



Web-Based Radio Show

Working with Family Dynamics: Turning Challenges into Constructive Opportunities


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Good morning and welcome to our web-based radio show. I'm very pleased that you can join us today. Today's topic is probably one of the most challenging ones for most families and clinicians who are helping families, and that has to do with the family patterns when there's a child with special needs challenges.

We shouldn't really talk about a child with special needs, we should talk, really, about families with special needs because the whole family has a very, very special role when a child has uneven development, whether the child is evidencing an autistic spectrum disorder or a severe language disorder or severe motor planning problems or severe sensory processing challenges – regardless of the nature of the challenge, the challenge is one for the entire family. What we've seen in working with many, many families – and, actually, if we trace human development way back through the course of evolution – we see two responses to challenges. We see this in the international community now, as well. One response is where – and this is the positive one – the challenge organizes everyone – the family, the community and, in some instances, the global community – to rise to the occasion and it leads to new ways of organizing, new ways of coming together and new constructive solutions to the challenges at hand. That's what we all wish for, and, certainly, families strive for that.


Unfortunately, there's another response pattern that all too often gets in the way of the constructive one of coming together and finding new solutions. The second response pattern is where the stress of the challenge leads us to narrow our focus, to become more polarized in our thinking. So we become all-or-nothing thinkers, “my way or the highway” type thinkers, rigid and polarized. With children who have special needs, sometimes by the fact of their developmental challenges they're naturally more rigid or it's harder for them to be flexible in the ways they deal with even everyday experiences, such as getting dressed or eating or playing with other children. Unfortunately, we as families sometimes do exactly the same thing. We become rigid or one-way thinkers –



what I'm calling "polarized" thinking – but that's really the "my way or the highway" kind of thinking. Again, we see this in the larger world, too, when there are international crises you see attempts at collaboration, sometimes, and constructive problem solving. A good example of that, historically, is after World War II coming together to help Europe regroup and it worked very well. Other times we've become historically more polarized, there's more prejudice, more us versus them mentality in thinking, and that's always gotten civilization into hot water and just like we see families be successful, we've seen an entire civilizations be successful.

So these two response patterns are coming together, broadening your perspective, thinking out of the box, finding new solutions versus getting rigid, anxious, polarized, focusing in on one or two details and limiting one's vision and perspective and ways of problem solving – you really want to focus on these two broad patterns and, obviously, the second pattern that I'm emphasizing is a common response to stress. By talking about history and evolution, going back even to early human ancestors - the reason I'm emphasizing this is to say that we come by this naturally. We have this response pattern well embedded in our history, and so we shouldn't be surprised if it rears its head and if we fall victim to it. In fact, in most healthy families you'll see an ebb and a flow between these two patterns. We all, some days, are more constructive and are problem solvers working collaboratively spouse to spouse, even with the extended family who sometimes can be helpful and sometimes we find not so helpful – but, often we find days where everyone's working together in a collaborative way and other days where you're all kind of fragmented and polarized and rigid and fighting a lot with each other and undermining each other.

So, we want to start off with saying it's natural to have both patterns and, obviously, in terms of balance, we'd like to tip it more on the constructive, broadening our perspective direction. Now, in order to tip it in the positive direction, it's very important to know, particularly for the mommies and daddies – or any caregivers – it could be Grandma or aunts or uncles or volunteers in helping the child – whoever's really a part of the intimate, everyday experience of the child with special needs and the siblings and the others in the family – it's very, very important in order to tip this in the constructive direction to understand the strengths and the weaknesses, or the Achilles' heels, of each of the major caregivers. I include siblings here, too. We all have natural strengths and each one of us has an Achilles' heel. For example, in one family I just saw the mommy was a very warm person and very nurturing and really read the signals of her little child very well and did what I would call great Floortime interactions. At the same time, however, when she got nervous she became very over protective and did too much and didn't challenge enough. So, her Achilles' heel was that when she became unsure of




herself, instead of, for example, in Floortime interaction challenging her child to come and find the little toy in her hands – so he would have to open her fingers and find it and be more assertive, so we wanted her to be very interactive with him but also very challenging, so he would have to take a little more initiative – she would kind of open her hand and give it to him and literally put it in his hand, which took away from him the opportunity to practice his assertiveness, his initiative-taking.

So, right in the same play we could see her strength, but also her Achilles' heel and, interestingly, this played out in her marriage, as well, when she became upset and unsure of herself she did what her husband described as “smothered me” and that led him to feel resentful and, it turned out when we talked about it, that she often did that when she was feeling resentful. It was her way of coping with her anger, which was to sort of feed the other person, but feed them aggressively – you know, stuff it down their mouth whether they wanted it or not – and her husband resented that.

So, here we have the strengths and the vulnerability and I have to just reiterate: Everyone has both. If you're human you have both and you should have both. So, to be perfect is not to be human. To be human is to have both strengths and Achilles' heels. The daddy in this family was a computer expert and a very orderly person – he ran a large division in a big company and he had to manage lots of people and his organizational skills and his being a systematic thinker served him very, very well. In the family, his strength was that he was the one who organized all the therapies and all the services and often negotiated very effectively with the school to help get little Susie what she needed. But in his Floortime play when little Susie wouldn't do what he what he expected her to do, got rigid and insistent. His voice, instead of remaining playful and saying, “Oh, I bet you can't find Daddy! I'm going to hide! Where am I? Where am I?” Instead he would start ordering her to, “Look over here! Look over there!” and you could see little Susie tense up and she then became more self-absorbed and more self-stimulatory, often jumping and staring at a fan up on the ceiling and staring at lights. You could see that whenever his voice would change and he would become more like a military officer, ordering her around, she would show her signs of stress, which was to become symptomatic, particularly in terms of self-stimulation and perseveration and self-absorption.

When, with coaching, we helped him maintain his playful side and I was delighted to see that he had a wonderful playful side – that he could relax and have a gleam in his eye and get funny and mischievous and challenge her in a playful way – like putting funny hats on and then ducking behind different objects and having her run around the room trying to find him and getting lots of circles of communication going in the process and a lot of back-and-forth interaction, when he did that he was delighted and




she was delighted. Then she was interactive and warm and engaging and she had a light in her eye and was beginning to use a few words. But when he stiffened up and got autocratic and he became the dictator, she regressed in terms of her symptoms.

So, each one of us is going to have a strength and an Achilles' heel – in fact, many strengths and many Achilles' heels. But usually we'll be able to capture the main strength and the main Achilles' heel in each major caregiver. We can see this in siblings, too, particularly older siblings who are likely to help and do Floortime with a younger child. So, the first job of the family – and when I say the “job,” I mean that the families can do this themselves as well as with the help of therapists – and so if it's a clinician working with the family this is one of the first challenges of the clinician – to help the family figure out the relative strengths and the relative vulnerabilities of each caregiver. When it's the family doing it themselves, what's critical is for the family to sit down – particularly the main caregivers – the adults, usually mommy and daddy, but it could be a grandmother and mother, etc., or any two adults who are caring for the child or many adults – three or four – to sit down and have regular times where they ask the difficult questions, “What are our strengths and what are our vulnerabilities?”

What I find that's interesting when I work with caregivers is that they're able to do this very, very well, particularly when I directly ask the caregiver, “What do you think of as your strength and what do you think of as your Achilles' heel, the area that you have difficulty?” I ask it a certain way, I say, “When the going gets rough, when you're under pressure, when you're under stress, what do you tend to do? What happens?” If the person can't answer I go through some of the common reactions, “Well, do you tend to withdraw, do you tend to get bossier, do you tend to get more overprotective, do you tend to get more fragmented and nervous and kind of lose sight of your goals?” If you run through the litany of these possibilities – there aren't that many – there are a few and I'll just reiterate them: You can withdraw and become self-absorbed, you can become intrusive, you can become over protective, you can become fragmented and get disorganized, you can become rigid and order people around, you can become sadistic and destructive and aggressive. Those are some of the negatives and, obviously, the constructive things you can do are you can become more soothing and regulating, you can become more nurturing and warm, you can become more interactive and facilitating, you can become verbally supportive, you can become more creative, you can become more collaborative.

So, there's a list of some things you can start out with and you can look at, “What do we do under pressure?” Again, most of us are going to have a little bit from both columns, again, as it should be if we're human. So, both therapists can help parents or family members or caregivers walk through this list and we can do it ourselves, and there




may be other characteristics that I'm not mentioning. These should be used as illustrative. But there is no reason why many families can't do this on their own. Often what I find interesting is I'll ask the spouse to help. So I'll ask Daddy, "Well, what do you think of Mommy's strength and Mommy's vulnerability and Mommy, what do you think of Daddy's strength and Daddy's vulnerability?" If the person can't do it for himself or herself, often the spouse will get it right away and that's kind of neat to see the spouse help the person do it and that often can be done in good spirits and good share. Rarely have I found a family where the spouse doesn't know the strength or weakness of their spouse.

Once we do that, we identify that, we look at how it plays out in two situations: First, we see how does this play out in terms of our functional emotional milestones, our Floortime goals? In other words, how did these patterns either enhance or get in the way of optimal Floortime type interactions? By "optimal Floortime type interactions," we mean the interactions that are fostering calm, regulated attention where a child can relax, attend, and focus. We look for how well these family patterns facilitate warm, nurturing engagement and real depth of intimacy. We look at how well the family patterns facilitate two-way back-and-forth communication with gestures and facial expressions and different kinds of emotional back-and-forth interactions. We look for how well it fosters long chains of back-and-forth social signaling and emotional signaling as part of problem solving, like little Susie taking Daddy by the hand and walking to the toy area and pointing to the toy she wants.

So, how well do the family patterns and the caregiver facilitate these – and you want to look at it, not just as each caregiver alone does Floortime, but the family as a unit when the family is together – how much intimacy is there? How much back-and-forth communication is there? How much shared social problem solving is there? How well does the family as a unit – as a group – facilitate creativity and imagination in the use of words or pretend play if a child's at that level? How well do they get to the next level, where they facilitate as a family logical thinking – connecting ideas together where the family members are making sense out of each other's words and opening and closing verbal circles or symbolic circles with each other, where when one person says something, someone else says something that's connected, as opposed to just changing subjects all the time. So, if a little child is saying in the family dinnertime, "blue car, blue car" then someone says to the child, "Where is the blue car, sweetheart? Where is the blue car?" and then the child points over there and says, "I want to play. No eat – play." Okay, now you've made sense of what could've been viewed as just a random comment.

Now anyone in the family could say that – a sibling, a mother, a father, a grandparent. But when the family's together, is there an attempt at back-and-forth logical



thinking? Or do we see the opposite in the family? When the individuals work with the child you may see some positive support for the functional emotional milestones of everything from attending to two-way back-and-forth logical thinking, but when the family's together as a unit, what you get is a lot of distractibility, a lot of self-absorption, a lot of fragmented interaction, a lot of concrete use of ideas rather than creative use of ideas, and very poor capacity to make sense out of things. The family always seems to always talk in parallel or at cross purposes with each other.

So, it's very, very important to look at the family as a unit – how well we all support each other and how well the family supports all these milestones. And not infrequently, if parents undermine each other or siblings are competitive with one another, individually, we may promote these milestones, but in a family unit we have trouble. So, we need to notice how well we're using our strengths and understanding our vulnerabilities to promote the emotional milestones, particularly the first primary six ones. Then we get to the higher levels of gray area thinking and reflective thinking that we've covered in prior discussions.

Now, the next question you ask as you review your strengths and weaknesses, your positive traits and your Achilles' heels, how does this play out in the marital relationship and in the family pattern as a whole because these same patterns that may undermine the work with the child where the child gets negative and the father becomes too autocratic, rather than more playful, that may happen with mommy, too, when the parents are alone having dinner or off on a Saturday night or just going over bills or talking about school for the child or therapy for the child, Daddy becomes insecure or unsure, becomes a little too bossy, then Mommy becomes resentful, etc. and we get the same conflicts playing out.

So, ask yourself the question, "How do the Achilles' heels and strengths play out in the couple's relationship – in the spouse to spouse relationship – as well as with the other siblings, if there are other siblings in the family. It's very important to understand that because if you're having warring spouses, it's very hard to have the energy to provide these nurturing interactions that the child requires. So, more often than not, the same Achilles' heels will play out in multiple ways with the child and in the relationship between the caregivers. I gave you examples before of how the overprotective mommy who would stuff things down people's throats, would do that with Daddy, as well as with her child, and the daddy became rigid with Mommy, as well as with the child. That's pretty typical.


Now comes the next principle, which is probably the most important one. Once you've identified these patterns – and once you've identified them – your strengths and

weaknesses – it’s not too hard to see how they’re supporting or undermining the functional emotional milestones in Floortime and it’s not too difficult to see how they play out in the adult relationship because, again, we’re creatures of habit and we tend to do the same things over and over again under stress. I want to emphasize, we don’t do this all the time. We do it when we’re unsure, when we’re uncertain, when we’re anxious and often this has a history to it - we’ve learned this in our own family. And I should add as a caveat that it’s helpful to understand – if we can, although it’s not essential – the history. How did we get to be militaristic and autocratic when we’re under stress? How did we get to be overprotective when we’re under stress? What in our own families led us to be that way?

Once we figure that out and even if you don’t figure it out, once you identify your pattern, then we get to the next principle, which is to work around your Achilles’ heel and play to your strength. Now, how do you work around your Achilles’ heel? Now, for those who are tennis players, it’s little bit like working around your backhand – you know, if you have a better forehand than backhand, you tend to try to use your feet and hit more forehands. You work around it. At school, for those who are good at literature and poor at math, in college I’m sure you took more literature courses than you did math courses, or vice versa, for those good in math and not as good in literature. So you worked around your weakness and you played to your strength. Well, the same thing here. If mommy and daddy know each other’s weaknesses, don’t stir them up! Be aware of your own weaknesses and don’t give into them.

So, let’s take the example I gave before to carry this through. The daddy who becomes more militaristic and autocratic and orders people around when he doesn’t get his way, so he’s aware of this now and when little Susie is being difficult and being negative, at that point he begins hearing his voice get more strident and he hears himself giving her more orders, Daddy can now just be aware of that tendency and just through conscious effort – even though it doesn’t feel natural, even though he wants to order her around, even though he’s angry, even though he’s thinking, “She’s being spoiled. I can’t cave into her. I can’t give into what she wants to do all the time. She’s got to learn to deal with discipline. She’s got to learn to deal with the tough realities of the world” – Daddy’s got to then take a step back and say, “Gee, but she’s only two and a half years old. We’ve got at least twenty years to help her deal with the realities of the world. It doesn’t have to be right away.”


Also, what I can tell Daddy is, when you’re using that rationalization to continue your old pattern, remember that if you continue your old rigid pattern, you’ll just dig the hole deeper! She will continue to be more difficult. On the other hand, if you play to your strengths, she will learn to be the kind of flexible thinker that you want her to be.



So the way to get her to adjust to reality is actually to play to your strengths. In this case Daddy needs to, at the moment of truth, be aware. He'll still get into his old pattern a little bit, but instead of doing it for hours and justify it and believe his rationalizations, what he has to do is start questioning his rationalizations. In other words, we all build castles that we live in. The castles are our own favorite ways of explaining the world. So, we can live in our castles for a few minutes, but then we've got to go out of the castle – we can't settle in there for hours and hours and hours. That's the big change. So as we become aware we work around our problem by saying, "We're not going to live in that castle" of being a general or being an autocrat.

If it's the mommy who's being overprotective in this example I gave, then – same thing: As you see yourself doing it, doing too much for the child, try to catch yourself. Say, "Oh, there I go again." You'll do it, but you'll do it for a few minutes instead of hours and hours and hours. And then you make a compensatory change and you play to your strength. You really make a sheer conscious effort and Daddy says, "I've got to turn the switch and become playful." Mommy says, "I've got to turn the switch and become more challenging – very interactive, still, but not as overstuffing and over protective." It won't be easy the first time or the second time or even the fifth time. But by the fiftieth time you do it, you'll get the hang of it and you'll catch yourself in the pattern. It's like any other piece of learning – it takes a while to learn, but the learning curve is surprisingly fast when it comes to yourself if you keep asking yourself the question, "Gee, what am I doing? Am I playing to my weakness or am I playing to my strength?"


So what you do is try to play around your weakness with sheer conscious effort. I can promise you it can be done. Now, sometimes spouses can help each other – and just remind each other – "Daddy, you're being the general again," "Mommy, you're being the 'feeder' again." Try to come up with one word that you can use as a signal to help each other out of the hole when you're digging yourself into the hole. This requires some self-observing capacities, but again we can all do it if we work at it and if we get some support, particularly from our spouses, which gets us to the next principle, which is what I call, "bring out the best in the other," or "bring out the best in your spouse." Typically, what we tend to do is dig the hole deeper. In the example we're giving – the rigid daddy and the overstuffing mommy – and, again, I should point out this is no way should be seen as stereotyping the mommy and the daddy into one pattern. In many families it's just the opposite, where the mommy is the rigid one and the autocrat and the daddy is the over-stuffer. There are ten other patterns, too, that you'll see, but we haven't got time to go into each one of them. We're using this one because it's a fairly familiar one and even though they may have a stereotype quality to it, that's only for familiarity. There are really infinite variations in all these patterns.



The principle is bringing out the best in the other. How do we do that? In other words, typically let's say Daddy's being rigid. Well, Mommy's going to get mad at him and he's upsetting my little sweetheart, my little Susie, and then Mommy is irritable or micromanages him, "Don't do that!" and gets critical. That makes Daddy feel even more upset and he gets tenser and then he gets even more autocratic and then everyone's angry at each other: Daddy and Susie are mad at each other, Mommy and Daddy are mad at each other, and everything deteriorates. Or vice versa: Mommy is overstuffing again and Daddy becomes critical and feels irritable. Also, he feels alienated that he's not getting any nurturing from Mommy – and here, she's putting all her energies into little Susie and he makes her feel anxious by being critical of her, by micromanaging her or withdrawing from her and then she just overstuffs more, because that's the way of her dealing with anxiety and uncertainty, and the pattern intensifies.

So, instead, if we bring out the best in the other, we say to ourselves, not "How do I put my spouse's face in their own mess and make them admit that they're the problem child in the family." But, instead, you say to yourself, "Well, how do I bring out the best in the other, how do I help my wife or my husband or grandma or grandpa or the teacher – how do I help them play to their strengths so they can work better with my child?" Because, remember, even if you manage your spouse, they're still the mother or father to your child. And even if you're divorced – I always tell divorced parents – these same principles hold because no matter how much you may be angry at your spouse, no matter what legal battles you're involved in, they will still be the mother or father of your child for life. So, you're in a relationship with your former spouse in a divorce situation for the rest of your life, so treat them like a valued relative, if not a lover, and follow these same principles. It's going to be harder to do, obviously, because you have to separate the legal and the other part of the world from your world where you come together around your children.

Now, how do you bring out the best in the other? Well, you play to their strengths. So, if Daddy's being rigid – but you know Daddy does that when he's feeling insecure – so knowing Daddy, how do you relax him? How do you help him be more playful? Maybe you join the play a little bit and become a little silly and maybe that works to get Daddy more playful. You may even use humor – you know, join the drama and say, "Yes, sir, General! Okay, we better listen to Daddy because he's the general here," etc. Or you may have a little chat with Daddy after the play, very supportively while you're giving him a back rub and while you're feeding him his favorite ice cream and talk about these general principles in a supportive way.




Each spouse knows the ticket into the other one's heart – what's going to make their heart melt and how they're going to relax. Once you get the person relaxed, they'll be able to then reason with you and you'll be able to bring out the best. So play to their strengths of the individual – don't bite the bait. Often when someone's being critical and anxious and controlling, what they need is warmth, and nurturance and security to get them relaxed because they're doing that because they're feeling nervous and tense. So, bring out the best in the other. For the mommy who's overfeeding, overstuffing – she may be feeling insecure that no one likes her food and maybe feel very guilty that somehow if she were a better feeder her little Johnny or Susie or Harold wouldn't have these problems. If Daddy is critical of her, then she feels she's not feeding Daddy properly, either. So, being reassuring, being supportive, letting her feel valued as a wife and spouse will help her relax with her little Johnny or Susie.

So, the key is think in terms of the game plan how to bring out the best in your spouse. Just having that question in mind, you'll find a way to do it. If one thing doesn't work, another thing will work. But you have to ask that question. Again, the typical pattern is to bring out the worst in the other one by upping the stakes because you get angry, you get annoyed, take it personally and say Daddy doesn't care or Mommy doesn't care – I find that almost all mommies and daddies care deeply about their children and care deeply about each other. It's a question of working out how to be supportive of one another, how to bring out the best in the other one.

Now, sometimes that's difficult – that's going to be hard. If you find that it is difficult, it's fine to get some help as a family. Children who have developmental challenges, who have special needs, do challenge families and some families do, as I mentioned at the very beginning of this talk, do come together and organize and problem solve in the most constructive ways and I hear families telling me “Actually, Susie's challenges brought us closer together. We've never been closer than we are as a family now.” You can just feel it – you can feel the connection, the working partnership and the family has a new level of meaning. They've discovered something new in life that makes the family relationship deeper and more meaningful than most families. This is not a family that a family that's just preoccupied with taking their kids to soccer games or the family vacations or fantasizing about where little Johnny and Susie are going to go to college. This is a family that has, often, a much deeper feeling tone to it and relating around deeper meanings, around intimacy, around warmth, around empathy, around caring, with a legitimate concern for one another, less preoccupied with external, superficial values.


So, it can really bring people together, but sometimes as I indicated earlier, it's not working. Instead of supporting one another the spouses are digging the holes deeper,



they're attacking each other, they're micromanaging, they're being critical. Then it's fine to get some help for the couple. The sign that you need some help is if you've gone through these exercises that we've tried – you've tried to analyze your strengths and weaknesses, you're really trying to do the Floortime – and it's just not working, you're not doing it – you're fighting with each other and there's conflict – you're still pressing each other's buttons, rather than bringing out the best in the other one, then seek out someone to help you as a couple. It could be the same person working with your child or guiding your therapy with your child or it might be someone they refer you to. It might be another person that you've heard about through friends or colleagues, but find someone who can help you understand your patterns as a family and as a couple, but bring this framework to them. In other words, bring your homework to them and say we're trying to figure out our strengths and weaknesses, we're trying to bring out the best in each other and it's not working. Maybe that person can help you remove some of the roadblocks. Sometimes, we must misperceive things. We perceive what the other person is doing as an attack or something personal when is just their way of coping with their uncertainty and their anxiety, but we personalize it. And sometimes it isn't easy to say in the heat of battle when you're feeling strong emotions, it's very hard to take that step back and figure it out. Sometimes we need a third party to do it. It could be anybody – a counselor, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a social worker, a clergyman – it could even be a close friend who's good at this.

Also, when the couples are having difficulties – and even when they're not having difficulties, but, often, it's even more important when the are – but, as a general principle you should pay attention to something that we call “Floortime” for the whole family or for the mommies and the daddies, which means that parents need some time alone to each other and often in busy hustle-bustle families adults are not taking time for themselves and they've lost, then, the glow or the gleam or the intimacy of the marriage. But, sometimes, especially when there's challenges with children, they're afraid to leave the children with babysitters or they don't have in-laws around and, often, there's no time alone and everyone's stressed out, everyone's exhausted, and there's no nurturing time where Mommy and Daddy go for a walk or have dinner together or go out to a movie and sometimes people with busy social schedules, whenever they do have a moment, are getting together in demanding social situations related to work or related to community activities, it's still not having that warm, nurturing time with each other. It's not infrequent that I hear that we're just running around with our heads cut off and leading parallel lives, taking the kids here and there and there's no intimacy.

Now, why is intimacy so important? Well, one it's the fuel that keeps the soul going and if that's missing in the marital relationship – and I'm not talking about how




many times a week a couple makes love – I’m talking about time together to be warm and nurturing and talk and understand each other and if that’s missing you don’t feel secure inside, you don’t feel valued as a person because that comes from your relationship with your good friends and your spouse, mostly from your spouse.

So, you need that and whether it’s with your spouse or close friends – everyone needs that and if you don’t get it, you don’t have it to give and the heart of Floortime is that warm, nurturing, gleam in your eye that you’re conveying to your child so your child will develop that sense of intimacy and want to interact with you, want to part of your world, rather than retreat into their world. You have to have it to give it and you can only go on your reserve tank for so long. So it’s very important to create time each week – or many times each week, but at least once a week – where you go off by yourselves. Work hard to find somebody you can trust – a relative or older sibling or a babysitter, even if you get off just for a couple hours – to go for a walk or go out for a quick bite to eat, it doesn’t have to be a whole evening – can be very, very, very helpful. And it’s good also to have some time each evening or at least three or four times a week when you have at least half-hour or an hour after the kids are asleep and even if they’re waking up at night, between their waking up, where you just kind of come together and chit-chat and tune into one another. So, parents need Floortime, caregivers need Floortime, and it’s hard to be good Floortimers if you’re not having Floortime with each other.

Now, also, siblings can be a challenge. Often the child with special needs is receiving so much attention that siblings become resentful and parents often ask me, “What do I do about little Sally or Jennifer or Johnny who’s not having challenges, but we’re spending all our time with little Susie?” There are two ways to do this: One is to be aware that it’s important to be even-handed and not devote all the attention to the child with challenges. But, it’s also very, very important and the way of doing this in a harmonious way is to draw the sibling in to the family pattern. In other words, there’s a sense some families have that they want to not burden the older sibling or the younger sibling who’s not having challenges with the challenges of, let’s say, little Susie. But that’s a big, big, big – underline the word “big” – mistake because if you don’t pull the sibling in to the family challenge – because this is a family challenge – the sibling feels excluded. You’re not doing the sibling a favor.

What I hear when I talk to siblings, especially older verbal siblings, is when they’re not involved they feel like, as one told me, “They feel I don’t know how to play with little Susie,” or “They feel I’ll hurt her,” or “They feel I can’t do a good job, so they don’t let me play alone with her.” So the sibling almost always feels excluded and our job is to help the sibling feel included and help the sibling feel included in a constructive way, but not a burdensome way. So you don’t want to make the sibling into another adult




like some families do when they give the sibling so many responsibilities and burden him with so much that the sibling gets resentful – so we don't want that and we don't want exclusion. We want the happy balance.

One way to do it is something I call “Group Floortime,” where, let's say, we have a six year-old without challenges and a three and a half year-old with challenges. So, we do group Floortime where the six year-old goes first and he becomes the leader and we pull the three and a half-year old in as best you can into the pretend play of the six year-old. So, the daddy and the three year-old may be hiding and the six year-old is trying to find them in a hide and go seek game. Or one team may be the good guys and one's the bad guys and you pull in the little guy as best you can. But, then, the second twenty minutes, the little guy's the leader and you have the big guy – who doesn't have challenges – helping Daddy do Floortime with the little guy.

So, if the little guy – let's say – is playing out a drama, the big guy's a character in the little guy's drama and Daddy's coaching the big guy into how to get the circles of communication open and closed and also Daddy models how to do that. So what happens now is that the sibling without challenges is learning how to do Floortime and then what you see after a number of weeks of this is on their own that child is doing Floortime and playing with their little sibling because they don't want to be isolated – they may tell you that they're mad that so-and-so's getting so much attention, or they're embarrassed because they bring their friend over and little Susie makes funny noises or runs around staring at the fans, etc., etc. There're all kinds of complaints, but what they really want – what's really behind all their complaints – is they want to be connected, they want to know how to play with little Susie and they want to have Susie be a part of their lives.

So, if you can help them do that, I find almost always they then seek them out and when you're busy cooking dinner and other doing things you'll see them playing and then the older sibling will then become a play partner. Sometimes, where there's a real older sibling – like a nine year-old and a four year-old – you can ask the older sibling to baby-sit and pay them babysitting wages. You're not bribing them to play, you're just asking them because they'll be babysitting for others pretty soon, why not baby-sit for their own sibling – with Mommy and Daddy in the house, obviously, with a nine year-old – and you show them how to play and how to interact and it becomes a source of pride and they get a deeper sense of empathy. It's very similar to schools where we have children without special needs in an integrated class be partners with children with special needs. The children without special needs get an awful lot out of that – they learn how to empathize, they learn how to relate, they learn social skills – because it's challenging to pull a child in who tends to get self-absorbed – and it's a very, very constructive experience. The




family that comes together that way is a much healthier, happier family than a family that tries to “protect” the child.

So, you don’t want to over involve the child without challenges so that they don’t get to play baseball, they don’t get to do the other things they need to do. You want to give them some one-on-one time also. In other words you want to help them also have time with you alone. So, it’s important to have the sibling have some one-on-one time where you go take them out for an ice cream or you go out in the backyard or play baseball or go dance together. So there should be some special one-on-one time, but also a lot of group time and family time so everybody feels that they’re part of this mission together. So sometimes you’ll find that the whole family is just having fun on the floor together – and I want you to just picture this – where there’s Mommy and Daddy and two or three siblings and the child with special needs all on the floor – and there your goal as a family is to just facilitate as much interaction between the siblings and between you and the siblings and the child with special needs together. Even though everyone’s at a different level – you may have a nine year-old and five year-old without challenges and a three year-old with challenges – well, everyone’s at a different level, even the children without challenges, but you’re trying to find some common drama, some common way of having fun together. It could be dancing to music or making funny sounds or playing “duck, duck, goose.” And you may switch gears – when we’re talking to the older child sometimes and the younger ones are kind of trying to pick up what little bits and pieces they can or sometimes catering to the younger one, so everyone’s kind of interacting and having fun together.

What you’re mindful of is are we able to facilitate these functional emotional milestones of calm, regulated attention and engagement and two-way back-and-forth gesturing and lots of interaction and shared social problem solving and using ideas creatively, using ideas logically, even being reflective thinkers? Are we able to facilitate all these levels of emotional and social and intellectual functioning with the whole family all the time? Each child will be at a different level, but if you’re facilitating all of them, everyone is getting something because the younger one – even if he’s not understanding all the words, he’s getting the interaction and engagement and the back-and-forth signaling; the older ones are getting all the words; and the oldest ones are being reflective with you and analyzing things with you and how to do things differently.

So, that’s the key and that becomes our last point: When you want to see how you’re doing as a family, and whether you’ve identified your Achilles’ heels and your strengths effectively; whether you’ve worked around your weaknesses and played to your strengths; whether you’re supporting each other’s strengths, bringing out the best in one another, whether you’re involving the siblings in a constructive way since they’re part of




the family and helping the child with special needs, but also feeling supportive of their independent lives – when you want to check out how well you’re doing just look at how well the whole family is mastering their functional emotional milestones, and that becomes your check.

So you start with that, to say, “How are we doing as a family? How are we supporting the functional emotional milestones as a family unit for all our kids? Where are we strong? Where are we weak? Where are we having troubles?” Then you say, “Why are we having the difficulties, if we are, or why are we doing so well, if we are,” and look for your strengths and your weaknesses, your Achilles’ heels and your special, unique assets. Then you work around them – you try to understand them, you support the best in one another. Get help if you need it and then try to come together as a family and keep improving your ability to support those important critical milestones that are the cornerstone of growth.

And, again, I can’t repeat this too much: If you try to be perfect, you’re trying to be nonhuman. The most important human quality you have as a family is your warmth and your spontaneity and your emotionality and if you try to be perfect, you’re going to do it in a rigid way. So, to be human is to be emotional. If you do the important things means that you’re going to also have both strengths and weaknesses and life is an ongoing process of keeping these in balance. So, that’s what you need to remember.

Now, next week we’re going to talk about a topic that we’ve talked about before but I get a lot of questions about and I want to focus in a little more on it, which is how to work with the child’s unique biological differences. We’ve talked before how each child is sensory under or over reactive; how some children are stronger with their visual memory; some with their auditory memory; some are better with their ability to plan actions – what we call motor planning – some are weaker. We’ve talked about identifying these and a little bit how to work with them, but I want to talk a little bit more – at sort of level two – of how to work with a child’s profile, how to help the child who’s very finicky and fussy and gets overloaded, how to help the child who’s sensory craving and moves around all the time; how to help the child who’s weaker in terms of what they see; how to help the child who can’t coordinate the left and right sides of their body or doesn’t understand the differences between left and right; how to help the child remember what they hear and follow instructions better. So, we’re going to talk about ways to strengthen all the processing capacities next time. That will pick up on a theme we’ve talked about before, but this will be the quote “advanced” discussion of working with the child’s individual differences, the child’s unique biologies.



Thank you for joining us today and we'll look forward to talking with you again next week.