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JOINT ATTENTION



Joint attention, also known as “shared attention”, occurs when two people focus on the same thing. Often, this begins when one person does something to draw the attention of someone else to an object or event, using gestures (pointing or showing), nonverbal actions (eye gaze- looking at something then looking back at you), or words (“Look!”, “Hey Dad!”).

Responding to others is an important part of joint attention, too. For example, if your child is playing with a toy, but you call his name, he looks toward you. Or, when you point to something across the room, your child follows your gesture with his eyes. Shared attention involves your child’s ability to shift his attention between an object/activity and another person.

Joint attention is important for language development because communication begins with shared attention and engagement with others. Babies and toddlers must regularly interact with people before they begin to listen to your words. Over time, with consistent listening and attention, they begin to link meaning to your words, and learn to understand what you’re saying.

Interaction ⇒ Listening ⇒ Understanding ⇒ Communication (gestures, facial expressions) ⇒ Talking

Without strong joint attention in interaction with others, opportunities for learning language can be limited. Children who have difficulty with joint attention inconsistently respond to your words, your gestures (such as pointing at something for them to look at), and your actions. They may appear to avoid others or ignore what’s said to them. They seem to tune out their own names and other verbal directions. A child with joint attention issues may also have difficulty using appropriate ways to gain attention from others, while a typically developing toddler will try to direct a parent’s actions in order to get what they want, even before they begin to talk. They look toward, point, or lead parents to what they want.

WAYS TO IMPROVE JOINT ATTENTION

Things you can do to establish solid joint attention skills during everyday activities at home:

- Working on eye contact and your child’s ability to look at your face when you’re talking to them.
- Be fun to look at and listen to as you’re playing or talking together!
- Use interesting objects to capture your child’s attention.
- Frequently model gestures, such as pointing and showing items, so your child will begin to understand these important nonverbal ways of communicating and eventually use them to initiate interaction with you.

- Get on the same level. Position yourself so that eye contact and sustained interaction is easier for your child.

If your child is struggling with joint attention it is important to discuss your concerns with your pediatrician or other healthcare professional. Ask for a referral for a developmental assessment. Early intervention is especially critical for a child with joint attention and other social skill issues.

If you have questions, contact the team of Speech-Language Pathologists at Wee Speech, P.C.