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Joint Attention Skills and the Autistic Child

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What is Joint Attention?

Joint attention is the ability to share a common focus on something (people, objects, a concept, an event, etc.) with someone else. It involves the ability to gain, maintain, and shift attention. Joint attention serves as a referencing tool that uses shared gaze (visually focusing on the same thing) and/or gesture for communication. Overall, sharing a focus not only helps individuals communicate, but it helps develop important social skills such as bonding and seeing another's point of view. Joint attention skills can be a predictor of future language development.

Joint attention starts in infancy between a child and a caregiver (parent). Early skills can include reaching to be picked up by a caregiver, pointing to a stuffed animal, or looking at the same page in a book. Some later skills can include focusing on a game, playing make-believe, or requesting certain items such as a favorite food. For autistic children, such activities may be difficult because these children tend to lack the social skills necessary to initiate or maintain focus with another individual. This may lead to difficulty in getting wants and needs met.



What Skills Are Needed for Joint Attention?

Several skills are important for joint attention (Woods & Wetherby, 2008, p. 181). Not only do these skills help an individual to get his/her wants and needs met, but they are necessary for appropriate interactions and developing meaningful relationships. These skills are:



- Orienting and attending to a social partner



- Shifting gaze between people and objects



- Sharing emotional states with another person
- Following the gaze and point of another person
- Being able to draw another person's attention to objects or events for the purpose of sharing experiences



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How Can I Help Improve Joint Attention?

One of the best ways you can help a child (particularly an autistic child) improve his/her joint attention skills is to be a good language model. Use gestures, such as pointing, along with eye gaze, to show the child where to direct his/her focus. Use hand-over-hand teaching (take the child's hand and help him/her point to an object to practice gestures). Pointing to objects a child is familiar with and has an interest in can be a good place to start. Another way you can help improve joint attention is to follow the child's lead. When a child shows interest in an object, you can mimic that interest. Some ways to join in his/her interest are to add a comment ("You want the truck. Big, red truck."), add a gesture (point to the truck), and add a visual cue (point to your eye and "draw" a pretend line going from your eye to the object).

Another good time to practice joint attention skills is during a daily routine. Since many children with autism tend to have more success with daily functioning when they have consistent routines, activities such as brushing teeth, walking the dog, and eating dinner can be good opportunities to practice joint attention. Keep in mind that practicing joint attention skills in the child's natural environment can help him/her achieve communication and social success at home, at school, and in the community.



Resources:

Woods, J. J., & Wetherby, A. M. (2008). Early identification of and intervention for infants and toddlers who are at risk for autism spectrum disorder. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, vol. 34, p. 180-193.

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