



The Interdisciplinary Council on  
Developmental and Learning Disorders

## Basic Principles of Floor Time

- I. **Follow the child's lead.**
- II. **Join in at the child's developmental level and build on her natural interests.** Through your own affect and action, woo the child into engaging with you (go for the gleam in his eye).
- III. **Open and close circles of communication** (i.e., build on the child's interest and then inspire the child to, in turn, build on what you have done or said).
- IV. **Create a play environment** with rattles, balls, dolls, action figures, cars, trucks, schools, etc. that will provide a vehicle for the child's natural interests and facilitate opening and closing circles of communication (e.g., some children do better with a few selected toys while others interact more with many toys). Avoid very structured games that reduce creative interaction.
- V. **Extend the circles of communication.**
  - A. Interact constructively to help the child reach his or her own goals (e.g., hold up the truck he wants so he can reach for it).
  - B. Interact playfully, but obstructively, as needed (when the child is avoiding interaction, position yourself between the child and what he wants to do to encourage interaction with you, e.g., hide the child's car in your hand so he is inspired to search for it, build a little fence around the child with your arms so that he needs to duck under, push up, or say "out" in order to return to moving around the room).
- VI. **Broaden the child's range of interactive experience.**
  - A. Broaden the thematic and/or emotional range.
    1. *Enjoy and engage in play dealing with the different themes of life:* closeness and dependency; assertiveness, initiative, and curiosity; aggression and limit-setting; and pleasure and excitement.
    2. *Challenge the child to engage in neglected or avoided types of interactions* (e.g., for a child who is only passive and controlled and avoids taking the initiative, in a slow-motion manner with a big grin on your face, move the child's favorite car away from the line of cars he has created and gently challenge him to take initiative and come after it to put it back.).
  - B. Broaden the range of processing and motor capacities used in interactions.
    1. *Engage the child with sound and/or words, vision, touch, and movement* (e.g., race trucks while making sounds or discuss where the cars are going, while looking for the house or school they are going to visit).
    2. *Challenge the child to employ underused or avoided processing capacities* (e.g., the child moves the car with you but ignores your sounds and words and doesn't make sounds on his own. You might block the child's car with your car and challenge him to make a noise or say "go" to get your car to move out of the way).

For a child who moves cars in only one direction, various barriers could get in his way to help him move his car in all different directions).

**VII. Tailor your interactions to the child's individual differences in auditory processing, visual/spatial processing, motor planning and sequencing, and sensory modulation.**

- A. Profile the child's individual differences based on observation and history.
- B. Work with the individual differences. Utilize natural strengths for interaction (e.g., visual experiences for the child with relatively strong visual/spatial capacities). Gradually remediate vulnerabilities (extra practice for listening to and using sounds and words for the child who has a receptive language or auditory processing challenge; extra soothing for the sensory-overreactive child; and/or extra compelling and animated for the sensory-underreactive child).

**VIII. Simultaneously attempt to mobilize the six functional emotional developmental levels**

(attention, engagement, gestures, complex preverbal problem-solving, using ideas, and connecting ideas for thinking). For the younger child or child with developmental challenges, the later levels will be mastered as the child develops.<sup>1</sup>

## Mobilizing Each of the Six Functional Developmental Levels

**I. Shared Attention**

- A. Use the child's individual sensory and motor profile to draw him into shared attention (e.g., more visual experiences for the child who especially enjoys looking).
- B. Harness all the available senses, as well as motor capacities and affects (e.g., involve the child in interactions that involve vision, hearing, touch, and movement, coupled with highly enjoyable activities).
- C. Use both constructive and playfully obstructive strategies (e.g., dance or run together with the active child; build a fence with your arms around the child who likes to avoid or run away).
- D. Stretch the child's capacity for shared attention by increasing the interactive circles of communication rather than trying to get the child to focus on a particular object or toy.

**II. Engagement**

- A. Follow the child's lead in order to engage in interactions that bring him pleasure and joy.
- B. Build on these pleasurable and enjoyable interactions.
- C. Join in the child's rhythm in terms of affect, visual, auditory/vocal, and motor movements.
- D. Join with physical objects of the child's pleasure (e.g., put the car he is fascinated with on your head and let him roll it on your head as though it were a mountain).
- E. Attempt to deepen the warmth and pleasure by giving priority to his comfort and closeness (allow him to lie on you or cuddle or rock with you or stroke your hair for long periods of time).
- F. If necessary, use a little bit of playful obstruction to entice him to focus on you. (Engagement involves a range of emotions, from pleasure and warmth to annoyance and assertiveness.)

**III. Two-way, purposeful interactions with gestures**

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<sup>1</sup> See Greenspan and Wieder, *The Child with Special Needs* and additional handouts

- A. Be very animated and attempt to exchange subtle facial expressions, sounds, and other gestures (i.e., entice her into a rapid back-and-forth rhythm).
- B. Go for the “gleam in her eye” (i.e., entice her with your animated exchanges into an alert, aware, involved back-and-forth pattern).
- C. Open and close circles of communication by building on her natural interests, inspiring her to respond to what you do. Keep it going as long as you can.
- D. Treat everything she does as purposeful, in order to harness circles of communication (flapping hands could be the basis for an interactive flap-your-hands dance or for a game of waving at each other).
- E. Encourage initiative by avoiding doing things for him or to him.
- F. Support initiative by challenging him to do things to you (e.g., when roughhousing, get him to jump on you or push you down or climb up to your shoulders, rather than simply picking him up and swinging him or doing other things that may be fun, but do not support his initiative).
- G. Help him go in the direction he wants to by initially making his goal easier to achieve, such as moving the desired ball closer to him.
- H. Help him be purposeful by creating a goal where none may appear to exist (e.g., he is moving his car around in a back-and-forth motion and you might stand behind the schoolhouse and claim to need a delivery).
- I. Over time, build obstacles between him and his desired goal to increase the number of circles of communication (block his access to the door or turn the door knob the wrong way).
- J. As needed, be playfully obstructive (build fences around him if he is aimless; get between him and his goals when he is repetitive or perseverative (e.g., get stuck behind the door he’s opening and closing).

#### IV. Two-way, purposeful problem-solving interactions

- A. Extend circles of communication by creating extra steps (e.g., play dumb so he has to show you how to open the door; when she is moving the car to the school, you exclaim and gesture that you first need a delivery at the hospital).
- B. Extend circles of communication by being playfully obstructive and creating interesting barriers or obstacles to his goals.
- C. Work up to a continuous flow of circles (e.g., some children will gradually go from three circles to five to ten, etc.; others will get into a continuous flow of thirty plus circles quickly).
- D. Challenge her to close circles of communication (e.g., the child is moving her car but ignores your desire to have your dolly go for a ride in it. You block her car with your hand while you gesture in an animated fashion for her to give the dolly a ride.).
- E. Combine affect with action and interaction (i.e., always be animated and show affect through voice and facial expressions while creating interactions).
- F. Increase the interactive range, including affects and emotions (e.g., child is just hugging dolls and the wolf comes to make trouble, so the child becomes challenged to knock the wolf away and increase assertiveness).
- G. Increase interactive range in different processing areas, including:
  - 1. Visual/spatial (e.g., chase, hide-and-see, treasure hunt games).
  - 2. Motor planning and sequencing (e.g., obstacle courses, search games, child has to use two or three steps to open the latch to find the cookie). Perceptual motor (e.g., looking/doing interactions such as rolling, throwing, and/or kicking Nerf balls back and forth, reaching for desired objects on a moving string [while crossing the midline]).

3. Auditory processing and language (using sounds and, when possible, words to communicate [e.g., use animated, compelling vocal tones to draw child's attention or to indicate safety, danger, approval, disapproval, or excitement]).
4. Imitation (draw child into copycat interactions where child is shown how to reach for or get something he wants or to make a sound that will get him something he wants).

## V. **Elaborating ideas.**

- A. Encourage the use of ideas in both imaginative play (e.g., hugging the dolls) and realistic verbal interactions (e.g., "open" door).
- B. Use ideas off of affect or intent (i.e., "want juice!" rather than labeling juice in a picture).
- C. **W(ords)A(ffect)A(ction)** – Always combine words or ideas together with affect and action.
- D. Chit-chat using words all the time.
- E. Encourage imagination through using familiar interactions for pretend play (e.g., feeding, hugging, or kissing dolls).
- F. Jump into a drama that your child has begun. Become a character and ham it up. Communicate mostly as the character, rather than as yourself.
- G. Alternate between being a character in a drama of your child's choosing and a narrator or sideline commentator.
- H. Periodically, summarize and encourage your child to move the drama along with a question or challenge
- I. Entice your child into long dialogues.
- J. Create challenges where ideas or words are necessary (e.g., "up" because the needed action figure is up on the shelf). Keep extending the dialogue.
- K. Encourage the use of all types ideas (symbolic expression) (e.g., pictures, signs, complex spatial designs [building a city], and acting out roles oneself).

## VI. **Building bridges between ideas (emotional thinking).**

- A. Close all symbolic circles in both pretend play and reality-based dialogues (e.g., challenge the child always to respond to what you are saying and doing, just as you respond to what she is saying and doing).
- B. Challenge the child to connect different ideas or subplots in a drama.
- C. Whenever the child seems confused, brings in something from left field, or seems fragmented or piecemeal in her thinking, challenge her to make sense and be logical. Do not supply the missing pieces of logic (e.g., "I'm confused. We were having a tea party and now we're flying to the moon? What happened?").
- D. Be patient and summarize the confusing elements. If the child is not able to build bridges between his own ideas, provide some multiple choice possibilities. Avoid supplying the answer or taking control of the discussion.
- E. Challenge with "w" questions, including "what" "where" "when" "who" and "why."
- F. When the child ignores or avoids responding to "w" questions, such as "what did you like at school today?" throw out some silly possibilities to get the child thinking (e.g., "Did the elephant visit your class today?" or "Did you see your boyfriend [or girlfriend] in class?").
- G. Explore reasons for actions or feelings (e.g., "Why are you attacking me?").
- H. Use multiple choice as needed, always putting the likely answer first and the unlikely one second.
- I. Have your character in the pretend play create unexpected situations to challenge the child towards creativity and new solutions. Use humor, conflict, and novelty.

- J. Challenge the child to broaden the emotional range in the dramas (e.g., so that it includes caring as well as assertiveness and aggression).
- K. Encourage reflection on feelings in both pretend dramas and reality discussions (e.g., “why do you want to go outside?” or “what’s the reason for the attack?”).
- L. Gradually increase the complexity of reflective thinking (e.g., challenge child to give different reasons or motives for actions or consider different views—“How does Sally feel after Mary took her toy” and “How does Mary feel?”).
- M. Challenge child to give opinions rather than facts (e.g., “what color do you like best and why?” rather than “which color is this?”).
- N. Enjoy debates and negotiations, rather than simply stating rules (except where the rule is absolutely essential).
- O. Encourage choices and discussions of choices.
- P. Encourage and challenge the child into the back-and-forth use of words, instead of focusing on correct grammar.
- Q. Increase spatial thinking (e.g., treasure hunt games, junior architect games—lay out a whole city for the action figure drama, etc.).
- R. Encourage motor planning and sequencing capacities (e.g., draw diagrams for a tea party or house decorations or attack strategies for space wars, etc.).
- S. Encourage understanding and mastering concepts of time by challenging the child to use the past, present, and future (e.g., “What are the space monsters going to do tomorrow?” or “Yesterday we went to the zoo. What would you like to do tomorrow?”).
- T. Encourage understanding and use of quantity concepts (e.g., how many cookies should each doll at the tea party have?).
  
- U. Pre-academic or early academic work, complex problem-solving, and social skills should be based on providing an understanding of basic concepts (i.e., connecting ideas) through emotional interactions. For example:
  - 1. In math, negotiate using candies, cookies, or coins to learn adding or subtracting. Keep the numbers small to avoid rote memory. Eventually work on visualizing the objects and doing the calculations using images.
  - 2. In reading, visualize or picture what is being read (whether the parent or child reads it) and then pretend it out and/or discuss it. Embellish the ideas further.
  - 3. In writing, initially use flexible spelling and word choice and focus on interactive, creative stories and communicating needs or opinions. Later, work on correct spelling, etc.
  - 4. For problem-solving and social skills, work on anticipating by visualizing what may happen later or tomorrow, including positive and negative situations. “Picture” the situations, feelings involved, typical solutions, and alternative ones.
  
- V. In both pretend and reality-based conversations, challenge towards higher levels of abstraction by shifting back and forth between the details (the trees) and the big picture (the forest). For example, periodically wonder how all the things the child has been talking about fit together.
- W. Gradually expand the child’s range of experiences (without overload or over-stimulation) because emotionally-based experiences are the basis for creative, logical, and abstract thought).
- X. Challenge the child to symbolize auditory, visual-spatial, tactile, motor planning and affective capacities together (e.g., building a city [visual-spatial, motor planning, tactile])

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with different dramas being acted out [auditory-verbal, thematic, imaginative] involves creative, affective interests being played out in a pattern of integrated thinking).

