



## Skill 8 Getting a Person's Attention

### What are getting attention skills?

Getting the attention of another person involves making a request. After all, you are requesting their attention! Learning how to get someone's attention in a socially appropriate way is something all children learn to do. This is an important skill because it allows them to share social experiences, participate in conversations, and helps them interact with others in positive ways. Some of the more common ways to get a person's attention include:

- Saying the person's name and waiting for them to respond
- Saying, "Excuse me," and waiting for the other person to respond
- Tapping a person on the shoulder

### Why is this skill important?

Getting or gaining a person's attention is an important life skill for everyone. Children might want to get the attention of someone else in order to:

- Share an item/activity/event of interest
- Initiate play
- Start a conversation

Getting someone's attention is a skill that is used throughout every day and in almost every environment. Children want to get the attention of their parents to share something interesting they did. Children get the attention of their peers at the playground so they can play together. Students get the attention of their teacher to show what they've learned or to ask questions. People get the attention of strangers out in the community to find out where something is located or to find out what happened.

### Why is getting someone's attention difficult for children with ASD?

Getting someone's attention is a social communication skill that most typically developing children learn through observation and imitation, and perhaps with a few reminders from their parents or caregivers. However, the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) makes interacting and communicating with others very difficult. Often, children with ASD do not learn social communication skills through just observation and imitation. Children with ASD may need much more support in learning this skill.

Because Autism Spectrum Disorder includes challenges with learning social communication skills, we might see some children with ASD use inappropriate behaviors as a means of getting attention such as

pushing or yelling. For example, a child with ASD might run up to another child at the park and push them as a way to get their attention and let them know they want to play. Of course, that is not a very effective way to request someone's attention! Other children with ASD may not understand subtle differences in how we get the attention of our friends versus how we get the attention of teachers or even how we might get the attention of a stranger. For example, a child with ASD might yell a quick, "Hey!" to their teacher in a classroom just like they would use with their friends on a busy playground. These are all ineffective ways to get another person's attention and may even end up isolating the child from others.

In order to improve relationships and friendships with others, increase inclusion, and improve interactions, the child with ASD must be taught effective, proactive ways to get someone's attention. The important thing to remember is that children with ASD CAN learn different ways to request attention with the right supports.

## What are some considerations for teaching ways to get someone's attention?

If a child with ASD is already using ineffective ways to get someone's attention, parents and caregivers will have to a more appropriate alternative and teach the child this new skill. In order to 'replace' an old way of doing something with a new behavior, families must understand that prompting and reinforcement are essential to teaching this type of skill. Families should know what the different types of prompts are and how to use them. Families should also know what motivates the child and how those items/activities/foods can be used to encourage the child to keep learning (reinforcement).

When starting to teach this type of skill, consider the following:

- Start by observing the child across settings and environments.
- Who is the child interacting with in a positive and proactive manner and how do they get that person's attention?
- How does the child communicate when they are interacting with that person? Does the child use verbal speech, sign language, picture exchange, or a device? Is the child's communication functional? In other words, is it helping them gain attention in a positive way?

As you start to teach this skill, remember that children with ASD may need more practice than their peers at learning something new. This includes learning how to gain someone's attention. Be patient and provide many different ways to learn this new skill!

## What materials will I need to teach this skill?

- Create a list of items/activities/foods that the child really enjoys. This list can be used to provide reinforcement and help motivate the child to learn the new skill.
- For children who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), be sure the child has access to the vocabulary needed to participate including sign language, picture exchange items, or a communication device that is programmed with the appropriate pictures and words.
- Write a social narrative for different ways to gain someone's attention. A social narrative is a simple, short story that explains what to do in different in situations. Social narratives can include pictures

or drawings as well as words. A good rule of thumb is to only show/describe what you want the child to do rather than what the child is doing wrong. A social narrative for getting attention should include things like, “When I want to play with my friends, I can...(tap them on the shoulder, say their name, etc...).” This narrative should also include other examples including how to get a parent or caregiver’s attention, how to get a teacher’s attention, and how to get a stranger’s attention.

## Activity #1

### 1. Teach your child to get a parent or caregiver’s attention:

- Review the social narrative that you have written for your child. Now practice getting a parent or caregiver’s attention with the child. One of the parents or caregivers can go first and model tapping on the other parent or caregiver’s shoulder. Wait until the person turns around and gives their attention.
- Tell the child it is their turn. Pause and wait.
- If the child responds with the correct tap on the shoulder, praise the child or provide the child with access to an item/activity/food that the child really enjoys for a short amount of time (up to 1 min.).
- If the child does not respond, prompt the child to tap the parent on the shoulder. Different children will require different prompts. For example, some children might need a quick gestural prompt that simply points to the shoulder. Other children might need more hand-over-hand type of assistance as the child learns how to tap on the shoulder.
- When the child responds correctly, provide the child with access to an item/activity/food that the child really enjoys for a short amount of time (up to 1 min.).

### 2. Teach your child to get a friend’s attention:

- Review the social narrative that you have written for your child. Now practice getting someone’s attention with the child. You can use a sibling for this activity. The parent or caregiver should go first and model saying, “Hi!” and a person’s name. If the child uses AAC, you can say, “Hi!” and the person’s name while also model using the appropriate sign language, pointing to the pictures the child uses, or pushing the correct buttons on a child’s device.
- Tell the child it is their turn. Pause and wait.
- If the child responds with the correct, “Hi!” and the person’s name, provide reinforcement and praise the child or provide the child with access to an item/activity/food that the child really enjoys for a short amount of time (up to 1 min.).
- If the child does not respond, prompt the child to say, “Hi!” If the child uses AAC such as picture exchange, point to the picture of Hi! as a way to prompt them into action.
- When the child responds correctly, provide the child with access to an item/activity/food that the child really enjoys for a short amount of time (up to 1 min.).

## Activity #2

- Role-play is a very effective strategy for teaching a variety of social communication skills, including getting someone's attention! This can be used in conjunction with a social narrative or with video modeling. Video modeling simply includes recording a video clip of someone performing the skill the child needs to learn. This can be the child's peers who are in the video demonstrating the skill, or it can be the child demonstrating the skill (video self-modeling). The child can watch the clip again and again and again as needed.
- After reviewing the social narrative and / or the video modeling clip, families can role play with their child what to do in different situations. For example, if the child needs help getting the attention of a cafeteria worker at school, the family can role-play how to do that at home and practice.

## Activity #3

- Once the child has learned how to get someone's attention, practice this skill during natural opportunities that happen throughout the day.
- For example, if a parent or caregiver is on the phone, the child can practice how to get their attention appropriately.
- Practice how to get someone's attention during unique situations such as virtual education settings. Teach the child how to use the raise hand function in the online platform if they need to get the attention of the teacher during a live session. Model how to use other skills such as the chat feature of the mute/unmute feature.
- Continue to use prompting and reinforcement as needed.
- Remember that children with ASD may need more practice than their peers at learning something new. This includes learning how to gain someone's attention. Be patient and provide many different ways to learn this new skill!

### Social Skill Extension Activity

Now you can practice using the skills above in a more interactive social skill activity. Remember, getting someone's attention is a skill that can be used throughout a person's lifespan and in a wide variety of environments. This is a skill that is used at home, at school, in the community, and at work. While the child may have learned the basics of getting someone's attention such as saying their name or tapping on their shoulder, there are other more subtle cues the child must also learn. For example, how close or far away that a person stands from someone else while trying to get their attention is a really important skill. If the child stands too close to someone while trying to get their attention, especially a stranger, it can make people feel uncomfortable. Alternatively, standing too far away can make it difficult to interact and communicate. There is often a 'just right' zone in terms of how far away to stand from another person. This also applies to knowing how to use the appropriate volume for voice, knowing when to say, "Excuse me," and knowing when to use Mr. or Mrs. or even sir or ma'am.

## Extension Activity #1

- Practice how far away to stand from people when trying to get their attention in different ways.
- You can use stickers on the floor, chalk on the driveway, or even just placing a sock or item on the floor that demonstrates where each person can stand during role-playing.
- Don't forget to practice how far away to stand in special situations such as COVID-19 physical distancing rules!

## Extension Activity #2

- Practice how to get a stranger's attention in different situations or environments. This can be especially helpful if a child is learning to regulate the volume of their voice.
- Create a social narrative that discusses how we use a loud voice in loud environments such as the park or playground but that we use a quieter voice in the grocery store or at church.
- Role-play how to get someone's attention at a loud concert and then how to get someone's attention during a church service. Try recording your practice with a cellphone, iPad, or camera so the child can watch and listen to how their voice changes in different scenarios.
- Don't forget to include waiting for the person to respond before talking or asking questions. In some situations, it might be considered rude if the child simply taps on the person's shoulder and then starts talking without waiting for acknowledgement.

## Links to resources on our website!

- View Video - VCU Autism Center for Excellence  
[https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how\\_to/simpleVideo.cfm?video=27](https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how_to/simpleVideo.cfm?video=27)
- Autism Q & A: Providing Choices  
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1194>
- Autism Q&A: Introduction to Teaching Young Children with Autism ...  
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1077>
- Functions of Communication - VCU Autism Center for Excellence  
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/ta/vagoals/communication/...to.../functions.cfm>
- How To Video Series - VCU Autism Center for Excellence  
[https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how\\_to/](https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how_to/)
- Evidence-Based Practices - VCU Autism Center for Excellence  
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/topics/evidence.cfm>
- Communication - VCU Autism Center for Excellence  
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/communication.cfm>

