

Joint Attention

Joint attention occurs when two people share a common focus for the purpose of interacting with each other. It is the ability to gain, maintain and shift attention through eye contact, gesture and/or spoken language. For example, a child may respond to an attempt to initiate joint attention by following the adult's point or gesture. A child may initiate joint attention by pointing at an object and gazing at the adult to look at it too.

Joint attention is important for the development of social-communication and expressive and receptive language skills. Without joint attention skills, it can be challenging for a child to develop meaningful relationships with adults and peers.

STRATEGIES

- Quietly observe the child. Identify what has caught their attention in that moment.
- Follow the child's lead and show an interest in what they are doing. Avoid introducing a new activity or redirecting the child to something new. A child is most likely to demonstrate communicative intent if they are motivated.
- Get down to the child's eye level. This will make it easier for the child to shift their attention between you and the object and promote sharing of the experience.
- Playfully join in by imitating the child's actions. Pause after you take a turn and observe what the child does next. After a few turns, model a new action.
- Use an animated voice and exaggerated facial expressions, especially when something unexpected occurs e.g., a block tower toppling over. Look at the child and make an enthusiastic comment such as, "Uh oh!" or "Wow!"
- Hold motivating objects near your face to encourage the child to direct their attention towards you.
- Acknowledge and respond to ALL communicative attempts including vocalisations, spoken language, gesture and facial expressions. For example, if the child points to a bird in the sky, say "I see a bird!"
- Introduce your child to a new song or nursery rhyme. Repeatedly model actions and lyrics. Once your child is familiar with the song, pause to create an opportunity for the child to share enjoyment, request continuation and/or participate e.g., "Old McDonald had a farm..."
- Create routines with logical, predictable sequences e.g., bath time, night time routines. When your child is familiar with the routine, wait at an appropriate time for your child direct their attention towards you. They may look towards you in anticipation of the next step (or even attempt the next step by themselves!)

