

The Floortime Manual™

Dr. Greenspan's Floortime Approach by Jake Greenspan

Based on thousands of hours of conversations, training,
and being brought up "Floortime"



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Note: This book is intended only as an informative guide and for those wishing to know how to do Floortime. In no way is this book intended to replace, countermand, or conflict with the advice given to you by your own physician. We recommend you follow your doctor's advice. Information offered in this book is general and is offered with no guarantees. The author disclaims all liability in connection with the use of this book. The names, examples, and identifying details of people associated with events described in this book have been changed. Any similarity to actual persons is coincidental.



For Dad,

Thank you for giving me so much. Your empathy and understanding taught me so much about myself, and also helped me understand and appreciate other people's differences. I couldn't have asked for more from you. I hope I can continue to share this with the world.



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Introduction:

The Science of Greenspan Floortime

Jake Greenspan

In the early 1970s, a young child psychiatrist named Dr. Stanley Greenspan said that at birth all children have emotional experiences and emotional systems. He believed it was these emotional experiences that drove the developmental process of each child and encouraged their interaction with the world. He also said that it is these emotional experiences and emotional perceptions that help us organize and integrate the different parts of our brain to develop a true understanding of the world around us. Having studied under behavioral conditioning leaders such as BF Skinner and studied the works of Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget, he determined that it was our emotions that drive and select our behavior. In 1989, he first described his Floortime approach as a way to help every child reach their maximum potential. Even though he couldn't see what was happening in the brains of the children, he instinctively knew that he was helping to improve their neurological organization and wiring. By encouraging growth from the inside, and letting that drive behavior and thinking, he saw that his results were comprehensive and lasting. We now know from neurological research done over the last 50 years that he was right. Currently there are a number of versions of DIR and Floortime-based interventions being used by parents and professionals, but there is only one original version that Dr. Stanley Greenspan created, The Greenspan Floortime Approach®.

FLOORTIME AND NEUROPLASTIC RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Many behavioral approaches, like ABA, and many special needs school curricula use repetition of adult-led activities to teach a child a desired response. These “stimulus-response” approaches focus on external observable behavior, not on what is happening on the inside of the child. This form of conditioning can get quick, measurable results. However, professionals have debated how



comprehensive these results are and at what cost to future learning they are attained.

In 2015, researchers found that individuals with autism spectrum disorders who were taught using techniques that involved repetition showed initial gains. However, after the learning experience, they had poor generalization of that information and “automatously poor learning.”¹

This research reports what many professionals and parents have worried about—that behavioral conditioning and teaching techniques don’t produce long-term generalized results. As disconcerting is that the results show that these techniques can also negatively impact a child’s ability to learn in the future. Since the behavioral techniques have been the standard for many years, this new evidence leave us asking, “What is the best teaching method for children to achieve long-term comprehensive results?”

Neuroscientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone has described our brain and the way it wires and reorganizes itself (its neuroplasticity) like the trails down a snowy hill. When we slide down, we create a path. This path is symbolic of the connections between the neurons in our brain that activate together when performing a task or when having an experience (the wiring). We can slide down and create a path, then try it again to create a second path, and a third path, and a fourth. From then on, we can be flexible in choosing which path to go down. Gradually a number of paths become deep and permanent. However, if we take the same path repeatedly, that one path can become a rut so wide and deep that ultimately no matter how hard we try to establish a new path down the hill, we can’t. Instead we constantly get trapped in the original one. If we get trapped in a rut in our brain, the result is rigid thinking and behavior.²

¹Harris H, Israeli D, Minshew N, et al., “Perceptual learning in autism: over-specificity and possible remedies”, *Nature Neuroscience*, 2015 Nov;18(11):1574-6.

² Pascual-Leone, A, described in Doidge N, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Penguin Books, New York, 2007, pp.208-9.



Rigid behavior is by definition maladaptive. Ideally we want to have many paths that are each permanent and well-defined but don't trap us. This raises the question, should we encourage children, especially those with ASD, to take the same path over and over, that is, engage in repetitive activities for learning purposes?

Over the last five years Dr. Greenspan's Floortime Approach has amassed a growing body of research and support. This research has not only collected empirical data that authenticates The Greenspan Floortime Approach® clinically, but it has also shown scientifically that this approach can change and rewire how the brain is organized. This rewiring strengthens existing connections in the brain while also helps to create new ones. We see this impact from a clinical perspective when children improve their abilities to relate, communicate, and exhibit flexible and adaptive social behavior.

Scientific evidence from other neuroplasticity research supports the positive effect that Greenspan Floortime has on a child's brain. When considering this evidence, it is important to understand how the brain works and wires itself. To do this it is important to understand neuroplasticity.

It is a well-accepted scientific fact that our brain is constantly changing. It remains plastic, developing and malleable throughout most of our lives, even into late adulthood, especially when proven learning principals are applied. The neuroplastic properties of the brain ultimately lead to changes in our behavior and thinking abilities. In this way the brain either produces more flexible (adaptive) behavior or more rigid (maladaptive) behavior.

An infant's brain changes and grows very rapidly, which is why at younger ages we absorb certain things so quickly. An example is language, where within the first seven years of life we have a critical phase (learning from exposure) for learning language. Similarly with other parts of our sensory processing system, stimulation within the first few months of life promotes



development.³ However, when the critical phase is over and the brain is no longer learning from exposure to stimulus and experiences, the brain is plastic in the sense that it can still build new connections and learn new skills and capacities under certain conditions. It is important to know the conditions for wiring the brain, particularly when tailoring a program for children who need support in helping their brains develop and grow more rapidly than they are predisposed to do, such as in cases of developmental delays.

NEUROPLASTIC PRINCIPLES FOR FLOORTIME

1. **A Fully Involved Child.** For the brain to experience lasting changes, people must be highly involved in a learning activity, i.e. pay very close attention.⁴ If they are passively involved, then changes in the brain will not be as solid and will not last. In other words the neural pathways are not sufficiently deep and permanent. It is under these circumstances that we often see children who make short-term gains, but not long-term ones. This can happen with activities where the child is only mildly interested because an adult chooses the activity and then leads or directs the child. Letting children pick the activities and helping them stay enthusiastically engaged is a way to ensure their high level of involvement. In The Greenspan Floortime Approach® we call this *Following the Lead*.
2. **Integrating Information.** Researchers have coined the phrase: “neurons that fire together wire together.”⁵ With most experiences in life, especially those that involve multiple elements, we use different parts of our brain simultaneously to process and respond

³ Hubel D and Wiesel T, described in Doidge N, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Penguin Books, New York, 2007, pp.51-52.

⁴ Merzenich M, described in Doidge N, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Penguin Books, New York, 2007, p 68.

⁵ Hebb D, described in Doidge N, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Penguin Books, New York, 2007, p 63.



to that information. For example, when communicating in a social setting we use such areas as: 1) auditory processing (understanding the sounds), 2) visual processing (watching the mouth and interpreting changing facial expressions and gestures), and 3) linking this information to the emotions the person is conveying. We integrate different types of information (motor, auditory, visual, and emotional, etc.) into a unified picture.

Neuroscientists know that when we can do this, the principle of “neurons that fire together wire together” is in place. Performing or even thinking about a multi-element activity lets us practice using multiple areas of the brain at the same time. The brain wires itself to perform those tasks as a unit. Researchers have seen through brain imaging that even saying or hearing a word like “garlic” lights up not only the language centers of the brain but also smell and other parts. Language is not just about words.

Conversely, “neurons that fire apart wire apart.”⁶ If we practice things in isolation, we only have access to those capacities in isolation. So if we practice auditory processing (understanding language) in the absence of a rich social-emotional environment, it may be more difficult to process auditory information when in a real social relationship. This is not to say that we can’t do exercises to isolate the auditory processing, but they should be only a small part of a program that focuses on integrating all the information, especially social-emotional.

So if we want children to learn from their teacher and from their social environment, then practicing should involve them being positively involved with their social environment—not just learning from a book or a computer screen, but learning in a 3-dimensional space in a social setting. Unfortunately many interventions for children with developmental delays use isolated activities or individual skill-based activities focusing only on one area. They do not integrate many components together. Especially during skill-based activities, like fine motor work, the child’s social-emotional

⁶ Hebb D, described in Doidge N, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Penguin Books, New York, 2007, p 63



connection with the adult is often sacrificed for performing the activity or solving the problem. In Greenspan Floortime the second step, *Challenging the Child to Interact, Communicate and Think*, uses integrated experiences to make sure a child can generalize and differentiate how and when to use a skill.

3. **Thinking vs Memorizing.** Reinforcing the thinking process, instead of conditioning (teaching) a specific answer or response, gets faster and more complete neurological results. By acknowledging and responding to a child's purposeful gesture, we encourage more communication and foster an internal process. Our responses help to improve the brain's wiring by causing the child to think and use different pathways, rather than the same one.⁷). Coming up with one's own response, rather than using one given repetitively by someone else, achieves long-term results and a stronger internal process for use in future situations. It helps children establish their own thinking process instead of giving them your solution (i.e. teaching to the test).
4. **Working from the Ground Up.** When helping a child or even an adult to develop greater neurological wiring and progress in a skill or ability, the challenges in the activities must be designed to meet them where they are developmentally. Unfortunately most teachers and therapists try to teach a specific age-appropriate expectation or skill. A bottom-up or "Ground Up" approach emphasizes neurological development, not chronological age. For example, to rewire the motor cortex of someone who is learning to walk after suffering a brain injury, they need to learn to crawl again and cruise again first. If a child is learning to communicate verbally, they need to learn to communicate physically and gesturally prior to developing language. Starting from the ground up will make sure we are developing the comprehensive neurological wiring necessary to support future functions. This will help achieve an integrated internal thinking process and ensure initial as well as longer-term success. In Greenspan Floortime we call this *Finding the "Just Right" Challenge*.

⁷ Taub E, Hebb D, described in Doidge N, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Penguin Books, New York, 2007, p 143



5. **Subtly Expanding Interactions.** Subtle changes in the challenge, starting from a point of success, are necessary to train the brain.⁸ Here, we need to make sure that the challenges we provide a child progress at such a subtle rate that the change is almost imperceptible and that the child can overcome the challenges in a fun and confidence-building manner. In Greenspan Floortime™ we call this “*Expanding the Challenge*”.
6. **Giving the Right Kinds of Reward.** It is through the release of certain chemicals such as dopamine⁹ and acetylcholine¹⁰ that our experiences become learning experiences. These chemicals are released based on the type of reward that we receive at the end of the experience. In turn these chemicals help solidify (remember) the learning while also fine tuning (making more efficient) what we learn from that experience. They are released from the parts of our brain that process pleasure, and it is through pleasurable experiences and rewards that researchers now know that we learn best.

What type of reward gives us the greatest level of pleasure?
Emotional rewards: ones we are able to receive constantly throughout the rest of our lives—a smile, a friendly look, even the feeling of self-confidence after overcoming an obstacle or achieving a goal.

The Greenspan Floortime Approach® is based on developing and deepening relationships that naturally give positive emotional rewards. These are not external and superficial, but instead center on the feelings you have for another person. If we become conditioned (i.e., develop the neurological habit and tendency) to expect an external reward such as an M&M, cookie, or computer time, the gains are not as strong because the rewards are not as meaningful. We do not receive these types of rewards throughout

⁸ FastForWord program.

⁹ Berridge K and Robinson TE, “Nature of Dopamine’s role in reward”, *Brain Research Reviews* 1998 Dec 28 (3), 309-69.

¹⁰ Hasselmo ME, “The role of acetylcholine in learning and memory”, *Current Opinion in Neurobiology* 2006 Dec 16 (6), 710-15.



our lives. Additionally using them in this way can make them addictive.

Another reason the positive relationship itself is the best reward is that we need to be cautious of children developing negative relationships, negative perceptions of people around them, or associations of always receiving an external reward for the activities need to perform for daily living. Learning a skill within a negative relationship can make a child (or adult) avoid using that skill.

7. **Involving Parents.** In addition to developing rigid behavior patterns, which many children are already predisposed towards, many behavioral approaches require the child to be away from parents for 20-40 hours per week, starting as early as 1.5 – to 2-years old.

We already know that spending time with a caregiver is important. Now new research sheds light specifically on its neurological importance. In a recent study researchers from Stanford University found that: “Nonsense words produced by mother activate multiple brain systems, including reward, emotion, and face-processing centers, reflecting how widely mother’s voice is broadcast throughout a child’s brain. Importantly, this activity provides a neural fingerprint of children’s social communication abilities”.¹¹ A child needs to hear mother’s voice. And we see clinically that they need to hear their father’s too! Hearing these voices improves the processing of social information and functioning.

A mother’s involvement does even more than improve sensory processing. In 2010, a study found that girls aged 7-12 who performed stress-inducing activities that raised their cortisol levels were calmed by a hug from their mother. “For girls who interacted with mom, their levels of oxytocin, often called the ‘love hormone,’ rose significantly, and the stress-marking cortisol washed away. This

¹¹ Abrams DA, Chen T, Odriozola P et al., “Neural circuits underlying Mother’s voice perception predict social communication abilities in children”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 2016 May 31;113(22):6295-300.



reprieve from stress was also lasting.” The same changes in hormones were experienced by another group of girls who heard their mother’s voice over the phone. Unfortunately many behavioral approaches tell parents to ignore their child when they are experiencing stress, anger, and frustration. How are they to learn to calm themselves?¹²

This research supports a parent-centered, therapeutic approach like The Greenspan Floortime Approach®. Dr. Greenspan urged parents to talk to their child, **especially non-verbal ones**, and be physically involved. He saw improvements in communication and self-regulation, the areas discussed in the above research. While some children with autism or other developmental challenges may initially have difficulty processing their parents’ voices, The Greenspan Floortime Approach® can improve a child’s responsiveness. Using fun techniques, parents become actively involved in their child’s program. With Greenspan Floortime parents’ voice and touch are important elements that are constantly being used for engagement and interaction and are helpful for children with behavioral challenges as well as social and communication ones.

Please note: Some versions of Floortime (not created by Dr. Greenspan) encourage parents to verbalize minimally with their children. Except for children who are extremely sensitive to auditory stimuli, this restrictive measure is neither a principle of Dr. Greenspan’s Floortime nor obviously supported by the above research. Given the research, a non-verbal or minimally verbal environment can be harmful to the developing child.

8. **Consistency and Intensity.** Research on Floortime at York University conducted by Jim Stiebens established that about 20 hours per week of in-home Floortime was necessary to see significant clinical results.¹³ Other studies on neuroplasticity suggest that there is a mandatory amount of time to create plastic reorganization of the brain. Neuroscientist Edward Taub found that a two-week intensive training period of three-hours a day seems to

¹² Seltzer LJ, Ziegler TE, Pollak SD, “Social vocalizations can release oxytocin in humans”, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, 12 May 2010.

¹³ Stieben J, unpublished research, reported in CBC program on DIR Floortime in Canada.



begin the plastic reorganization process within the brain, a finding he continues to explore.¹⁴

At The Greenspan Floortime Approach® facilities, such as The Floortime Center®, strong clinical results are being achieved through intensive treatment programs that involve 3-4 hours a day for a minimum of two weeks. We see that these intense intervals jump start a child's developmental process. Treatment programs at The Floortime Center®, where the above neuroplastic conditions are applied within Greenspan Floortime-based services, include Greenspan Floortime opportunities for parents coached by Jake Greenspan or Tim Bleecker as well as opportunities for Greenspan Floortime-based approaches for occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, feeding therapy, visual-cognitive therapy, and social opportunities.

At the end of these intensive periods, not only have the children significantly strengthened their relating, thinking and communicating, but the parents have received a good foundation for doing Greenspan Floortime at home. Families can then maintain a level of Greenspan Floortime throughout daily life and revisit The Floortime Center® for another intensive program a number of months down the road.

CONCLUSION

In 2006, the consulting firm Accenture studied 251 of its executives to determine what made them successful. It concluded that although intelligence is an important factor, it is not the main one. The key predictor is emotions: more specifically, “interpersonal competence, self-awareness and social awareness — all elements of emotional intelligence.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Taub E, described in Doidge N, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Penguin Books, New York, 2007, p 149.

¹⁵ <http://business.financialpost.com/executive/careers/the-biggest-predictor-of-career-success-not-skills-or-education-but-emotional-intelligence>



This conclusion makes eminent sense. In a seminal monograph in 1979¹⁶, Dr. Greenspan described how emotions are the foundation of intelligence, to the skepticism of some of his colleagues. And almost 40 years later they still are. They continue to be the basis for the Greenspan Floortime Approach, which he described in the monograph.

One of the most important emotional capacities associated with emotional intelligence is empathy. Empathy—the emotional connection between human beings that gives an understanding of others’ feelings—is critical for a fully participating in life. The basis of empathy is flexible behavior.¹⁷ Since all children need to develop empathy, especially those with developmental challenges like ASD, it is important that we encourage flexible and adaptable behavior versus rigid and repetitive behavior.

Using the principles of neuroplasticity within an approach like The Greenspan Floortime Approach® lets all children achieve flexible adaptable behavior, empathy, and improvements in communication and thinking. Knowing how adaptable the brain is proves that these are all realistic goals for children with developmental challenges and behavior difficulties. Simply teaching them a new behavior is insignificant when compared to what these children can truly achieve through an approach that is aligned with optimal neuroplastic development.

¹⁶ Greenspan, SI, *Intelligence and Adaptation: An Integration of Psychoanalytic and Piagetian Developmental Psychology*, IUP, New York, 1979.

¹⁷ Eslinger PJ, Neurological and Neuropsychological Bases of Empathy. *European Neurology* 1998;39:193-199,



Foundations of Greenspan Floortime™

Chapter 1: What Greenspan Floortime™ IS and What it IS NOT

1. Follow the Lead
2. Challenge
3. Expand

Chapter 2: Types of Play

1. Greenspan Floortime with Movement—
Sensory Play
2. Greenspan Floortime with an Object—
Object-based Play
3. Greenspan Floortime with Ideas—Symbolic
Play
4. Transitioning from One Type of Play to
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Chapter 3: Description of Regulatory

Profiles

1. The Sensitive Child
2. The Seeking Child
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A. What Greenspan Floortime™ IS and What it IS NOT

Working with my father for many years, being trained by him for over 10 years, and having thousands of hours of conversations with him about his work has lead me to a number of conclusions about Greenspan Floortime. One of the most important realizations is that Greenspan Floortime is both **a science and an art**. Greenspan Floortime is a definitive and organized set of techniques and principals that create a standard of practice and application: the science. However knowing how and when to use each of the techniques requires interpretation, analysis, flexibility, and finesse: the art. Most beneficial curriculums have both features, using a one size fits all cookie cutter approach to children has proven to be unsuccessful. This doesn't mean an approach should be completely void of systems either. This book will explore both sides of Greenspan Floortime, the science and the art. Before we start learning about what Greenspan Floortime "IS", it is important to understand some misconceptions about it.

Through my experience practicing Greenspan Floortime for the last 15 years, I've met hundreds of professionals who said they were trained by my father and that they love my father's work. Many of these therapists have even attained some level of "Floortime Certification". While it is fantastic to hear what an impact he has had on these professionals, as I inquire about how they use his ideas I'm constantly disappointed. More often than not I come across a therapist who says they use Greenspan, Floortime, or DIR at their practice and they show off how they have his Developmental Milestones from his DIR Model on their wall. They explain to me that they work on these with their clients, but as I begin to watch what they do in their therapy sessions I see they provide traditional Sensory Integration OT, or play based Speech and Language Pathology. While there is nothing wrong with what they are doing, they are not actually practicing Greenspan Floortime or working on Dr. Greenspan's developmental milestones as they claim. In other words, they don't "**practice what they preach**". In many



instances in life we see this inconsistency, like with a friend who posts about clean eating and healthy lifestyles all over their social media, and then in person we see that they frequently want to go out to eat at some chain restaurant or fast food. Fortunately in many scenarios the only person who is effected by a misrepresentation is the person making the claim. However, in the case of Greenspan Floortime being misrepresented the family and especially the child are impacted.

When Dr. Greenspan created Floortime, he had a very specific definition of what it was and the philosophy behind it. One of the most prevalent misconceptions is that the first step of Greenspan Floortime, following the child's lead, means just following the child around and letting the child do whatever they want. Oftentimes I've see trained and "Floortime Certified" therapists just walking/running behind the child as the child aimlessly moves from one object, activity, or place to another. While this is certainly following the child, it is not Greenspan Floortime. This version of following the child's lead does not achieve the goals associated with Dr. Greenspan's developmental model, mainly establishing interaction. **In Greenspan Floortime, there are expectations, goals, and even boundaries and limits.** Children are not just supposed to run free and do whatever they want, especially when it comes to health and safety. Part of following a child's lead is knowing what they need and what is developmentally beneficial for them. This book will explore what it means to truly follow a child's lead according to Dr. Greenspan.

Another misinterpretation about Greenspan Floortime is that when working with non-verbal children that we ourselves need to be quiet. Unfortunately, this misinterpretation was promoted by many of Dr. Greenspan's colleagues who didn't fully understand his approach. Dr. Greenspan understood the importance of and the positive neurological impact of children hearing language, especially from their parents. He felt strongly that therapists and parents alike should be talking to children. The use of language within meaningful interactions produces various affective states for both the child and the adult. It also improves auditory processing when the language occurs within positive engaging experiences.



It is widely known that the more language a child hears and processes, the better their language development is. While Greenspan Floortime takes into consideration that many children with developmental differences have auditory sensitivities or auditory processing weaknesses, this only means that we should be talking in a simpler, calmer, and a more modulated manner. Unfortunately, if you're doing Greenspan Floortime with a child and not talking to them, they are not going to receive the all of the benefits from the experience that they should.

Another misinterpretation, or misuse, of Greenspan Floortime is when many adults use following a child lead to motivate the child, and then they try to teach them something specific, such as using a specific phrase, or even labeling specific emotions. We've seen in many sessions with professionals who've received Floortime training, that they use following the child's lead simply to motivate the child, and then they quickly take over and do traditional adult-led “skill building”. They try show the child how to do a specific task, tell the child to use certain phrases and specific language, or they try and teach the child to express a certain emotions even though it may not be what the child is truly feeling.

Greenspan Floortime is a thinking-based curriculum: **the goals are to help the child emotionally connect, solve the problem, create their own ideas, and figure out their own communication patterns.** Unfortunately, many educators, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and mental health professionals have the tendency to do the work for the child. They teach the child their specific solution, their specific word, or their label for an emotion instead of encouraging real thinking.

It is important for both professionals and parents to understand these misconceptions so that they can provide the best services possible to their children. Even though Dr. Greenspan is no longer with us it is important for everyone to have his knowledge and standards to achieve his groundbreaking clinical outcomes. The rest of this book will explore many of his techniques.



Greenspan Floortime™: The Three Steps

All children have unique personalities. Children with special needs are no exception. They can have every combination of traits, including warmth, humor, curiosity, and empathy. These traits just have to be nurtured and strengthened. And the best nurturers are parents. Nurturing by parent, not only promotes these traits, it strengthens the relationship between parent and child. It gives parents a greater understanding of what their child needs and how they can support their child's developmental process and progress. By nurturing these core capacities, children can grow up to be warm, happy, communicative, curious and caring adults.

Interacting and playing with children is one of the best ways to nurture their emotional development, social skills, and thinking abilities for future success. Researchers at the Princeton University Baby Lab found that socially interactive, creative play does more for a young child's neurological development than academic activities. It is an indicator of long term success. However, for children who want to play on their own or avoid interaction, playing and interacting with them can be difficult. Fortunately, there is a way for parents, professionals, and even siblings to overcome this challenge, helping them engage, interact with, and communicate with their child. It is called The Greenspan Floortime Approach®.

The Greenspan Floortime Approach®, a developmental approach, focuses on strengthening the whole child. Through it children improve their ability to 1) regulate their sensory system; 2) attend to and learn from their environment, 3) relate to the world with a broad range of emotions, 4) communicate with gestures and language, and 5) think logically—the steps in a child's developmental ladder. Mastering these functional capacities enables children, and actually all of us, to learn, socialize, think, and become adaptable adults.

From birth, social interactions help wire our brains so that we learn from new experiences and move up the developmental ladder. They are an essential part of all children's development. But children with autism, and other developmental disorders, have difficulty learning through social interactions and from their



environments. Without intervention, these experiences are largely lost on them. The Greenspan Floortime Approach harnesses children's motivation to interact so that their thinking ability can build on the richness of human interaction and new experiences. With the help of parents and other caregivers, a child can progress to higher levels of social and emotional awareness.

The Greenspan Floortime Approach is based on three main principles:

- **Following the child's lead** to identify emotional interests, help motivate a child to push themselves, and relate to a child on their terms
- **Challenging** the child to move up the developmental ladder and push themselves in a fun way
- **Expanding** on those challenges in a dynamic fashion so the child is always creating and experiencing something new, and experiencing new interactive patterns leading to flexibility and adaptability.



1. Following the child's lead

The first step of Greenspan Floortime is to join the child's world. Children are much more likely to want to play and engage with us if they get to choose what to do and how to do it. This is one way we can get involved in what our child is interested in. While there are actually many ways to follow a child's lead based on each situation and child, the most important piece is to understand what your child needs (and giving it to them) by paying attention to what they are showing you.

Follow the lead:

- Identify what the child is doing, or what they need
- Make sure the child is calm; if not, soothe first or give necessary sensory supports
- Physically join the child's interest and activity without taking control (i.e. sensory, objects, ideas); don't just watch and comment
- Treat the child's every action (even repetitive motions) as purposeful
- Use your voice and facial expressions to become the most interesting object in the room
- Use language and gestures/movements together. Describe what you are about to do
- Respond to the child by raising or lowering your energy level and voice
- Encourage and entice the child, but don't give directions or control their play
- RESPOND to every gesture, sound, and word the child makes



But, and this is essential, ‘Following the child’s lead’ does not mean simply going along with whatever the child is doing. Unfortunately some people just aimlessly follow behind a child as the child aimlessly moves from place to place or thing to thing for however long the child wants to. This is not Dr. Greenspan’s intention for following the lead, and it does not accomplish the goal he set out.

“Following the lead” is much more, and it has a very specific goal—that is, to get the child to engage with us and interact. We tap into the child’s interest as the means to enter the door to their world. Ultimately we want to bring them into ours.

If we follow a child’s lead successfully, we join their world and establish a mutual trust and respect. With these emotional ingredients, the child knows that we are there to support them, to help them to regulate, and to encourage them to socially interact and communicate. When we give them what they need and identify their interests, they have more fun and are more motivated to overcome challenges.

The description that follows explains how to follow the lead of children with different regulatory profiles. As you will see, different children require different approaches. That is, there is not a singular way of doing this, but there are basic principles as given above.

The lack of a singular technique is because children can have difficulties regulating their nervous system. Without a regulated nervous system, a child may be more reactive or rigid and will have difficulty interacting and being open to new experiences. By following a child’s lead, we can identify sensory activities that their body and nervous system need to function at a higher level. Whether children are on a swing, trampoline, or a ball, we can see what types of stimulation they choose to help regulate their nervous systems. If we introduce rhythmic patterns into the activities—



where we start and stop and start and stop—paying close attention to a child’s response to us, we will see that they will begin to attend and engage and even begin to interact—exactly what a child needs to reach higher levels.

Because of the importance of a regulated nervous system in the early stages, The Greenspan Floortime Approach® emphasizes movement and physical activities during those beginning interactions. Rutgers neuroscientists have conclusively determined that autism is at its core a sensory-motor dysfunction. This dysfunction impairs a child’s ability to regulate sensation, relate and communicate, and connect to the emotional world. Consequently, this approach may seem different when helping a child work on the earlier developmental milestones than when we are working on the later ones.

As mentioned in introducing rhythmic patterns, we may have to initiate some interaction to follow a child’s lead. Sometimes they want to ignore us completely, not even a glance in our direction, or recognize us in a cursory or perfunctory manner and then ignore us. There are many examples and descriptions of this reaction in the profiles. And obviously to follow their lead and interact, we need to do just that—interact with them in what they want to do. Here is where we use challenges, as discussed in the next step, to open the door and get into their space in a non-intrusive way. When we use challenging for this purpose—opening the door to following to the lead—we need to keep in mind that our aim is to be involved in their activity, that is to follow their lead. We are not trying to take over their interest or change it. We challenge with that in mind.

The next section on challenging, which is step 2, shows how it relates to creating the spark in following the lead when our presence is seemingly of no interest to the child.



2. Challenging

Sometimes children let us join in, sometimes they don't. If they do, we can establish a trust with them quickly. We join their world and then gradually draw them out of their world and into ours by **challenging them to interact with us**. This is the second step. Once we have joined them and discovered what interests and motivates them (i.e. the first step), we can harness their interests and interaction to connect with them so we can **eventually challenge them**—creating an even more fun and engaging interaction around the activity or toy, adding in a very slight change to their agenda. The profile section gives many examples.

If they resist our participation, then we may have to become more exciting or challenge them a little more to get things going. This may mean our child is more sensitive, which we need to acknowledge. Even with a sensitive or avoidant child, we can still establish trust and a deeper relationship, but we ourselves will have to be more sensitive to what they need.

If a child is more avoidant or self-involved and doesn't want to include us in the play at all, the challenge step may need to happen early on, as we mentioned in the discussion of Follow the Lead. In this situation we must create a challenge to entice the child to attend, engage and respond. The challenges should be developmentally appropriate so the child is motivated to respond to them and climbs the developmental ladder voluntarily.

The principles of challenging and then expanding are important because once we and the child start to interact, the activity has to become more interesting (subtly more challenging) as it progresses. It's often up to us to expand the shared experience—without taking charge or directing the play.



Challenging:

- Before you challenge too much, make sure the child is interested in and engaged with you (i.e. HAVING FUN!)
- Encourage interaction, communication, and thinking, building complexity with each challenge. (Do not teach!)
- Use the '**playing dumb**' approach for children who are purposeful and want or need something from you.
- Use the '**playful obstruction**' approach for more avoidant, repetitive, self-absorbed children. You encourage interaction by playfully getting in the way—but not too frustrating or irritating. You're essentially following the lead and challenging at the same time.
- Never sacrifice the fun of an interaction and lose the child's interest when challenging.
- Get in their way a little and give the child a chance to respond.
- Expect a response.
- Do not try for one desired answer. The goal is whatever response they give you.
- Respond positively to any response and treat it as purposeful and effective.
- Let the child think of new solutions, move his or her own body, and use his or her own ideas as much as possible.



We want to encourage the child to use a new gesture, word, or idea to solve a problem. For example, we may create a cranky character that won't follow direction, as in, "No, I don't want to go to sleep. What else can I do?" This kind of response may require a bit of practice because, as parents, our urge is to keep the story or the play going. We know what could or should come next and want to provide it. It can be very hard not to fill in the gaps with directions or solutions of our own.

Being Playfully Obstructive:

If a child is being avoidant, it may be necessary for us to join the activity and challenge at the same time. The goal is not restrict them or become overly intrusive, but instead to trigger some sort of response and interaction with the child. By playfully getting in front of them, playfully getting in their way achieving their goal, or chasing after them we can encourage a response. **These actions must be preempted with playful language describing your actions.**



3. Expanding

Using this positive relationship and interaction with our child, we can expand the challenge and encourage new communication, thinking and experiences. This is the third step.

It's crucial to try to expand every interaction, play scenario, and conversation with a child—gradually, each one, another and another and another. Expansion provides a child the opportunity to change repetitive play and behavior patterns, improve creativity, and become a more dynamic social problem solver. Expansion of activities and ideas is important for all children, but specially for a

Expanding: Activity, Communication, and Challenges:

- Always aim increase the interaction by only one or two new steps to encourage a new response and not frustrate the child
- Choose a challenge that encourages the child to communicate with subtle new gestures or ideas.
- Make sure that the pace of the expansion gives the child the opportunity to succeed in overcoming the challenge
- Let the child expand the interaction and activity when possible. Be patient, and avoid filling in gaps or suggesting new directions. (sometimes a longer pause after you do something allows the child to think and respond)

child who has the tendency to get stuck in repetitive or rigid thought patterns.

Expansion needs to be gradual. By gradually expanding the play and our interactions with a child, we can make subtle change into a fun and exciting experience. Too big of a change can upset a child.

More and more professionals agree that a parent-centered approach is the ideal for children with autism and other



Playing Dumb/Silly

When a child is involved with us or wants us to do something for them, playing dumb is an effective way of challenging and expanding. To do so means that we pretend we don't know how to do what the child wants or, if they are expecting us to do something, we do it wrong in a silly or new way. This encourages the child to give us more circles of communication if they are trying to correct us or show us what they want.

developmental challenges. The Greenspan Floortime Approach strengthens the most important relationships in a child's life, gives parents control over their child's development, and smoothly integrates developmental activities into everyday life. As a result, children can progress all the time, not just when they are in a therapy session.

The Greenspan Floortime Approach can improve the core deficits of developmental challenges, like relating and communicating, and applies to children of all ages and developmental abilities. *It never assumes that there is a limit to what children with special needs can achieve, but rather continues to challenge each child to rise to his or her true developmental potential.*



C. Types of Play

Researchers at Princeton University's Baby Lab have determined that early learning is dependent on two factors: **the ability to detect and create patterns and our interest in people.**

Understanding how these work together helps us see how early experiences shape a child's learning process.

"For younger children, it can be as simple as rolling a ball across the floor, talking and singing to your baby, and cuddling. It's about showing the baby how fun it is to be with another person, and how communicating with others is rewarding. Live interaction is better for learning than passively watching TV, which is why some medical organizations now recommend no TV viewing for the first two years of life."

"The cognitive processes required for imaginary play are more demanding than sitting there looking at flash cards

Casey Lew-Williams, Assistant Professor, Princeton University

FLOORTIME WITH MOVEMENT - SENSORY PLAY

For many children play is all about being physical. Very young children enjoy playing chase games, twirling, rolling, tickling, and bouncing. This sensory play is great for Greenspan Floortime™, as it helps satisfy a child's sensory needs while also building positive relationships, improving attention and encouraging communication.

Through these physical activities children can become more focused and more able to interact. "Sensory play" uses physical activities that a child enjoys or seeks out, and turns them into interactive games by modulating the physical input. This means you start and stop the swing, push it high and then low, and fast then



slow, etc. all while enticing the child to communicate (looks, smiles, grabbing, or words). Ideally we are taking cues from the child to “go again,” go higher, etc.

FLOORTIME WITH AN OBJECT - OBJECT-BASED PLAY

Before children think about make believe, they stack blocks, roll cars back and forth, pop bubbles, and play simple hide-and-seek or treasure hunt games. When parents follow a child’s lead in object-based play, they can encourage back and forth communication and fun interactions by moving the toy or object the child is interested in around the play room. Modified treasure hunts are a good example of this type of play. Keep in mind that just because a child picks up a toy, say a car, they are not necessarily ready to go on a pretend trip. To them at this point, it is an object with wheels that move. They may recognize what it is, but that doesn’t mean they want to make a story with it.

FLOORTIME WITH IDEAS - SYMBOLIC PLAY

When children are ready to use words and express their imagination and creativity they start doing pretend play. Their toy dog barks, they become superheroes, or they act out other emotionally relevant experiences. This is symbolic play. This play can be simple or complex, but it is always a great way to build social communication skills. It uses many parts of the brain, explores emotions, and helps children understand language sequences and patterns. If you try doing pretend play with a child that quickly loses interest, either the child isn’t ready for it yet or you may not be following the child’s lead and interests so they develop the story.



Transitioning from one “Type of Play” to another

These three types of play—sensory, object-based, and symbolic—are not self-contained, each in its own box. As children mature and develop emotionally, one type flows into another. When children engage in each of these different types of play the play will become more complex. There are transitions. We see these transitions happen over time as children become more engaged in a particular type of play, and their play becomes more complex. The interactions become longer with more gestures and more communication.

When this happens we often see a natural transition from one type of play to the other. For example, a child who might be interacting more and more complexly within a sensory activity, like swinging will be taking your hands, nodding, smiling, pointing, and getting in a more complex longer back and forth interaction. As this happens they naturally become more coordinated and interested in many of the objects in the room. This happens because their regulatory system is now more organized, and they are developing the planning skills that aid in their curiosity and understanding of how to use different objects. We can support the child’s new interests with techniques described in the object-based play section to stimulate a fun, interactive activity.

However, sometimes children can have a difficult transition. If the child is fixed in sensory-based play, then we may have to create a challenge so that they become more aware of objects in the room and can “interact” with them while doing the sensory activity they prefer.

For example, let’s say a child is jumping on a trampoline and getting into a fun back and forth with us, grabbing our hands, smiling, starting, or stopping. That is all they want to do. But they are interacting with us a lot. Because of their degree of interaction, we now have an opportunity to try out new challenges. We can put cushions, stuffed animals, or balls on the trampoline in order to be playfully obstructive (a term about playfully being in the way, which we explore later). This encourages them to interact with us and the objects to continue to get bounces on the trampoline. If we do it in



a fun and playful manner, the child will see that this is not threatening or controlling. Instead the child can learn to manipulate the objects, add onto an already fun social activity, and gradually appreciate the fun of playing with objects.

This same type of challenge can be integrated into other sensory type activities. For instance, you could use various objects to playfully obstruct a child as they're trying to get on a swing or on the slide and make a fun game with the objects. These types of challenges should be used after the child is already enjoying interacting with the adult and has achieved a minimum of 5-10 back and forth circles of communication.

This type of “transitional” play is in line with our goal of always expanding the interaction. For example, if at first we challenge a child with just our own bodies, and they're overcoming the increasing challenges (coming to us, pulling our hands in, etc.) to get a tickle, a bounce, or a swing, then we can add in a new challenge that involves some of the objects in the room.

The same principle is true as children transition from object-based play to symbolic play. Sometimes the play naturally expands, and they start using objects, especially ones like stuffed animals, in a more symbolic way. All of a sudden, instead of throwing the stuffed animal around, they bring the stuffed animal onto the swing to ride next to them. Instead of lining up pretend food, they start handing it to people to eat. This natural transition occurs when a child gets into more complex and longer sequences of back and forth interactions utilizing objects in the room. Again, when this does not occur naturally, we need to challenge the child to expand, because sometimes when children engage in object-based play—manipulating balls, blocks, or stuffed animals around the room—they get stuck in comfortable, familiar patterns.

One way we can do this is to use the object, like a stuffed animal, as a character. Instead of the big plush teddy bear just lying on the trampoline, the bear (with our voice) now talks to the child and says, "Hey! That's my trampoline." We become the bear or dog or whatever. We challenge the child to see the object differently, as less of an object and more of a symbolic representation of a character from a story or scenario that we help to create.



It's important to remember, **we're not directing the child to play symbolically, and we're not teaching them what or how to play.** Instead we're challenging them to interact with us as we expand into the symbolic world. Sometimes the child will reject that and say, "Go away bear," in which case the bear should run away. Nonetheless, even if the child says, "Go away bear," or indicates gesturally that the bear needs to go away, they are now interacting with a symbolic bear versus just a big stuffy pillow.

Becoming a symbolic character yourself within play, even if the child is not yet doing that themselves, is an essential technique for challenging them up to the next level and type of play. You still need to respond to the child's wishes. If they don't want you to be the character or if they don't want the character to participate, we need to respect that.



D. Description of Regulatory Profiles

All children, and adults, experience the world differently, from both an emotional perspective and a sensory one. As a result they develop unique regulatory profiles with different personality traits, behaviors, and learning styles. When helping a child to learn, we need to adjust our methods to this unique profile. Dr. Greenspan figured out the best way to do this back in the 1970's and created the Greenspan Floortime Approach®, which recognizes every child as a unique individual.

The three main regulatory profiles (which include both sensory and emotional components) explored in this book are: the Sensitive child, the Seeking child, and the Passive child. These profiles present in different ways, and it is through a child's behavior and tendencies that we gather information about them.

To understand a child's profile, we need to think about each of the different sensory and emotional systems- how we hear, how we see, how we touch, even taste and smell as well as two other systems that are very important to understand. One is the **proprioceptive** system, which is how we perceive pressure feedback in our muscles and joints. It helps us understand where our bodies are in the space around us. The other is the **vestibular** system, which is how we process our movements and where our head is relative to the floor. It also gives a sense of where we are in space, but it does other things too, such as give us a sense of balance and control over how our eyes move. We also have to be aware of how a child is perceiving, and responding, to the **emotional components of an experience**. All of these systems, sensory and emotional, are meant to be used together.

*Many of the examples of different experiences and exercises we'll discuss later in the book define what a truly integrated experience is. In general it's one that includes using as many of our sensory systems as possible, in an organized and balanced manner, while also experiencing **social-emotional interaction**. This way all of the different parts of our brain are working together to perform one activity and have one meaningful experience, and that is a truly integrated experience.*



Let's start out with simple and standard definitions of these three profiles. Don't take these profiles too literally because we all have variations and unique systems. These 3 categories are just a way to help frame and think about the different possibilities in each of our regulatory systems. There are many complexities that can turn these definitions on their head and necessitate a different reaction to a child.

The Sensitive Child might be bothered by such factors as noise, busy areas with lots of people, certain kinds of touch (even the way food feels the mouth) or a place with lots signs and pictures. A restaurant or shopping mall might not be the best place for this child. Negative emotions are also a big trigger. With any one or more of these stimuli (usually a combination of a sensory and an emotional stimuli) the child could over-react. They could express this in many ways, such as try to move away from the area, have a tantrum, or find an isolated corner to find comfort in.

The Seeking child may not avoid a crowded room, and because their nervous systems need more stimuli, the child may set out to find some. People, furniture, things—may get touched, pushed aside, thrown, or bumped into. They may also use their own bodies to satisfy their needs by flapping their arms, walking on their toes, or running in circles. The child is trying to feel something, to give themselves sensation to “balance” their bodies and achieve a state on homeostasis or equilibrium.

The Passive child does not react much and this child tends not be organized enough to go out and seek what their bodies might need. Constitutionally, they may have low muscle tone, or poor coordination or motor planning abilities. As a result they don't seek out potentially beneficial and stimulating experiences. They don't express their need for stimuli. They are often the “easy” child because they seem to entertain themselves.

As these profiles show, we all can either under-react to stimuli, over-react to it, or seek it (or more often some combination of the three). Regulatory profiles are sometimes mixed. A child may be sensitive or over-reactive in one area, and in another area be under-reactive or seek specific stimulation. Above are just some of the common behaviors and tendencies that we watch for.



The over-reactive Sensitive Child

With a child who is **Sensitive**, their visual and auditory systems are often the most sensitive, and sometimes their tactile system too. This is because each of these systems takes in information from the environment that is too much for the child to handle or perhaps to organize. As we have indicated, busy, chaotic, or disorganized environments can lead them to be more avoidant, revved up, or reactive. Aversions, distractibility, and over-reactions are fairly common. Aggression, meltdowns, avoidance, and transition problems are some of the specific symptoms that we see.

Some children may be sensitive in a few areas, such as their visual and auditory systems, and at the same time seek stimulation in others. For example, a child may be overwhelmed by busy, large, disorganized environments with a lot of people and commotion. But instead of avoiding, hiding, withdrawing or shutting down, the child revs up and seeks stimulation, in particular seeking movement, pressure or touch. And there may be an emotional-seeking component too with the child trying to get you to respond to them, sometimes with inappropriate actions. They're under-stimulated in the areas they now seek and are trying to regulate themselves, but unfortunately they can't always find the right balance. A child with this particular mix of under-and over-reactive sensitivities tends to become hyperactive, trying to stimulate one or all of these systems to achieve a state of regulation or equilibrium. There are many other mixtures of these systems as well.

The under-reactive Seeking child

A child who is under-reactive **Seeking** can also be sensitive in a few of the above areas too. This child tries to balance out their regulatory system. When these children are in a seeking state, they may choose a more self-involved or isolated way to satisfy their needs. For example, if they're seeking visual input, they might organize the room in a certain way or look at a puzzle or book over and over. If they are seeking movement, they may run, spin, bounce, or swing independently. For tactile seeking they might go around touching lots of different objects, people or even their hair. This child is trying to organize themselves by giving themselves the stimulation that their body and brain tell them they need. Unfortunately when a child does this on their own, outside of a



social exchange, they are not developing long term regulatory skills that require emotional regulation as well. They can also develop maladaptive regulatory habits that drive them further into isolation.

When children perform these activities, it is less of a decision they are making and more of an itch they are trying to scratch. Certain activities will scratch that itch better than others. However, just like with an itch, you can over-scratch it and actually irritate (overstimulate) the system. Many children who seek movement or pressure can go past the point of equilibrium and over-stimulate themselves while getting it. We need to be very cautious about allowing a child to simply engage independently or in an overly intense sensory activity. The best way to make sure a child doesn't overdo it, and learns long term regulation, is to connect with a person around these sensory activities. The social interaction helps modulate the experience and makes sure the child associates the calming experience with a person.

(Unfortunately some sensory gyms and traditional sensory integration therapists provide sensory exposure activities without encouraging an emotionally meaningful and continuous social interaction to help the child figure out how to modulate the experience.)

Many children are seeking because they're under stimulated and under reactive in certain areas. However, not all children who are under reactive have the drive or the know how to seek out the type of stimulation they need.

The under-reactive Passive Child

Some children, whether because of having low muscle tone, poor motor planning and sequencing, or just being very much in their own worlds, are also under reactive, but Passive and withdrawn. This passivity leads them to not seek out sensory stimulation and often to look lethargic, disconnected, and uninterested. The three main areas where children tend to be under-reactive are: tactile for touch, vestibular for movement, proprioceptive for pressure, and positive emotions/positive affect. By providing children who are under reactive and passive with many of these stimulus within a fun, interactive, social exchange, we see that we can help alert their sensory and emotional system to become more engaged and interactive with the world around them.



What's really important to note here is that we all have different regulatory systems, and all of us need different types, different amounts of stimulation.

When we're able to identify the correct types of stimulation for a child who's more passive, withdrawn, and under reactive and provide them with this input within a fun social exchange, we see that they can become quite alert and begin to interact with their environment. With consistency this often leads them to be more proactive and assertive in meeting their own needs.

In addition to having an under stimulated sensory system, they can also have an under reactive or under stimulated emotional system. In order to help activate an under-reactive child, we need to provide them more stimulation in all the areas that they appear to be under reactive in.

In children with behavioral, learning, or developmental challenges, we see that these regulatory differences tend to be more profound in one particular area, or more often, a number of them. These differences in the way they perceive the world lead to more difficulty in learning from the rich social-emotional information around them. Greenspan Floortime™ is the only approach that looks at all of these different pieces- sensory and emotional regulation and how they're mediated by an individual's social-emotional development and communication.

Recently it was determined that developmental challenges like autism are at their core sensory motor issues. This means it's the nervous system that begins to be different in a child with these social-emotional communication deficits. It was Dr. Greenspan's finding that the delays in the social-emotional interactions and communication skills occur because there becomes a disconnect between the various sensory systems and the emotional systems, which drives communication. By addressing a child's sensory and emotional needs, and communication needs together we're working on everything in a truly integrated experience as opposed to isolating skills which tend not to be well generalized.



Section 2: How to “Follow the Lead”:

Different Regulatory Profiles and Types of Play

Chapter 4: The Sensitive Child

- a. Sensory Play
- b. Object-based Play
- c. Symbolic Play

Chapter 5: The Seeking Child

- d. Sensory Play
- e. Object-based Play
- f. Symbolic Play

Chapter 6: The Under-reactive/Passive Child

- g. Sensory Play
- h. Object-based Play
- i. Symbolic Play



A. The Sensitive Child

a. Sensory Play (Follow the Lead)

Following the lead of a sensitive child requires different types of emotional and sensory input when compared to working with an under-reactive or seeking child.

The most important thing when working with sensory and emotionally-sensitive children is to go slowly and be gradual with all of the different types of stimuli we offer, both emotional and sensory. When we join their activity, we must be very gradual as we introduce ourselves. Think of moving slowly like a snail or a turtle. This is especially important when they're already engaged with us. When they're engaged (connected with you) they're taking in and processing you and the "information" you're giving them. If your words, gestures, and movement are still being presented in a heightened manner it can be overwhelming. Sometimes we raise the enthusiasm in our voice and gestures to help get a child's attention. While that helps the child realize you're there, if you continue using that level of enthusiasm the child now

Example of Sensory-based Play with a sensitive child:

I was working with a little boy who was sensitive and as a result avoidant of other people and sensory input from them. When someone would get near his trampoline, go near him to give him a tickle, or pick him up in the air he would avoid you, scream or get upset if you tried to do it anyways. Even though he needed these some of these inputs, we had to be very cautious and offer them gradually. If I wanted to provide him with tactile input, like tickles, I had to use language like, "Here I come, I'm going to give you a tickle." Instead of just giving him the tickle, I had to go near him and show him that my hands were available for a tickle. If I didn't get a response, I would follow up with a light touch, instead of a full tickle. This showed him that I was following his lead and not going to take control and potentially overstimulate him. As a result he became far more accepting of my presence and allowed me to actually give him gentle tickles which evolved into a fun interactive game. I was very gradual and cautious and only provided the smallest amounts of sensory input so that he had the opportunity to let him show me whether he wanted more for less.



gets over loaded by the intensity of it all.

A sensitive child requires a high level of finesse. They may be more avoidant or averse to our participation at first. The louder, the more intense, or the faster we move (especially toward them if they're looking at us), the more reactive and averse they may be.

With sensory activities, a sensitive child may be very cautious and even avoidant of certain beneficial sensory inputs, whether going on a swing, being picked up, or stepping into a large room. The child may avoid, and be more rigid about participating or being exposed to these stimuli. As a result, the child may withdraw, react, avoid, or even rev up.

It is important to help a sensitive child, nonetheless, receive some of these sensory inputs—even ones that they may not seek out themselves because they've had negative or overloading experiences in the past doing them. Unfortunately having a negative experience, like feeling scared while being pushed down a slide, can make a child more sensitive to that experience in the future. To help a sensitive child **enjoy** these activities the key ingredients are as follows.

- 1) It is often a visual, auditory, tactile experience, or some combination of the three that they are sensitive to. We also may see gustatory (taste) and even olfactory (smell) sensitivities. When following the child's lead, we want to see what types of sensory activities they may not be seeking out, but may need and potentially enjoy. The most important types **children need can involve movement, pressure, and touch.**
- 2) When we perform these activities with a more sensitive child, the feeling of being in control of the activity is more important for the sensitive child than any other child we may work with. As a result, moving very slowly towards them, describing our actions, and providing them with very small doses of sensory input, like tickles or even just putting our hands underneath their arms very gently without actually lifting them off the floor, are good places to start.



Each of these sensory activities needs to be performed with a great level of ease, calmness, and subtlety, so the child always feels that they have a chance to respond **affirmatively or negatively**. If we see the child resist us in any way, it's important to back off immediately and let them know that we understand the communication. This will help them feel more in control. However, we may need to persist and gently offer the same or similar stimuli again a moment later.

- 3) Sensitive children will usually enjoy the sensation of being tossed in the air or even getting little tickles, if they feel it's their choice to receive it. In some situations, sensitive children may resist and avoid being hugged, unless they initiated it themselves. Oftentimes, when children initiate a hug, they'll hug us harder than we may expect. They really do need and enjoy the pressure that the hug provides.

The key ingredient in following the lead of a sensitive child is letting him or her feel in control, where we show the child that we can and want to provide what he or she needs, but will do it in a very gradual, calm and slow manner.

If your sensitive child still won't engage in a sensory play simply by you following their lead, then you should read the section on challenging a sensitive child in sensory play. For some children you have to do both simultaneously by being playfully obstructive.



b. Sensitive Child: Object-based Play (Follow the Lead)

A sensitive child may also be interested in playing with different objects. In fact, focusing on these objects can be a way of tuning out the world around them to decrease the level of stimulation they perceive. The objects may provide auditory input, like a certain sound to tune out noise around them, or certain visual input like pictures, letters, puzzles, or things that open and close so the child can visually focus in on the world right in front of them. Children can use this method is used to decrease the stimulation from a potentially large, noisy, or disorganizing environment. They can also be attracted to or “drawn into” these interests as a result of their sensitivities. Unfortunately, allowing this to continue in a self-involved manner can lead to maladaptive anti-social behaviors later on, and in some case creating what look like “addictions” to these interests.

Objects can still be beneficial interests to sensitive children, and we can use these interests to follow their lead. If a child is playing with a puzzle or a cause-and-effect toy, such as a Jack in the Box, we want to join and participate in the activity—even if they are using it in a more self-involved or repetitive manner. However, we have to be very gradual and calm as we join. If we move in very slowly so that the child can anticipate our presence, and if we respond affirmatively to any gestures or words, especially the negative ones, we will allow the child to feel in control. If we intrude, the opposite will happen. I've worked with many sensitive children that don't want me to participate with them, initially. Every time they look at me and make a negative noise, I respond by sitting down on the floor, backing off, or even leaving the room. The sensitive child needs to understand they are the ones in control at that moment, that their communication is being acknowledged, and that I'm not a threat. As a result, their sensitivity turns into confidence and a sense of control, and the child is no longer averse to my participation. In fact, they start to be amused by the fact that I run out of the room when I hear the grunt. Now, instead of being sensitive, which is often tied to certain levels of overstimulation and fear, they feel



empowered and confident from interacting and communicating with a new person in a typically self-involving activity.

As you'll learn later, there are small challenges in this example. Sometimes we have to follow the lead and challenge simultaneously.

Often the sensitive child will grunt, turn their back to us, or even push us away as soon as we approach. However, that response is still interacting and should be what the activity centers around. It is the communication that we need to respect. By helping a sensitive child feel in control, they become more open to us participating in any activity, and we can truly follow their lead.

Example of Object-based Play with a sensitive child:

A little boy was playing with markers, scribbling different colors on a piece of paper, and didn't want anybody to come near him. This was his way of being self-involved and tuning out the rest of the world. Unfortunately, it was a very socially isolating activity and, the more he practiced, the more socially-isolated he became. As I picked up my own marker, I used language to explain what I was about to do, and very gradually used my actions to show him. I said, "I want to come put my blue marker on your paper. Here I come," and slowly moved my blue marker towards this paper. But before I could make a mark, he said, "Eh," and I immediately backed off with an exaggerated affirmative response, affirming his wish for me to keep away.

As a result, he started to realize that he was being heard. He didn't smile yet but, each time I did this, he held his hand up and went, "Eh," to which I would have quite large responses as I backed off. I helped him understand that his small, negative responses led to my large responses, which he started looking for and getting quite a kick out of. As we continued this game, he was actually looking for me to come towards his paper with my marker. One time, he even held his paper up and offered it to me, then pulled it away and went "Eh" with a big smile on his face.

By doing this, the child was inviting me into his game, but not into the actual game of drawing. This was irrelevant to me. We were playing with the paper; it didn't matter how, only that he and I played together. The game was a bit of a teasing and keep-away game. What was beautiful was, as we continued playing, he let me participate in greater and greater ways, to the point of actually doing some of the drawing, and even holding the paper myself.



Whether playing with a puzzle or rolling a car back and forth, the sensitive child now welcomes us in becoming part of their activity—and world. We are no longer a threat. Eventually, the child chooses to join our world too.



c. Sensitive Child: Symbolic Play (Follow the Lead)

For a sensitive child, symbolic play can be very challenging. We saw that for a sensitive child involved with objects and sensory activities, we have to be cautious and gradual with our introduction. The same is true during symbolic play. If the child is playing with action figures, cars, or stuffed animals, we have to be very gradual with our introduction and may even start playing right next to them with our own characters or cars.

Examples of Positive Things to Say

- **“Wow! Look at how fast your car is going!”**
- **“ Ooh, you look like a great cook!”**
- “ I love your castle; can I come in?”**
- “I’m going to make a building too!”**

Many children whose sensitivities make them averse to other people's participation in their symbolic world need to know we will not take over and direct the play. To show them this we can start having fun on our own. If we play out our similar story next to them and make it sound fun and interesting, it allows them to feel comfortable with our physical presence since we are not being intrusive.

Gradually we can use our verbal presence to become more involved in their play. For instance, our character may drive very slowly up to their car or into their town. As we do this, we explain this by using many simple statements, and we can see if the sensitive child accepts us into their world. If they push us away and tell us no, then we drive back to our town and have our own fun again. Each exchange helps the child feel more in control and able to express their- which we listen to and acknowledge.

We are often pushed away at first. It may appear that they are rejecting or avoiding us but, in either case, it is important to acknowledge their reaction and let them feel in control. If we are intrusive or forceful, it will be much harder for the child to want us to become part of their play. If we respect the child’s communication, we will see that the interaction can begin around



their aversion to our involvement. The child may even tell us what to do in our own play scenario, such as where to go or where to sit.

Example of Symbolic play with a sensitive child:

A boy who loved Star Wars came to see me at my office. He was very used to playing on his own and he was avoidant of other people. He wouldn't let anybody get involved with him. He would end up playing with his Star Wars figurines in his own head, by himself for hours on end.

Even though this seemed to be his preference, this child was very sensitive and needed the social interaction both to balance out his preference of isolation, and to work on his rigidity. The main reason he chose to be isolated and play on his own, was that he didn't like to be flexible. He didn't like to have to adapt and adjust to some of the social needs of the other person. This was one of his biggest challenges, and limitations.

To start with, I had to do some parallel play with him. When he was playing on his own, I would ask to participate in his play and he would keep saying "No". So I sat down and started playing with my own Star Wars figurines, creating my own little drama that he could hear and see. I was trying to establish would not become intrusive. I was going to let him be in control during a time where he's allowed to be in control.

.As our parallel play continued, he became more interested in what I was doing. My characters were fighting, they're blowing things up and they were running around. Because my characters adventures were interesting, and non-intrusive, he actually started moving closer and closer, even looking and asking questions about what they were doing. This allowed us to get into a small interaction around the activity.

I still needed to challenge him just a little bit, because even sharing his attention and engaging with me was a difficult for him. The entire time, though, I was following his lead: by letting him be the one to show interest in me as I showed him that I was there to be playful, and not intrusive or controlling. Focusing on fun and listening to him, especially if he said no, let me follow his lead and let him feel he was in control.

Developing this kind of interaction with a child who is sensitive is a slow and gradual process. However, once the transition occurs and the child wants to participate with you, then you can very



slowly begin to use some of the more challenging techniques, but not until then.

Eventually, by following his lead, making it fun and on his terms where he gets to be in control, and being available to him, he allowed me to become one of the bad guys in his story. Again, I followed his lead and quickly became one. And my bad guy did what bad guys are supposed to do: fight the good guys and ultimately lose. The more fun he had and the more he felt he in control, the more he let me to participate in his game. Once he saw that I was no longer a threat, he became open to challenges and to being more flexible and adaptable.

For a sensitive child, this is the most important step: helping him to decide to let us become part of his world and part of his play. Once this happens, then we can move on to the more challenging and expanding steps of Greenspan Floortime. Unfortunately, most people try to challenge and try and expand too rapidly with a sensitive child, causing the child to not want to participate with them.

Even though they are not allowing us into their play/world, they are still communicating with us. We need to respect and respond to this communication and persist with trying to follow their lead. It is here that following the lead and challenging a sensitive child happen somewhat at the same time. Often, just our involvement is a challenge to a sensitive child. When they push us away or resist our participation, we have to follow their lead by listening and responding affirmatively, but we also have to come back and try again. If they told us to go away, leave the room, or play in the corner by ourselves, we need to do that to show we're listening. But we then challenge them by coming back a few seconds later. We should come back gently and gradually with our car, truck or animal and try to reintroduce ourselves by following their lead in their storyline.

The most important principles to use here are

- **Supportive and positive language,**
- Acknowledgement of what the child is doing in a very fun way, and
- Enthusiasm about his or her toys and characters.



Our actions will help the child know that we are interested in what they are doing versus trying to take over control. Sometimes, we may not be able to become part of the play at first and there may be two separate play scenarios going on. However, if the child lets us play our own story next to their storyline, this is still participation and interaction. We can still challenge, ideally as if the child were allowing us to be part of the play scenario, by asking questions and getting them to give us directions, even though our town or play scenario is separate. Having them direct what our character does or where our car goes lets the child feel in control and lets them communicate and think as if he or she had already allowed us into the story.



B. The Seeking Child

a. Sensory Play (Follow the Lead)

Following the lead of a child who is sensory-seeking involves identifying what types of sensory stimuli he or she is trying to seek out. Often, the child’s own behaviors, which may seem aimless or self-stimulatory, are serving the purpose of stimulating his or her sensory and nervous system. These behaviors may involve moving the body in certain

patterns, such as running back and forth, spinning in circles, flapping hands, or waving hands in front of the eyes. Each of these behaviors satisfies a specific type of sensory need. It's important to identify what that is and try to provide it to the child.

Key Points to Remember

- Make sure you are moving with the child
- Use comments to explain your actions as you join the child
- You have to use actions and language within the play
- Have fun before you move onto challenging

The main goal of following the lead is to motivate a child to engage, and the right sensory stimulation is an essential ingredient. If we are joining in a sensory activity, like a child bouncing on a trampoline, we need to make sure that we're helping him or her receive the sensory input while encouraging interaction with us. A simple response may do, such as a smile from the child to indicate we should toss them in the air one more time. Or we may get something more purposeful, such as the child giving us his or her hands or doing something more deliberate and intentional.

As already mentioned, when we start to follow the lead, it often happens simultaneously with challenging. The challenge we provide needs to be based on encouraging interaction. Usually, children who are performing more sensory-based activities are still working on organizing their bodies and gestural communication. Here, we are trying to stimulate the creation of a more physical interaction, including gesturing.



Sometime we have to challenge a child when following their lead. There are two fundamental types of challenges that we can use in sensory activities. **Playful obstruction** is one type that is appropriate for children who are sensory seeking leading to avoidance or self-involvement.

- If a child is seeking sensory stimuli and doing it in a more independent or isolated manner, it is important that we use the technique of **playful obstruction**. This involves getting in the child's way and encouraging interaction. We create an obstacle that prevents him or her from providing the sensory stimuli to themselves. If the child is bouncing on the trampoline, we may step on it and get in the way of bouncing. The child would look at us and we may start bouncing along, or he or she may push us off the trampoline to bounce independently again. By getting in the way—preventing him or her from bouncing in an isolated and independent manner—we encourage an interaction. Whether a child wants us to join and help, or pushes us off, we now have an interaction.

Once this is established, we must aim for a more complex interaction. Ideally, we go from simple responses to ones that are more complex, leading to more circles of communication to solve the physical problem that we present. . Every time the child performs some sort of interaction, **we must have some sort of response** that recognizes the child's intent but does not necessarily complete the child's goal. This positive response is how we continue to follow the lead while being involved in an interaction. The end result is a much longer chain of communication expanding the activity past its original one or two circles of interaction. We start simple and expand the activity to more and more circles, making the communication pattern more complex. Early adult-child physical interactive patterns are the basis for later social patterns.

One of the crucial key elements when working with children on these types of sensory-based activities is that we have to be **responsive to every movement and gesture they provide us with**. Even if we don't think the gesture is the communication we're



looking for, we still want to help them understand that even their subtle communication and gestures are purposeful and meaningful. The little communication will lead to bigger communication.

However, if we ignore the little communication or try and teach sensory-seeking children use our type of communication, then we will be discouraging their own thinking process and creating a reliance on prompts, which does not encourage thinking.

If a child realizes that they are enjoying the experience and wants us to continue to be involved—for example, when we get on the trampoline, the child enjoys jumping together and wants us to help him or her jump higher. We should help them,

following their lead and making it fun to participate with us. After a few times of jumping high, instead of being playfully obstructive by getting in the way, we need to do the opposite by using a technique called ‘playing dumb’. This can only be used when a child wants something from us. If they want to be tossed in the air, pushed on the swing, or receive another tickle, ‘playing dumb’ allows us to expand the interaction by challenging the child to interact with us. We pretend we don't know exactly what he or she wants or how to do it (we will get more into this technique in the challenging sections). Even though this is a description of a challenge, and not following the lead, in this example you can see how challenging and following the lead have to sometimes be used in quick succession.

Example of Sensory Play with a seeking child:

Children who are sensory seeking may ignore us as they are providing sensory input to themselves. To start an interaction with a child jumping on a trampoline, we may start by getting on the trampoline ourselves. This can show the child we are there to join them, and it can also inhibit the child's ability to jump independently. They can choose to jump with us—in which case, we may help the child jump higher than they naturally would alone, which would also encourage the child to come back to us for more jumps—or they could choose the opposite response, leading us off the trampoline. We then need to move off the trampoline, but in doing so encourage as many steps of communication as possible. If the child gives us a little push, we only move a little bit away. If they give us a nudge, we move one of our feet off the trampoline while the other one stays on.



For example, if a child wants us to toss them in the air, the best thing we can do is hold out our hands, (following their lead and acknowledging their need. Then they have to come to us, or even pull us down to get the toss in the air. Where we're essentially pretending, "**Here are our hands (following the lead), but we don't know what to do with them (challenging)**," the child has to show us where our hands are supposed to go, thereby encouraging interaction and communication. This can be taken even further where, as soon as the child takes our hands and puts them under his or her armpits, we still don't lift the child in the air but, instead, they have to look at us and maybe even shake our arms to indicate we are supposed to lift them up. Which each of the gestures the child uses to show us what they want we have to respond positively, but not fulfill their need all the way. However, we do need to make sure they don't get frustrated and that they achieve success while still enjoying the process.

Every additional step that the child has to figure out about how to perform the social activity requires a circle of communication. If we respond to each gesture and encourage him or her to expand, we are encouraging communication and interaction at greater and greater levels. Remember: the most important principle while using this technique is that we have to be responsive to even the subtle communicative gestures that the child uses. We are following their lead by responding to their communication. If we ignore or miss some of the more subtle communications, it is unlikely that the child will use larger ones. The more we are in tune with the child's subtle communication we are, the stronger their overall communication will become because of our feedback. Without the child getting some level of positive feedback of moving in the right direction, it will be difficult for them to feel encouraged and confident to go even further. That is the purpose of our response: to give the child positive feedback without saying that they have done enough to satisfy their goal.



Seeking Child: Object-based Play (Follow the Lead)

When it comes to following the lead of a Seeking child, regardless of level of play, we have to be prepared to be physical and move our bodies.

After moving on from the sensory-based play, which is really about running, jumping, bouncing, and swinging, then the child gets interested in objects. These objects, nonetheless—whether they are balls, stuffed animals, or other objects in a play environment—can and should still facilitate movement and sensory experiences. The child may want to watch the object roll or move or bounce, or move their body while playing with the object.

Key Points to Remember

- Make sure you are moving with the child
- Use comments to explain your actions as you join the child
- You have to use actions and language within the play
- Have fun before you move onto challenging

A child who is playing purely for the purpose of seeking stimulation- watching the balls roll and bounce and move- needs that stimulation, but ultimately the child needs to connect it to a social exchange so that they can move past that behavior. The first step for us is to join what the child is doing, i.e. throwing the balls. As we do this, we may also mildly challenge them to interact with us and respond to what we’re doing with the balls. Again, going from following the lead to challenging can sometimes happen quickly as in this example.

For a child who is seeking we want to encourage them to choose to organize their body’s movement themselves so they can participate in a social interaction and communicate. If we tell them or show them what to do, then we are doing the planning for them. Planning is often the hardest part of organizing one’s body and movements. And planning is what many seeking children struggle with. However, if they figure out how to effectively move their own body to participate in a social activity, like getting the ball from us, then they are doing all the thinking. It’s our job to entice them with warm and encouraging affect and to find the “just right challenge” that they can be successful with.



Example of Object-based Play with a seeking child

It's important to understand that, with object-based play, the child is often manipulating an object and moving it around the room while using their motor and visual systems to interact with it, **and with us**. They are not trying to tell a story.

For example, if we have a sensory-seeking child who may want to throw balls all over the place, we may start throwing balls all over the place ourselves, but with a certain rhythm and description of our own actions. Instead of just picking up a ball and throwing it randomly, we can explain and describe where we're going to throw the ball as the child is throwing theirs. The child sees that we're throwing ours behind the shelf, then under the couch, or maybe even placing it underneath some cushions. After each of our throws we pause, looking to see how the child is responding. Our changes in the placement of the ball should be gradual, but also allow the child to get the ball by moving in fun way, like climbing. This will support their sensory needs while also challenging them to coordinate and organize their movements while encouraging them to socially interact.



Seeking Child: Symbolic Play (Follow the Lead)

When we get into symbolic play with a seeking child, they may run, jump, crash and move around the room, but now they will be doing it with some of their favorite action figures, cars, airplanes, stuffed animals, or as a character in a story. It's important that we, again, try to meet the child at his or her speed and physical level with similar toys or characters. If they fly an airplane around the room, our airplane flies across the room. As we fly it, we enthusiastically describe our actions to show the child that we're there to join them both physically and symbolically.

Key Points to Remember

- Be character- talk in first person.
- Comment on what you're character is physically doing
- Only ask questions some of the time
- Pause after you comment or question to allow for a response
- You have to use actions and language within the play
- Have fun before you move onto challenging

They may also be seeking emotional feedback and doing things that center around emotional themes they are experiencing, like anger or frustration. Their character may be more physical/aggressive in the play and they want to act out a fight sequence, or destroy your character's town. Similar acceptance and following their lead must take place.

In both scenarios we want to make sure the child doesn't rev up too much, and at times we may need to use a calm voice and energy to slow things down.

We simply need to find the right inroads into the child's creative world—if he or she is an airplane, so are we- or a helicopter, GI Joe, or a superhero (or supervillain). The key here is using gestures, language and actions to describe what we're doing as we move around the room with the child. As we start to see shared attention, engagement, and basic interaction from the child, then we can begin to challenge and gently expand by doing something a little different to gently expand or by asking questions. As the child begins to have fun with us, then following the lead can quickly flow into challenging.



Example of Symbolic Play with a seeking child:

For a seeking child, many of the same principles apply from other versions of symbolic play, however, we have to be much more physically active. An example of this is when I was playing on the swing with a little boy. He was still enjoying the sensation of the swing, but he was developmentally ready to get into pretend play. This play was not easy for him to engage in at first. So I challenged him a little bit to get into the symbolic world, while following his lead around providing him sensory input and the ideas he created. As he was on the swing, I continued to push the swing and give him that sensory input. *Some children may jump right on the swing and want to pretend they are going on a special journey. The same principles apply.*

When I stopped the swing to make sure there was an interaction, I encouraged him to expand the play into the symbolic world. Using a mild challenge I asked him what the swing was, and where we were going. Ultimately, the swing became an airplane and we flew to the beach, one of his favorite places. By **following his lead and engaging around the swing**, I helped him to be motivated to explore the symbolic world. However, if I had tried to direct him to sitting on the floor or playing in a more stationary environment with action figures and cars, he would have been far less open and willing to participate, and possibly resistant.

Ideally, when following the lead of a seeking child, we have to join their sensory activity and then challenge them just a little bit to get into the symbolic world. Once they do this a few times, they usually enjoy pretending to go somewhere on the swing. One day it will be an airplane; another time it's a helicopter, a car or a boat, and they may go different places each time. The key is making sure we continue to follow their lead by doing the sensory activities they enjoy, whether it is running around, swinging, bouncing, or crashing.



C. The Under-reactive/Passive Child

a. Sensory Play (Follow the Lead)

For an **under-reactive and passive child** engaging in sensory-based play one of the most important things to note is that they still need sensory stimulation, but for various reasons, are unable to overtly show us they need it or seek it out themselves. The child may have poor motor planning and sequencing, and not know how to get the stimulation, or may just be too passive and withdrawn in their own world. In addition, the child may have been taught that they are not allowed to seek out that sensory stimulation, i.e. it is a learned passivity.

The three most important types of sensory stimulation that under-reactive and passive children often need are movement (stimulation of the vestibular system), pressure (proprioceptive stimulation), and touch (tactile stimulation). Children often respond very well to receiving these types of stimulation, especially in a controlled and organized fashion versus one that is overly intense and erratic (i.e. out of their control). Even a passive child gives us indicators showing what they need. For example, a child laying on the floor may need more touch or pressure. Giving them tickles or squishes should illicit a smile or other positive response.

Sensory input should always be combined with high amounts of emotional stimulation. Our voices and gestures

Examples of Emotionally Stimulating things to say before you give a child sensory input:

- **“Here I come, I’m going to give you a tickle!”**

- **“Uh oh, if you’re going to lay down I’m going to come squish you... Here... I... Come!”**

- **“I’m going to toss you in the air. Here I come!”**

- **“Ready, set..... Go!” or “1, 2...3!”**

Make sounds like “Oohh” and “Aahh” when your child does something purposeful

- **Exaggerate your facial expressions**

- **Be melodramatic in a silly and playful manner**

- **Exaggerate your gestures and movements**



can make a big impact—we can alert a child's their nervous system through these types of games. The more alert they become the less they operate in a passive manner.

Although we want to be enthusiastic and interesting, **we don't have to be loud**. We should describe our actions and give them the opportunity to anticipate receiving the positive sensory stimulation we're about to give them. While doing this we also need to be aware of children's responses: smiling, moving toward us or away, wincing, pulling back, etc.

This is still considered following their lead because we're identifying what they need and we provide it to them because they themselves are unable to initiate it or show us.

With more passive and withdrawn or lethargic children, we often have difficulty following their lead because they may just want to lie on the floor and do nothing. In reality, that's not their true desire; it's simply what's easiest to do at that moment. Often their true desire is to be socially and emotionally engaged, interacting and having fun, and even receiving some of these sensory-based activities. When we see a passive or withdrawn child engage in the above activities we see new levels of enjoyment that involve smiling and laughing, and a greater emotional connection. If we find and consistently provide the right balance of sensory and emotional input for a child, they will have fun, smile, and be happier. They will also be more aware of the world around them. But we need to know how to use these sensory activities and turn them into interactions. By giving the child sensory stimulation, we are still following their lead. This is especially true if we are creating interaction and encouraging the child to be more proactive and assertive in getting more of that stimulation.

For example, if they are lying on the ground being passive, we could lie down next to the child or even gently on top. Providing proprioceptive stimulation (pressure) is still joining and following the child's lead while providing sensory stimulation that their body may need and enjoy. This could also turn into a tickle game, providing tactile stimulation instead of proprioceptive stimulation.



The key element with all of these activities is creating interaction so that the child gets to be assertive with their gestures, it is not just about providing high doses of stimulation to wake them up. Often, if children feel the stimulation is overly intense or out of their control, they might resist or become avoidant. I have seen instances of children getting tickled where the tickles are too intense and out of their control, leading them to push the adult's hands away. Sometimes, even a mild tickle can lead to this reaction. We need to be sensitive and have them feel in control of the activity. Remember: we're trying to follow their lead, NOT do what we want to do. That means finding the **type, speed, and intensity** of the sensory input they want, need, and enjoy. **We have to watch and listen to them carefully as we try to give them what they need.**

If we experience a situation with a child who is averse or avoidant to the sensory stimulation that we think they need, then that avoidance can become the activity. For example, if they push us away or roll away from us, then we create the interaction while still listening to the child's rejections. We playfully pull back, withdraw ourselves, and then gently pursue again.

We may never actually tickle the child again. Because we want to give

When approaching the child use language like,

- "Uh-uh, you just rolled away from me."
- "I want to come give you another tickle."
- "Here I come..."

the child plenty of time to anticipate it, see that it's coming, and, if they want, even push our hand away before it touches them, the activity becomes about their anticipation, not the tickle. We give the child the opportunity to be in control of the activity and feel that we are following their lead. To do this, we must approach very slowly and watch closely for their cues. It's here that again we challenge simultaneously as we follow the lead. Turning a little tickle game into a playful chase game when the child pushes you away gives the child the emotional input they need. If done correctly an avoidant child quickly becomes engaged and wants to keep playing.



If the child exhibits this more avoidant/averse response then this may mean the child is not truly a passive under-reactive child, but instead a sensitive child who has withdrawn and shut down. If this is the case please use the techniques from the sensitive child section of the manual.



b. Passive Child: Object-based Play (Follow the Lead)

Creating an interaction around an object makes that object more fun for children, and also helps further their communication skills. Under-reactive, passive, and withdrawn children tend to lie on the floor and rolling a train or car back and forth, or watch a ball roll or spin. We need to understand what they are trying to “satisfy” and why they are performing that action with this object. Sometimes, it is still very sensory-based need. If they're watching a car roll back and forth, and there doesn't seem to be an elaborate creative drama occurring, then their car itself is most likely more of a sensory stimulus. In this case the child may like watching the car move/ roll which gently stimulates the same part of their sensory system as swinging, their vestibular system. However, it's less intense and often less fully satisfying.

Watching something roll is a very inefficient, but nonetheless mildly satisfying, form of movement. It stimulates our vestibular nerve through our visual system. It's a way of stimulating our vestibular system, but moving our bodies on a swing or running can be far more effective and efficient. Watching something move is like taking a sip of water instead of taking a big gulp when we're thirsty. In cases like these, we need to identify the sensory stimulation a child needs and try to help them get it within a social activity the same or similar object. We could pick up our own car and roll it faster, helping them understand that we can be part of the activity and help provide what they're looking for in a more fun, stimulating, and effective manner.

By helping the child connect with us using the object in an emotional and sensory stimulating activity, we satisfy his or her needs better. The child will start to connect more with us and others, while meeting their different needs. **Another important and necessary benefit of our participation is that people will become associated with satisfaction, comfort, and regulation, instead of only objects providing those feelings.** In these scenarios, whether the child rolls a car back and forth, or just taps an object on their hand, adults need to get involved in the same



activity with the child so that they receive sensory and emotional stimulation through social exchanges.

There are times that a child may ignore us if we roll our own car back and forth because they have one of their own. Why look at ours? Instead, asking the child if we can play with theirs may be necessary. If they give it to us, then we could roll it faster or further and the child can enjoy the increase in stimulation. The child may also need to move to go after it. This results in an activity where we follow their lead and simultaneously create a social interaction. However, it does not always go that smoothly. Often, rather than give us the toy they're playing with, children will still ignore us. They'll pretend we don't exist because they're perfectly happy playing with a toy or object on their own. In a scenario like this, it's necessary to combine being playfully obstructive—a type of challenge we'll get into more in the next section—with following their lead and being very enticing and animated.

In the scenario with the car, there would have been no interactions if we did not say and do something. As we say it and follow through with the action, we see that children can be very responsive. We begin by using language with high effect and warmth playfully saying, "Oh boy, I want to see that car, too. Here I come!" The child has one of two options:

1) Offer us the toy, which only happens sometimes and is not necessarily a good thing

Being Playfully Obstructive:

It is here in following the lead that we use the "challenge" technique of being playfully obstructive at the same time, and make sure we are being **playful** the entire time. For example, if a child is rolling a car back and forth in a passive and socially withdrawn manner, it may be necessary for us to follow his or her lead and join the activity by saying things like, "Oh boy, I really want to see that car. Here I come! I'm going to come play with that car, too." The goal is not to take the car from them, but to trigger some sort of response and interaction with the child. (Note: All Greenspan Floortime-based activities should increase interaction. If at first there is no interaction, we just strive to create a simple interaction like getting a smile in response to something we just did. If there are simple interactions, we then strive to create ones that are more complex.)



since it may be a sign of learned compliance and not true interest, or

2) Resist giving us the toy by ignoring us, hiding it, or taking it away, which can actually lead to a fun game. Even though the child doesn't allow us to play with it, they're still communicating with us explicitly when they say, "No, it's my toy!" As this interaction continues, we may retreat and say, "Oh fine, I guess I can't get it." If we think about what has just been accomplished, we have now reinforced the child's sense of control. Stating that we're not going to take their toy, and responding to their communication, thereby reinforcing it.

Even a 'no' is communication. However, we don't stop there. We may continue with the activity by using similar language and continuing to go after the child in a very playful manner. "Oh, gee, that is such a cool car. I sure would like to play with it." Of course there is no need to do that.

Simple interactions involve only a few back and forth circles of interactions involving gestures such as:

- Smile for a smile, or
- reaching and taking a toy from our hand

Complex interactions involve many steps often combining gestures and words to accomplish social goals such as steps to get a toy:

- Taking us by the hand, walking us to the shelf, pointing to the toy, pushing our arm toward the toy, and possibly even saying "up" or something to indicate what they want.

This initial interaction can result in a fun chase or keep-away game, helping them feel in control of the playful interaction. We can accomplish multiple goals of participating with the child using their object, while helping them feel in control and communicate all within one activity. When playing these games children who are withdrawn and passive end up feeling more assertive and often come out of their shells, even if it seems that all they're doing is saying "no" and withholding their toy. Remember one of the best things we can do for a passive child is help them feel more in control and assertive with their communication.



c. Passive Child: Symbolic Play (Follow the Lead)

Many children, even as adolescents, can struggle with the symbolic world. Sometimes, they prefer to be passive and receive information by watching TV, playing video games, or reading books. While these pursuits tend to involve some creativity and symbolism, the child is not the one producing the ideas. It is very important that, as a part of our set of goals, all children develop the ability to express themselves symbolically—especially within the creative, play-based realm.

Symbolic Play Reminders

- Be a character- talk in first person.
- Comment on what you're character is physically doing
- Only ask questions some of the time
- Pause after you comment or question to allow for a response
- You have to use actions and language within the play
- Have fun before you move onto challenging

Even though we want to follow the child's lead, sometimes it may not lead to the activities that are most beneficial. If a child's lead is to sit and watch TV, it's not going to be developmentally beneficial to sit and watch TV with them. This will not foster our goals of improving communication and thinking, and developing/deepening relationships.

Sometimes, we will need to challenge children who are under-reactive and passive at the same time we are following their lead. We only want to challenge them to enter the symbolic world once they've already exhibited the potential for symbolic communication. This means that we do not push non-verbal children into pretend play or push them to use language to reach higher and higher levels of symbolic communication if they're not ready. Instead, passive and withdrawn children may need a little support in sharing the pretend, creative world.



Example of Symbolic Play with a passive child:

Recently I worked with a child who liked super-heroes. His preference was to watch Ironman and Thor in cartoon form or read comics about them.

So to follow his lead at the symbolic level, I used his interest in them to help him develop stories. Creating his own stories was difficult for him and he did not usually initiate this. Since he was passive and withdrawn, but had language skills, we could create an environment that was supportive of exploring these new ideas. This meant making certain materials available in the room, such as pictures or action figures of his favorite characters in the room, while also limiting the availability of other activities that he may have been more comfortable doing repetitively. If his preference was reading a book, we would make sure to start in a more physical environment. With his first, self-involved, choice no longer available, we had to think of something else. Using action figures or pictures were there instead for us to expand and create our own symbolic dramas.

If a child isn't interested in the action figures then that's ok too. We still follow his lead, but we can, and should, organize the environment to expand his thinking.

It is important to note that this example with superheroes is still an example of following the child's lead. We don't force the child to play with characters or ideas that they are disinterested in, but rather use what we know the child likes—based on previous knowledge or conversations—to help them become more creative. By changing the environment, limiting access to activities that may be more repetitive and familiar, and creating opportunities for things that are new and symbolic, we are following the child's lead and challenging them at the same time. Ultimately, we need to challenge some children to get into these creative and symbolic worlds, especially those who are passive and withdrawn, or even rigid and concrete.

As we make these interests available, it is important for us to make comments and statements about what our superhero or character is going to do and try to elicit a response from the child. They may be very uncertain as to which direction this story and creative drama can go, or they may choose a very formulaic or memorized script that they have seen before. In either case, it is our



goal again to encourage new creative ideas and not fall into repetitive patterns. When using our language, we need to communicate within the first person—that is, become our own character. We are no longer Mom, Dad, or therapist, but instead Thor, Ironman, Thomas the Tank Engine, or whoever it is that appeals to the child. Using the word ‘I’ instead of speaking in the third person about what Thor is doing helps the child connect with the creative world versus being an outside participant.



Section 3: Challenge and Expand

Different Regulatory Profiles and Types of Play

Chapter 7: The Sensitive Child

- a. Sensory Play
- b. Object-based Play
- c. Symbolic Play

Chapter 8: The Seeking Child

- d. Sensory Play
- e. Object-based Play
- f. Symbolic Play

Chapter 9: The Under-reactive/Passive Child

- g. Sensory Play
- h. Object-based Play
- i. Symbolic Play



A. The Sensitive Child

a. Sensory Play (Challenge and Expand)

When challenging and expanding within sensory-based activities for a sensitive child, we have to be very cautious. A sensitive child will be quick to resist or avoid a suggested activity if it disrupts what he or she is doing. For instance, if we push the child on a swing or give them little tickles, the goal is to create an interaction and entice a response by stopping the stimuli.

The challenge we're creating would be us briefly pausing the activity, and then pulling back and getting ready to do it again.

However, many children, who are very sensitive tend to react negatively as soon as they perceive the challenge or as soon as we stop providing that positive input. As a result, we have to be very cautious when we stop providing the input. We need to be ready to quickly provide it again so that the child perceives the challenge as a very, very small change, a momentary pause in the swing vs a complete and sustained stop.

An example is pushing a child on a swing who is enjoys the movement, vestibular input. If we pause the swings movement, then we need to make ourselves immediately available to start pushing it again. We may let go of the ropes, but then immediately put our hands back on them, look at the child with a big smile on our face, and nod our head. We could say, "Are you ready to go again? Here we go!" before pulling the swing into the air. We help the child **anticipate** that the swing is getting ready to go again by pausing for just a second and looking for a smile or other reaction

Being Playfully Obstructive:

If a child is being avoidant, it may be necessary for us to join the activity and challenge at the same time. The goal is not restrict them or become overly intrusive, but instead to trigger some sort of response and interaction with the child. By playfully getting in front of them, playfully getting in their way achieving their goal, or chasing after them you can encourage a response. **These actions must be preempted with playful language describing your actions.**



The overall theme when working with a sensitive child is to be very gradual and create very small challenges that are appropriate for this type of child. In fact, ideally the child doesn't even realize that they're experiencing actual challenges. There may just be a pause or we might move our hands a few inches away, requiring the child to wiggle around to get another tickle or a toss in the air. These "challenges" should seem like part of the fun activity. In this way the child can learn to handle and overcome them. Doing this requires anticipating what the child wants and figuring out how to actually break the activity down into very small challenges.

These challenges are much smaller than we might provide to another child who is less sensitive. With

another child, we may be able to let go of the swing entirely. In response, they might shake the ropes or look at us to overcome the challenge with more complex gestures. A sensitive child may give us a smile or nod as we pull the swing again without fully stopping.

Example of Sensory-based Play with a sensitive child:

I was working with a little boy who was sensitive and as a result avoidant of other people. As a result when you would get near his trampoline, go near him to give me tickle or pick him up in the air he would avoid you, scream or get upset if you tried to do it anyways. Even though he needed some of these inputs, and would even give them to himself, we had to be very cautious and gradual in offering them to him. **I had to challenge him to allow me to be part of his world. If I was going to try and provide him with tactile input, like tickles, I had to use language like, "here I come, I'm going to give you a tickle."** Instead of just giving him the tickle I had to go near him and show him that my hands were available for a tickle. If that didn't get a response I would follow up with a light touch, instead of a real tickle. This showed him that I was following his lead and not going to take control potentially overstimulating him. **It also helped expand the interaction and continue to challenge.** As a result he became far more accepting of my presence and allowed me to actually give him tickles, and even pick him up, which expanded into a fun interactive game. I was being very gradual and cautious and only providing of the smallest amounts of sensory input to let him show me whether he wanted more for less.



In addition to being cautious about how much complex language we use, we should also be cautious about how much physical stimulation we provide. Giving too much stimuli can overwhelm a sensitive child. As we interact with them and create a challenge, we have to be very slow and soft with both the enjoyable input (our affect and the swinging) and the challenge (pausing).

Again, the key ingredient is to be **gradual and subtle**. The challenges have to be almost imperceptible that the child doesn't even realize they are experiencing actual challenges. The small challenges can build up to larger and larger ones. If the activity is fun and the child is feeling success from overcoming the small challenge, we can *very* gradually expand as the child becomes more capable of overcoming larger challenges after a session or possibly multiple sessions.



b. Sensitive Child: Object-based Play (Challenge and Expand)

Challenging a sensitive child who is playing with an object in a non-symbolic manner requires many of the same principles as challenging a child who might be involved in sensory play. The two main types of challenge of playful obstruction and playing dumb still apply here. If the child is using the object in a more avoidant or self-involved manner, we need to use playful obstruction. This may involve the child rolling a car back and forth, or using an object in a self-stimulatory sensory manner—such as pushing a button over and over, rolling beads on a track, and things of that nature.

However, if the child is more involved with us and is interested in using the object *with* us, or wants us to help him or her get the object, we can create play around the object by using the technique of playing dumb and pretending we either don't know how to get the object, or know how to use it in the way it was intended.

Playing Dumb:

When a child is involved with us, or wants us to do something for them, playing dumb is an effective way of challenging and expanding. To do so means that we pretend we don't know how to do what the child wants. Or if they are expecting us to do something, we do it wrong in a silly or new way. This encourages the child to give us more circles of communication if they are trying to correct us or show us what they want.

Teaching the child how to use the object is NEVER the goal. Instead we need to do something different with it to encourage a new thought process and response from the child. It may simply involve them moving further across the room to get the object back from a new place. By asking for the object and subtly expanding on what's already happening in the activity, we encourage the child to respond to us in a new way.

If the child is more avoidant and less interested in including us in the play, we have to use a higher level of playful obstruction. Here, we could tell the child in a very playful, but obstructive manner that we're coming to get the object just before we “do” what we just said. We would use language like, “Oh boy, I want to come see that. Here I come! I'm going to come grab it,” and move in a **very slow** and cautious manner to make sure the child feels in control of the object and can come up with a purposeful response.



This is especially important for the more sensitive child.

The more sensitive a child is, the more aversive their reaction will be if we approach rapidly with a loud voice or just take the object from them without giving any warning. **Remember: the goal of these activities is to get a response and create interaction, not to get the object.** If we never get the object from the child, that's okay. If the child turns it into a game of keep-away, we may keep reaching for it, but intentionally miss. And as we keep missing, we might playfully fall on the ground. The child will eventually see that: 1) we are there to be a playful partner in the activity, not take control or be a threat, and 2) their responses, such as moving the object away from us get affirmation from us. We could say, "Oh man, I almost got it", lightheartedly expressing our pretend frustration, or have a physical response where we fall over because we reached for the object in a silly way and missed. In either case, the interaction is now playful, and the child who is sensitive and socially avoidant will feel more in control and see how people can be enjoyable.

Sometimes, for a truly self-involved or avoidant child, we may have to be slightly more involved by putting our hand on the object, or using our body to provide the child sensory input like in the example on this page.

Example of Playful Obstruction providing sensory input during object based play:

Let's say a child is holding an object and avoiding us. We can use our hands almost spider-like to crawl up the child's leg until we get to their arm slowly approaching the object. By providing sensory input in the form of touch, we see that a child is able to be more aware of our involvement and come up with a meaningful and purposeful response. The key ingredients to this game are the same as before:

- 1) Getting an initial response and
- 2) Continuing to challenge the child gently to progressively communicate with more and more steps.

We are challenging the child to communicate about getting the object back from us **or finding new ways to keep the object away from us, such as hiding it or moving to the other side of the room.** This should all be encouraged.



As I've played this game with certain children, they enjoy the emotional element of keeping the object away from me so much that it becomes less about rolling the object back and forth and more about almost taunting me with it, which is a far more enjoyable and silly game. It can go so far that the child prefers playing with the adult versus just the toy. Once we see that, we know the child is fully involved and wants to continue playing the game because, now, they are reinitiating the next cycle of the activity.

The principle of expanding these interactions is very important. We have to expand the interaction, and encourage the child to expand it, to include more circles of responses and initiations. Ultimately, we want the child to use more steps to accomplish their goal, which may be keeping the object away from us or getting the object back from us. By increasing the number of physical and communicative steps, we simultaneously help expand their communication pattern while making the activity more complex. This ability to expand the interaction improves thinking, flexibility, and adaptability.

We can play dumb, if the child wants something from us and is already involved with us. Instead of being playfully

obstructive—going after the toy or keeping it away from the child in a safe and playful manner—the goal is to pretend we don't know how to do what they want so that we encourage a response.

Example of Object-based Play with a sensitive child:

Let's take a child who is using an object, say a train or a car, in a more self-involved or avoidant manner. The key here is to create an interaction around the child's self-involvement or isolated play. First, we want to try to get involved in a positive manner by saying things like, "Oh boy, look at that truck. Can I see it?" and see how the child responds. If the child responds positively and gives us the car, we may roll the car back and forth ourselves and hand it back to them. Now we have created the beginning of a very simple interaction. If this pattern continues, our goal will be to engage in this back and forth of asking for the car, rolling it ourselves, but doing something different each time—perhaps rolling it further away, rolling it faster or to different places around the room—so that we expand and change the way they would treat the object.



This may involve getting a toy off a shelf or using a toy in a certain way, such as turning something on or opening it. Each of these object-based playful scenarios can turn into a ‘playing dumb’ challenge, where we follow the child's lead, such as going over to a cupboard that they might want to open. But instead of opening the cupboard just because the child points to it, we might pretend that it's stuck and open the wrong cupboard.

Here, the child may have to put our hand on the doorknob or help us by holding our hand there while also showing us how to pull. Each of these steps, if done with us, is considered a circle of communication. And each of these circles contributes to the goal, which is the same as before: to increase the number of steps and get the child to be more purposeful with their communication. The more circles, the better the communication pattern. We need to expand the interaction to the point of challenging the child to show us more and more steps of how to accomplish their goal, whether it be putting up a swing, getting a ball or a toy off the shelf, or opening a trunk, closet or bin.

In each of these situations, we want to make the challenge very socially interactive so that the child needs us to facilitate a solution. Instead of just putting a ball on a low platform and having the child get it—which is fine as part of a game—it would be better to put the ball up higher, just out of reach. Then they have to come

Examples of child's responses to a challenge, and to expanding communication

- The first time, the child may get the object back just by reaching and taking it from us.
- The second time, they may have to reach and pull a little harder, or pull with two hands.
- The third time, the child may have to pull our arm down because we have raised it, and then play a little tug-of-war.

to us to be picked up and direct us. The child might point to the ball, then take a step closer. If they aren't pointing directly enough, we might walk in the wrong direction or take very small steps. The child has to make more gestures. Each time that we respond and are playful, the child knows that they are closer to reaching the goal. If done correctly, the child will find this playful and fun rather than threatening.



c. Sensitive Child: Symbolic Play (Challenge and Expand)

For a **sensitive child**, symbolic play can be equally as challenging. We have seen that we have to be cautious and gradual with our involvement when it comes to objects and sensory activities. The same is true for symbolic ones. If the child is playing with action figures, cars or stuffed animals, we have to be very slow to introduce ourselves, perhaps playing right next to them with our own characters. Many children who are averse and sensitive to other people's participation in their symbolic worlds need to know that we are not going to take over and direct the play. If we just start playing our own game next to them and making it sound fun and interesting, it allows them to feel comfortable with the fact that we're not going to be intrusive in the beginning.

In the earlier chapter about the sensitive child we had to entice them to let us follow their lead. This meant we had to challenge them at the same time as following their lead. As the child becomes comfortable with our physical presence, we can start using more language to become more involved in their play, and continue to challenge and expand. For example, our character

may drive very slowly into the child's town. While we explain what we're doing, using many different statements, we can see if a child who is more sensitive accepts us into their world or pushes us away and tells us 'no'. This is challenging them to engage and interact with us. In the case of them telling us "no", we can drive back to

Example of Symbolic Play with a sensitive child:

As we drive into town and challenge the child to respond to us, we need to expand the challenge. This means doing slightly different things each time. Expansion should be small changes in what we are doing to encourage new responses from the child. With the sensitive child, the challenges and changes have to be very small.

-Drive into town from different directions

-Go to different places in the town

-Do different things (Go to grocery store, go to play at park, go to grandma's house)

Make sure you explain what you're going to do as you do it.



our town and start having fun again, thus follow their lead again and acknowledging their communication. With each of these exchanges, we're starting to help the child feel more in control and capable of expressing their desires, which we then receive and acknowledge. Every so often, we can try to go back to the child's town and, each time, respond affirmatively to their response. The more we do this, and the more creative and fun we are with our own town, the more the child will ultimately accept us.

As this progresses, the challenges can involve some questions. We can ask, "When should I go?" or "What should I do?" Using open-ended "W" questions are appropriate after the child starts to have fun with you. They should be used with affirmative comments, to let the child know you are still following their lead, and negative comments (like the ones in the box) to expand the challenge.

Examples of challenging comments
"But I don't want to go back to my town"
"But my town is so lonely"
"I want to go somewhere new!"

Making these comments and pausing during certain types of play still gives the child an opportunity to come up with a new idea of their own. The key is to make the comments that give your opinions which challenge part of the story or scenario. **You're basically presenting a problem without directing or leading the child to a specific solution.**



B. The Seeking Child

a. Sensory (Challenge and Expand)

Just like when following their lead, challenging children who are seeking involves identifying what types of stimuli they are trying to seek out for themselves. Oftentimes, their own behaviors may seem aimless or self-stimulatory, but are serving a purpose of stimulating their sensory and emotional systems. These behaviors may involve moving their bodies in certain patterns by running back and forth, spinning in circles, flapping their hands, waving them in front of

Being Playfully Obstructive and Playing Dumb with a seeking child:

If a child's bouncing on the trampoline, our approach is to try to join them. If they accept our involvement b/c we show them that there to help them jump and have fun, then we can think about challenging them. First we have fun by jumping with them, then we challenge them by stopping our jumping and holding out our hands so they can show us they want more. If they keep jumping we might need to sit in the middle of the trampoline to dampen its effect. Each time we either stop jumping, or get in the way of the child jumping we are using '**playful obstruction**'.

If they grab our hands to indicate they want more jumping when we stop, then we can **play dumb** and encourage them to show us with more "circles of interaction" what they want. They might shake our arms or make a noise to show us they want to bounce together, or the child may insist on bouncing independently again and push us off the trampoline. But, by getting in the way—preventing them from continuing the activity in an isolated and independent manner—we encourage some type of interaction

The goal is not to direct or restrict them, but instead to establish some sort of response and interaction with the child. By playfully getting in front of them, playfully getting in their way while they are trying to satisfy their sensory need, or giving them more of the sensory input with your own body you can encourage a response. **Remember, our actions must be preempted with playful language describing them.**



their eyes, or finding inappropriate ways to get your “attention” (actually seeking an emotional response). Each of these behaviors satisfies a specific type of need. It's important to identify what that is and try to provide it to through an interactive game as we are preparing to challenge the child.

Once we reach the challenging stage of Greenspan Floortime—which can happen at the same time we are ‘following the lead’—the goal is to create interaction with each challenge. If we are joining a sensory activity, such as a child bouncing on a trampoline, we need to make sure that we're helping them receive the sensory input (following their lead) while encouraging interaction with us (challenging them). We may encourage a simple response from the child, like a smile, by slowly counting to 3 as we prepare to jump with them. The anticipation of a big jump and the slow count entices the child to respond. As the jumping progresses we may expand the challenge and aim for a more complex and intentional response. Usually, a child performing sensory-based activities is still mastering the first four developmental milestones. We are trying to create a primarily physical interaction by physically connecting the child.

For more information about Dr. Greenspan's milestones go to www.stanleygreenspan.com and take the professional course or the free parent course.

Interaction is what we are always aiming for within Greenspan Floortime. Once we achieve a simple back and forth interaction, we must aim for a more complex interaction. Ideally, we go from simple responses to encouraging more purposeful responses and behaviors, leading to more circles of communication. As we are challenging the child, if we use the trampoline example, we may jump on the trampoline ourselves and inhibit their ability to jump independently. The child can either choose to jump with us—in which case, we may help them jump higher and encourage them to come back for more jumps. Alternatively, the child may push us off the trampoline. In either case, we must listen and encourage many steps of communication. If the child gives us a little push, we only move away a little. If they give us a strong nudge, we move one foot off the trampoline while the other stays on. Every time the child does something purposeful, we must have



some sort of positive response, but our response does not have to fully accomplish their goal. The end result is a much longer chain of communication, expanding the activity past its original one or two circles of interaction. We start simple and expand the activity to more and more circles, making the communication pattern more complex.

One of the crucial key elements when working with a child on these types of sensory-based activities is that **we become responsive to every movement and gesture they show us**. Even if we want something specific like language or pointing, we first need to help the child understand that all their communications and gestures, **even the subtle ones**, are purposeful and meaningful. The little communication will lead to bigger communication. However, if we ignore the little communication, or try to teach the child to solve the problem our way, we will discourage their own thinking process and create a reliant, passive child.

If the child is enjoying the activity and wants to continue it together, such as jumping higher on the trampoline (instead of us being playfully obstructive by getting in the way), then we need to use the 'playing dumb' technique. **Playing dumb can be used only when a child wants something from us**. If they want to be tossed in the air, pushed on the swing or receive another tickle, we can expand the interaction by challenging the child to interact with us with new gestures. We simply 'play dumb', pretending that we don't know exactly what they want or how to do it, or even doing it intentionally wrong in a silly manner.

If the child wants us to toss them in the air, the best thing we can do is hold our hands just beyond the child's body so they have to come toward us, lean in, or pull us toward them. We're essentially saying, "Here are my hands, but I don't know what to do with them." We encourage the child show us where our hands are supposed to go, thereby encouraging interaction and communication. This can be taken further where, as soon as the child takes our hands and puts them under his or her armpits, we still don't lift the child in the air. Instead, we pretend they are too heavy encouraging another response, like the child looking at us or maybe shaking our arms to indicate what the desire is.



Every additional gesture and step the child communicates with that we respond to is a circle of communication. If we respond to each gesture, but not any further than the child shows us, we're **expanding the interaction** and their communication. The key principal is that we have to **be responsive to the subtle gestures that the child uses to communicate**. If we ignore or miss some of the small communications, we will be unlikely to encourage larger ones. The more in tune with the child we become, the stronger their overall communication will become in response to our feedback. Without receiving some level of positive feedback that the child is moving in the right direction, it will be difficult for him or her to feel encouraged and confident to go further. That is the purpose of our response: to give positive feedback, encourage the child to socially problem solve, and to enjoy communicating on their own terms.



b. Seeking Child: Object-based (Challenge and Expand)

As a sensory-seeking child continues to progress in interactions, they will gradually become more interested in objects, and eventually the symbolic world. Challenging a child in object-based play who is sensory-seeking must include both physical and verbal aspects. This means always combining our words with actions. If we find that we are primarily using language, and not using physical actions, or vice versa, we will not be as effective. A child playing with a favorite ball, pillow, or stuffed animal will need us to stimulate an interaction by moving it around the room, placing it up on a shelf, or hiding it underneath something. We want to make sure that we describe our actions, just prior to, or while moving the object. It is essential that children hear our language, and associate it with actions throughout this process to help them stay connected and respond. It will also help them develop an understanding of the words we're using as they pertain to the activity. This way, they see and experience what the words mean. Because we are doing this with a sensory seeking child, we need to think ahead about our next move to help keep the active child involved. By moving the object to different places around the room, office, or home, we can help the child get sensory input while also organizing their movements by connecting them to a social purpose.

Especially when it comes to object-based play, our language should primarily include comments and statements, rather than questions. This means that, as we move an object around or put it in different places, we simultaneously comment on what we're doing. Asking a question may be too big of a challenge for the child at this time. Making statements about our own actions within the play is allowed as part of Greenspan Floortime as long as the statements expand the challenge without directing the child.

Remember: The goal is not to direct the child, but to describe what we are doing and encourage a response from him or her.

As we discussed in the earlier section on following the lead, for a child who is seeking we want to encourage them to choose to organize their body's movement to help participate in a social



interaction and communicate. If we tell them or show them what to do, then we are doing the hardest part of organizing their body and movements for them. We would be doing the planning, which is what many seeking children struggle with. However, if they figure out how to effectively move their own body to get the ball from us or solve some other problem, then they are doing all the planning and thinking. It's our job to entice them with warm and encouraging affect and to find the just right challenge that they can be successful with.

Example of Object-based Play with a seeking child:

There was a little boy playing with some plastic food in a very self-involved and repetitive manner. It wasn't necessarily food to him, it was just an object. Rather than pretending to eat it, he was doing repetitive things with it—like throwing it and rolling it. As we got involved with the food, I put an apple on my head after I said, "I'm going to put the apple on my head." The boy looked at me with a big smile, climbed on my lap and took it off my head. He then took the pretend apple and with a big smile put it on his head. I reached for it, and he took it away, teasing me. This all led to us running around the room, and us going back and forth taking turns going after the person with the apple. The chase continued and developed into a more complex game that involved more pretend food. Instead of just throwing the new pieces of food he was offering them to me and his parents so that we would put them in different places around the room.

The goal of my actions was **not to teach the child** what to do with the food, as we might expect in a more traditional play scenario, but to let him know that this is a creative opportunity and to encourage creative thinking.

Doing something slightly new and silly with the food, was my challenge and expansion. This allows a child to respond on their own terms. With a seeking child, it is important to perform this activity within a motor-based environment. The child needs to have the ability to move around the room, climb to different heights, and place the food in different locations. This activity provides some of the sensory supports they need while still working on the interaction and thinking process.



When thinking about making our comments we should be aiming to create new patterns of interaction. If the child continues to roll his or her favorite ball down the slide, we may catch the ball at the bottom of the slide and say, "Uh oh! Now, I'm going to roll the ball over to the couch." In this way, we are challenging the child by doing something a little new and a little different, but not telling them to do it. This encourages a thinking process in the child where they get to respond in their own way. The child can disagree with us and say, "No, no, no" or shake their head, or look displeased with us. If that's his or her communication, we should bring the ball back to the slide. Alternatively, the child may look at us with a big smile and run over to grab the same ball, or a different one, and roll it over to the couch by themselves—or, more ideally, somewhere else in the room based on their own idea. When we challenge children to expand with these types of comments, sometimes, they will run with creating new ideas themselves.



c. Seeking Child: Symbolic (Challenge and Expand)

The same challenge and expand process using language and actions is necessary when joining in symbolic play with sensory-seeking children. We must describe our actions and make sure that our play is in a motor-based environment where the child can, and is encouraged to, move. It is also important for us to use symbolic toys—like stuffed animals, cars, trains, or action figures—within that space. Instead of simply rolling the ball or the train as in the previous section, the train is now driving over to the store, which may be across the room over on the couch. The train may have first rolled down the slide, and now it's driving over to the store.

Symbolic Play Language to Use

- Speak as the character- In 1st person
- Use comments that are positive, supportive, and follow the child's ideas
- Use comments that are challenging and require the child to respond to you with new ideas
- Ask opinion-based Questions like Who, What and Where
- Eventually ask opinion-based Questions like "Why" and "How"

We encourage the development of further ideas from the child. Here, our challenges can involve some questions. When doing this, we need to remember to become your own character in the play. Become a train, car, or something so that we can speak in the 1st person within the story. This way we can make comments about where we (the character) are going, and what we are about to do. Use the word "I" instead of saying "the car" or "the train" etc. As we do this, we primarily want to use comments and statements to encourage thinking and communication. But certain kinds of questions are good too. "Who else should go to the store?", "Where else should I go?" and "What should the other train do now?" are all great to start with—the 'who', the 'what', and the 'where' questions. Eventually we can ask, 'why' and 'how' questions after a child is comfortable with the "Who", "What", and "Where". 'Why' and 'How' tend to be more complicated for the child when they just begin symbolic play.



It is important for our questions to be based on opinions, not facts. We're **not** going to ask questions like, "What is this?" and "What color is it?". We want to ask the child their opinions about where they want the character to go, what the character should do, and who should go with it. Eventually, the questions should become more emotionally-based, talking about the enjoyment level of the character: "Are they having fun during this?", "Are they scared?", "Are they lonely?", "Are they tired or hungry?", and so forth. We can even mimic experiences from our own lives.

We need to remember that since the child is a seeker, we still want to involve movement and action with these questions and comments. This will support their sensory system, and also create a socially interactive pattern to help organize their movements and body.

At first, a child's symbolic play will mimic reality-based experiences that they might have had at home, such as sleeping, using the washroom, eating, and even playing with friends. These scenes will eventually move on to more abstract and creative scenarios where we might be flying to the moon instead of driving to the store. As the child becomes more creative with the storylines, the level of emotional themes they include will become more apparent. The child should also describe some of the emotional elements of the story. Characters might be "mean" or "bad", or the child's character might be a figure of power and want to be in control. While we are likely to see physical actions of a scared or angry character like running away or being aggressive, we will want to expand to find out what made the character scared or angry.

When the child gets into more creative and emotional play, our goal is **not to try and solve the emotional problem. We don't want to teach the child, or the character, to take ten deep breaths when they're angry.**

- The goal of these activities is to help them become more expressive and logical when it comes to symbolism and emotions; it is not to teach them our solutions or our perception of those emotions.



Asking open-ended Socratic questions is vital in encouraging higher levels of thinking and communication. The 'who', 'what', 'where', and 'why' questions are appropriate during this type of play.



C. The Under-reactive/Passive Child

a. Sensory (Challenge and Expand)

When challenging an under-reactive, passive child, it is important for us to understand that the goal of Greenspan Floortime is to stimulate thinking and interaction. Because it is difficult to simply follow this child's lead to start that interaction we need to help them regulate and become more alert.

The challenge is that—even though they do not look like it—the child with this profile is dysregulated, but in an under-stimulated and passive state. Dysregulation is often viewed as running around or having a meltdown. This type of child does not run around or frequently have meltdowns, but they still have a type of dysregulation that must be addressed. This is best achieved by understanding what the child's sensory and emotional systems need.

Since providing both sensory and emotional stimuli is the best way to regulate a child, interaction is a mandatory component of all sensory-based activities. When providing the child with the sensory stimuli they need (a version of 'following the lead'), our goal is to quickly establish shared attention, engagement, and—at minimum—get the child to respond to us (closing the circle of interaction). Even a simple response, like a smile, a look, or a movement of their body or hand, would be sufficient for us to establish that basic interaction.

The best way to accomplish this is to use a rhythmic sensory-based activity with the child, making sure to stop and start the movement, pressure, or touch when they respond. For example, this could involve lightly tickling the child until they look or laugh, then stopping, then gradually moving back towards them to get ready to tickle again, saying something like, "Here I come... Here comes another tickle."

These types of activities establish a pattern that the child can anticipate and respond to, especially as we change the tempo. As we get ready to provide the tickle or other stimulus, we would approach the child more slowly so they have a chance to respond to the anticipation of receiving the tickle, squish, or push on the swing.



We need to make this activity stimulating enough to elicit a smile, or some indicator of enjoyment. Once we do that we can slowly start to challenge. As the child is starting to have fun, then the key is to provide the tickles or the pushes on the swing more slowly to illicit some sort of response from the child. By changing the pace of our approach or pausing before we tickle or swing, we are challenging the child to respond. A smile, a look, a nod, a wiggle of the body, or a movement of the hand is enough to show a purposeful response from them that signals to us to provide the sensory stimulus again. A passive child will show very subtle responses at first. We have to acknowledge them and encourage more.

Our most important goal for a passive and under-reactive child is to help them become more purposeful and assertive with their bodies and communication. This should happen first with their body (gestures) and then with their words. That means if we show or tell the child what to do or say, then we will work against that goal. We will instead encourage more passivity and reliance on adults. For this reason, we have to encourage the child to figure out their own response to what we do. Encouraging children to respond to us by purposefully moving their bodies or looking at us with a big smile, helps them learn to establish intent with their communication. As this starts to happen they begin think for themselves.

We can continue to expand upon this once the child offers a “little” movement. As we approach for another tickle—with our hands hovering overhead before we actually tickle—we should wait with apparent excitement and enthusiasm until the child reaches up to touch or grab our hands and pull them down. That is a more significant response on their part. To encourage this response we may need to wait a little longer (an expansion of the challenge) before giving the tickle. Any time

Remember:

When doing this, it is essential that we use enticing affect. This means that our voices and facial expressions should express the excitement and anticipation of the impending tickle or other stimulus. For example, pause between words like, “Here... I... come....” The anticipation in your voice is a key part of encouraging a response.



we make a small change like this in our part of the interaction, the child has to use slightly more complex interaction/communication to meet their needs/goal. This can continue to happen where our hands might hover even higher above the child so they have to sit up and pull our hands down. Our hands might also move be further back so the child has to scoot towards us and pull our hands closer to get the tickle.

Each of these additional subtle challenges requires the child to do more to get the enjoyable and needed sensory stimulus. Adding in new steps, especially by encouraging the child to coordinate their body and communicate with new movements for the sensory stimulus, will help the child become more purposeful, intentional, assertive, and active.



b. Passive Child: Object-based (Challenge and Expand)

When challenging and expanding object-based play with a child who is under-reactive and passive, it is important that we remember the same principles for challenging in sensory-based activities. That is, we often need to help them become more alert by stimulating their sensory system prior to challenging them. This means providing the sensory stimulus that they need before we expect a response.

However, once the child has moved past some of the pure sensory-based activities, their system should be a little more activated naturally. The child should also start to become more interested in objects, yet perhaps still choose to play or interact with these objects in a passive and withdrawn state. In order to help activate their sensory and emotional systems, so they can push themselves to think and communicate, it is important for us to encourage movement and interaction within these object-based activities.

Once we see the child interested in objects, we can use some of the same visual motor challenges and expansions that we have used before—such as gently going after the object and moving it around the room. However, for a more passive and withdrawn child, it is important that we do this in a very gradual and subtle manner. If we move it too far or too fast (too big of a challenge), it will seem too difficult to get and will require too much effort, the child will likely stay in a passive and withdrawn state.

For example, if the child is looking at a ball or watching the wheels on a car spin, we must treat these toys as basic objects, that is, not part of a pretend play scenario. Even though the wheels are spinning, the child may still not view it as a car that drives to the store. Instead it's a car that rolls around the room. By rolling it slowly across the floor or under the couch we are encouraging the child to move, come up with a response, and get into an interactive pattern.

However, if we move the object just out of reach and entice the child to get it, and then we move it just a little further out of reach



the second time, it can turn into a small chase game. Now they will chase us and the object around the room. Gradually we will see the child start to become stimulated and activated during their pursuit of us and the toy.

That said, as usual the language we use here is also very important. We want to make sure that we describe our actions and entice the child to come after us and the object.

Use statements like "Oh, I'm going to move it again." "Here I go. You can't get me." "Oh, I'm right over here. You can't get me."

Each of these communication

patterns is meant to elicit a response. If the child feels capable of achieving success with the activity, they are more likely to push themselves to join in. This is also why the challenges have to be very small and gradual. As the child starts moving around the room and their level of alertness increases, we can increase the level of challenge, moving quicker and further away. Ideally, the activity should result in the same type of interactive patterns as other examples where the child is moving around the room to get the object. We can continue to move or hide the object, use it in different ways, be silly with it, or do other fun things with it that the child may not expect—all good ways to expand the activity so they are always seeing and doing something new with the object.



c. Passive Child: Symbolic Play (Challenge and Expand)

When it comes to symbolic play, the same principles are true again. We have to make sure the child is regulated and alert, which means giving them the appropriate

Symbolic Play Reminders:

- 1) Be a character- talk in the first person.
- 2) Comment on what you're doing.
- 3) Pause after you comment or question to allow for a response

sensory and emotional stimulation by being physical and by being silly and playful with our language and ideas. Emotional input for a child can just as stimulating and alerting as with the sensory input. Many children who are into symbolic play may need more stimulation than just sensory. How much of each stimulus a child needs depends on the individual child. Some need high amounts of both sensory and emotional stimulation, and some just need the emotional. Sometimes the best way to determine this is to be a detective and test out providing high amount of emotional stimulation by being silly and playful, and to test out being physical,

Example of Symbolic Play with a passive child:

I was working with a little boy who was laying on his side and putting cars in and out of different small buildings. In order to capture his interest in the social piece of the activity (ME) I had to be more interesting and more physically involved. In order to follow his lead I picked up my own car and started driving it over to his building, but unfortunately just following his lead by joining in his play was not enough. He was too withdrawn, passive and under-reactive to be interested in my simple approach. I had to use my character (my car) to stimulate him so that he could be more alert, active and participate in the social component of the play.

Instead of just driving my car into his town, I started driving my car up his leg. I said, "Oh boy, this looks like a nice road!" As I drove up his leg he started giggling. Staying with in the theme of being both "silly and sensory" I prepared to jump off one leg and said, "Oh, that's not a road!" I jumped onto the other leg and he giggled again. The small amount of sensory stimulus the car provided on his leg along with me being silly and playful pretending I didn't know it was not a road, allowed us to connect around the cars. These cars were his initial interest, and by using my car in these specific way it allowed him to become more interactive with me during symbolic play.



silly and playful. The child's response will show you if you've given them what they need. If they become more alert and interactive then you have achieved your goal.

When we challenge an under-reactive and passive child to interact with us in symbolic activities, it may be difficult for them to respond to us. One of the best ways to encourage a response is to be "silly and sensory" with the toy. Do something new (silly) with it that interests the child, and something that makes the toy physically connect (sensory) with the child.

The same rules from before apply where we need to make comments about what our toy or character is about to do, before we do it. These comments should not lead the child and we should avoid using language like, "Let's do this," or "Come with me." Instead, we will want to offer descriptions in the first person, such as "I'm going to do this. Here I go. I'm flying to the store." Each comment is meant to stimulate a response from the child. If we use a statement that is especially stimulatory, silly, or even something they don't want us to do, we will see that they can respond to us and our emotional and physical stimulation.

In the above example, we see that the symbolic toy is moving on from the child encouraging a response. Eventually it may move away from the child, and their car, to encourage the child to get up and come after it. "I'm going to new town," or "I'm going to see what's over here," are good ways to draw a passive child out, and help them become more active. As we make these statements and get interaction and interest from the child, we can then begin to ask questions.

We have to be careful and only ask questions once the child starts becoming more assertive and interactive during the play. Questions are a high level of challenge. If we have not established basic, fun interaction first and the child is not motivated to play and interact with us, then they will not answer our questions about where the characters should go and what they should do.

The key here is to follow the child's interests, whether playing with superheroes, cars, trains, or stuffed animals. We can create an environment that allows them to pursue these interests— sometimes a physical environment for a child who needs more sensory stimulation or a just pure symbolic play environment where we



make sure there's plenty of emotional enthusiasm and silliness. In this environment we challenge the child to interact with us by making comments and asking opinion-based questions where they direct the play scenario and describes what the characters should do.



Appendix I: Greenspan Floortime™: Cheat Sheet

Always give before you expect- have fun before you challenge. Listen before you ask a child to listen to you, respect a child's needs and wants before you expect them to respect yours.

Sometimes to get an interaction going you will need to do something first (**give**) to get a response from a child. Being silly and giving sensory input are two good options.

Always treat a child's behavior and actions as purposeful, even if you don't know what they mean. Most behaviors are driven by emotions and/or sensory seeking/reactions. Don't ignore or shutdown either.

Always respond to your child's gestures, sounds, and words with exaggerated affirmation. If they tap you or nudge you, move as if they were firmly tugging you. If they make noises, then make enthusiastic noises back giving their sounds purpose.

Always try to entice a child to perform, don't direct or push them to do something

Always focus on the Process over Product. The goal is always the interaction, and longer more complex interactions. Getting a child to say a specific word or perform a specific action, doesn't lead to long term benefits.

Follow the Lead to establish motivation, fun, and a connection.

Always use gestures and words when joining a child's world. A child needs to see and hear you. Your words can describe your actions.

Challenge to encourage interaction.

Use movement within your challenges. **Do something and Say something.** Stop and start physical games like tickles or bouncing, Move yourself further away, move objects gradually out of reach or up on higher elevation. Even in verbal pretend play move your car or character around the room.

There are 2 main types of Challenges,



1. **Playful Obstruction** for a child who is self-involved, avoidant, or repetitive
2. **Playing Dumb** for a child who is interested in you or getting something

Expand to encourage new interactive patterns, flexibility, and adaptability.

Changes should be made very gradually. Only one small variation in the play at a time.

Counter Regulate to help maintain a balanced emotional and physical state

Raise your affect and enthusiasm to get a child's interest. When you have their shared attention and engagement then slow down. If you stay in a heightened state when they are looking at you and connecting with you then you can overstimulate them.



Appendix II: Greenspan Floortime™ Block Schedules

When doing Greenspan Floortime it is important to provide a child consistent and intensive opportunities to practice their abilities to relate, communicate and think. Dr. Greenspan used to recommend 6-8 sessions per day for most children, and research in Canada found that to achieve positive neurological changes that 20+ hours per week was necessary. Typically Greenspan Floortime™ sessions at home are done in 20-30 minute increments, and longer sessions are ok if the child is open to it. Younger children, 6 months to 24 months, usually do well with shorter sessions and older children can handle longer ones. Use your judgement by looking at the child’s sensory and emotional regulation as the session progresses. If the child is getting irritable, more physical, or more avoidant then you may need to decrease the challenges or decrease the duration of the session.

Here are two possible blocks for doing Greenspan Floortime, but you can do Greenspan Floortime in any schedule that works for you and your family.

20 min	FT.
20 min	Break
20 min	FT.
20 min	Break
20 min	FT.

Breaks should be times where the child is still **engaged, but not being challenged**. Snack, going for a walk, and looking at books **together** are good options. Breaks should time that is **not** self-involved.

30 min	FT.
30 min	Break
30 min	FT.
30 min	Break
30 min	FT.

