



The Role of Joint Attention in Early Communication

In order for communication to be successful, it is important that we make it a “joint effort.” You can make communication a joint effort with your little one by making an attempt to get into her world. Think of yourself as a detective and your job is to figure out what your child enjoys, desires, feels, and what your child is communicating to you whether it be verbally or non-verbally. You may not always be right in your attempt to analyze your child, but chances are that you know your child better than you may think.

Once you are able to get into your child’s world, you will open the door for many more teachable moments. You can begin to better help your child explore his environment through his eyes and interests. Three methods commonly used to help create these teachable moments are listed below.

Joint Action Activities: Try making an effort to become physically involved in the same activity as your child. Often times, this may be an activity of your child’s choice. Other times, your child might take interest in what you are doing. Your joint participation in an activity will help to promote joint attention which will open the door for a teachable moment. During the joint action, try imitating your child’s play. If he allows you to, then add to or expand his play. If not, just be beside him playing with the same toy; he will take notice. If you and your child are engaged in separate activities, chances are that he will not attend to you and your activity as much as his own preferred activity.

Joint Attention Activities: Your physical involvement (joint action) in an activity will help to promote joint attention which is shared focus on the same objects or actions. This joint attention to the same activity opens the door for a teachable moment. Try some of these methods to help create joint attention activities.

1. Reduce the amount of toys that your child has access to during a play-time with you. This will help to create an environment that is more focused which will open the door for more joint attention activities.
2. Follow his lead during play with toys. If he is interested in the car then focus on and explore the car with him. If he allows, introduce other cars and see if he takes interest in your toys. Sometimes guiding a child’s hand towards an object will lead his eyes to the object as well.
3. If your child shows interest in what you are doing, allow him to participate. Give him a broom to sweep with or some laundry to put away.

Joint Referencing Activities: Once you are engaged in joint action and have established joint attention then introduce the language component by talking about the object/action that your child is attending to. For example, if your child is playing with a car, then guide your attention to the car, talk about what it is, what it looks like, what it is doing, etc. The car is what is important to him right now so take that teachable moment and teach him something about that car. Be careful, though. If he is holding and looking at that car and you are holding and talking about a train, he might get some mixed signals!