



Joint attention

what this means, why it is important and how to develop it

What is joint attention?

Joint attention is a behaviour in which two people focus on an object or event, for the purpose of interacting with each other. It is a form of early social and communicative behaviour.

Joint attention involves sharing focus on something (such as other people, objects, a concept, or an event) with someone else. It requires the ability to gain, maintain, and shift attention. For example, a parent and child may both look at a toy they're playing with or observe a bird on a fence.

Early joint attention skills may include a child reaching out to be picked up by an adult or looking at the adult when they play peek-a-boo. As these skills develop activities may include focusing on a game or looking at the same page of a book with another person.

Joint attention (also known as 'shared attention') may be gained by using eye contact, gestures (e.g. pointing using the index finger) and/or vocalisations, including spoken words (e.g. "look over there").

This will look different for every child.

Why is joint attention important?

Being able to establish joint attention is vital for developing social-communication, language and cognitive skills. Joint attention enables children to interact and develop relationships with their supporting adults and peers. Joint attention helps develop important social skills such as bonding and seeing another's point of view.

What does joint attention look like?

A child can show joint attention by **responding** or **initiating**.

An example of a **response** would be if a parent and a child are playing together and the parent says, "**Look** at the puppy!" The child responds by following the parents gaze and the direction they are pointing, and **looks** at the puppy. It is a natural sharing of



enjoyment in an object or activity. For a younger child you might blow a raspberry on their tummy, they giggle and look at you in response.

An example of **initiating** would be the child bringing you a toy they want you to operate for them or the child pulling you and pointing/ looking towards a toy or object.

Strategies to develop joint attention:

1. Matching is important to develop play and joint attention

Match what your child does and say what your child says; when you match your child, you show that you accept your child and their abilities and because you are doing what your child can already do, it is much easier for them to join in with your play.

How to match your child:

- **Play in/with the same activity as your child;** Watch and then quietly join in.
- **Let them choose;** Children stay in interactions longer when they have some choice of what to do – so, let your child choose the activity and then you join in.
- **Play as your child does;** move as your child moves, makes sounds the way your child makes sounds.
- **Play more than you talk;** being quiet can help both you and your child focus more on the play
- **Use gestures, sounds and/or words like your child does;** If your focus is sounds use the same kinds of sounds and maybe add a word or two e.g. if your child says “ah ah” when you blow bubbles you copy “ah ah/ ah ah bubbles”. If your focus is words and your child is using single words, use one word sentences yourself – maybe sometimes add a second word when appropriate.
- when you talk, **talk about what you are doing** and then they will have more meaning – e.g. if your child hits/ bangs an object, you can say “bang, bang, bang”).

When with your child and you wonder how to get an interaction going, remember this:

When in doubt, imitate! And then wait.



- **When playing, try to:**
- Be a “**balanced partner**” take the same number of turns as your child, often adults take the most.
- **Do an action and then wait for your child to ‘take a turn’** – imitate and then wait! Try to be as patient as possible many children need some time to respond.
- **Pay attention** to the smallest of behaviours (verbal and nonverbal) and **respond to them**, as for you child these may be a purposeful communication for them. E.g. your child looks up at the corner of the room, stand beside them, look at it yourself, point to something in that area and name it.

2. Choose play activities that promote joint attention, such as:

- Play peek-a-boo.
- Tickle games; round and round the garden.
- Rolling a ball or car or tossing a bean bag back and forth.
- Rolling objects back and forth inside a cardboard tray or box.
- Hanging a ball on flexible string and batting it back and forth.
- Using straws (or your mouths) to blow a feather or ping pong ball to each other.
- Playing a musical keyboard together.
- Singing songs with actions together, like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”.
- Holding hands and dancing to your child’s favourite song.
- Holding a sheet or blanket with your child and rocking a baby doll or stuffed animal.
- Playing tug of war with stretchy material.

3: Find Something Motivating to the Child:

Find something that the child loves. Perhaps you already know what that is. Does he love bubbles? Or toys that light up?

If you don’t already know what the child loves, you’ll need to find a selection of toys/items that you think may be motivating to the child and present them to the child, wait and watch to see which ones sparks an interest. They may smile, reach towards it or just look at it. You can then find other toys that your child likes so you have a good selection to offer at playing time that you can share and enjoy together.



To extend this you could, fill a container with those objects they love as this creates an opportunity for them to initiate by taking it to you to access the contents, you can then have fun sharing play with the toy.

Having fun together is the most important aspect of developing joint attention.

