

Especially for practitioners working with infants!

Joint-Attention Activities

Nonverbal Communication and Signing

By the end of the first year of life, infants are able to include adults in their play with toys and other objects. The ability to go back and forth between playing with a toy and looking at an adult is called shared attention or joint attention. This is an important first step in learning to interact and communicate with other people.

What is the practice?

An infant's interest in an adult and object or toy at the same time does (at least) two important things. First, it provides the infant the opportunity to share his or her interests with others. Second, it provides an adult the opportunity to describe and talk about what the child is doing. One of the main benefits of shared-attention activities is that a child learns to interact with and communicate with others using gestures and other social initiatives.

What does the practice look like?

Imagine an infant sitting in her bouncy seat with a favorite rattle or squeeze toy. The child shakes the toy and produces a fun sound. She looks up at her mom to see what she "thinks about all of this." Her mother responds by saying, "You made that noise, didn't you? Shake the rattle again!" The child gets so excited that the rattle drops to the floor. Her mother picks it up, shakes it, and asks, "Do you want to do it again?" She hands the rattle to the child. They play the back-and-forth game many, many times.



How do you do the practice?

Joint attention is a back-and-forth type of play. It involves an infant's abilities to follow another person's actions and to influence another person's focus of attention. The best joint-attention activities are ones that include both types of infant actions.

- A child's interest in people, objects, and events is extremely important for joint-attention activities to be successful. Start by identifying things that especially interest a particular child.
- Any object with which she enjoys playing is used to involve her in a joint-attention activity. While playing, label and describe different features of the activity. (For example, point to a ball and say, "Look! See the ball? Let's play 'roll the ball.'")
- The child will first become involved in joint-attention activities when you start an activity. (For example, place the child in a sitting position and roll a ball to her and saying, "Catch.")
- This is followed by statements to get the child involved in the activity (e.g., saying "Roll the ball back to me" and by gesturing with your hands).
- The more joint-attention-activity games you play with the child, the more she will start to initiate play and attempt to include you in the activity. Any attempt on the part of the child is an opportunity to use words to describe and label the actions of the play.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the child look at you while you are playing together?
- Does the child share objects or toys with you?
- Does the child vocalize to get you to give her a toy or an object?

Take a look at more joint-attention activities

Shaping Up

Eleven-month-old Alan and his caregiver, Dara, are sitting on the floor facing each other and playing with a shape box. Dara opens the box and Alan reaches in and removes one of the shapes. Dara asks Alan, "Can you get one more?" Alan looks at Dara while she asks the question and removes another shape. Dara points to one of the holes in the shape box and says, "Alan, put the shape in the hole." Alan struggles to insert the shape but after a short time he is successful. He looks up at Dara, who says, "You did it! Alan put it in!"



Taking Turns

Thirteen-month-old Zelda loves to be outside. Her mother and her home visitor, Tom, have taken Zelda and her big brother, Danny, to the neighborhood park. They decide to play in the sandbox. The sandbox has five or six toys scattered about. Mom picks up a toy shovel and starts digging in the sand. Tom says to Zelda, "Look at what Mommy is doing! Can you dig like Mommy?" The mother hands the shovel to Zelda, who pokes at the sand with the shovel. Tom describes what Zelda is doing ("Zelda is digging a hole. Can Danny have a turn?"). Zelda looks up at Tom, who has his hand held palm up requesting that Zelda give him the shovel. Danny shows his sister another way to use the shovel (filling a bucket). Mom describes what he is doing ("Danny is putting the sand in the bucket. Now it is Zelda's turn to fill the bucket.") Danny holds the shovel out to his sister. Zelda reaches and takes the shovel and tries to put sand in the bucket.



Back-and-Forth Attention

Fifteen-month-old Theo has a syndrome associated with difficulties in engaging in joint-attention with objects and other people. With help from his early interventionist, Theo's mother has figured out some interesting ways to help Theo play with toys and other objects. She encourages and supports Theo's interactions with her and the toys. Mom has learned to sit across from Theo with toys placed between them. Mom places the toys between Theo's legs so that he can easily reach and play with the toys. Mom describes in simple sentences what Theo is doing while pointing to her son's focus of attention. Mom occasionally asks a question or uses a gesture to request an object. This encourages Theo to look up at her. Mom then describes what Theo does with the toy.

