



Supporting Attention in Children with ASD

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Have you ever tried to engage a child with autism in an interaction but they're so focused on a preferred activity that they don't even notice you? For children with ASD, shifting their attention from what they're doing can be extremely difficult and yet the ability to do so is critical for learning. As such, we're left with an important clinical consideration: how can we support attention in our clients with ASD?

Patten and Watson (2007) compiled and appraised treatment strategies that have been presented in the literature to enhance attention skills in preschool aged children with ASD. This article shows that the Hanen strategies we use to facilitate children's development of social communication skills also improve their attention skills!

Attention & ASD

First, let's take a look at the types of attention that can be impacted by ASD:

- **Orienting Attention** - occurs when an infant or child pays attention to something in his environment by looking or turning his head towards it. Decreased orienting has been observed in 8- 10-month-old infants who later received a diagnosis of ASD, making impaired orienting one of the earliest symptoms of ASD (Werner, Dawson, Osterling & Dinno, 2000). It's especially hard for children with ASD to orient towards information that's socially relevant. For example, many children with ASD have difficulty looking toward someone who calls their name.
- **Sustaining Attention** - is the ability to maintain attention to something. Children with ASD can show increased sustained attention, especially for topics they're interested in. Since children with ASD can show increased sustained attention, they may have difficulty shifting their attention to something other than their preferred interest.

- **Shifting Attention** - has two important parts:
 1. Disengaging from what they're focused on
 2. Shifting their attention to something new

Children with ASD have a lot of trouble disengaging from their interest. They may also have difficulty shifting attention quickly or to something that's socially important. For example, children with ASD often have difficulty shifting from their preferred topic of conversation and talking about someone else's interest.

Joint Attention

Sharing attention socially can be especially hard for children with ASD. Joint attention occurs when a child shifts his attention from a person/object/event to another person to connect with that person in order to share what he has seen. For joint attention to truly be present, **the child must want to share the experience for social purposes**. For example, a child looks at a toy car and, all of a sudden, it starts to move on its own! To share this exciting experience, the child looks at her dad and back at the toy to check that he's seeing the car move too.

Joint attention requires the child to:

- disengage from what she's paying attention to, such as the car that has started to move;
- shift her attention to the person she wants to share the event with, such as her Dad in the example above;
- and shift her attention back to the original object/event, such as the car

By sharing a common focus, children hear words matched to their interest in that moment, enabling them to learn language associated with that experience. Joint attention is a very important skill because it's used to connect with others and is predictive of language development.

Attention & More Than Words® Goals

Attention skills are not treated explicitly in the *More Than Words* Program but they are addressed in the context of children's social communication goals. Here are some examples of *More Than Words* goals at each stage and how they relate to attention:

Stage	Example <i>More Than Words</i> Goal	Type of Attention Needed
Own Agenda	Notice me (i.e. the parent)	Orienting, shifting
Requester	Send messages while also looking at me	Orienting, shifting
Early Communicator	Look at what I point to and then back at me	Orienting, shifting, <i>working towards joint attention</i>
Partner	Engage in longer back-and-forth conversations	Sustaining

More Than Words Strategies that Facilitate the Development of Attention Skills

Patten and Watson recommend the following strategies to support young children with ASD in developing their attention skills:

- **Follow their Lead** - Patten and Watson discuss following the child's lead by interpreting and labeling the child's interest. In *More Than Words*, we help parents to follow the child's lead by interpreting, and labeling his interest as well as joining in and playing the way the child is playing. Following the child's lead helps the child notice and interact with the adult. When you follow a child's lead, the child won't have to use his mental energy to shift his attention to another activity or topic. Following the child's lead leaves more capacity for engaging in and sustaining social interactions.
- **Include their Interests** - Given that caregivers know their child best, Patten and Watson recommend engaging caregivers in the intervention so that they could share their child's specific motivations and interests. Observing, Waiting and Listening to the child also gives us a lot of information about what he's interested in. It's important to include children's interests (even perseverative ones) because it can facilitate increased joint attention and interaction (Vismara & Lyons, 2007 as cited in Patten & Watson, 2011).
- **Imitate** - Patten and Watson recommend imitating children with ASD. The *More Than Words* Program promotes having a parent or clinician imitate what a child does or says (even if it's unusual!) because it can help get the interaction started. Imitating can help shift a child's attention from an object to an adult since the adult is doing something that's interesting to the child.
- **Cue**- Patten and Watson also recommended cuing children as necessary. The "C" in ROCK is for cuing the child, if needed. Both Patten and Watson and the *More Than Words* Program support decreasing the amount of cuing as children become more proficient at attending and demonstrating skills. Cuing a child to help him know what to orient towards can help him learn to pick up on social nuances.

Facilitating the child's ability to pay attention to others is an important aspect of early language intervention with children on the autism spectrum because it has a profound impact on the child's learning and social communication skills. It can be very helpful to consider the types of attention a child with ASD is using and whether there are any breakdowns in orienting, sustaining or shifting attention. We don't believe it is necessary to target attention as a skill on its own. *More Than Words* goals and strategies, which target social communication, are geared towards promoting the child's attention in the natural context of enjoyable, everyday social interactions.

References

Patten, E. & Watson, L. R. (2011). Interventions Targeting Attention in Young Children with Autism. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20, 60-69.

Werner, E., Dawson, G., Osterling, J. & Dinno, N., (2000). Brief Report: Recognition of Autism Spectrum Disorder Before One Year of Age: A Retrospective Study Based on Home Videotapes. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 30(2), 157-162.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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