



Paying Attention to Children’s Joint Attention

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In the illustration above, a little boy and his dad are sharing a moment as they feed some birds. Dad notices a blue jay whistling and draws his son’s attention to it by pointing and saying, “Look at that bird!”. The little boy turns to see what dad is looking at and pointing to. While this might seem like a very ordinary moment, this is actually a very big deal when it comes to child development. We call a child’s ability to coordinate his focus of attention with that of another person “**joint attention**”.

What is joint attention?

Joint attention happens when two people pay attention to the same thing and let each other know that they are sharing that moment. They do this by looking at each other, gesturing (pointing to it), and/or saying something about the thing they are paying attention to.

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A child who sees a garbage truck through the window and then looks at their mom excitedly to check whether she's seeing the garbage truck too is trying to join attention with her. If she isn't looking, they might point to the truck or say something about it to get her attention. In order to have joint attention, both people need to be aware that they are focussed on the same thing, which means they shift their focus between the object and each other and communicate in some way that they are sharing the moment together.

Joint attention usually develops towards the end of a child's first year and continues to improve into their second year. It's a really important skill that helps children develop interaction and language skills. Through joint attention, children learn:

- how to share their interests with others.
- the enjoyment that comes from having back-and-forth interactions.
- the words that match whatever has caught their attention when adults describe what they are focused on at that moment.

Children on the autism spectrum tend to have difficulties with joint attention. In fact, it's one of the earliest signs that a child might be struggling with their social communication development.

Some key things to know about joint attention

- **Joint attention always involves objects/events** – two people can be interacting and share a moment together, such as when a parent and child play a tickle game and laugh and smile at each other. However, if they are not also both focussing on an object or something that's happening, it isn't joint attention. They need to be focussed on each other but also on something else at the same time, such as an airplane flying by, someone who has just arrived for a visit, something that just fell off a shelf, an interesting picture in a book, a surprising noise a toy just made, or a dog barking next door. Usually, one of them notices something and draws the other person's attention to it. Which brings us to another key point about joint attention...
- **There are two parts to joint attention: initiating joint attention and responding to joint attention** – initiating joint attention involves drawing someone's attention to something interesting, whereas responding to joint attention involves responding when someone else draws your attention to something. These are two separate skills, and some children (such as children on the autism spectrum) may have more difficulty initiating joint attention than responding to it [1].
- **Joint attention is always about sharing interests** – joint attention happens when two people join their focus to share an interest, not because one of them wants to ask for the item. For example, when a child wants a cookie up on a shelf and points to it and look at their parent, that is not joint attention because the child is asking for the cookie. They are not pointing out the cookie just to show it to their mom out of interest;

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they actually want her to get it for them. Joint attention is for purely social purposes, to show something to someone just for the sake of sharing an interest in it.

How to help children develop joint attention

There are a few simple things you can do to encourage your child to develop joint attention:

- **Be face-to-face when interacting** – you can make it easier for your child to join focus with you if you are at the same physical level and facing each other. In this way, your child is able to look at you and catch your attention when interesting things happen.
- **Follow your child's lead to discover what's caught their attention** – if you carefully listen to and observe your child, you will learn about their interest in the moment. Then, you can join in with your child's interest and focus on and communicate about the same thing.
- **Point out interesting things in everyday life** – as unusual or interesting things happen during the day, get down to your child's level, look at your child, then look at the interesting event and say something about it. Then look back at your child and wait. This will give your child a chance to join attention with you and notice what you're looking at. Anything unusual or interesting provides a great time to work on joint attention – it could be a broken toy, squirrels chasing each other, a funny picture in a book, etc.
- **Do something unexpected and wait** – you can set up situations where your child may want to draw your attention to something by placing objects in unusual places (e.g., a crayon in the toothbrush holder), doing something silly (e.g., pretending to put on your child's shoe instead of your own), or making mistakes happen on purpose (e.g., handing your child a fork to eat their yogurt instead of a spoon). After you set up a situation, wait for your child to react. Make sure you are face-to-face so your child can look back and forth between you and the interesting object/situation and do something to get your attention. Your child might point, make a sound, or say a word.

Joint attention is a building block for children to learn to communicate. When children focus on the same thing as their caregivers, and when they hear the words that match their joint focus, they are primed to learn new words [2]. For children on the autism spectrum, research shows that the better their joint attention skills are early on, the better their communication skills are when they are older [3,4]. By helping your child develop joint attention, you are not only showing your child that it's fun to interact and share interests with others, but you are paving the way for other communication skills to develop.

References

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