The Power of Affect, Pace & Relationship in Floortime

In DIRFloortime®, adults play a critical role in supporting a child's development through intentional use of specific tools. Three of the most powerful tools adults bring into Floortime are **AFFECT**, **PACE** and **RELATIONSHIP**. Each one helps create the emotional safety and engagement that are essential for meaningful interaction and growth.

These tools are subtle but powerful. When used consistently and thoughtfully, they turn everyday play into moments of growth, and connection.



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Affect - Your Emotional Expression

Affect refers to your facial expressions, tone of voice, and emotional energy.
Affect helps children read emotional cues, develop emotional thinking, and stay connected.

Using Affect in Floortime

Use animated facial expressions to show interest, and express emotion - excitement, or surprise.

Adjust your tone of voice—warm, inviting, silly, or dramatic—to help guide emotional engagement.

Example

You're rolling a ball back and forth. As the child rolls it to you, you exaggerate your facial expression with excitement: “Whoa! That was a fast one!”
You raise your eyebrows and lean in with a big smile, making the moment feel emotionally charged and fun. Your enthusiastic affect makes the child feel noticed and invites continued back-and-forth interaction.

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Why Affect Matters

It Helps the Child Understand Emotions
Children—especially neurodivergent ones—may struggle to read subtle emotional cues. Using clear, exaggerated affect (like tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures) helps make your feelings more visible and understandable.

It Builds Emotional Thinking
Affect helps children connect feelings to experiences. Over time, they begin to understand that actions have emotional meaning. This helps the child link the event with the emotion —supporting their ability to recognize emotions in themselves and others over time.

It Keeps the Interaction Going
Expressive affect—like laughing, showing curiosity, or pretending to be surprised—makes interactions more engaging and fun, which keeps the child emotionally invested and wanting to stay in the moment.

It Draws the Child Into Shared Attention
Even when a child doesn't respond to words, they often respond to emotional energy. Your tone, rhythm, and facial expressions help pull their attention in and create shared moments of connection.

AFFECT IS THE EMOTIONAL GLUE IN FLOORTIME.

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PACE - Match and Respect the Child's Rhythm

Pace means how quickly or slowly you interact, and how much space you give. Pacing interactions based on the child's cues allows them to stay emotionally regulated. It tells the child, "You're in control of the tempo, and I'm here with you," which builds trust and confidence.

Adjusting our Pace in Floortime

Slow down so the child has time to process, respond, and take initiative.

Be patient with silence—it gives room for thinking and participation.

Example:
The child rolls the ball toward you and looks away. Instead of quickly rolling it back, you pause, wait for them to look back at you, and then gently say:
"Ready?"
Once you get a visual cue or glance, you slowly roll the ball back. By matching their rhythm and waiting for their signal, you allow space for them to feel in control of the interaction.

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Why Pace Matters

Supports Processing
Every child processes information differently. Slowing down allows the child to take in what's happening—visually, emotionally, and socially—and gives them space to respond in their own time. It also allows time for the adult to observe.

Encourages Initiation
When adults pause and wait, children have more opportunities to take the lead, whether that's through movement, eye contact, gestures, or words. This supports autonomy and confidence.

Fosters Co-Regulation
A gentle, calm pace helps regulate the child's nervous system. When adults slow down, children often follow, leading to more shared regulation and emotional balance.

Builds Emotional Safety
By not rushing or overwhelming, the adult creates an environment where the child feels safe, respected, and in control—laying the foundation for connection and growth.

PACE IS ABOUT TUNING IN, NOT TAKING OVER.

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Relationship - The Foundation of All Growth

Relationship is the heart of all learning and development. It's not just about being present with a child—it's about building a trusting, joyful, and responsive connection that creates the emotional foundation for engagement, communication, and growth.

Building a Relationship in Floortime

Focus on connection over compliance.

Be curious, not controlling—follow the child's interests and intentions.

Example

The child is bouncing a ball by themselves. Instead of taking over or directing, you sit nearby and begin bouncing your own ball in sync. You say:

"We're both bouncing! Boing, boing!"

You giggle when your ball bounces away and playfully chase it, looking back to see if the child follows. This shared experience builds trust and connection, inviting the child into reciprocal play while honoring their lead.

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Why Relationships Matters

Relationship Creates Emotional Safety
Children grow and learn best when they feel safe. A strong, trusting relationship tells the child:
“You’re accepted as you are, and I’m here with you.”
This emotional security gives the child the confidence to take risks, explore, and connect.

Development Happens Through Human Connection
In Floortime, development is not something we “do to” a child—it's something we co-create through relationship. Skills like engagement, communication, regulation, and problem-solving all begin in shared emotional experiences.

Relationship Builds Motivation
When children feel connected to an adult who truly "gets" them, they’re more motivated to stay in interaction. Connection becomes the reason to engage.

Relationship Makes Play Meaningful
In Floortime, it’s not just what you play—it’s who you’re playing with that matters. Shared joy, inside jokes, and emotional connection turn everyday activities into powerful developmental experiences.

RELATIONSHIP IS THE FOUNDATION OF FLOORTIME.

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THESE TOOLS - AFFECT, PACE, AND RELATIONSHIP - MAY SEEM SIMPLE ON THE SURFACE, BUT THEY ARE INCREDIBLY POWERFUL WHEN USED WITH INTENTION. IN FLOORTIME, THEY BECOME THE ADULT'S WAY OF ENTERING THE CHILD'S WORLD AND INVITING THEM INTO A SHARED EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCE.

THESE TOOLS DO NOT REQUIRE SPECIAL MATERIALS OR COMPLICATED TECHNIQUES. INSTEAD, THEY RELY ON PRESENCE, CURIOSITY, AND EMOTIONAL ATTUNEMENT. WHEN ADULTS USE EXPRESSIVE AFFECT TO COMMUNICATE EMOTION, ADJUST THEIR PACE TO MATCH THE CHILD'S RHYTHM, AND PRIORITIZE CONNECTION OVER CORRECTION, THEY CREATE A SPACE WHERE THE CHILD FEELS SAFE, SEEN, AND SUPPORTED.

OVER TIME, THESE SMALL, EVERYDAY MOMENTS - LIKE ROLLING A BALL - BECOME RICH WITH OPPORTUNITY. THEY BECOME THE STAGE FOR:

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION
SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT
SHARED PROBLEM-SOLVING
COMMUNICATION
IMAGINATIVE THINKING

Try these tips out and share your feedback.
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Remember

It's not about getting it "right." It's about showing up with curiosity, presence, and love. You help create the foundation for connection, communication, and growth.

Aha Connections
Empowering neurodivergent children through relationship-based play
🌐 www.ahaconnections.org

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