



Increasing joint attention skills in young children with autism

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Joint attention: what is it?

Joint attention is the development of specific skills that involve sharing attention with others. Typically developing children do this in a number of ways. For example they can point at objects and people to share their interests, they can bring and show objects to others, and they can also coordinate looking between objects and people. Children also develop the ability to share attention states and can demonstrate this by being able to mutually sustain joint engagement with others, for example by playing a simple game together or looking at a book and pointing at the pictures together to share interest. These social skills usually develop during infancy and by the age of three we expect that children will be competent at gaining and maintaining joint attention.

Why is joint attention important ?

Joint attention is something of a hot topic and has been the focus of recent early intervention studies in autism. Parents of very young children who were later diagnosed with autism have reported their concern and worry that their children had problems with, or completely lacked joint attention skills. Difficulties with social responsiveness and joint attention have been reported so often that they are included in most instruments that screen for autism such as the Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (ChAT) and the Developmental Behaviour Checklist (DBC) (see other ACT-NOW factsheets). It is now widely accepted that children with autism experience difficulty with both initiating joint attention and sustaining joint engagement.

When James was two and a half years old, he had no interest in looking at or being with other people and preferred to be on his own. He showed no interest in social baby games such a pat-a-cake, did not respond to his name being called. He never brought toys to show and share with his mum and dad. He never pointed out things of interest and did not follow his mother's point when she said "Look James" to show him things when they were in the car. When he was four years old he was diagnosed with autism.

Why is this important?

It is thought that the ability to engage others non verbally (eye contact, smiles and gestures) are related to the ability to talk. Some studies have found that children who have a protodeclarative (social) point, can share interest in toys and events and can look between people and events, acquire language faster than children who do not have these skills. All children who have autism have both delayed and disordered language. If this is exacerbated by poor joint attention skills then perhaps programmes that teach joint attention skills will lead to earlier language development.

How can we teach joint attention?

Researchers have been trying to develop programmes to teach joint attention skills to young children. Some studies have shown that children with autism can be taught joint attention skills using a table top approach but these skills are usually not generalized. Perhaps this is because the children have been taught in a structured and unnatural way so that the child learns in a “work” situation but doesn’t understand how to use these skills in naturally occurring situations. It is also possible that the programme will not succeed if children are not developmentally ready to learn these skills. Some other studies have shown that models where parents are the teachers can result in increased joint attention skills in young children with autism. Recently, Kasari et al (2010) developed a programme that has shown very promising results and taught parents/carers how to teach their children. This has advantages over clinician only models. Little children spend most of their time at home with parents/carers and learning in natural environments has been shown to be more effective and helps with generalisation of learning. This model also focussed on the development of the child’s play routines and taught parents how to follow the child’s play routines, maintain and then expand the play activities. This gives the parents more opportunity to socialise and engage with the child as attention increases. . The Kasari et al model consisted of 10 modules:

- Setting up the environment
- Allowing the child to initiate an activity
- Playing with established routines
- Facilitating and maintaining states
- Scaffolding an engagement state
- Facilitating joint engagement
- Allowing the child to initiate communication
- Recognizing and responding to the child’s joint attention skills
- Imitating and expanding language
- Generalizing skills to other routines

The results of this programme reported that gains in joint engagement, joint attention responding skills and types of functional play acts were either maintained or improved 1 year after intervention ended.

Implications

1. It is important to target joint attention skills in early intervention programmes
2. Developmental assessment is important to establish the entry point into a joint attention programme
3. Children at risk for autism (e.g. have a developmental delay, have siblings with autism) should be involved in programmes that teach joint attention skills
4. Parents and clinicians should work together on developmentally appropriate programmes for at risk children and those diagnosed with autism

Reference:

Kasari, C; Gulsrud, A., Wong, C., Kwon, S. & Locke, J., 2010. Randomized Controlled Caregiver Mediated Joint Attention Engagement Intervention for Toddlers with Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Published online: 10 February 2010

Note: See PowerPoint presentation on this article on the ACT-NOW Journal Club webpage:

www.med.monash.edu.au/spppm/research/devpsych/actnow/download/journal08.pdf