

Joint Attention

What is joint attention?

Joint attention occurs when two people focus on the same thing and acknowledge they are sharing that moment through eye contact, gestures, or words. For example, if a child sees a dog and looks at their parent to share their excitement, they are trying to engage in joint attention.

Joint attention usually starts to develop toward the end of a child's first year and continues to develop through their second year. However, some children with disability or developmental delay may find it more challenging to engage in joint attention and may take longer to develop these skills.

Why is joint attention important?

Joint attention is an important skill for children to be able to communicate and connect with others. Through joint attention, children learn:

- how to share interests with others
- the enjoyment that comes from back-and-forth conversations
- the words that match whatever has caught their attention when adults describe what they are focused on



Without joint attention, it can be challenging for children to learn to express themselves, understand others, and build strong relationships with adults and peers.

How can we help children develop joint attention?

- Be face-to-face when interacting
- Follow the child's lead to discover what's caught their attention
- Point out interesting things in day-to-day life
- Do something unexpected or silly and wait to see if they react e.g., pretending to put your child's shoe on instead of your own, or handing your child a fork to eat their yoghurt instead of a spoon.

Playgroup Activities to Encourage Joint Attention

Bubbles

Blow a few bubbles then pause and wait for the child to look at you. If they look at you, blow more bubbles, indicating you understand their attention.

You can encourage requests by waiting for the child to show they want more bubbles, whether through eye contact, gestures or vocalisations. Praise them for their attempts e.g., enthusiastically say *"You want more bubbles!"*, and blow more bubbles for them



Songs



Interactive songs and nursery rhymes are a great opportunity to promote joint attention with children. For example, when singing *'Round and Round the Garden'* with your child, gently trace the inside of their palm whilst singing *"round and round the garden, like a teddy bear"*, then walk your fingers up their arm as you sing *"one step, two steps"*, then hold off on tickling them until they look, gesture, or vocalise that they want to be tickled. Then, enthusiastically tickle them whilst singing *"tickly under there!"*

"Ready, Set, Go"

This can be used with so many activities! For example, blowing bubbles or pushing a toy car down a ramp. As you prepare for the activity, say *"Ready, Set, Go"* pausing after *"Set"* to encourage the child to look at you, vocalise or gesture, and anticipate what's coming next. Once they have shared joint attention say *"Go"* and perform the action e.g. blowing the bubbles or rolling the car.

