



Be the Bridge: Building Language While You Wait Part 2 – Communication Before Words

Tips and Tools: Joint Attention

If your child is not demonstrating joint attention (shifting his gaze between you and a desired object), here are some tips to try:

If you are using a desired toy:

1. Start by being face-to-face.
2. Hold the desired object.
3. Wait with an anticipatory facial expression.
4. Wait it out when your child tries to grab for the object. Do not let him get it. Just hold it naturally but firmly. Wait until he shifts his gaze from the object to your eyes. Even if it is the slightest movement you can acknowledge the joint attention by saying, “Yes, bear” because the eye contact meant “want bear” and we are interpreting it as such.
5. If your child does not shift his gaze, you can quickly bring the object near the side of your face and back down again. Then wait for even the slightest movement and acknowledge the joint attention by saying, “Yes, bear!”
6. Give him the bear, let him play with it a while. Then take it away and start again. The more you do it, the faster he will learn to look at the bear, then at you, and then back at the bear, in order to get the bear.
7. At no point should you say “look at me” because it shifts the focus from your child being an initiator to being a responder.
8. We are teaching your child that the purpose of eye contact is to initiate a social interaction.

Audet, Lisa (2010). *The Communication Connection: Methods to Understand & Support Interaction with Children with Autism [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from Speech Pathology.com website: http://www.speechpathology.com/slp-ceus/all/#/term:the_communication_connection/cat:autism-asd-social-emotional*

Tips and Tools: Joint Attention

If you are singing a song: Your child may be more likely to look at you to keep an interaction going when you are singing a song together because there is no object to take his eyes away from you. When singing together:

- 1) Be face-to-face
- 2) Sing a favourite song
- 3) Stop and wait at a predictable part in the song (Ring around the Rosie, stop at “husha husha....”)
- 4) Wait with an anticipatory facial expression
- 5) When he makes even the slightest eye movement towards your eyes to establish joint attention, continue with the favourite part of the song (“we all fall down!”)

From More Than Words® guidebook (Sussman, 1999), The Hanen Centre.

Note: Joint attention may not develop in some children until over 20 months of age. You should not start working on pointing until you have joint attention established.

Tips and Tools: Encourage Gestures (Pointing)

Step 1: Practice the actual point

- Touch the tip of their pointer finger and say “let’s get our hand ready”

Choose activities that practice pointing:

- Poke out puzzle pieces
- Push poker chips into playdough or Pop the playdough
- Read a book together. Take turns pointing at pictures. Make sure the pictures are within reach.
- Choose between objects – make sure one is desirable and the other is not desirable at first (e.g., toilet paper roll and favourite toy). Once pointing starts to emerge, then introduce two desirable objects.

Step 2: Practice pointing to something out of reach and keep the emphasis on the finger that has “meaning” which is the pointer finger

- Place desired object out of reach
- Touch the tip of your child’s pointer finger “let’s get our hand ready”
- Wait
- Accept an attempt at a point and give the desired object
- Give his point meaning by reinforcing this with words “Bottle.”

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Tips and Tools: Encourage Gestures (General)

A nice way to work on gestures is by reading, rhyming, singing, and playing with your child.

Start with just the two of you (no toys are necessary at this point)

Activities include:

- a) Songs that are highly predictable: Head and Shoulders. (You put your hands on your head, she puts her hands on her head).
- b) Games that are highly predictable: Pat-a-cake. (You clap, she claps).
- c) Imitate your child’s actions or give your child an action to imitate, in the context of a social interaction so that the child learns his actions are communicative. (Take turns pointing to pictures in a book and you label the picture for your child, you say “whee” and put yours arms up as she goes down the slide, she puts her arms up in the air).

The purpose is to build meaningful gestures in a fun way that creates a desire to do it MORE. The more your child wants to engage with you and copy gestures, the more symbolic language they will learn. This will lay foundation for intentional communication to develop.

From More Than Words® guidebook (Sussman, 1999), The Hanen Centre.