



# Fact Sheet #1

# Joint Attention

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Contributors:  
Noel Woolard, Ed.D.,  
BCBA, LBA & Lauren  
Vetere, MEd., BCBA,  
LBA

Editors:  
Alicia Hart, B.A. &  
Stefanie Paul, MEd.,  
BCBA, LBA

## Supporting Joint Attention in Young Learners with ASD

Joint attention is an important and complex skill that emerges early in development as children first learn to shift their attention to and from caregivers, objects, and toys in their environment. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often have difficulty learning joint attention and lack of joint attention can interfere with the development of other social communication skills. However, there is considerable research surrounding strategies that can improve and build joint attention skills.

### What is joint attention?

Joint attention is the sharing of attention between two people. Joint attention involves the child initiating interactions to share with others and joining in the joint attention efforts of others. An example might include when a child uses eye gaze to look at a caregiver, even for a very brief moment. The child then turns their gaze to look at something else (such as another person, an item, or an event in the environment). The child will use eye gaze to look back and forth from their caregiver to that other person / item / or event in order to share an experience. Or a caregiver might point to something interesting in the environment and the child then follows their caregiver's gaze and point to share the experience with them. As you can see, both eye gaze and gesturing are an important component of joint attention.

### Why is joint attention important for young learners with ASD?

Joint attention skills are important for children to learn because it can support the development of other more complex social and communication related behaviors. Joint attention is a necessary skill for learning about language. For example, caregivers and providers can use moments of joint attention to label and describe the world. Without joint attention skills, young learners may miss a variety of shared experiences with others and may miss important social communication interactions. 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 eye gaze to the caregiver. The caregiver responds and labels the picture on the page.
- A child care 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 sock in the other in close view of the child. She then asks with enthusiasm, "Do you want frog or sock?" 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.



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## Who can teach joint attention?

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Joint attention skills can be taught by anyone! Family members, caregivers, teachers, support staff, and even siblings can help young children develop joint attention skills.

## Where should joint attention skills be taught?

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Joint attention skills can be taught and reinforced in any setting including home, school, and the community. However, there should be an emphasis on teaching these skills throughout natural everyday routines and activities. Teaching a young child through natural opportunities during the day is a great way to ensure skills transfer or generalize to other situations.

## I want to teach joint attention skills, but where do I start?

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First, informally observe the child. Determine the types of activities and objects that the child seeks out and seems to enjoy. Do these activities and objects shift his or her attention when first presented in his 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 perhaps even conducting a preference assessment (see the VCU-ACE Early Childhood Fact Sheet on Preference Assessments to learn more).

## How do I start teaching these skills?

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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 time and meal times. Let's look at a few examples that encourage joint attention throughout the day.

### *Encouraging Joint Attention During Play* ●

A young child is playing with their toy blocks on the living room floor. A caregiver can help encourage joint attention by first sitting on the floor next to the child. Being at eye level with the child provides many opportunities for engagement. At first, try not to interfere with how the child is playing. The caregiver can simply start playing next to the child with the same blocks that the child is using. Some children with ASD may not be comfortable playing next to someone else and this first step may take time. When you are sure the child can tolerate another person in their space and sharing their materials, start to play with the child. For example, if the child is building a tower with the blocks, a caregiver can subtly pick up a block and place it on top of the child's tower. The caregiver can build language by saying, "On top" as they place the block. Next, the caregiver can pick up a block, hold it up at eye level, and say in an excited voice, "Look what I found!" Once the child looks in the direction of the toy, hand the child the item while saying something specific about the item or exchange such as, "Oh, you want the block," or, "That's a red block."

### *Encouraging Joint Attention Through Pointing* ●

A caregiver would like to encourage a child's joint attention when pointing out an interesting item in the home. 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 is responding consistently to these statements, try this during other activities such as lunch time. Move the toy across the room from where the child is eating. Point in the direction of the toy and say, "Look at that, what is that?" 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. Use specific praise once the child begins looking back and forth from the direction you are pointing to the object that may be of interest. An example of specific praise might be, "Great! You looked at the train!"

### *Encouraging Joint Attention During Choicemaking* ●

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 does like 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 for any cues or reactions the child might express when a choice is provided.

### *Encouraging Joint Attention During Reading* ●

Reading is another natural opportunity to facilitate joint attention that takes place within many family or daycare/school routines. When reading a story, the parent/caregiver will hold the book close to the child's direct view and in close proximity to the caregiver's face 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!" and motion the book close to the child in a playful manner like a dinosaur stomping. 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 too much going on all at once! The point is to encourage mutual sharing or being focused on an object or activity at once. The parent will want to pause and notice if the child looks in the direction of the book or in the direction of the motions that the parent displays. Social praise should be paired if the child responds by looking towards the parent's gaze and/or the book. "Great job looking at me!" or perhaps saying, "Yay, you looked at the dinosaur too!"

## Tips for Success

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### *Tip #1 Make it fun!* ●

Teaching joint attention skills should be enjoyable for both the child and the person who is supporting them. Remember though that joint attention can be difficult for young children with ASD so start small and build from there. It takes time to fully develop a repertoire of joint attention skills. Having the child look at an object for 1-2 seconds and shifting their gaze to you is a great start! A good example of a fun starter activity for children is blowing bubbles. Young children often find this activity exciting but they are also learning while having fun! A caregiver can blow the bubble, point to the bubble, 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.

### *Tip #2 Serve and Return* ●

Serve and return is a critical concept in child development. Serve and return refers to the back and forth nature to 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 play time. For joint attention, an example of serve and return might include 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.

## Resources:

Bottema-Beutel, K., Yoder, P.J., Hochman, J. M., & Watson, L.R. (2014). The Role of Supported Joint Engagement and Parent Utterances in Language and Social Communication Development in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(9):2162-2174.

Ferraiola, S.J., Harris, S.L. (2011). Teaching Joint Attention to Children with Autism Through a Sibling-Mediated Intervention. *Behavior Intervention* (26), 261-281.

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