

## FLOORTIME: WHAT IT REALLY IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T

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Floortime, as you know, is at the heart of our DIR/Floortime Model, and it's at the heart of a comprehensive program for infants, young children, and families with a variety of developmental challenges including autistic spectrum disorders. This comprehensive program includes working on all the elements of the DIR/Floortime Model – the functional emotional developmental levels, the individual processing differences and creating those learning relationships that will help the child move ahead in their development – relationships that are tailored to their individual differences that move them up the developmental ladder, mastering each and every functional emotional developmental capacity that they are capable of. The DIR/Floortime Model involves often not just Floortime, but different therapies like speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, education programs, counseling support for parents, and intensive home programs as well as school programs.

Today we really want to focus on the Floortime component, which is at the heart of the home component and also at the heart of the other components that must be carried out at school. In other words, Floortime is a particular technique where we get down on the floor and we work with the child to master each of their developmental capacities. But it is also a philosophy that guides the way occupational therapists work and speech pathologists work and educators work with the children. So you need to think about Floortime in two ways:

1. A specific technique where for 20 or more minutes mommy or daddy gets down on the floor with little Johnny or Susie.
2. A general philosophy that characterizes all the interactions with the child, because all interactions have to incorporate the features of Floortime as well as the particular goals of that interaction, be it speech therapy or occupational therapy or special set of educational goals.

In thinking **what Floortime is and what Floortime isn't**, we will define it in a way that will hopefully help both professionals and parents understand **why Floortime is the cornerstone, the engine that drives the DIR/Floortime Model and drives the developmental process**. At the heart of our definition of Floortime are two of what could be called emphases that sometimes work together very easily and other times may appear to be opposite ends of the continuum:

- 1. Following the child's lead**
- 2. Joining the child's world and pull them into a shared world in order to help them master each of their Functional Emotional Developmental Capacities.**

We have to always have to be aware of both of these polarities, tendencies or dimensions of Floortime. *Read more*

## 1. Following the Child's lead

The most widely known dimension of Floortime is **following the child's lead, harnessing the child's natural interests.** Why do we follow the child's lead? After all, we are trying to teach the child, and in the history of education, we have often felt that children have to be taught things they don't want to learn, that we can't just do what a child wants to do because children are historically viewed as creatures of their instincts; creatures of their "primitive pleasures" and they would never get socialized if we just did what they wanted to do and followed their lead. So why do we follow the child's lead? Why do we take our clue and our cue from the child? **Well a child's interests or the child's lead is the window to their emotional life.** Through the child's interests; through the child's natural desires, we get a picture of what is enjoyable; what is joyful; what is pleasurable for that child. For example, a child is staring off at a fan. That seems like something inappropriate and something we want to discourage. But yet something about that is meaningful or pleasurable to the child. The child is rubbing a spot on the floor over and over again. Something that is meaningful or pleasurable about that to the child. The child is opening and closing his door repetitively or aimlessly wandering around the room. So we always start off with asking the question which must be asked: Why is little Johnny or Susie doing that? And to simply say it's because he or she has this or that disorder; that it's due to their autism or due to their Down's Syndrome or due to their "this or that" doesn't answer the question. Little Johnnie or Susie are human beings. They may have a disorder or a set of problems, but they are not the disorder or set of problems. They are human beings with real feelings and real desires and real wishes. Sometimes maybe they can't express or tell us about it, so we have to say from what they are doing if they can't tell us about it, what does this tell us about what they enjoy in life? What is giving them pleasure? Why does it have meaning for them? So we follow their lead at the entry point because the first goal is to join them in their world, but not stay in their world with them, but to pull them into a shared world where they are a part of a world with us. In all human development, it begins with that relationship between the caregiver and the child joining into a shared world. It doesn't happen just in human beings. It happens in our non-human primate cousins like chimpanzees. It happens even in other mammals where we will see a puppy dog and the mommy dog playfully interacting together. So in many forms of life, development begins with a shared world between the caregiver and nurturer and the helpless infant.

So the goal is to pull the child into a shared world from their world, but we don't want to pull them in screaming and yelling and yipping. We want to pull them in with real warmth and pleasure. We want the child to want to be in the shared world and that's the key. How do we help the child want to be in a shared world with us? For a variety of reasons, a child may have elected to be more self-absorbed or more aimless and seemingly in his or her own world. What will motivate them to be a part of a shared world? Well, the first motivation is to join them in their world and show them that you can respect what they are interested in. So if the child is aimlessly wandering around the room and jumping, we wander and jump with the child. The child then experiences a partnership in aimless wandering and jumping. Or we might rub a spot on the floor with them. But, that's one part of the equation – following their lead. If a child is moving a

truck, we may move a truck with them. We can put our hand so they can move the truck towards our hand, pretending our hand is a tunnel. But these are all ways of following a child's lead, entering their world to pull them into a shared world. **We will see that as a child, instead of looking annoyed or looking irritated or running away from us, starts giving us some friendly looks and some warm smiles and some friendly glances. That's the beginning of that shared world.**

## **2. Joining the child's world and pull them into a shared world in order to help them master each of their Functional Emotional Developmental Capacities.**

Following the child's lead is only one half of the equation; one half of this dynamic that we call Floortime. There is another half. The other half; the second part of it is *we join them in their world and pull them into a shared world in order to help them master each of their Functional Emotional Developmental Capacities*. These are the fundamentals of emotional, social, language, and intellectual development. When we talk about Functional Emotional Capacities, we're talking about the fundamentals of relating, communicating, and thinking.

So we have a bigger goal in joining them in their world. We want to pull them into our shared world to teach them and help them learn how to focus and attend, how to relate with real warmth, how to be purposeful and take initiative, and have a back-and-forth set of communications with us through gestures, and eventually through words. We want to teach them how to problem solve and sequence and get them involved in a continuing interaction with their environments and the people in their environments. We want to teach them to use ideas creatively and then we want to teach them to use ideas logically and then progress up the developmental ladder until they are not only using ideas logically but actually showing high degrees of reflective thinking and high degrees of empathy and high degrees of understanding the world so that they can evaluate their own thoughts and feelings and say things like, "Gee, I'm angrier than I should be today" or "I agree with Mark Twain, but I disagree with Tolstoy because Twain had a similar upbringing to my upbringing." **That's our ultimate goal for entering their shared world – to help them be empathetic, creative, logical, reflective individuals.** Not every child is capable of achieving the highest level of reflective thinking, but most children are capable of moving up the developmental ladder. Some, we have found, a significant subgroup are capable of reaching the highest levels, regardless of their original diagnoses. So that's the second part of Floortime. It's helping the child master their Functional Emotional Developmental Capacities – their basic social, emotional, intellectual, language, and academic abilities.

### **How do we get from following their lead to helping them master all these wonderful and marvelous capacities?**

Now how do we use "following their lead," the first part of it, to actually mobilize and help them master these critical developmental milestones? Is it as simple as simply running around and jumping with the child but playing on the floor and building blocks with them, or is it as simple as banging toys with them? Or is it as simple as simply

being silly and making funny noises with them and playing copy-cat games with them? In other words, how do we get from following their lead to helping them master all these wonderful and marvelous capacities? Now we are talking about the real skill in doing Floortime; the real infrastructure of Floortime.

We have identified six core developmental capacities and three additional ones – nine altogether that we want all children to master. The six core ones have to do with attending, relating, purposeful communication, problem-solving interactions, using ideas creatively, and using ideas logically. So for these core six developmental capacities, and then three more advanced levels of reflective thinking, we've worked out a number of strategies where we start with following a child's lead, but we use that to help the child then want to learn each new, wonderful developmental ability.

So for example, to help a child master the first stage of shared attention – the child is wandering away from us all the time – we may play a game where we keep getting in front of the child and the child has to then move around us. But to do that, he has to look at us to see where we are because we are blocking his pathway. So it's a little cat-and-mouse game. And that little cat-and-mouse game is the first little island of shared attention where he looks at us and we look back. We may build what we call a “moving fence” around him where we put our arms around him without actually touching him, and then to keep wandering around the room he has to pick up our hands. That, too, requires him to pay attention to us; to recognize our existence as a separate person from him. That's the beginning of shared attention. It's also the beginning of engagement because he is now involved with us. Interestingly, it is also the beginning of purposeful action because he is moving our hands up in order to move around the room. The child has a favorite toy that he wants to just touch and bang on the floor. We hide that favorite toy outside the door and we show it to him. Now he is banging on the door and we say, “Should we help you? Should we help you?” And pretty soon he's taking our hand and putting it on the doorknob to help us turn the doorknob. Then three weeks later, he's even saying “Op, op, op” and eventually “Open” to get us to open the door to get that favorite toy. So now we have mobilized through following the child's lead, not just attention and engagement and purposeful action, but actually problem solving and even the beginning use of words. We call these strategies “playfully obstructive strategies” and they are for the most aimless child or the most avoidant child, where they are necessary. Often, they are not necessary, however. The child who is moving the truck back-and-forth and we open our hands up to make it into a tunnel. He may look at that, give us a big smile and move it right into our tunnel. Now we have shared attention, engagement, purposeful action, and some problem solving, and eventually we may introduce the word “truck, truck, truck move?” and he may repeat it, then we have the beginning of words. We can even give him choices: “Do you want to move it into the tunnel or into the house?” He may go, “Ha, ho” indicating “house” and point over there. Then we have thinking occurring along with the use of words.

So there are strategies where we follow the child's lead, helping them do what they want to do, which pulls them into our world and helps them master the different levels. We also have playfully obstructive strategies. But **the goal is to follow the child's lead on**

**the one hand, but then create opportunities and challenges that help the child master each of their functional emotional developmental capacities.** That is the “dialectic,” the two opposite polarities of Floortime: *joining the child in his rhythms, joining the child in his pleasure, but harnessing that to bring the child into a shared world, and a shared world where they then master each of their functional emotional milestones. So that means creating systematic challenges to master each level of development.* It is in those systematic challenges that many of the specific techniques and strategies of Floortime come in. **So Floortime is not just simply following the child’s lead, that is only what gets into the child’s emotional world, helps the child feel pleasure so the child want to relate to us, want to share attention with us, and want to learn from us. Then we create challenges that help the child move up to higher levels of relating, communicating, and thinking.**

**So whenever you think about Floortime, I’m asking you to always think about these two poles of Floortime – the following the child’s lead and challenging the child to master new milestones.** We are always trying to broaden the child’s capacities in terms of the current milestones that they have – some children can relate a little bit and be a little bit purposeful – so we are strengthening and broadening those and introducing the next one. If they can be a little purposeful, we want them to be very purposeful. If they can open and close what we call three or four circles of communication that have three and four back-and-forth’s with gestures, we want to get it to seven and eight and then to ten and then to twenty until we get 50 and more. If they have a few words, we want to extend to back-and-forth conversations. So this is at the heart of what we call Floortime.

*Now in order to do this, in order to engage in these Floortime interactions where we are following the child’s lead on the one hand and on the other hand we are challenging the child to master each of their functional emotional developmental capacities; their new milestones; we have to do something very, very important which is part of our DIR/Floortime Model: we have to tune into their individual processing differences!* If a child, for example, is under-reactive to touch and sound, we have to be very energetic as we pull the child into a shared world. If a child is over-sensitive to touch and sound where they are holding their ears and they get overwhelmed easily, we may have to be extra soothing while being compelling. Many children have mixtures of over- and under-reactivity, so we have to be soothing and energizing and compelling, but with a soft voice like (whispering) “Here! Here!” at the same time. We also have to pay attention to their auditory processing and language abilities. We don’t like to slow down the cadence of our words or speak in monotones; to simplify the language world in order to help them tune into our words because they may process words more slowly. What we like to do is keep a normal rhythm going in the auditory processing, because that is more pleasurable to the child and it is actually easier for the child to digest a normal rhythm, but we may use simple phrases and repeat them. So if we are trying to say “open the door” it’s not (in a monotone voice) “ooopen, ooopen,” but it’s (in sing-song voice) “Open door? Open?” and showing the child. So it’s with energy and rhythm, but simple phrases. And we’ll repeat those until the child gets the phrase. But that depends on the child’s auditory processing. With visual spatial processing, some children may have good visual memory, but can’t see the forest for the trees and they are not yet good visual problem

solvers. So we may use lots of visual cues in their visual memory skills to help them come into our world and be part of a shared world. Many children have motor planning and sequencing problems. So we'll start with simple actions and go to more complex action patterns. So we have to tune into the child's individual differences in order to challenge them to master their different levels.

**We also need to pay attention to ourselves as caregivers, as families, as family members, as therapists.** What are our natural strengths and weaknesses? What do we do easily? Are we a high energy person so we are great for kids who are under-reactive and need a lot of energizing and wooing but we have a hard time soothing? Or are we great soothers and very good with hyper-sensitive children who need a lot of calmness and a lot of soothing, but we have a hard time energizing up for the child who is under-reactive? What are our own natural strengths and weaknesses? Do we take the child's avoidance as a personal rejection and therefore shut down and don't try as hard? Or do we take the child's avoidance when he runs away from us as rejection and therefore try too hard and get too intrusive and not pay attention to his pleasure and try to just grab the child and force the child to pay attention to us as opposed to wooing the child into that relationship. So we have to pay attention to our own individual personalities and our family patterns, and as therapists, our therapeutic skills and strategies and what kind of children we have an easier time with and harder time with. When we ask those difficult questions, we can then fine tune our strategies to meet the child's individual differences; to create the learning interactions that that child requires.

So Floortime then involves this polarity between following the child's natural interests and pleasures on the one hand, and challenging the child on the other hand. The child is never simply doing aimless activity and us doing aimless activity with him. To do this, we pay attention to their individual differences and we pay attention to our own unique characteristics as caregivers, as family members, and our own family patterns.

Many parents ask me, "Well, I don't know what to do and I've tried all my bags of tricks and nothing seems to work." My answer is always the same: Don't feel the pressure to do so much. The goal isn't so much what you do. The goal is to observe what your child is doing. So whenever you feel stuck, and a lot of parents tell me that they are stuck in Floortime, I tell them to take a step back and relax and observe. Ask yourself the question, "How do I build on what little Johnny or Susie is doing? How do I build on their pleasures?" Often the answer is, "Well, they aren't doing anything or they are just walking or they are just banging or they are just wandering." I tell them that that is something. They are always doing something. How do you build on that? What can you do? Always ask yourself that question. So you join them by joining activities. You can start by even copying what they are doing. But then you have to take it to the next step. **How do you create interaction? Here the key point is to harness the child's initiative. We don't just want to do to the child. We want the child doing to us. So we challenge the child to do something to us rather than use doing to the child.** We can always get something started often with a little tickle game or swinging the children. Children love to be swung and love to get on top of daddy's shoulders and have lots of movement. That's ok to start it off with. We do something to the child that we know

they enjoy. But then how do you get the child to do to us? As soon as he is up on our shoulders, he has to gesture or make a sound or point or somehow show us that he wants the horse to move some more or he wants the airplane to go again. So we challenge the child to take initiative. If we are giving the child a backrub, the child even just showing us where he likes to have his back rubbed or whether he wants his tummy to be rubbed or his back to be rubbed or his arms rubbed. If we are playing a little finger game or a little toe game – which foot he wants rubbed or which toes on which foot – he can show us by wiggling or moving that foot a little bit. So we are always challenging the child to take the initiative to do to us rather than us doing to him.

Once we get the interaction cooking, once we get the back-and-forth going where we are getting attention, engagement, and purposeful communication, then the whole question is, and this is the biggest missing piece that I see and the hardest part for both professional colleagues and parents and for other caregivers and educators, is **how we get the continuous flow of communication going**. In other words, children communicate often once they can be purposeful with gestures – the smile, the head-nods, the arm gestures and body posture – as well as hopefully and eventually, words. But the hardest thing for children is, particularly children with developmental challenges including autism, is how to make that a continuous flow. How to not just have one interaction where they use a single word or a single gesture, but how to make it 50 or 100 back-and-forth interactions in a row so you are having a real conversation. So a child is interacting and communicating for ten or fifteen minutes and it has a feel to it that has a nice back-and-forth rhythm. Here this is the most difficult part for everyone – getting that continuous flow going. Here my advice is very, very simple: Make it a major objective. Don't skip it. In other words, it is hard to do and we just want to keep it cooking and keep it going. The child who wants to go out the door, well we can make that a 10-step interaction rather than a one-step interaction. Well, mommy can't open the door, you go get daddy. The child pulls daddy and daddy is having a hard time. "Can you show me where to turn the knob?" and the child shows you. And the child can make a sound to make the door open, and so forth and so on, until you are getting 10 circles of communication rather than just one in just the simple act of opening the door. Extending those circles of communication, getting the continuous flow where the child is taking the initiative, where it isn't just us doing, and the true continuous flow is not just repeating the same action over and over. The child may want to move the car back-and-forth, but if we move our hands and he's following our hands with the car, he's changing the movement all the time. So we always vary what we do and that challenges the child to vary what they do, even if it's within the same basic action or the same basic game. So getting many circles of communication cooking is critical. Once the child has words, it's the same thing: can we get a lot of back-and-forth use of words? Once a child is logical, can we get many logical circles of communication? I see many, many children who are already reading and doing math. They can use whole, long sentences, but can't have a long back-and-forth conversation and that becomes the hard part. So that is often the missing piece in many children's development. Getting the continuous flow going is very important.

In conclusion, **Floortime involves this polarity, or this dialectic, or this tension between following the child's lead, entering his world and pulling him into your**

**world, finding his pleasures and his joys, and challenging him to master each of the levels that we are talking about. That means paying attention to the child's individual differences in terms of the way they process sounds and sights and movements and modulate sensations, and also paying attention to the family patterns and therapists to your own personalities so you know how you have to stretch to work with a particular child so you can enter their world and tailor your interactions to their nervous system. That is the heart of Floortime.** That is what we are talking about. And that is why Floortime is not just a technique where we often advocate 6-10 times a day for 20 minutes or more with a child at home with mommy or daddy or a helper, but also a philosophy for school interactions and for interactions when you are in the store or in the car. In other words, you always want to mobilize all these levels of back-and-forth interaction.