

Child-Directed Play / Floortime

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What is child-directed play?

- *Child-Led.* The child is in control. They decide what to do. You join in their choice of activities.
- *It's About Process, Not Product.* Play is done for its own sake, and to deepen the relationship between those at play, not to accomplish a task.
- *Creative and Spontaneous.* It's flexible and open-ended. It changes and evolves as play time goes on. The child can adapt items, create something new or experience things in a new way.
- *Fun.* Both players are happy and engaged.

What is Floortime? A specific method of child-directed play. Created by Stanley Greenspan for kids with autism or developmental delays, it can also be used with and beneficial for any child. It is helpful for parents who want to feel more connected to their child and want to play in a way that boosts learning, communication, social-emotional development and a positive parent-child relationship.

Set the Stage

- Find a time when you can focus on play, when you and your child are both well-rested and fed.
- Be present – set aside mobile devices / other distractions, relax, stay focused on the interaction.
- Gather a few items that interest your child and have them available.
- Sit in front of them – that's better for connecting than side by side or behind them. Get down to their level. Physical nearness, affectionate touch, and eye contact help them to stay engaged.
- Invite them to play. Call it "special time" to cue this is time they get to decide what happens.

Follow their Lead – Share Their Focus

- Let them choose the activity. It doesn't matter what you play, it matters that you *play*.
- Don't feel like you have to teach them. Just let them explore and discover. If they signal that they want your help, then help, but don't just jump in and do things they haven't asked for.
- If they are motivated, don't change the activity. It's OK to do the same thing over and over.
- Be playful! Find joy in your interaction. This supports and encourages them.
- Look for the gleam in their eye. That's a great sign that it's working.

Serve and Return

When Floortime is working well, it's like a game of volleyball, full of back and forth interaction. You know your child's interests, so you "serve" by offering a toy. They "bounce the ball back" to you by taking the toy. You talk to them about the toy. A young toddler may only be able to go back and forth a few times before disconnecting. The older they are and the more play experience they have, the better they'll get. The goal of Floortime is to build to completing more of these circles of connection. But when their attention truly moves on, move on with them and share their new focus.

Communicating while you play

Don't quiz them on academic questions that have a right answer – these questions drain the energy of the play. Either they don't know the answer, which is stressful for you both, or they (and you) already know the answer, so nothing new is learned by asking the question. Instead, try:

- Silent observation, just responding with body language and facial expressions.
- Respond to their play with simple reactions "uh oh!", "what's that?", "hurray!"
- Notice what they're interested in and talk about that. They're setting the agenda, not you.
- Ask open-ended questions – questions that you don't already know the answer to. "What are you planning to do next?" "What would happen if...?"
- Narration – talk about what you see them doing. "You're putting the toys in the basket. You noticed there's only one toy left on the floor. Whoa, you dumped all the toys back on the floor so you can do it again!" This narration tells them that you're paying attention and that what they're doing is important to you. It also allows us to use the "attention principle." Giving positive attention to any behavior you want to see more of motivates your child to do it more.

Use Emotional Expression and Responses to Engage Them

- Expression – Use your eyes, facial expression, tone of voice and body language to connect and communicate. Your emotions (especially anticipation, surprise, and delight) help to attract their attention and keep them engaged. When you pair your words with emotional expression, it gives your child a better understanding of both the words and the emotions.
- Observation and Response – Can you read their emotional cues? Do your expressions engage them more? If so, keep it up. If they're seeming overwhelmed by you, back down a little – you're following their lead.

Stretch the Play

Once you're connected and have a nice back-and-forth pattern established, then you can work to take their play up a level.

Expand the play by adding in some new toy or aspect of play, or offering choices. For example, if they've been using blocks to make a stable for toy horses, put a "roof" on one of the "stalls." If they've served you the toy pizza over and over, ask for a drink to go with it. If you were playing peek a boo, drop the scarf and pretend to have a hard time finding it.

Your goal is sustained engagement – keeping a back-and-forth going as long as we can. If your new extension keeps them engaged, keep it up. If it loses their attention, return to what engaged them.

Try this for ten minutes every day for a week. Reflect on it – how is it working for you and your child?

Learn more by reading The Incredible Years by Stratton, or check out Protectum's free Parent Toolbox: <https://www.profectum.org/course/profectum-parent-toolbox> or check out a great video on "serve and return" at: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>