Joint Attention

Mirroring

1. To support the development of joint attention mirror what the child is doing. If the child is playing with figures, get down on the floor and play with those figures in the exact same way. If the child is making a tower with blocks, you build a tower too. If the child is lining up toys, you line up toys. If the child is spinning around and looking upwards, you spin and look upwards.

Motivating

2. Find something the child loves. You may already know what that is. Do they love cars, dolls, dinosaurs, teddies? Or things that light up, bounce or feel soft? If you know, fill a container with those things.

If you do not already know then put a selection of toys and interesting objects and present them two at a time. For example, hold up a dinosaur and a flashing ball. Show them what each one does and then hold them in front of them until they reach for one. Give the one they reach for and allow time to play with it and take it back. Introduce a new toy and then hold that toy up alongside the one they chose before. Let them pick again and continue until you have a good idea of the type/s of items they will pick. These will be the items you will put in the container.

Reinforce Proximity:

Once you have a few things you know they like, put them out of sight for a few days. You want them to be new and exciting when you pull them out to work with the child.

Stand away from the child (not right next to them) and pull out one thing from the container and hold it so the child can see that you have it. If it is a toy that does something (lights up or makes sound), activate it once so the child gets interested.

If the child moves close to you (and the object), say “you see my ___” and then give it to him. At this point, you want to reinforce the child for just coming close to you. This is the first step of joint attention.

Let him play with it for a few moments and then say, “my turn” and take it away and walk a few feet away. Once the child comes close to you again, say “you see my ___” and give it to him again. Keep doing this until he will consistently come close to you to share in what you have. If he loses interest, switch to a different reinforcer. With some children, you’ll need to switch each time.

ALTERNATIVE If the reinforcement is an activity, like getting tickled, you can start by doing the activity and then walking a few feet away. For example, tickle the child until he is smiling, and then walk a few feet away and wait. If the child comes toward you, tickle him again.

4. **Gradually Increase the Level of Engagement You Expect**

Once the child is consistently moving toward you to share in what you have, you'll want to increase your expectations. Start requiring to the child to do something slightly more difficult before you give him the reinforcer.

Here is a suggested order of "next steps" when trying to gradually increase a child's engagement or join

Look in your general direction/face you

- Looking directly at you or the object (hold the object near your face to reinforce faces)
- Reaching for the object
- Pointing at the object
- Pointing at the object and looking at you

You should tell the child what you want him to do and then provide assistance if you can. For example, you can say "look at me" or "look over here" to encourage the child to look in your direction.

5. **Gradually Increase the Amount of Time the Child is Engaged**

Once the child is sharing joint attention with you, you'll want to try to stretch out the amount of time it lasts. Up until now, you have given the child the object as soon as he establishes joint attention.

Now, you'll want to try to get the child to keep looking at the object with you before you give it to him. The next time the child establishes the joint attention (by looking at the object with you), say "look at this" and point to something on the object. Then, give the child the object. By doing this, you've added a few seconds on to the amount of time that the child looks at it with you.

Once you can do that without the child having a meltdown or getting upset, try adding a few more seconds. Say "look at this! Wow, that's cool" and then give it to him. Continue gradually adding seconds by pointing out more features, talking about it, or anything else that will keep the child's attention momentarily. There's no magic number here, just keep trying to stretch it out until you feel like the child is sharing attention with you on an object.

** ALTERNATIVE ** If the reinforcement is an activity, like getting tickled, you will want to try to stretch out the amount of time that the child is looking at you and happy about the activity. Try talking to the child while you're doing the activity and provide more of the activity if the child keeps looking at you or maintaining the interaction in some way. Take little pauses and say something silly (like "here comes the tickle monster") and then provide more tickles if the child continues to watch you or stay engaged while you said it.

6. **Gradually Increase the Variety of Activities that the Child will Share Attention During:**

Now that the child is able to share attention with you on a highly preferred activity (such as a preferred toy or snack), see if you can get him to share attention with you on something of your choosing.

My personal favourite for doing this is with book-reading activities. Reading books with children is one of the best ways to increase language so if you can only get the child do to one non-preferred activity with you, it should be book-reading. Start with books that contain real photographs of your child's favourite things (for example, my son loves trucks).

Start by bringing out something from the child's reinforcer tub (like a fun toy) but also have the other thing you want the child to attend to with you as well (the book in this example). When the child tries to get the

reinforcer, say “look at this” and point to the other thing (the book). If the child looks at the other item that you have, reinforce by saying “good looking” and then give him the original reinforcer (the toy). If the child doesn’t look at the other item, hold it up in front of him so he has no choice but to look at it, and then say, “good looking” and reinforce with the toy. Keep doing this until you no longer have to hold it up in his face.

Once the child gets better at this, try to elongate the amount of time the child is paying attention to the other item (the book) by saying “look at this. Cool!” or “Look at this! Oh, look at this one, too!”. Just keep stretching it out just like we did in the last step until the child will look at more and more of the book before getting his reinforcement.

Joint Attention Established! Let the Teaching Begin!

If you keep working on this, you should get to the point where the child will sit down with you and pay attention to something that you pick out. This will allow you to start teaching the child new skills and new concepts.

Activities

- **Peek a Boo** games
- **Use bubbles** and hold close to your face when you blow them
- **Take turns** stacking blocks or pushing cars down a slide/ramp.
- **Model gestures/visuals with songs** e.g., “Wheels on the bus” and “Itsy Bitsy Spider.”
- **“Ready, Set, Go!”** This can be used with many activities. Say the phrase repeatedly and then try Wait to see if they look towards you before saying “Go!”.
- **Roll a ball** back and forth.
- **Use animated voices and gestures** during play or when looking at pictures in a book.
- **Balloons!** You can push a balloon back and forth, let air out of it and watch as the balloon flies off.

