

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

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?" and 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 that 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 that she enjoys playing with is used to involve her in a joint-attention activity where you label and describe different features of the activity (for example, pointing to a ball and saying, "Look! See the ball? Let's play 'roll the ball.'").
- The child will first become involved in joint-attention activities by you starting an activity (e.g., placing her in a sitting position and rolling 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 play 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 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, her mother, and her home visitor, Tom, have gone to the neighborhood park to play in a sandbox with Zelda's big brother, Danny. 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. Mom shows her daughter another way to use the shovel (filling a bucket) while describing what she is doing ("Mommy is putting the sand in the bucket. Now it is Zelda's turn to fill the bucket.") Mommy holds the shovel out to her daughter, who reaches and takes the shovel and tries to put sand in the bucket.

Back-and-Forth Attention

It really doesn't matter much that 15-month-old Theo has a syndrome associated with difficulties in engaging in joint-attention with objects and other persons. With help from his early interventionist, Theo's mother has figured out some interesting ways to help Theo play with toys and other objects while she encourages and supports Theo's interactions with her and the toys. Mom has learned to sit across from Theo with toys placed in 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.

