



Helping Your Child Attend and Intend to Communicate

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Do any of the following characteristics describe your child?

- My child doesn't pay attention when I talk to him or try to show him things.
- My child doesn't enjoy playing with toys with me or showing me what she's playing with.
- My child doesn't try to get my attention to notice what he's discovered or what he sees.
- My child won't listen and doesn't seem interested when I try to read a storybook.
- My child's attention span seems short, and she moves quickly from one toy to another as if she doesn't know what to do with them.

These behaviors are all related to joint attention and communicative intent. Joint attention is the ability to share interest in the same object or event with another person. It includes looking at, pointing to, talking about, or playing with the same objects or events. Communicative intent is the ability to communicate about these interesting objects or events. These communications include asking questions, making comments, requesting turns, rejecting objects or turns, and commanding others. Joint attention and communicative intent both begin to develop during the first days of life. Poor development in these areas may cause children to have many language and learning problems.

How Do Joint Attention and Communicative Intent Develop?

At birth, infants and their parents spend many hours establishing joint attention. Their attention is focused on each other. Parents look into the infant's eyes, and the infant gazes back. Parents focus attention on the one thing that the child is able to attend to at this age: they attend to the child's body. Parents encourage the infant to touch, to grasp an adult's finger, and to respond to their voices by talking in a high pitch with exaggerated vocal changes. The adult's attention on the infant's body helps the infant learn how to share attention.

At the same time, parents treat infants as if they are born communicators. If the infant hears a noise and widens her eyes, the parent considers that to be a comment about the sound. The parent answers, saying "Did that noise scare you?" or "Yes, your brother dropped the block." Parents

know that the infant was only reacting to the sound, but they behave as if the child communicated something meaningful and intentional. Every burp, cry, hiccup, or sigh is reacted to as if it were communicating a comment, a request, a protest, or a command.

Three-month-old infants are able to attend to things other than their own bodies. They begin to look at rattles, stuffed animals, colorful toys, and other interesting things their parents show them. The joint attention now focuses on these objects. Parents show and talk about objects, encouraging the child to look at and to try to touch, hold, or explore. Every smile, hand movement, wiggle, or reach is treated as if it were a sentence requesting, commenting about, asking for, or rejecting the object. The bond between the parent and the child increases during these mutually enjoyable "conversations."

Because they are treated as intentional communicators from the first days of life, infants become intentional communicators before the first birthday, usually about 10 months of age. But some children have difficulty establishing these bonds. They don't seem interested in watching their parents or looking at and talking about the things parents show them. They show resistance, throw temper tantrums, leave, or attend to something else. Their attention spans seem very short. These behaviors are confusing to parents, who may feel hurt, frustrated, and even angry at times. Parents know that the child isn't learning very much about objects used by people or the language used to talk about them, but their attempts to teach the child don't seem to work.

What Can Be Done?

You can help. There are strategies you can use if your child has not learned how to attend jointly to objects with you or to communicate intentionally about them. Play simple games that establish joint attention and communicative intent at the same time. Follow the suggestions and guidelines outlined here:

Select interesting toys. Your child will attend to things
that are interesting. Interesting things are usually colorful and textured, make interesting sounds, or do interesting actions. Children typically enjoy puppets, stuffed
animals, music boxes, wind-up toys, and toys with push
buttons and levers. You will soon discover which things
are interesting to your child and which are not.

- Share the toy. If your child is holding an interesting toy, then there is no reason to include you. To get joint attention, you must hold the toy and bring it to your child for a turn. During this turn, the puppet might kiss the child or nibble on fingers and toes. Or your child might turn the dial or push the button on a toy. During this turn, you should talk about what your child is doing ("Push the button all the way," "Turn the dial") or about the toy ("The puppet's getting your toes!" "The music sounds pretty").
- Withhold the toy. The turn should last only a few seconds. Then hold the toy just out of the child's reach to encourage your child to indicate he wants another turn to play.
- Give and take away. Bring the toy back to your child for another turn. Then, after a few seconds, hold the toy at a distance once again and encourage another request for a turn. You might say things like "Now what?" or "What do you want?" Continue playing the game through cycles of encouraging the child to communicate, interpreting some behavior as a request for a turn or providing a turn with the toy while you jointly attend to and talk about it, then holding the toy at a distance to set up another cycle.
- Respond to requests. Indicating the desire for another turn is one type of communicative intent. During early stages of this play, you may have to respond to a random hand or foot movement or other unintentional behavior. Treat these behaviors as if they are requests for a turn. Respond to these random movements just as parents respond to hiccups and burps. If you behave as if your child is communicating (even when the child isn't), your child will begin to learn how communication works.
- Be patient and continue. If your child at first resists
 and fusses, don't give up. This new way of interacting
 may seem different and confusing to your child. Patiently continue to play the game, choosing some
 behavior to treat as a communicative intent and then
 jointly attending to your child's play with the toy.
- Recycle. Your child should start to enjoy the game and should start to do something to keep the game going. Your child might purposefully hold out a foot if you have been reacting to foot movements. Or your child might purposely hold out a hand to request a turn with the toy. As soon as you see these behaviors, provide a turn and continue the cycle. If your child does not give you a purposeful communication on the next turn, then respond to a random movement again. Your child is just learning to communicate, and it may take quite awhile to figure out how it works.

- Combine action of toys. Once your child starts to play
 the game very successfully, add more complexity. For
 example, during the child's turn, put a puppet on the
 child's hand and then bring over a second toy, such as
 a cup, a plastic apple, or a hairbrush. Encourage your
 child to feed the puppet or brush its hair. Your child
 is now learning to attend to objects away from her
 hody.
- Continue cycles. Continue the cycles: wait for your child to signal a request, present the puppet and other objects for a short turn, and talk about the objects and actions, then hold the toys at a distance to encourage another turn.
- Model language. Use language yourself that your child can use to request a turn. Point to the hairbrush and say, "Let me brush his hair" or "Give me the brush." Model other communicative intents, such as having the puppet protest ("Ouch! That hurts!"), comment ("My hair is pretty now"), or command ("Brush behind my ears").
- Add steps. Continue to increase complexity by adding more steps to the play. During one turn, brush the hair of several puppets, stuffed animals, and dolls, or dry their hair with a towel before brushing it and then looking in a mirror. Talk about and encourage your child to talk about these events.
- Talk about details. Begin to focus on parts of objects, talking about the same object or event in detail. Talk about these details as you point to them. Talk about the ears or nose of the stuffed animal as they are brushed. Refer to their length, color, size, shape, spots, smoothness, and so on. Encourage the child to talk to and about the animals and the ongoing actions.
- Introduce storybooks. As you look through storybooks with your child, talk about the pictures as outlined in the previous step. If your child has difficulty attending to pictures, demonstrate the depicted actions using similar stuffed animals and objects. Invite your child to point to parts of the picture, and then talk about what is seen. Point to parts of the picture, and ask your child to talk about them.

Summary

You can establish joint attention and communicative intent through enjoyable play and storybook reading with your child. You can also use the same cycles of communication and attention during dressing, eating, and other daily routines. These interactions teach children how to focus attention and communicate. Soon children become independent learners who can talk about their world.