

FIRST STEPS FIRST:
Getting started with Floortime®
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A parent asks, "I'm eager to start – but what do I do first?"

1. **"Start where the child is:"** If there is a Floortime motto, that's it.
2. **Be an observer.** Begin by simply watching – you will learn a lot. Use your eyes and your instincts. Where is your child going? What does your child like to do? What captures his interest? What comes hard for her?
3. **Become a play partner (*not a movie director*):** Invite yourself in to meet your child at their level. (That's what puts the "floor" in Floortime.) Put your agenda aside, turn your phone answering machine on, and "follow your child's lead." That means joining your child wherever she is at, whatever she's doing, no matter how seemingly meaningless, and attempt to "woo" her playfully into letting you in too.
4. **Pacing is everything:** You don't want to move too fast, or try too hard. Your child may pick up your intensity, or feel pressured and that is sure to lead to resistance. Try to slow your eagerness down and simply go with what the child can tolerate at first. It will expand with time and experience.
5. **You are better than any "toy:"** Don't get too caught up in having enough toys around. Think of toys, at least early on, simply as props that facilitate interaction. The best "toy" in Floortime with your child is you. You are the magic, the wonder, the "main man" (or woman) that entices your child into meaningful interaction. No one has the power to reach your child the way you do.
6. **Affective equals effective:** You hear a lot about using "high affect," but what is that exactly? Affect simply means "emotions." In Floortime we use our emotional expression to entice a child's interest and attention, and make an *effective* connection with a child. That means using your warm and inviting smile, sparkle in your eyes, or the playful tone in your voice (regardless of whether or not they can understand) to woo your child in. Think of "affect" as both the carrot and the "glue" that holds the two of you in there together. Careful - a highly emotional and a sensitive child may back off if you come on too strong. Too low, or "flat" in affect, and your child will take no notice. (And don't be afraid to look goofy.)
7. **Floortime is any time:** You don't have to stand guard, or frankly even "schedule" the time to engage in Floortime with your child. (Though scheduling Floortime with their child at intervals throughout the day is recommended and often helps some parents make the time happen.) Wonderful, natural interactive moments can happen all day, anytime. Simply allow yourself to move with your child into playful back and forth

interaction whenever opportunity occurs or when you find it. Feeding time, bath time, car rides, etc., all have potential.

As I tell my clients, there is no such thing as "bad" Floortime, only "better." Here are some common situations and some ideas to get you and your child "cooking."

The Escape Artist

You may be thinking, *"Yeah, following his lead sounds great, but Johnny won't stay still. He runs from me!"* With a young child on the move - there are often initially a lot of "escape" efforts going on. He may not want to be hemmed in, nor "forced" to attend and focus on you, let alone engage. Maybe close contact is a bit hard – too much sensory information or too much talking going on. Maybe she has had some therapies that force" interaction, so she has learned to avoid it. Don't take resistance as a rejection. In Floortime, we don't "force." Instead – we go with it. We even use "escape" as an engagement opportunity.

a) "Playful Obstruction:" A lot of folks read Drs. Greenspan and Wieder's book (see recommended readings below) and perhaps misinterpret this strategy. They think that it suggests that it is OK to simply get in their child's face and block their movements and force interaction, to the point of a giant kid-melt-down. Rather, the idea is to gently and playfully use yourself and your body as "something to deal with" as a child navigates their space, seemingly without purpose. Get on the floor adjacent to him, preferably in his line of sight. As he moves away, you move in front of him, capturing his attention, his gaze, even if only fleeting. He moves away again. You crawl after him, moving your body in front of his, as though trying to "playfully" dodge and block his "escape." Use engaging "affect." So, smile big, giggle playfully as you move, don't restrain your child...let him move if he has to (avoid a power struggle). Your goal? To entice the "gleam" in his eye that let's you know he's checked in with you and having fun.

Let him move around you if he must, even getting just a bit frustrated with you (but not too much). Pace and pursue. Each time you move in front of him, go for eye contact, and repeat, again and again, until he is giggling too. If this isn't successful at first, try again later. Ultimately he'll realize that *"silly mommy blocking me"* is just a game, and it's fun....and in time he may initiate it himself.

b) "The Chase Game:" A simple game of "chase" can be a wonderful Floortime start. As you move in close to your child, she may scoot away. Follow after her (not too fast, not too spirited, or you could overwhelm her). Say in a playful voice, *"mmmmm gonnnna get youuuuuu."* Depending on her tolerance for touch, as you catch up with her either capture her with big sweeping hugs, or simply a gentle squeeze. Then release, step back, shrug, as though saying, "Now what?"

Give her a chance to signal to you, in whatever way she can manage, that she wants "more." A "signal," can be verbal, but more likely it's going to be in her body language. That means whatever natural gestural or physical communication she can produce to suggest she wants "more." Tune in. It may be "a look," such as sideways glance and a half-smile, or even her darting away again, but looking over her shoulder *hopefully*, to see if you are following. Go for it again, and again.

The Train Engineer

Your child may have some interest in toys, but perhaps not necessarily using them "appropriately," or better still, "functionally and interactively." One example is the child who lines up his toy trains, over and over again. You know it's not "train play," the way other kids do it. (*And darned if isn't "one of those things" you hear that many children with autism do.*) It's hard to resist trying to break this cycle. However, in Floortime we honor the child's lead and "join" this kind of perseverative (repetitive) activity and, over time, "move it forward" into something more meaningful and interactive.

a) "Which hand?" Position yourself in front of your child, with the trains between you both. Join him as he lines up the trains, helping him create his line by adding pieces yourself, just as he is doing. He may resist your efforts, or even pick up the train piece you just placed, and replace it somewhere else. However, as he begins to realize that you are not going to intrude and redirect his play, he'll get comfortable with you participating.

Now, you can get a little mischievous. Make sure he watches as you playfully scoot some of his collection of trains into a little pile behind you (you want him to track your actions visually). All the while you are smiling invitingly as though you have this *amazing secret* you want to share. Use your body to gently block him from getting "grabby." Reach behind your body and clasp a train in each hand from the hidden collection. Produce your two clasped fists in front of you, preferably at eye level (to encourage him to take your facial expressions in). Momentarily open each fist and "flash" the train in each, then clasp tight again.

At first he may try and pry your fingers open to get the train – and that's OK. Let him retrieve it. That helps him feel sure that he can get his desired object and not go into complete meltdown. Smile encouragingly. Repeat. On the second or third round, pull your hands a bit out of reach as he tries to retrieve, shrug and with wide eyes say, "Which hand?!" As he goes to touch your hand, (before he starts to pry), open it big and smile broadly, exclaiming, "This hand!" Do the same with the other hand. Repeat. A few rounds later, present two hands, but now one is empty! He has to guess and pick. Pretty soon, he's smiling and engaging with you around getting the train he desires. He may still line them up, but he's always coming back to you for "more."

You're in. It is no longer a solitary activity. Rather it is one that you are engaging in together. It is now interactive and playful, "shared" or mutual. In addition, watch as he begins to communicate using signals or gesture (touching your hand to find the train or even pointing), all the while referencing your face for information for the reassuring facial read – telling him it's OK and playful! Finally, you are promoting multiple back and forth interactions as you hide, reveal, and then repeat.

Keeping Track: Moving this train-line-up play forward takes some creativity. After all, trains need to go somewhere, do something, right? So, now play "which hand" with the tracks. Collect them and hand them out playfully, but only as he signals for more. As he lines up his trains on the track and circles them round and round, suddenly drop something in a train compartment – a marble, a pebble, a piece of toy food, or wad of paper, etc. He may fish it out and throw it away. Get something else and try again – mischievously sneaking the item on when perhaps he isn't looking. As he fishes it out in frustration, move in again and repeat. Keep up a playful tempo.

Join his track building, but break the familiar track pattern he's used to. Send a track piece in a different direction – thus, moving track under a table, or over a table, or down the stairs. Invite his train to follow – as you build your track ahead of his train into all sorts of silly places.

The Spin Master

Maybe your child likes nothing better than to settle down on the rug, resting comfortably on her side, with a toy car, propped wheels up - repetitively making and then watching the wheels spin. Position yourself, on your tummy if need be, face to face with your child with the spinning wheels of the car in between your mutual gaze. Watch her make the wheels spin and watch her watch you through the spinning spokes.

Don't move in too quickly. Have a couple of craft feathers on hand. Use one to touch the spinning wheel, slowing it down. She will start it up again. Repeat. She may take the feather from you (but she is taking you in, eh?). Have another on hand, and repeat. The game becomes one of her starting the spin, you slowing it with the feather, and she starting it up again. Or maybe she likes your idea and tries it herself.

Next, take a Popsicle stick and hold it in between you both so she can see it. She may wonder, "now what is he going to do?" Slowly poke the stick in between the spokes bringing them to an abrupt halt. She may glance at you in frustration. Play dumb, shrug, pretend to get the stick out of the spokes, but no matter how hard you (pretend) to budge, it won't come out. She pulls it out, and you gesture wildly applauding her success. Now she spins again, and you repeat the drama. Perhaps after a few rounds she tries the stop maneuver herself. And you tug and try and pull it out and again, she rescues you.

The Toss Champ

Your child seems to like nothing better than to simply pick up toys and throw them, a toy truck for example. You and Dad aren't really comfortable with that. After all, something could break, or someone could get hurt. You may be trying hard to somehow make that throwing truck play more "purposeful" – trying to introduce figurines to drive the truck, or put stuff in the truck. And he just keeps throwing it. (If that isn't working, than you may be overshooting his level of interest at this time, at least developmentally.)

It is helpful to try and figure out what is the appeal for him in "throwing" these objects. It is often simply the experience of sensory feedback and "cause and effect." *"If I do this - that big sound happens. Wow!"* If you are comfortable - and this isn't dangerous to anyone or furniture - try imitating him. Take a toy truck and, though not throwing it, drop it yourself right in front of him. If he does it again, then you do it back. If his eye is only on the truck and not on you, bring that truck right up to your eyes, hold it, look eager, wait a beat till his gaze tracks the truck to your eyes (hold his gaze, hold his anticipation) and dramatically drop it again.

Parents may worry that this will "encourage" the otherwise undesirable "truck throwing" behavior, and it may for a bit. But if you can tolerate the "truck toss game," you can also help it grow and expand. Next pick up a weighty ball or a bean bag perhaps - something with "oomph" when it drops. Now drop that right in front of him. Use your facial expressions and look of sheer pleasure as it lands – look at him with big eyes. Woo him into looking back at you. Share a smile and invite him into doing it himself. And he will.

Now introduce a target - (a receptacle) like a large empty trash can. Put the can right in front of him and you. Drop your bean bag with great flourish straight into the trash can. Encourage him to do the same. (By now you can be subtly moving the truck out of the "game" if you must.) Go back and forth as often as you both can tolerate. Introduce and invite him to experiment with you with different "safe" objects – a metal spoon goes "clink," a cotton ball is silent, a marble goes "plink."

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So what do all these ideas have in common? In a few easy moves, like magic, you have begun to mobilize your child's first three all-important developmental levels in Floortime-speak:

- 1. Attending and focusing.** Your child is regulated and tuned in to you, just as you are to him.
- 2. Sharing attention, or mutual engagement.** You and your child are sharing an idea, an activity together.

3. Back and forth two-way interaction/communication. Each sequence of physical back and forth play with you - chase/capture, pick up and toss ... are those ever important very *first* "Circles of Communication". (Communication starts with gestures, physical back and forth interaction. It's not just about words!)

Most important? You and your child are having fun together. And that is indeed where it "starts" and always needs to be.

Recommended Readings and Websites:

The Child with Special Needs: Encouraging Intellectual and Emotional Growth, (1998) by Stanley Greenspan MD and Serena Wieder, Ph.D.

www.icdl.com: The official website of the Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disorders, founded by Drs. Greenspan and Wieder.

www.floortime.org: Partner website to ICDL-floortime information website.

Floortime@yahoogroups.com. An "unofficial" parent-chat room that offers support and ideas.