

**“Climbing the Symbolic Ladder in the DIR Model  
through Floor Time/Interactive Play”**

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**Abstract**

The Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship-Based model (DIR®), a theoretical and applied framework for comprehensive intervention, examines the functional developmental capacities of children in the context of their unique biologically based processing profile and their family relationships and interactive patterns. As a functional approach, it uses the complex interactions between biology and experience to understand behavior and articulates the developmental capacities that provide the foundation for higher order symbolic thinking and relating. During spontaneous “Floor Time” play sessions adults follow the child’s lead utilizing affectively toned interactions through gestures and words to move the child up the symbolic ladder by first establishing a foundation of shared attention, engagement, simple and complex gestures, and problem solving to usher the child into the world of ideas and abstract thinking. This process is illustrated by a case example of a young boy on the autism spectrum interacting with his father during “Floortime” over a three year period.

**Key Words:** DIR, Floor Time, Symbolic Play, Affect, Autistic Spectrum Disorders or Autism

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Play is the most important enterprise of childhood. It ushers the child into the world of symbolic thinking where symbols and images can represent reality. We have constructed a model of symbolic elaboration (the Functional Emotional Developmental Model) based on an integration of affect and cognitive theory (Greenspan, 1979; 1989; Greenspan & Shanker, 2003). By elevating feelings and impulses to the level of ideas expressed through gestures and words, ideas and feelings can be shared and expanded through symbolic play and conversation. The gestures encompass the affect cues which give meaning to the words, actions, use of figures and toys (i.e., the tone of voice, facial expression or type of movement). These affect cues convey what is coming, what is safe, and what things mean, providing the support necessary for regulation and taking the risk to broaden feelings and ideas to climb the symbolic ladder. Because symbolic play and conversation provides the distance and safety from real life and the immediacy of needs, it offers practice to differentiate one's own and others' experience and feelings as well as to differentiate from the environment in order to prepare for abstract thinking.

Play is also the most important enterprise for children with special needs where uneven development related to sensory processing and regulatory challenges need not limit the potential and propensity to develop the capacities for a symbolic life. In children with regulatory and autistic spectrum disorders, interactive play uniquely addresses the core deficits of relating and communicating as no other approach can. Interaction is the key to facilitating development, where long sequences of back and forth co-regulated affect cues help the child focus, initiate and elaborate ideas. As early as eighteen months the absence of symbolic play has been identified as a critical indicator of high risk for autism (Baron-Cohen, Allen, & Gillberg, 1992). Yet, while various intervention models include some form of play, symbolic processes are not given the centrality necessary to reach abstract levels even though no other activity encompasses the complexity and opportunity interactive play provides.

Symbolic process is central to the Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship-Based model (DIR) (Wieder & Greenspan, 2001; 1998; Greenspan, 1992; Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disorders Clinical Practice Guidelines Workgroup, 2000), a theoretical and applied framework for intervention which articulates the developmental capacities that provide the foundation for higher order thinking and relating (see Table I).

In the DIR model affectively toned interactions between child and parent, teachers or

peers, be they gestural or verbal, move the child up the symbolic ladder. An example of one child on the autistic spectrum moving through the first six developmental stages (“D”) will illustrate the range this concept embraces. This example will not describe the full range of comprehensive services the child received but focuses on “Floor Time”, the component which is spontaneous, led by the child, where the caregiver follows the child’s lead and promotes the continuous flow of interactions utilizing affect cues which entice, challenge, soothe and encourage the child further. Floor Time does not mean just following the child and commenting on what they are doing but is the active process of interacting in a continuous and rapid back and forth manner at all the levels the child is capable of, from sensory motor pre-verbal interactions, to problem solving, to symbolic play and abstract conversations. The purpose is to strengthen each functional developmental capacity which together form the foundation for higher order abilities. It is important to note that some children have language and constricted interests but weak interactive capacities for mutual attention, relationships, and the back and forth affect gesturing necessary to expand feelings and themes. These gaps derail development of symbolic and emotional abilities.

*The key elements of “Floor Time” are described at each developmental stage.*

- **Stage One: Self-Regulation and Shared Attention (Interest in the World) -** Harness all senses and motor capacities, to help child stay calm and regulated in order to draw child into shared attention. Involve child in enjoyable interactions that involve looking (look and examine faces), hearing (focus on voices), touch (pleasurable tickles, stroking or sharing an object or toy) and movement. Use constructive and playfully obstructive strategies with affect cues to stretch child’s capacity.
- **Stage2: Engagement and Relating -** Woo the child into engaging with pleasure seen when child brightens, smiles, references (looks), moves, vocalizes, or reaches. Encourage growth of intimacy and falling in love. As child develops, deepen the relationship to include the full range of feelings such as assertiveness, anger or sadness that can be incorporated into the quality and stability of the child's engagement (e.g., does she withdraw or become aimless under stress, does she stay connected when angry or scared?). Emphasize relationships all the time to develop a sense of security, intimacy, caring and empathy. Relationships also support the hard work needed to develop motor planning, language, and positive attitudes towards all new learning.
- **Stage3: Two-Way Intentional Communication -** Follow child’s lead and challenge her to communicate through exchanges of gestures and emotional signals about her affects (interests, needs or intentions). Be animated and show affect through tone of voice and facial expressions. Begins with a dialogue without words through subtle facial expressions, a gleam in the eye, and other emotional signals or gestures, to a dialogue with problem solving words. Use affect cues (signals) to woo and **wait** for child’s purposeful social gestures (facial expressions, making sounds, reaching, pointing, throwing, movement, etc.) to

express desires, objections or other feelings. Get reciprocity by challenging child to do things to you, help him achieve his goal, and later build obstacles to add steps. Encourage continuous flow by opening and closing multiple circles. A circle is opened when the child evidences some interest or initiates a behavior, e.g., the child looks at a toy, and the parent or caregiver follows the child's lead by picking up the toy and showing it to the child, and the child closes the circle by reaching for the toy, while acknowledging (looking, smiling at) the parent.

- **Stage 4: Purposeful Complex Problem Solving Communication** - Work up to a continuous flow of 30+ back and forth circles of communication, e.g., child can take a parent by the hand, walk her to the door, point that he wants to go out, and perhaps vocalize a sound or word to further understanding of his intentions. Expand the conversation by asking where child wants to go, what he needs, who else will come, what they will get, what else, how come, etc. These conversations negotiate the most important emotional needs of life, e.g., being close to others, exploring and being assertive, limiting aggression, negotiating safety, etc.
- **Stage 5: Creating and Elaborating Symbols (Ideas)** - Encourage child to relate sensations, gestures and behaviors to the world of ideas which can be shared in pretend play. Let child initiate the play idea and join him as a character through dramatization in direct roles or using figures to elaborate themes and expand range of emotions (closeness, assertiveness, fear, anger, jealousy, aggression, etc.) which child can explore and express safely. When feelings and impulses are elevated to the level of ideas they can be expressed through words, e.g., child doesn't have to hit her friend, but can say, "I'm mad." without acting out. Play provides the distance from real life and immediacy of needs to differentiate self from others through empathic roles, e.g., child pretends to be a mommy comforting her frustrated baby who broke his toy. Look out for polarizing or being dominated by one or another feeling state (aggression and impulsivity, needy or dependent behavior, fearful patterns, etc.). Engage in long conversations to communicate interests, feelings, desires and objections throughout the day (Wieder, 1996).
- **Stage 6: Building Bridges Between Symbols (Ideas)** – Challenge child to connect his ideas together by seeking his opinion, enjoying his debates, and negotiating for things he wants **using logical reasons**. Promote the use of pretend play, words, and/or visual symbols to elaborate a partially planned pretend drama (theme or idea is identified in advance), or engage in logical conversation dealing with causal, spatial, and/or temporal relationships between themes. Recognize fragmentation and encourage child to “makes sense”, with a beginning, middle and end where elements in the drama logically fit together, motives are understood, and child can put himself in someone else's shoes. Challenge child to create connections between differentiated feeling states, e.g., “I feel happy when you are proud of me!” Identify relationship (contingency) between feelings, thoughts and actions. Expand differentiation of more subtle feelings states, e.g., lonely, sad, disappointed, annoyed, frustrated, etc. This capacity is essential for

separating reality from fantasy, modulating impulses and mood, and learning how to concentrate and plan.

### **The First Stages of Intervention**

Joey was diagnosed on the autistic spectrum at 30 months of age. He was withdrawn and self-absorbed, spending his time pushing a car back and forth lying on the floor, examining it through his peripheral gaze, shuddering and quickly covering his ears as he heard unexpected sirens or cries. He did not respond to his name or appear to understand what was said to him, typically looking away. But he recognized a few songs, turned the pages of books, and loved jumping. There were times he smiled as he enjoyed dancing and bouncing on the bed, but he did not point or wave, or come to his parents except to take their hands to get a cookie or toy car. At two he was still silent, with just a few guttural sounds. His parents decided not to wait any longer as they experienced their child slip away and sought evaluation. It took nearly six months to put a comprehensive program in place (see Table I; ICDL, 2000). The following narrative captures the course of his progress through a series of Floor Time interactions over a period of four years of intensive intervention which included: **(a)** six daily Floor Time sessions, **(b)** four semi-structured and sensory-motor activities, **(c)** intensive speech and occupational therapies, **(d)** 3-5 playdates weekly, **(e)** inclusion in a preschool and **(f)** various music, gym, drama and sports activities.

*Joey and Dad are rolling on the floor engaged in gleeful rough house play as Joey bounces on his Dad's tummy, waiting to be lifted up once more onto his dad's knees to "fly into the sky". He waits breathlessly anticipating his flight and bumpy landing, his hands trembling, but to no avail. Their gazes meet with joint excitement and Dad asks, "Are you ready Joey? Ready for take-off sweetheart?" his voice wooing Joey into the next step which Joey must initiate if his intent is to keep flying, both patient and reassuring. Joey finally takes his Dad's one hand and then the other pulling both towards him and blurts out, "Eh, eh!" With that the engine revs up as Dad stretches the moments of their shared gaze and joint attention until Joey tugs once more, their pleasure mounting as the plane soars into the "bumpy skies". Joey is now the captain, signaling his wish to go higher or faster as his Dad waits for him to initiate the next move by gesture or vocalization until they reach their "destination" designated by nearby photos of Nanny and Pop-Pop or Disney World towards which Joey first reaches and then points as his Dad models pointing with an energetic, "Over there or over here?"*

*Sometimes the plane "crashes" and needs to be repaired with Joey's hammer (fist), sometimes it needs to be refueled with kisses, and sometimes it stalls or gets lost before Joey arrives and he is met with tight squeezes and hugs. Their journeys stretch from moments to minutes as Dad encourages Joey to sustain a continuous flow of gestural interactions where Joey is in charge of each next move, solving every problem as it*

*arises unpredictably, closing circle after circle of communication in a co-affect regulated state until they reach their destination.*

On this joyful journey many goals are accomplished for this 30 month old little boy diagnosed on the autistic spectrum only six months earlier. The most important was the deepening of Joey's relationship with his Dad who acts as his "toy" and makes playing with people more compelling than pushing his cars back and forth (which he relied on earlier because of poor motor planning and sequencing) or spinning in his craving for movement (because of his under-reactive vestibular system). While Joey always enjoyed rough house play with his Dad, it was Dad who always threw him around and did all the work for his passive low muscle tone little boy. Building on this one area where he could still reach the "little boy he lost", Dad learned how to help Joey develop critical functional developmental capacities through play with his non-verbal pre-symbolic son.

Mutual attention and engagement were enhanced through affect cuing to get Joey to initiate what he wanted and communicate this to his Dad, who wooed but waited for Joey to make the first move knowing what Joey's intent or desire was. Their mutual pleasure deepened their relationship and affection, expressed in deliberate smiles, hugs and kisses. By waiting and being playfully obstructive, Dad was able to get Joey to elaborate not just on getting more of a ride but wooed him into more complex gestures where Joey not only had to tug at his hands, but look, pull, figure out if the next step or solution to the problem was to bang his hammer or give a kiss or point to where he wanted to go, identifying the purpose of his flight. On this **two-way street**, Joey became a better problem solver. Dad then challenged him to find more complex solutions as they maintained a continuous flow of interactions and Joey learned to get off the plane and get the gas truck, or tool kit, or other passengers who could get on board (his favorite teddy bear and figures). He developed more complex gestures as he learned to "close his seat belt, pull up the throttle, and listen for the count down (5,4,3,2,1)" etc., until he could first point and then say "up" and "go". He mastered a sequence of actions (motor planning) necessary to take his trip through interactions.

A bumpy ride which first just met his proprioceptive and vestibular needs through rough house play where Dad "recaptured" his son, ushered Joey into the symbolic world. The countless times his parents had pointed to the airplanes rumbling in the sky (which Joey was very sensitive to) and the plane trips they had taken to visit his grandparents, prepared Joey for the symbolization which now accompanied their lengthier and lengthier interactions. Choosing symbols and actions which had personal meaning based on experience, coupled with strengthened capacities for mutual attention, engagement, communication and problem solving prepared Joey for the symbolic world.

## Six to Eighteen Months Later

Six months later Joey and Dad **continued to play** on the floor (Floor Time), but this time family figures were boarding a small airplane as Joey called out “All aboard” and told “Mommy, on!” “Daddy, on!” “Ready, set, go (to) Nanny!” His family figures had driven up to the airplane on a bus, transferred their luggage, and were ready to board. Joey was still the captain as Dad spoke for the various figures. Enveloped by strengthened basic developmental capacities for shared attention, engagement, reciprocal communication and problem solving Joey went on to develop some verbal language and motor planning to now express his ideas through symbolic play. His love of airplane rides readily expanded to symbolizing many other aspects of his real life experience as he pretended to be “Pilot Joe” or “Chef Joey” serving various foods (some of which he did not eat in real life!) at picnics and dinners. He was also a good daddy giving his babies baths and putting them to bed with his personal rituals. He was the doctor, the teacher and the traffic controller, eager to “play” at anytime with his parents, sister, therapists and play dates. His language propelled forward in his eagerness to express his ideas with words, built on the strong gestural communication and comprehension aided by the use of toys, another language he could “see” as he listened and talked. He practiced the words, embedded with rich meanings and affect cues, provided during the interactive play. His excitement and impulsiveness was co-regulated through affect cues signaling caution, moderation or action. The elaboration of play and ideas with toys relies on expanding interaction and communication, as well as motor planning abilities which allow the child to plan and execute his ideas. He was encouraged to develop ideas or stories with a beginning, middle and end which had a point or mission.

Soon Joey entered the world of symbolic solutions and magical thinking as his emotional range expanded and he moved from safe dependency themes feeding, fixing and “in control” of the world through symbolic role play and use of figures and toys related to reality, to the new emotional themes lurking in the shadows as he encountered meat eating dinosaurs ready to pounce on the plant eaters, jealous queens with spells and potions, mean stepmothers or sea witches impeding romance, brother lions fighting for a kingdom, hungry alligators ticking as they waited for mean pirates, and noble kings ready for the rescue. Now baskets became cages and jails, rubber bands bound the enemies, and Nerf swords were ready for battle so romantic weddings could go on. When all else failed or fears were too high, a magic wand could come to the rescue. To be sure, the “good guys” almost always won. Time and space had no bounds!

During this stage Joey became very anxious as he struggled to understand what was real and what was fantasy, as well as to grasp his emerging range of new complex emotions related to competition, jealousy, power, loss, aggression, death, justice and morality which he would encounter the next few years. Again it was lots and lots of symbolic play and reflective conversations which would give him the opportunity to safely explore these emotions, their meanings, and the alternative solutions they posed.

Joey's Floor Time partners all followed the same principles: let Joey initiate the idea, follow his lead, be a "player" (not interviewer), do not change topics, help him elaborate by challenging him to solve the problems at hand (some of which occurred incidentally and other opportunities created by you), provide new language to encourage conversation, not ask questions he already knew the answers to but get him to think, get him to predict what you will do through signals and cues, keep the back and forth pace rapid, and use affect cuing to provide challenges and continuous flow as long as possible. It was also at this time the stage was set up for the development of abstract thinking through reflective conversations where Joey was encouraged to give his opinions, figure out what he and others were feeling, empathize, and determine what was right and wrong, safe and dangerous.

### Three Years Later

As he turned six, Joey was contemplating motives as he discussed different strategies to capture the "Dark Side!" He no longer automatically arrived in space ready to win. He even negotiated with Dad who would be on which side as he now planned his play and debated what was possible. Their conversations were now rich with why questions and discussions of feelings and motives as Joey embarked on his journey into abstract thinking and increased empathy. Dad asked questions which required Joey to anticipate how he would feel in certain situations as well as how someone else would feel. He asked Joey his opinions about choices and to compare and contrast experiences. Dad also realized Joey had missed a lot of incidental learning all the years that auditory and language processing difficulties impeded picking up information about the world around him. The combination of these efforts through daily conversations and floor time play started to move Joey towards more abstract thinking. The world was becoming less black and white.

He applied these emerging capacities to his interactions with peers as he realized some days his friends would be nice to him and other days not. Running with the crowd was now easy as he had learned to join social games on his numerous play dates, enjoying chase, Capture the Flag, and even soccer. On the Floor, he and his friends engaged in superhero battles and tigers were no longer kitty cats. He joined the "Justice League" as he

borrowed the power of different superhero roles to compensate for his growing realization he was only a little kid after all in a world full of rules and many bosses loomed above him. He discovered the other “darker” side of emotions as he encountered characters consumed with jealousy, competition, and lust for power. With his parents, he turned to his fears, sorrow, loss and disappointment, and need for compassion and support as he expanded his emotional range. After a tough day he brought his daily struggles to Floor Time, reenacting his conflicts and confusion. After a victorious day he brought his success to Floor Time to analyze what was fair and loyal, as well as to empathize with others. As he experienced defeat or disappointment, it was only in play he could experiment with negative emotions and aggression without getting in trouble. Without play symbols he was at risk for acting out his newer emotions and conflicts. During Floor Time he prepared for the next day’s encounters.

Symbolic play and conversations were now the opportunity to work out real life dilemmas whereas before he used it to imagine, fulfill wishes, practice roles, and enjoy the magic he conjured. Now, entering school years, “Saying so no longer made it so”, as he grasped reality and reflected on the experience of others. He was now prepared to go onto the next stages of emotional development.

Not every child progresses at the same rate as Joey during four years of intensive intervention, central to which were the daily Floor Time interactions. But every child with developmental challenges must have the affective interactions necessary to develop each functional milestone. More than six months were necessary to just build the foundations for higher level problem solving and symbolic process. Whether playful rough housing or tickle games, or gleeful chase and hide and seek, the foundation was established for pleasurable relating and communicating through interaction. Joey’s progress represents the stages of symbolic play and thinking essential for later life, stages traversed through affect based interactions as each stage emerged. This is evident when toys become symbolic ideas and words convey emotions, empathy and logical and abstract thinking.

Joey’s progress was the result of a very comprehensive intervention program addressing all processing areas manifested in his individual differences but most importantly was rooted in building interactive relationships and thousands of daily interactions conveyed through affect cues, gestures, and maintaining a continuous flow to tread new territory as he climbed the symbolic ladder. Central to his progress was Floor Time which helped him build the structure necessary for higher levels. Play provided the lifeline for development. It set the foundation for abstract thinking needed for comprehension of literature and history, as well as logical thinking related to time, space and numbers. When symbols can stand in for reality, there is the opportunity to experiment, practice, comprehend, communicate, empathize, develop theory of mind, and become logical and abstract through the interactions inherent in relationships, the essence of life.

Follow up studies indicate many children initially diagnosed on the autism spectrum can achieve the developmental capacities necessary for relating and learning as Joey did with appropriate interventions (Greenspan & Wieder, 1997b; ICDL Conference Proceedings, 2002).

## Table I

### **The DIR Model**

The DIR model examines the functional developmental capacities of children in the context of their unique biologically based processing profile and their family relationships and interactive patterns. As a functional approach, it uses the complex interactions between biology and experience to understand behavior.

**“D” = *Functional emotional developmental level*** - examines how children integrate all their capacities (motor, cognitive, language, spatial, sensory) to carry out emotionally meaningful goals which include the ability to:

1. Attend to multisensory affective experience and, at the same time, organize a calm, regulated state (e.g., look, listen, and follow the movement of caregiver).
2. Engage with and evidence affective preference and pleasure for a caregiver
3. Initiate and respond to two-way presymbolic gestural communication (e.g., back-and-forth use of smiles and sounds).
4. Organize chains of two-way social problem solving communications, i.e., open and close many circles of communication in a row across space, integrate affective polarities, and synthesize an emerging pre-representational organization of self and other (e.g., taking Dad by the hand to get a toy on the shelf).
5. Create and functionally use ideas as a basis for creative or imaginative thinking, giving meaning to symbols (e.g., pretend play and using words to meet needs).
6. Build bridges between ideas as a basis for logic, reality testing, thinking, and judgment (e.g., engage in debates, opinion oriented conversations, and/or elaborate, planned pretend dramas).

**“I” = *Individual differences in sensory, modulation, processing, and motor planning.***

These biologically based individual differences are the result of genetic, prenatal, perinatal, and maturational variations and/or deficits, and can be characterized in at least four ways (Greenspan & Wieder, 1999):

1. Sensory modulation, including hypo- and hyperreactivity in each sensory modality, including touch, sound, smell, vision, and movement in space.
2. Sensory processing in each sensory modality, including auditory processing and language and visual-spatial processing. Processing includes the capacity to register, decode, and comprehend sequences and abstract patterns.
3. Sensory-affective processing in each modality (e.g., the ability to process and react to affect, including the capacity to connect “intent” or affect to motor planning and sequencing, language, and symbols). This processing capacity may be especially relevant for ASD (Greenspan & Wieder, 1997a; 1998).
4. Motor planning and sequencing, including the capacity to sequence actions, behaviors, and symbols, including symbols in the form of thoughts, words, visual images, and spatial concepts.

**“R”= Relationships and interactions.** Relationship and affective interaction patterns include developmentally appropriate, or inappropriate, interactive relationships with caregiver, parent, and family patterns. Interaction patterns between the child and caregivers and family members bring the child’s biology into the larger developmental progression and can contribute to the negotiation of the child’s functional developmental capacities. Developmentally appropriate interactions mobilize the child’s intentions and affects and enable the child to broaden his/her range of experience at each level of development. Interactions that do not deal with the child’s functional developmental level or individual differences can undermine progress, e.g., an aloof caregiver may not be able to engage an infant who is under-reactive and self-absorbed.

The assessment process, described in detail elsewhere (Greenspan, 1992; Greenspan & Wieder, 1998) provides the ***Functional Developmental Profile***. This profile captures each child’s unique developmental features and creates individually tailored intervention programs (i.e., tailoring the program to the child rather than fitting the child to a general program). It describes the different interaction patterns available to the child at home, at school, with peers, and in other settings. The profile should include all areas of challenge, not simply the ones that are more obviously associated with symptoms of one or another syndrome or disease. For example, the preschooler’s lack of ability to symbolize a broad range of emotional interests and themes in either pretend play or talk is just as important, if not more important, than that same preschooler’s tendency to be perseverative or self-stimulatory. In fact, clinically, we have often seen that as the child’s range of symbolic expression broadens, perseverative and self-stimulatory tendencies decrease.

### **The DIR Comprehensive Intervention Model**

This model utilizes multiple components designed to meet the individual needs of each child based on his or her developmental and sensory processing profiles. Each component is based on the premise that all learning is facilitated by interactive relationships. The affective connections between the adult and child assist the child in making the links between perception and experience that turns action into learning i.e., brings it under the child’s intentional and functional control to be used again.

The DIR model includes:

- **“Floor Time”** - Home based, developmentally appropriate interactions and practices. Four levels of interaction may be utilized:
  1. **Spontaneous follow-the-lead Floor Time** – by following the child’s lead these sessions encourage the child’s initiative and purposeful behavior, deepen engagement, lengthen mutual attention, and develop symbolic capacities through conversations and pretend play. It is recommended that up to eight sessions a day be devoted to this effort.
  2. **Semi-structured problem solving** – these sessions involve setting up problem solving challenges for the child to learn something new through out the course of

the day when the child desires something or encounters changes in expectations which trigger the affect to motivate new learning and help the child experience new competencies. Solving problems may require new language, concepts, motor planning or sequencing, motor skills, etc. Semi-structured learning also includes ritualized social interactions and play, such as Simon Says, musical chairs, Indian Chief, red light-green light, hand games, etc. Other games focus on auditory or visual processing (e.g., Telephone, Treasure Hunts, board games and books).

3. **Sensory motor, sensory integration, and visual spatial activities** – These activities are geared to the child’s individual differences and regulatory system. They may initially be used to help children become more regulated, attentive and engaged, and move onto development of various skills, guided by OT, PT, oral-motor, sensory-motor, and visuo-cognitive therapists.
  4. **Play dates** with one child (mediated as needed to insure interaction) who provides good peer modeling beginning at age two at a minimum of two times a week, three play dates at three years of age, etc. In addition, periodic small group activities such as gymnastics, music, drama, etc.
- **Educational Programs** – these include the continuum of school (and in some cases home based) programs ranging from full inclusion, hybrid programs (regular, special and home education), learning disability programs and special education.
    - When additional structured teaching strategies are indicated, select from such approaches as the ABLC , TEACCH, Miller Method, Verbal Therapy, or ABA for children with more severe challenge to encourage imitation, gestures, and language. To secure generalization, dynamic challenges and Floor Time should be utilized to apply new skills.
  - Speech and oral-motor therapy – three or more individual/group sessions plus home program
  - Occupational, physical, sensory motor, visual-cognitive therapies – two or more individual/group sessions in each area as indicated plus home program and sensory diet to support regulation.
  - Biomedical interventions, including nutrition
  - Consideration of new technologies designed to improve processing abilities including augmentation and auditory training.

## Table II

### Floor Time Strategies to Building a Symbolic World

- ***Establish the foundation*** – Be sure to develop spontaneous shared attention and engagement, as well as reciprocal interactions before embarking on the symbolic ladder. While many children can carry out simple symbolic actions (e.g., feed the baby, dump the truck), they do not expand without the flow of reciprocal interactions where affect cues guide the next steps. Think of yourself (parent or other caregiver) as the first “toy”.
- ***Facilitate a continuous flow of back-and-forth, affective gesturing*** at all times as a foundation for symbolic play and as a vehicle for regulating mood and behavior, forming a sense of self, and enabling symbols to emerge. Keep the continuous flow of affective, gestural exchanges going both during the foundation-building stages and the stages of symbolic play.
- ***Create an inviting environment*** for symbolic play and ***let your child explore and discover new ideas*** - Identify real-life experiences your child knows and have toys and props related to these experiences available on the floor, the seats or low shelves where the objects will entice the child’s curiosity. He may just bump into them or you may just notice him looking at them and can comment to woo him into exploration. A baby doll on the couch with a bottle nearby, or a slide with a figure ready to go down, or a tow truck on the road to the farm (simply designated by masking tape and a barn or area for animals) may entice the child to feed the baby, push the figure down the slide as you say the ritualized “Ready, set, Go!”, or push the truck towards a destination.

Other useful toys include pretend food, doll house and furniture, figures of people who can be family and friends, figures of favorite characters (Sesame Street, Barney, Disney..), play ground, pool, vehicles, garage and airport, plastic animals and dinosaurs, camera, musical instruments, puppets, hats, dress up, doctor kit and tool kit (include masking tape, rubber bands and clips to hold toys together). Limit cause and effect toys to those with symbolic potential and keep semi-structured materials such as puzzles, play dough, markers, and games in another area. These can and should be used to develop interaction but may be over-relied on when symbolic toys are more challenging to organize and sequence.

- ***Toys are a language.*** Children play with toys before they speak and can express their interests and thoughts using toys before they have words. Also consider toys the augmentation you need to help children comprehend what you are saying by ensuring they ***see what they hear.***

- ***Let your child discover the symbolic world*** - saying “pretend” isn’t usually necessary. Just respond to your child’s real desires through symbolic (pretend) actions and props.
  - Allow child to discover what is real and what is a toy, e.g., if he tries to go down a toy slide or ride a toy horse, encourage him to go on; if she tries to put on the doll’s clothes, do not tell her it does not fit; if he takes his shoes and socks off to put his foot in the pool, ask if the water is cold.
  - If your child is thirsty and asks for a drink while playing, offer him an empty cup or invite her to a tea party.
  - If your child is hungry, offer her a piece of the toy pizza pie you are “eating” or ask if she wants ice cream or a cookie.
  - If she wants to leave, offer her the keys or a toy car.
  - If she lies down on the floor or couch, get a blanket or pillow, turn off the light and sing a lullaby.
  
- ***Encourage representation*** – use a specific set of figures/dolls to represent family members or friends and call them their names as you play, e.g., “Here come Daddy and sister Sarah!” The child is more likely to accept figures named for other people before he accepts a figure with his name. At first he may experience representing himself as having to give up the object he desires!
  
- ***Be a player*** - Get involved in the drama. Be a player and assume a role with your own figure`
  - Use two voices – as the parent encouraging, supporting, clarifying as well as the other kid or symbolic figure you want your child to play with! Your parent voice, which should have your natural tone in a compelling whisper can encourage the child to close the circle, e.g., “But you didn’t tell Ernie what you want!” and insist your child try to answer the question.

***Be a partner*** - Help your child negotiate and problem solve with your figure or directly as you step out of the story for a moment to take his side with your parent voice to help him work things out or be more assertive, or figure out what to do with the hungry alligator as it (you) inch it along towards the pirate ship!

- ***Encourage role play and dress up as well as puppets-*** child may prefer to be the actor in dramatic play as an alternative to the use of the figures which may also be harder to manipulate. Similarly, a puppet is the extension of one’s body and often easier to execute. Role play may allow for clearer gestures and imitation.

- ***Start with symbolic figures*** your child knows and loves, such as Disney, Sesame Street, or Blue to generate symbolic play with simple feeding, picnics, playground trips, bedtime, etc.
- ***Give symbolic meaning to furnishings and other objects in the environment*** – when your child climbs to the top of the sofa, pretend he is climbing a mountain, or when she comes down the slide, treat it as if she is sliding into the ocean to see the fish, etc.
- ***Substitute one object for another when props are needed*** – the ball might be a cake or the spoon a candle.
- ***Resume use of gestures for props along with toys and substitutes*** – just use your hand in a gesture to offer money for the toll or to drink a cup of tea!
- ***Elaborate, elaborate, elaborate!*** – Try to expand child’s idea by expanding its purpose (e.g., drives the car >> to go to the park or zoo and bring props over), or make use of breakdowns or problems with symbolic solutions.
  - If the car crashes, get the tow truck and mechanic with tool kit.
  - If the doll falls, hug the boo boo, get a bandage (masking tape) or rush to the hospital with doctor kit, etc!
  - Don’t over-ritualize by doing the same expansion each time!
  - Provide “seat belts” (rubber bands) to keep the figure on the horse or seated on the chair so things aren’t always falling apart and child can be encouraged to go on with the idea. Masking tape, clips and silly putty can be essential tools!
  - Re-enact familiar scenes your child chooses from books or videos to build better comprehension.
- ***Insert obstacles into the play*** to challenge and make your child think, be more assertive, learn to negotiate, etc. Be compelling and use affect cues to hold his attention and tolerate the dilemma.
- ***Use reasoning to deepen the plot!*** - This can be done through questions in a role you add to the child’s where you ask to go along or object for some reason. Ask the child to tell you his or her idea and what they want you to do. Try to deepen the plot by posing problems, asking “what if”, “if ...then” or why questions, ask about feelings and predictions, etc. Expand reasoning in real life and incidental learning simultaneously with symbolic play.
- ***Expand the range of themes and emotions*** - The hierarchy of themes and emotions moves from dependency, separation, bodily injury, fears, anger, sadness, joy, surprise, jealousy, rivalry, competition, aggression, power, revenge, friendship, loyalty, to justice and morality. Support child’s attempts to explore new ideas borrowed from experiences, stories, videos and peers

beginning with “bad guy wolf, witches, or Captain Hook”, to “bad guy” themes in reality – robbers, kings, wars, etc.

- ***Drama, drama, drama to convey affect cues!*** Match your tone of voice to the affect and theme at hand. Pretend to cry when your character is hurt, cheer loudly when happy, convey anger or fear when needed, exaggerate deceptiveness to help child figure out what you really mean!
- ***Focus on process*** – Plan idea with your child including where story takes place, what characters, what props, what the problems is, and as you move through the story focus on who is in trouble, who is safe, guessing what the other side feels and will do, what the ending will be, how each character will feel, etc. Identify the beginning, middle and end of each story ideas.
- ***Reflect on the ideas and feelings during and after the story is over*** – Discuss your child’s themes and feelings and elicit the point of the story and the abstraction of what is right, wrong, or to be learned from the story. Remember symbolic play and reflective conversation is the safe way to practice, re-enact, understand, and master the full range of emotional ideas, experiences and feelings.
- ***Encourage representation of personal issues*** - Encourage child to role play situations which may be challenging which he has experienced or anticipates.
- ***Build bridges between ideas*** – Through conversations, ask for opinions, compare and contrast themes, have debates, change sides, empathize and reflect on how play relates to personal challenges.

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