

Joint Attention in Young Learners with Autism

Joint attention is foundational for a child to learn language and social skills. Without joint attention skills, young learners may miss a variety of shared experiences and social communication interactions with others. Opportunities to teach joint attention skills occur in the home, school, and the community and this skill can be taught by anyone! Family members, caregivers, teachers, and support staff can help young children develop joint attention through natural opportunities during the day. This is a great way to ensure skills are generalized and transferred to other settings.



● Joint Attention Defined

Joint attention is when two people intentionally focus on the same thing for social reasons. It can involve sharing focus on an object, activity, or person. For example, two people might look in the same direction and discuss what they see, or one person might point out an object, and the other person shifts their attention to look at the object.

● The Importance of Joint Attention

Joint attention is foundational for a child to learn language and social skills. Without joint attention skills, young learners may miss a variety of shared experiences and social communication interactions with others. Although autistic children may have difficulty with joint attention, this skill can be taught by anyone! Family members, caregivers, teachers, and support staff can help young children develop joint attention skills. Opportunities to teach joint attention skills occur in the home, school, and the community. Teaching a young child through natural opportunities during the day is a great way to ensure skills are generalized and transferred to other settings.

SOME EXAMPLES OF JOINT ATTENTION SKILLS IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS AND INTERACTIONS INCLUDE:

A child who is with others sees an airplane in the sky, points, and says, **“Look!”** to share what they see with others.

A child sees a dog in the park. The child points and gestures towards the dog then looks back and forth between their brother and the dog. The brother turns to look in the direction of the point and shares in the moment. The brother says, **“That’s a dog!”**

A caregiver reads a book with a young child. The child points to a picture on the page and turns their gaze toward the caregiver. The caregiver responds and labels the picture on the page.

A daycare provider offers a choice of two different toys during a floor time/ play activity. The provider holds a toy frog in one hand and a doll in the other in close view of the child. She then asks with enthusiasm, **“Do you want the frog or the doll?”** while pausing briefly after presenting each item. The child briefly looks at the hand with the frog in it and back at the provider. The provider hands over the frog to the child, and the child plays with the item.

● *Tips for Success*

TIP #1: **Get to Know the Child**

Determine the types of activities and objects that they seek out and enjoy. Do these activities and objects shift his or her attention when first presented in their environment? If so, these are items and activities that are perfect to use when starting to teach joint attention! If there does not appear to be an obvious item or activity that shifts the child's attention, then the observer will want to try to determine some preferences through free play observation, asking for family/caregiver/educator input, or by conducting a preference assessment (See the VCU-ACE Early Childhood Fact Sheet on Preference Assessments to learn more).

TIP #2: **Make it Fun**

Teaching joint attention skills should be enjoyable for both the child and the person supporting them. Remember that joint attention does not require direct eye contact with another individual. It takes time to fully develop a repertoire of joint attention skills. Start small and build from there. For example, having the child look at an object for 1-2 seconds and shifting their gaze to you is a great start!

TIP #3: **Serve and Return**

Serve and return is a critical concept in child development. Serve and return refers to the back-and-forth nature of the interactions between parents or caregivers and their child. It can be something as simple as smiling back at a child who smiles at you, but it can also be more complicated and include back-and-forth conversations and interactions that we see during playtime. For joint attention, an example of serve and return is when a child shows excitement about something in the environment. Perhaps the child claps and giggles when a new wind-up toy car zooms across the floor. When caregivers see this excitement, they should stop what they are doing and respond! The caregiver can point to the toy car and excitedly say, "Look at that car!" Responding to moments that a child finds exciting and fun is a great way to incidentally teach joint attention skills.

● *Practical Ways to Teach Joint Attention*

For younger children, joint attention skills are best taught in a familiar and relaxed setting. This might be the family living room floor, the child's bedroom, outside in the yard or playground, or at the table during snack and meal times. Let's look at a few examples that encourage joint attention throughout the day.

DURING PLAY

A good example of a fun starter activity for children is blowing bubbles. Young children often find this activity exciting and learn while having fun! A caregiver can blow the bubble, point to the bubble, and then excitedly say, "**Look at the bubble!**" Then, to encourage the child to turn their eye gaze back to the caregiver, the caregiver can hold the bubble wand up at eye level near their face while slowly blowing into the wand.

THROUGH POINTING

This can be done by using a natural daily routine, such as bath time, and with a toy that the child really enjoys, such as a toy train. Hold the toy train at eye level and say, "**Look, it's a train!**" When your child looks up at the item, hand over the toy. As the child engages in these activities regularly, place the train close by and say, "**Look, what is that?! Is that a train?**" It will be important for the child to respond by looking up and looking at the toy when you make statements that start with "**Look!**" Once the child responds consistently to these statements, try this during other activities, such as lunchtime. Move the toy across the room from where the child is eating. Point in the direction of the toy and say, "**Look at that, it's the train!**" Help the child see that you are pointing to something in a different location of the room by walking to it while continuing to point.

DURING CHOICE MAKING

A caregiver can also encourage joint attention when they offer a choice between two objects or two activities. A good example of this might be during snack time. A caregiver can hold up two snacks at eye level. One snack can be something the child may not enjoy or prefer. The other snack should be something the child really likes. Let's say a child does not enjoy carrots but loves bananas. A caregiver can hold up a carrot in one hand and a banana in the other (both at eye level) and ask, **"Do you want the carrot or the banana?"** The caregiver can wait a few seconds for the child to respond. When the child glances at the banana, the caregiver can hand over the banana while saying, **"It looks like you want the banana!"** Caregivers will want to pay close attention to any cues or reactions the child might express when a choice is provided.

DURING READING

Reading is another natural opportunity to facilitate joint attention. Try to choose a book that is interesting to the child or a book that contains the child's special interests. Public libraries are great places to find books that align with a child's interest. For example, the book **"How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight,"** by Jane Yolen and Mark Teague, could be a great choice for a child who enjoys dinosaurs. While using enthusiasm to gesture and point to pictures on the page in a book, the adult may say phrases such as, **"Look, it is a dinosaur. ROAR!"** Of course, it is important to be in tune with just the right level of enthusiasm and how the child might react to noises or any abrupt gestures when acting playful. For some young children, that might be overstimulating. The goal is to encourage mutual sharing or focus on the activity. The parent should take note if the child looks in the direction of the book or in the direction of the motions that the parent displays. Provide social praise if the child responds by looking toward the parent's gaze and/or the book.

● Resources

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