attention, engagement, two-way emotional signaling, social problem solving (where the child takes you by the hand and walks you places) and then we work on also the creative use of ideas and words, so sounds and eventually words to indicate that you’re happy or sad, you want juice or an apple. And then we work on pretend play as part of that. Then we work on logical use of ideas, “I want to go out because I want to play.” But in order to do that in the DIR Floortime Model, we tailor the approach to the child’s processing differences. So if they have verbal and auditory processing problems, we use a lot of visual support in the interaction. If they are sensory over-reactive and cautious we’re very soothing; if they are under-reactive we are energizing. So we tailor to the child’s nervous system. And in doing that, some children just take off and they develop the relationship, and through the relationship the language comes in just as it does ordinarily in development. We don’t have to do a




lot of structured techniques. We don't have to recommend a lot of structural behavior-oriented approaches.

Other children require a combination of the Floortime, emotional work, and some more structured work. And for those children we developed a new curriculum that we call the Affect Based Language Curriculum, which is available on our website (www.icdl.com or www.floortime.org). The Affect Based Language Curriculum takes in the best of the structured approaches that are also harnessed in behavioral approaches, but combines it with the Floortime and emotional approaches. So what we are doing in the Affect Based Language Curriculum is that we are actually building the foundations for relating, communicating, and thinking. We're not just working on isolated behaviors. But we are doing some of that in a structured way for the children who require a little more structure. Now for some children, we may employ some behavioral techniques too, including to teach for example, imitation as you're doing. But the key difference is, and what we recommend, is that structured approach or those behavioral strategies be part of an overall program not be the defining characteristics of the program. So in the DIR Model, we might have the child doing a number of hours a day of Floortime, a number of hours a day doing more structured work including working on imitation, time with peers, time with just relaxed family time, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and as the child gets older, a school program. But the key thing is to have a model which is what we call the DIR Model that can help you figure out which pieces to use and how to use them in combination. In that way, we tailor the approach to the child.

So what I recommend is take a look at our book called, "The Child With Special Needs" ...

Caller: Yes, I just ordered it.

SG: Ok, great. And this will describe our overall approach. You'll see that there's room for more structured approaches. But what you may decide to do is to have the people who are helping you with the more structured work do this more broad, comprehensive program. If you can get them to do that, I think you'll have a broader, more comprehensive, possibly more balanced program. Remember the key is to build the foundations for relating, thinking and communicating that include specific behaviors like imitating, but it has to work on these emotionally based interactions to really get these foundations for spontaneous meaningful communication and for really loving



relating. Now for a child who one suspects, and again I can't talk about your child because I don't know your child well enough, but if a parent suspects that their lack of availability somehow accentuated the symptoms or if there was a family stress, then it's very important, if possible, for that parent or both parents to be a vital part of the program. In the DIR Floortime approach, the parents are critical. We don't want others doing the lion's share of the work, we want the parents doing as much as possible because it's a labor of love and we want the child falling in love with mommy and daddy and that fuels the creative use of ideas and words and language and relationships. So we'll get helpers so mommy and daddy don't get burned out but we want them doing the lion's share as opposed to having 30 hours a week with others.

Caller: Exactly. I took a leave of absence at work.

SG: Well, if you're doing that, then take a look at "The Child with Special Needs" and see how you can create the kind of comprehensive balanced program under the broad umbrella of the DIR Model that was so beautifully described in the book you mentioned. Thank you for your good question and good luck to you.

Caller: Thank you, thank you for what you are doing, Dr. Greenspan.

SG: Thank you, bye bye. Well, this is our show for today. Next week we will talk about the myths of autistic spectrum disorders and other special needs conditions. There are many misleading assumptions out there that we call myths. We will go through these myths and provide a picture of what actually happens and what the correct "picture" is of children with special needs and children with autistic spectrum disorders. So next week's show is, "The Myths Surrounding Autism." Thank you for tuning in today.