

## floortime: getting eye level with kids

**O**n any given day, Speech Language Pathologist Lauren Hutson may be diving into balls, playing with super hero dolls or jumping on a trampoline at the Tulsa Sunshine Center in Broken Arrow.

What Lauren is doing may sound like play, but as a therapist and owner of the Tulsa Sunshine Center she is offering serious therapy for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Lauren is specially trained in the DIR®/Floortime™ therapy model, which is specifically designed to help therapists, parents and educators who work children who have ASD. “Floortime” is one part of a larger comprehensive treatment approach called the “Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship-Based (DIR) Model,” developed by psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan and psychologist Serena Weider.

Lauren explains that DIR is like a tree. The “R,” Relationships, are the soil, which constantly nurture the roots and trunk. When parents and caregivers continually engage the child by making eye contact, smiling, singing or touching, the activities “nourish the tree and decrease undesirable behaviors.”

“Any kind of engagement counts as the R,” says Lauren. “Are they [the children] engaged with someone, or are they retreating into their own world, watching TV,

spinning and flapping. I try to teach parents about engaging by having them sit in on therapy sessions. I teach them how to play with their child on their child’s level.”

The way an individual child sees, hears and interprets information, make up the “I” or “Individual-Differences” of DIR.

The “D” is the Developmental Trunk of the tree, involving many things such as interest in the world, two-way communication, shared

social problem solving, using words and ideas, and creating a growing sense of self and reflection.

The branches of the tree are the behaviors the child is exhibiting. The goal of floortime is to provide good feeding and nurturing to the soil, roots and trunk of the individual child’s developmental “Tree” so that unwanted behaviors such as repetitiveness or anxiety are replaced with more desirable



**LAUREN HUTSON, SPEECH LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST AT THE TULSA SUNSHINE CENTER, WORKS WITH AIDAN THOMAS, AGE 5. AIDAN’S MOM, BRANDY BRISCOE, SAYS THAT AIDAN HAS STARTED SPEAKING AND HAS MUCH BETTER SOCIALIZATION SINCE HE HAS BEEN WITH LAUREN.**

behaviors. While some therapies focus only on symptoms, floortime focuses on the child and his or her intrinsic motivation to change behavior from within.

“Pathways in the brain are being formed every day,” says Lauren, “and those pathways are going to become weak and die off, so a child may not reach his potential. The younger a child starts [creating pathways], the better.”

Lauren says that floortime therapy takes the child where he is, recognizing that each child is unique. First, she observes the child’s behavior, looking for clues about what interests the child and how the child communicates with her environment.

“If they like to jump, I have a trampoline,” says Lauren. “If they like to swing, we swing. I follow the child’s lead – whatever is interesting to them at the time, and I don’t try to divert them. I entice them into interaction.”

While it may sound like play, Lauren says she is actually trying to create “circles of communication” by giving the children opportunities to interact. “If they initiate, they are opening a circle of communication,” she explains. “We’ll build language activities by having them ask for a specific toy in a box of toys, or by finishing a phrase like ‘Ready, set, \_\_\_\_\_.’ One of my goals is to give them a reason to communicate. When you

*continued next page*

can get 40 circles of interaction in a row, then you're going to have a pretty good communicator."

Lauren points out that floortime is good for all children because it gives them a sense of self, and helps them learn to overcome and solve problems on their own in their play. It creates better ways to communicate, relate and think. "There are adults out there who don't have these skills," says Lauren.

**TO LEARN MORE**

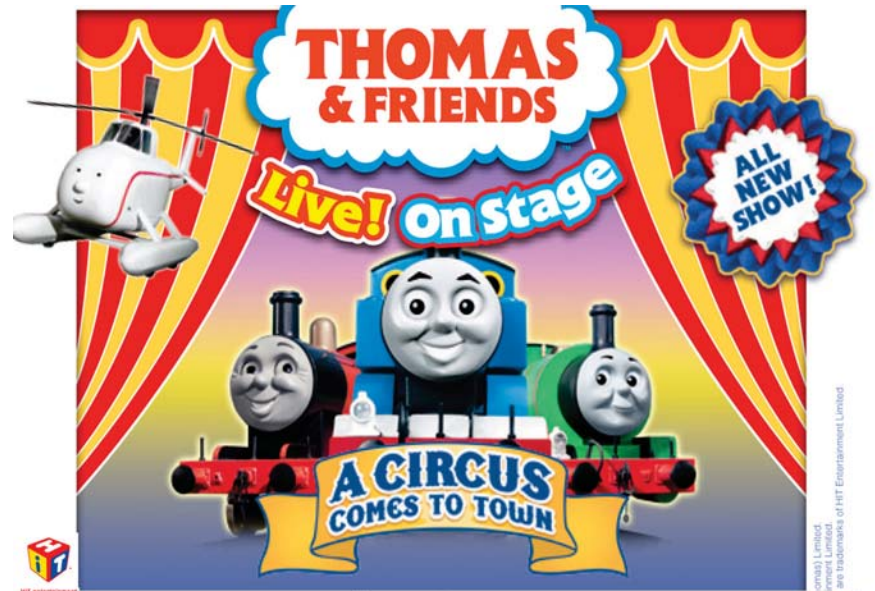
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