



"Ham It Up and Get It Cookin!!" Thoughts From Dr. Greenspan

Contributed by [Kim Davis](#)

At The Infancy and Early Childhood Training Course, 'Ham it up and get it cookin' was the motto of Dr. Stanley Greenspan and his colleague, Serena Weider as they discussed Floortime as an option for teaching young children with autism spectrum disorders. Greenspan and Weider have written numerous articles and books on this topic, as well as producing several videotapes that discuss this playful learning model.

According to Greenspan, it is important to realize that autism spectrum disorder is a multi-system disorder. There are biological challenges that impact most individuals with autism. These biological challenges impact the central nervous system (CNS) that includes auditory processing, visual processing, spatial processing, motor planning, cognitive processing and other sensory issues (*See IRCA article on **Movement Difference***). These CNS dysfunctions change the child-caregiver interactions, and the ability to share information or teach. This change then impacts the fundamental developmental capacities that ultimately impact diagnostic patterns. It is a never-ending cycle of challenges. The complex issues these challenges create can only be addressed with complex thinking. This is not simple! There are no simple answers any more than there is only one answer!! Each child is different and therefore it is important to keep trying to discover what is best for each individual child.

It is important to look beyond the disability and at each individual child. In the past, the skills and differences of children with an autism spectrum disorder have been compartmentalized by looking at their milestones individually: motor, language, cognitive, etc. If achievements or milestones are addressed separately, Greenspan believes it is not possible to see the real and complete child or how that child integrates into a whole. He emphasizes that it is important to look at the child as a whole not merely as segments or areas of achievement or development.

Greenspan further states that the importance of relationships and affect on learning (emotions and interactions) should not be overlooked. Emotions and cognitive coding for experiences develops early in life and we need both to learn. Consider the different experiences that may occur between a child repeating 'Hi' to someone based only on cognitive reasons (rote memorization of a situation) and that same child saying 'Hi' to someone based on emotional and cognitive reasons (high affect and energy based on past situations). Emotions help the context of learning. All aspects of learning are based on formative emotional experiences. Emotionally meaningful learning is far superior to simply learning by rote. Like most people, children with autism achieve more in areas where there is an interest, and when enthusiasm and attitude is positive!

The basic ideas are that if someone feels emotions such as joy or excitement (affect) or interest in a topic or activity, they will more likely stretch themselves and want to learn. Conversely, if people feel a lack of emotion (affect) or interest about a topic or activity, the motivation to learn or stay involved is diminished greatly. It simply makes sense! The classes that I did well in were those in which I felt enjoyment or excitement as well as felt excitement and emotion coming from the teacher. Where there was less excitement from the teacher and I had feelings of frustration or boredom, I achieved much less. The same thinking can be applied to students with autism. When there is higher interest and enjoyment in an activity, there will be better opportunity for engagement and learning. Forget the incredible emphasis on academics and rules for young children and instead

simply 'ham it up and get it cooking' in order to get those youngsters involved, interacting and engaged. Children need to be engaged before learning can take place. When they have a good time, the adults have a good time. This enthusiasm continues to escalate and build!

In order to get the learning process going, he says we need to inspire and challenge our children instead of always doing things 'for' them. One of the best ways to begin is to take cues from the child; let them be in charge of a situation using their interest areas to build upon. This was made obvious in a video clip he shared showing a young girl in a room with her parents. They were trying to engage her in what the parents thought was a meaningful activity. The child was not interested. However, with prompts from Dr. Greenspan, they let their guard down and changed their approach to build upon her interest in an eyeglass case. The entire situation changed. She was interested in looking at and playing with the case. Her parents began to play and hide the case from her. She initially just stood dumbfounded as the parents changed their interaction style, but then began to seek the case with lighthearted encouragement from her parents. When she found the case, there were squeals of glee from her as well as from her parents. The high and happy affect became contagious and the entire situation was joyful. There were many different interactions between the parents and the young girl as they shared the case, hid it, tossed it and simply created many different ways to challenge and interact with each other. The genuine joy and upbeat interaction between the parents and the child also carried over to those viewing this tape as gentle laughter filled the viewing room. The parents later shared that the interaction was more animated and engaging than they had ever had with their daughter. They felt renewed. An interest area helped create a situation that was fun, meaningful, and interesting to all involved as well as create the potential for a repeat performance. 'Ham it up and get it cookin' at its finest was portrayed.

As all this is happening it is important to step back and realize that in these high affect/high motivation activities, **all** of the child's capacities are working together...motor sequence, visual processing, spatial processing, auditory processing, cognitive processing, language, emotions, perceptual memory as well as social interaction. Each domain is working and dynamic learning interactions are taking place. This dynamic interaction that engages all the domains creates true learning and not just rote memorization.

Rote memorization can only get an individual so far in school, but it is the ability to put ideas together to make sense out of things, and to figure out cause and effect that moves children along in school and in life. So much emphasis is placed on rote learning in school instead of helping students to link ideas into integrated thinking. If there is no variation, memorization not learning occurs. Therefore, the social and emotional (high motivation and high affect) aspects are critical for learning according to Greenspan and Weider.

While this type of interaction seemed to work well, Greenspan stated that professionals should help parents realize that no one approach works with each child with autism. Great care needs to be taken when making general statements because there are many individual differences among each of us. No matter the data (on different approaches) it wasn't used on your child yet, " he says. So it is important to observe the impact on your child no matter the number of studies done. Each child is unique and we need to see the whole pattern of impact and not just one area at a time in any intervention.

In summary, several of the basic principles of Floor Time are as follows:

- First and foremost is engagement in "emotionally meaningful learning experiences characterized by high interest and motivation." It is vital! Remember, in order to engage anyone, especially an individual with autism, it is important to use his or her interest areas. Initially, it should not matter what that interest may be as long as there can be some engagement that brings about high energy and high affect that translates into fun for the child!!

- Floor Time is child-directed with adults merely adding their support and encouragement. In other words, the adults are not 'in charge.' This is quite different from most other techniques because it gives the child the ability to direct the play and type of engagement. It is truly based on the present interests of the child and gradually, through the engagement or play, interests can be expanded.
- Adults in the environment should continually increase the range of experiences and opportunities for the child to be intentional and work on different types of challenges. Keeping the child engaged is paramount. Make the child deal with the adults in the situation. If a child seems to wander aimlessly, intrude on their world, be creative, and don't stop trying to engage them in an interest area.
- Build on logical sequences or connections between experiences, gestures, behaviors, and ideas as the interactions continue between the child and the adult(s) in the play situation. Take the child's lead and run with it in as many different ways as possible. Adults should put rules aside and simply become a kid again. Be in the moment and play along with the child. This can make the play more engaging and complex as it moves along.

Dr. Greenspan and Dr. Wieder can provide more detailed insight into the mechanisms of how to keep engagement going through their books and videotapes. Training and coaching in Floor Time may be a useful tool for some families to consider, however as with all teaching tools, investigate them thoroughly prior to making any firm commitment. Learn the pros and cons, and the financial, mental, emotional and physical 'costs' of any tool for the child as well as for the entire family. To paraphrase Dr. Greenspan, not every program works for every child.

Selected Books and information by Greenspan:

The Child with Special Needs: Encouraging Intellectual and Emotional Growth, Perseus Books, 800-242-7737.

Floor Time, a video tape from Scholastic Inc. NY, NY, 800-631-1586.

Davis, K. (2002). "Ham it up and get it cookin'!!" Thoughts from Dr. Greenspan. *The Reporter*, 7(2), 5-7, 12.