

Five Steps in Floortime

Step One: OBSERVATION

Both listening to and watching a child are essential for effective observation. Facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, body posture, and word (or lack of words) are all important clues that help you determine how to approach the child, e.g.:

- is a child's behavior relaxed or outgoing?
- withdrawn or uncommunicative?
- bubbling with excitement?
- is child a real go-getter?

Step Two: APPROACH - OPEN CIRCLES OF COMMUNICATION

Once a child's mood and style have been assessed, you can approach the child with the appropriate words and gestures. You can open the circle of communication with a child by acknowledging the child's emotional tone, then elaborating and building on whatever interests the child at the moment.

Step Three: FOLLOW THE CHILD'S LEAD

After your initial approach, following a child's lead simply means being a supportive play partner who is an "assistant" to the child and allows the child to set the tone, direct the action, and create personal dramas. This enhances the child's self-esteem and ability to be assertive, and gives child a feeling that "*I can have an impact on the world.*" As you support the child's play, the child benefits from experiencing a sense of warmth, connectedness and being understood.

Step Four: EXTEND AND EXPAND PLAY

As you follow the child's lead, extending and expanding a child's play themes involves making supportive comments about the child's play without being intrusive. This helps the child express own ideas and defines the direction of the drama. Next, asking questions to stimulate creative thinking can keep the drama going, while helping the child clarify the emotional themes involved, e.g.: suppose a child is crashing a car: Rather than ask critically, *Why are those cars crashing?* You may respond empathetically, *Those cars have so much energy and are moving fast. Are they trying to get somewhere?*

Step Five: CHILD CLOSES THE CIRCLE OF COMMUNICATION

As you open the circle of communication when you approach the child, the child closes the circle when the child builds on your comments and gestures with comments and gestures of own. One circle flows into another, and many circles may be opened and closed in quick succession as you interact with the child. By building on each other's ideas and gestures, the child begins to appreciate and understand the value of two way communication.

Strategies for Floortime Intervention

- follow child's lead and join them - it does not matter what they do as long as they initiate the move
- persist in your pursuit
- treat what child does as intentional and purposeful - give new meanings
- help child do what they want to do
- position self in front of the child
- invest in whatever child initiates or imitates
- join perseverative play
- do not treat avoidance or "no" as rejection
- expand, expand, expand - keep going, play dumb, do wrong moves, do as told, interfere etc.
- do not interrupt or change the subject as long as it is interactive
- insist on a response
- do not turn the session into a learning or teaching experience

Questions to Ask Yourself if You Are a Good Floortimer

- Do I use a calm voice?
- Do I give gentle looks?
- Is my body posture supportive?
- Are my actions non-intrusive?
- Do I use encouraging gestures?
- Do I demonstrate calm and supportive listening?
- Am I aware of the child's rhythms and gestures?
- Am I able to help the child identify play themes?
- Do I expand and extend the child's drama by staying involved with the play theme and help to elaborate the details?
- Am I able to help the child extend the drama by summarizing main ideas of play themes?
- Do I observe the behavior, language, and gestures of the child?
- Do I observe the child's style of relating?
- Do I approach the child slowly, with respect and thoughtfulness?
- How often do I allow the child to take the lead? Do I follow that lead?
- Do I let the child know through gesture, facial expressions, emotional tone, and supportive body posture that I am there for the child?
- Do I know when to be verbally responsive, and when it is better to quietly share a child's emotion?
- Do I work to understand the emotional needs of the child?

Home Based Opportunities for Floortime

- **dressing and undressing:** giving child choices about what to wear or not or what to take off first
- **mealtime:** chose one meal a time with enough time - talk may focus around food preparation, different foods being served, which foods are particularly enjoyable or any topic relating to the child's life.
- **car time:** engage child in a relaxed conversation in which child takes the lead, or sing-along for which child chooses songs
- **coming and going time (home, preschool, sitter):** plan to have at least a little time to get child settled or in switching and transitioning from one activity to another by reading a short story, visit pet in classroom or at home or at sitter, or look at special toy. Show child support through your interest and warm, clear "good-bye" when leaving. On picking child up, give the child a chance to tell you/show you something important about the day while you are still in the school setting.
- **bath time:** Bath toys are wonderful props as they float, get dunked, and come into contact with each other. The water is a great opportunity for play. The child will naturally relax in the water.
- **book time:** Read the book with the child on your lap or next to you on a chair or bed. As you read, be aware of responses and questions that you can extend (If the child is totally absorbed, however, it is best to continue reading and simply enjoy the sense of shared interest)
- **bedtime:** Bedtime is often accompanied by a ritual, but is also a moment to feel close and loving. Children sometimes share important thoughts and feelings during the last moments before falling asleep. Although you will not want to *rev-up* the child up prior to sleeping, you can respond with empathy and stay close until the child is calm and feels safe enough to sleep.

Turning Every Day Activity into Problem-Solving for Child

- chair not close to table, not in the child's spot, when meal time arrives
- bottle not open when you are trying to pour juice
- bathtub empty of water when you tell child it is time to take a bath
- shoes hidden from usual resting place
- changing the shelf locations of favorite books, DVDs, etc.
- putting two socks on same foot
- putting shirt on feet
- give child adult shoes instead of their own
- use rubber band to hold together a spoon and fork when giving child tool for eating
- being sure cup is upside down when offering child a drink
- put markers in a new container which child has not yet learned to open
- mix puzzle pieces of two or three puzzles together

Strategies for Engagement and Two-way Communication

- Give child's seemingly random actions new meanings by responding to them as if they were purposeful.
- Use sensory-motor play -- bouncing, tickling, swinging, and so on -- to elicit pleasure.
- Use sensory toys in cause-and-effect ways: hide a toy, then make it *magically* reappear; drop a belled toy so that child will hear the jingle; bring a *tickle feather* closer, closer, closer until finally you tickle child with it.
- Play infant games, such as peekaboo, *I'm going to get you*, and *patty cake*.
- Play verbal *Ping Pong* with child, responding to every sound or word the child makes and continue the ping pong match to expand the number of circles closed.
- Pursue pleasure over other behaviors and do not interrupt any pleasurable experience.
- Use gestures, tone of voice, and body language to accentuate the emotion in what you say and do.
- Try to be as accepting of child's anger and protests as you are of child's more positive emotions.
- Help child deal with anxiety (separation, getting hurt, aggression, loss, fear, and so on) by using gestures and problem solving.

Strategies for Helping Child Build Symbolic World

- Identify real-life experiences child knows and enjoys and have toys and props available to play out those experiences
- Respond to child's real desires through pretend actions
- Allow child to discover what is real and what is a toy (e.g., if child tries to go down a toy slide, encourage child to go on; if child tries to put on doll's clothes, do not tell it doesn't fit; if child puts foot in pretend pool, ask if is cold)
- If child is thirsty, offer an empty cup or invite to tea party
- Encourage role playing with dress-up props and/or use puppets - child may prefer to be the actor before using symbolic figures
- Use specific set of figures/dolls to represent family members and identify other figures with familiar names
- Give symbolic meaning to objects as you play:
- When child climbs to top of the sofa, pretend child is climbing a tall mountain
- When child slides down the slide at the playground, pretend the child is sliding into the ocean and say "watch out for the fish!"
- Substitute one object for another when props are needed. Pretend that the ball is a cake or the spoon is a birthday candle.
- As you play, help child elaborate on personal intentions.
- Ask who is driving the car, where the car is going, whether child has enough money, did child remember the keys to the car, why is child going there, why not somewhere else, etc.
- Expand as long as you can. (Use all of the Who, What, Where, Why, When questions, and keep them open ended)
- When a problem crops up during play, create symbolic solutions.
- Get the doctor kit when the doll falls so child can help the hurt doll, tool kit for broken car etc.
- Acknowledge child's disappointment and encourage empathy.
- Get involved in the drama.
- Be a player and take on a role with your figure.
- Talk directly to the dolls rather than questioning child about what is happening or narrating
- Both help the child and be your own player.
- Talk as an ally (perhaps whispering), but also have your figure oppose or challenge child's ideas.
- Insert obstacles into the play. (e.g.: make your bus block the road. Then, speaking as a character, challenge child to respond. If necessary, get increasingly urgent (whispering to child to encourage to deal with the problem, offer help if needed by becoming an ally)).
- Use symbolic figures child knows and loves, such as Barney, Disney or Sesame Street characters, to generate symbolic play. Reenact familiar scenes or songs, create new ideas, and notice characters and themes child may be avoiding or fear.
- Use play to help child understand and master ideas/themes which may have been frightening. Work on fantasy and reality.
- Let child be the director. Child's play need not be realistic (child may still be a magical thinker) but encourage logical thinking.
- Focus on process as you play; which character to be, what props are needed when ideas have changed, what the problem is, when to end the idea, etc. Identify the beginning, middle and end.
- As you play, match your tone of voice to the situation. Pretend to cry when character is hurt, cheer loudly when your character is happy, speak in rough or spooky tones when you are playing the bad guy. Remember, **drama, drama, drama** to give child affect cues.
- Reflect on the ideas and feelings in the story both while playing and later on as you would with other real life experiences
- Discuss child's abstract themes such as good guy/bad guy, separation/loss, and various emotions such as closeness, fear, jealousy, anger, bossy, competition, etc.
- Remember symbolic play and conversation is the safe way to practice, reenact, understand and master the full range of emotional ideas and experiences.

Strategies to Develop Motor Planning Abilities

- encourage "undoing"
- move object in line
- cover desired object
- put puzzle piece in wrong place
- bury desired object(s) under other toys and very different objects
- hide desired object from the place where child last put it
- child throws something - catch it in basket
- child holds figure (little person, animal) - bring over toy slide, school bus, food (if child does not use spontaneously, ask if the figure would like to... give choices if needed...ask figure directly...try not to direct)
- child taps - bring over *drums* (can be plate, plastic toy, sticks etc)
- child rolls car - bring over garage, crash into it, block with figure
- child reaches for hand - play *give me five*, variations, dance
- create problems to solve - require multiple steps
- put desired objects in boxes to open, untie, remove tape or rubber band
- pretend object needs to be fixed using tools, tape, rubber bands, Band-Aids (symbolic)
- create obstacles to child getting around
- hold book to read upside down and/or backwards
- offer pens/markers which do not work
- sit in child's special place
- get to where the child is running first
- hide object child desires in one hand or the other so that the child can choose
- when child seeks your hand, instead of using own hand, put your hands on your head or in your pocket
- put socks on child's hands instead of feet
- give child your shoes to put on
- make desired toy/object a moving target (move from place to place)
- be playful and supportive as you encourage and expand these interaction
- change environment frequently to encourage flexibility, create problems and expand discussion
- move expected objects (change drawer content, change content in baskets)
- rearrange furniture and create problems (child find chair upside down, or is told to sit down when chair is across the room)
- hang up pictures from magazines at eye level and change frequently
- *Ready, Set, Go!*
- provide cues - *uh oh, knock, knock, help*
- use indirect prompts (call the figures to come, *where are you?*)
- bring over next step (puppet to eat pretend food, mirror to see the hat, etc.)
- trade objects, positions etc.
- deal with consequences of actions symbolically
- baby doll fall (is dropped) - *Uh oh! He's crying. Are you hurt? Get a bandage. Go to the doctor. Call an ambulance...*
- car crashes - *Oh no, it's broken! Can you fix it, mechanic?*
- basket is dropped - *What a mess! What do we do now?*
- model/mediate sequence of actions needed to solve problem
- play interactive song-hand games: *Itsy bitsy spider*, *one potato two potato*
- board games (cognitively challenging)
- cooking
- drama
- arts and craft activities

Child's Attainment of Developmental Milestone Rating Scale

(Material for this scale came from Chapter 5, pp 91-97 of *The Child with Special Needs* by Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D. & Serena Wieder, Ph.D., Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1998.)

Name of Child: _____ Date of Rating: _____

Directions: Determine which milestones the child has mastered and which still needs to work on. The abilities that signal mastery of each milestone are listed on the left. Use the rating scale to rate the child in each one as the child is the day of the rating. If the skill is always present, record at what age it was mastered.

Rating Scale:

N = ability never present

S = ability sometimes present

A = ability always present

L = child loses ability under stress (hunger, anger, fatigue, etc.)

CHILD'S ABILITY	N S A L	Age Mastered
Milestone 1: Self-regulation and Interest in the World (0 to 3 months of age)		
1. Shows interest in different sensations for 3+ seconds		
2. Remains calm and focused for 2 + minutes		
3. Recovers from distress within 20 minutes with help from you		
4. Shows interest in you (i.e., not only in inanimate objects)		
Milestone 2: Intimacy – Engagement/Falling in Love (2 to 4 months of age)		
1. Responds to your overtures (with a smile, frown, reach, vocalization, or other intentional behavior)		
2. Responds to your overtures with obvious pleasure		
3. Responds to your overtures with curiosity and assertive interest (e.g., by studying your face)		
4. Anticipates an object that was shown and then removed (e.g., smiles or babbles to show interest)		
5. Becomes displeased when you are unresponsive during play for 30 seconds or longer		
6. Protests and grows angry when frustrated		
7. Recovers from distress within 15 minutes with your help		

Milestone 3: Two Way Purposeful Communication (3 to 9 months of age)

1. Responds to your gestures with intentional gestures (e.g., reaches out in response to your outstretched arms, returns your vocalization or look)		
2. Initiates interactions with you (e.g., reaches for your nose or hair or for a toy, raises arms to be picked up)		
3. Demonstrates the following emotions: Closeness (e.g., by hugging back when hugged, reaching out to be picked up)		
Pleasure & excitement (e.g., by smiling joyfully while putting finger in your mouth and putting it in child's own)		
Assertive curiosity (e.g., by touching and exploring your hair)		
Protest or anger (e.g., by pushing food off table or screaming when desired toy not brought)		
Fear (e.g., by turning away, looking scared or crying when a stranger approaches too quickly)		
4. Recovers from distress within 10 minutes by being involved in social interactions		

**Milestone 4: Complex Communication/Shared Social Problem Solving
(9 to 18 months of age)**

1. Closes 10 or more circles of communication in a row (e.g., takes you by hand, walks you to refrigerator, points, vocalizes, responds to your questions with more noise and gestures, and continues gestural exchange until you open the door to get what the child wants)		
2. Imitates your behavior in an intentional way (e.g., puts on a hat, then parades around room looking for admiration)		
3. Closes 10 or more circles using:		
vocalizations or words		
facial expressions		
reciprocal touching or holding		
movement in space (e.g., roughhousing)		

large motor activity (e.g., chase games, climbing games)		
communication across space (e.g., can close 10 circles with you from across the room)		
4. Closes three or more circles in a row while feeling the following emotions: Closeness (e.g., uses facial expression, gestures, and vocalizations to reach out for a hug, kiss or cuddle, or uses imitation, such as talking on toy phone while you are using a real phone)		
Pleasure and excitement (uses looks and vocalizations to invite another person to share excitement over something: shares "jokes" with other children or adults by laughing together at some provocation)		
Assertive curiosity (explores independently; uses ability to communicate across space to feel close to you while exploring or playing on own)		
Anger (deliberately hits, pinches, yells, bangs, screams, or lies on floor to demonstrate anger; occasionally uses cold or angry looks instead)		
Limit setting (understands and respond to your limits whether expressed through words - "No, stop that!" - or gestures - shaking finger, angry face)		
5. Uses imitation to deal with and recover from distress (e.g., bangs on floor and yells after being yelled at)		
Milestone 5: Emotional Ideas/Creation of Ideas (24 to 30 months of age)		
1. Creates pretend dreams with two or more ideas (e.g., trucks crash and then pick up rocks, hug dolls and then have a tea party; ideas need not relate)		
2. Uses words, pictures, gestures to convey two or more ideas at a time (e.g., "No sleep. Play"); ideas need not be related		
3. Communicates wishes, intentions and feelings using:		
words		
multiple gestures in a row		
touch (e.g., lots of hugging or roughhousing)		
4. Plays simple motor games with rules (e.g., taking turns throwing ball)		

5. Uses pretend play or words to communicate the following emotions while expressing two or more ideas: Closeness (e.g., has doll say: "Hug me." then child answers: "I give you kiss.")		
Pleasure and excitement (e.g., makes funny words then laughs)		
Assertive curiosity (e.g., makes pretend airplane zoom around room, then says it's going to the moon)		
Fear (e.g. stages drama in which doll is afraid of loud noise and then call for mother)		
Anger (e.g., has soldiers shoot guns at one another then fall down)		
Limit setting (e.g., has dolls follow rules at tea party)		
6. Uses pretend play to recover from and deal with distress (e.g., plays out eating the cookie the child couldn't really have)		
Milestone 6: Emotional Thinking/ Creation of Logical Bridges between Emotions and Ideas (36 to 48 months of age)		
1. In pretend play, two or more ideas are logically tied together, even if the ideas themselves are unrealistic (e.g., the car is visiting the moon and gets there by flying fast)		
2. Builds on adult's pretend play idea (e.g., child is cooking soup, adult asks what's in it, child answers, "Rocks and dirt.")		
3. In speech, connects ideas logically; ideas are grounded in reality (e.g., "No go sleep. Want to watch television.")		
4. Closes two or more verbal circles of communication (e.g., "Want to go outside." Adult asks, "Why?" "To play.")		
5. Communicates logically, connecting two or more ideas about intentions, wishes, needs, or feelings using:		
words		
multiple gestures in a row (e.g., pretending to be an angry dog)		
touch (e.g., lots of hugging as part of pretend drama in which child is the daddy)		
6. Plays spatial and motor games with rules (e.g., taking turns going down a slide)		

7. Uses pretend play or words to communicate two or more logically connected ideas dealing with the following emotions: Closeness (e.g., doll gets hurt and Mommy fixes it.)		
Pleasure and excitement (e.g., says bathroom words, such as "doody," and laughs)		
Assertive curiosity (e.g., good soldiers search for missing princess)		
Fear (e.g., monster scares baby doll)		
Anger (e.g., good soldiers fight bad ones)		
Limit setting (e.g., soldiers can hit only bad guys because of the rules)		
8. Uses pretend play that has a logical sequence of ideas to recover from distress, often suggesting way of coping with the distress (e.g., the child becomes the teacher, bossing the class)		


 Coping.org is a Public Service of James J. Messina, Ph.D. & Constance M. Messina, Ph.D., Email: jjmess@tampabay.rr.com
 © 1999-2007 James J. Messina, Ph.D. & Constance Messina, Ph.D. Note: Original materials on this site may be reproduced for your personal, educational, or noncommercial use as long as you credit the authors and website.