

# 6

## *It Takes Two to Tango*

### Building Back-and-Forth Interactions

**Chapter goal:** To help you build joint interaction routines and back-and-forth interactions with your child into your daily play and caregiving activities, so your child is more engaged and is communicating more with you.

#### *Why Back-and-Forth Interactions (Turn Taking) Are So Important*

One of any child's biggest accomplishments in interacting with others is to learn to take turns. The ability to cooperate in give-and-take exchanges is fundamental to social development and to communication. Think about board games, conversations, the grocery store checkout, religious services, meetings, dancing, children playing pretend—all these social interactions are built on taking turns. Take a moment to notice your social interactions with other people, and look for all of the turn taking that occurs during those exchanges. We are not talking about structured interactions in which one person says, "It's my turn," and the other waits. We are talking about the natural turn taking that occurs in adult conversations, in parent-child social games, and in playful interactions between young children—for instance, where one child picks up a bucket in the sand and puts sand in, and the other watches and then comes over to put sand in the bucket too. Watch two people interacting, and you will see this natural turn taking everywhere.

Even the youngest children have a sense of taking turns, which parents often experience while playing with their baby. A parent may make a silly face, and the

baby may then look at the parent's eyes with a delighted smile and laugh. That is the baby's turn, and the parents are likely to respond by taking another turn and repeating the silly face. This kind of turn-taking pattern also occurs in vocal play. The baby makes some sound just for the fun of it, and the parent takes a turn and imitates the sound. Then the baby takes another turn, imitating the sound again or watching and smiling, and the parent responds again in turn. When babies become toddlers, they continue using this turn-taking structure in imitation and interaction games with adults and with other children. In a very familiar kind of play, a 2-year-old watches another child do something and then imitates it, at which point the other child does it again, and so on.

In these interactions, what may look like nothing but light-hearted play is actually serious learning. Each person in the interaction fits his response to the other person's response, and the two partners build their interaction back and forth: Maybe a little boy opens his mouth wide and throws his arms in the air when a block tower topples. His playmate then knocks over a block tower and makes the same gestures. The first child watches this imitation with delight and then builds on it by adding jumping to his feet the next time the block tower falls. Young children use this behavior to learn an enormous amount from other people. They watch a person who is important or interesting to them; they observe the other person's words and actions; and they hold them in their minds to make sense of them and remember them. They may imitate it right then and there or later, to practice and learn what the other person was doing. This kind of social learning is one way that little children learn so much without anyone teaching them directly.

Turn taking also establishes a kind of balance to the interactions. No one is the boss, and no one is the follower. Instead, the two partners take turns directing and following. One leads, and the other follows; then the follower may lead something new, and the previous leader now becomes the follower into the new routine. We refer to this as *sharing control* of the play. When partners share control, the activity is balanced. Both partners lead, and both partners follow. This requires each to communicate to the other, back and forth. Neither controls the other or the activity. They share control and trade the lead back and forth. Your child takes control when she makes a choice of objects; acts on a toy; refuses a toy; fusses or reaches; speaks; or communicates with her eyes, body, and facial expressions. You take control when you offer a choice, demonstrate a toy, hand something to your child, or ask a question. Sharing control in turn taking creates an activity that both partners build together—a shared activity. The balance between partners increases the learning opportunities available for the child. It fosters the child's initiative and spontaneity by giving the child some control. It fosters the child's attention to the partner when the partner has the lead by focusing that spotlight of attention on the partner—the leader. Each shift of the spotlight highlights a learning opportunity for the child.

## What's Happening in Autism?

The social play routines—sensory social routines—that we have encouraged you to build with your child in Chapter 5 build on turn taking. The back-and-forth interaction of you starting a game, your child responding with indications of enjoying the game and wanting more, and you continuing—this whole back-and-forth dance builds the child's awareness of turn taking and of the whole purpose of communicating. This comes easily to most children, but it is more difficult for children with ASD. They may be less aware of their partner's turns, because they are less tuned in to the subtle communications of eyes, face, and voice that speak volumes to most babies. For children with ASD, the volume of those communications seems to be turned down.

*Joni wanted so much to play with her 2-year-old son, Jacob. He was her first child, and she had looked forward to being a mother and being a good playmate for her child. She had gathered many toddler toys from garage sales and hand-me-downs, and she had cleared out space in the family room TV shelves for his toys. But all he ever wanted to play with were his little cars, and all he wanted to do with them was drive them back and forth along the edge of the coffee table or carpet. He liked to watch the wheels turn as he ran them along. Joni tried to play cars with Jacob, but he got upset when she touched them, and he wanted them back. She tried to show him how to use the toy parking garage with the cars, but he wasn't interested in it. He just took the cars off and lay down on his side to run the cars back and forth on the carpet in front of his eyes. It made her sad, having him turn away to play alone. She felt like a failure as a mom and didn't know what to do.*

## Why Is It a Problem?

When young children with ASD do not tune in to their parents' communications or do not respond to them (take a turn), they miss the opportunity to build critical skills (imitation, sharing emotion) that underlie communication. The risk is that young children with ASD will continue to play mostly alone, rather than to draw parents into their activities or to look for social responses from their parents. They may become more and more removed from the social world around them and from all the crucial learning experiences available within that world. This early lack of engagement not only interferes with their learning, but also occurs during a very sensitive period of brain development, when their brain cell networks are particularly ready to absorb and process social and language information. This sensitive period lasts only a few years during early childhood, and we want to make sure that those developing brain networks are receiving the input information they need to learn to process social communication.

Fortunately, there are lots of ways to turn up the volume of your communication, making the learning opportunities present in your turns stand out

for your child. In this chapter, we focus on taking turns in play with toys or other objects and in other daily activities, so your child no longer misses the learning opportunities inherent in social interaction but instead learns to expect your responses, imitate you in play, use gestures and words, and experience the fun of social interaction.

## ➔➔➔➔ **What You Can Do to Increase Your Child's Turn-Taking Skills**

There are six specific steps you can carry out to increase your child's participation in taking turns:

- Step 1.** Understand the four-part framework of joint activities for taking turns.
- Step 2.** Start to practice—beginning involves setting up the joint activity.
- Step 3.** Set the theme.
- Step 4.** Elaborate the joint activity—add the variation.
- Step 5.** Close the joint activity and start another.
- Step 6.** Create joint activities during other daily routines, to foster multiple areas of development.

In the following pages, we describe how to carry out each of these steps, give you some ideas for activities to try, and suggest what you can do to solve problems that may come up.

### **Step 1. Understand the Four-Part Framework of Joint Activities for Taking Turns**

There is a specific structure for carrying out play with very young children that is particularly rich in learning opportunities for social communication and turn taking. *Joint activities*, or *joint activity routines*, were originally described and given those names by a very influential language scientist.<sup>1</sup> A joint activity is like a conversation, involving a set of turns between you and your child, based on a shared activity. In Chapter 5 you learned how to build sensory social routines, mainly those that don't involve toys or objects. In this chapter you'll learn to do the same thing with toys and other items, devising joint activity routines that may last for 2–5 minutes for very young children. The framework consists of the

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<sup>1</sup>Bruner, J. Early social interaction and language acquisition. In H. R. Schaffer (Ed.), *Studies in mother-infant interaction* (pp. 271–289). New York: Academic Press, 1977.

following four parts (each of which is elaborated in one of the remaining steps in this chapter):

1. One of you chooses a toy and begins to do something with it—the **setup**.
2. Then the other joins in on the same activity so that the two of you imitate each other, build something together, or take turns to complete the same activity—the **theme**.
3. Doing the same thing for a while can be boring and repetitive, so after a while you add some changes to the play—the **variations**. During the variations, the turn-taking structure continues, and the two of you go back and forth playing a little differently from the way you started.
4. As your child's interest in the activity wanes, you know it's time to start a different activity, and so the two of you finish the game you have been playing—the **closing**—and move on to something else (a **transition** to a new activity).

The new activity begins with another setup or initiation, and continues through the theme, one or more variations, and another closing.

**Rationale.** The balance between partners and the structure around a shared theme that are the critical features of joint activities enhance learning opportunities. The back-and-forth interaction of turn taking repeatedly puts each partner in the other's spotlight of attention. Whenever it's your turn, your child's attentional spotlight is focused on you: He sees what you are about to do, hears your words, sees the effect of your actions, and so can learn from it. Then it is your child's turn, and he can practice right away what he has just seen and heard (with your help), so he is an active learner in the process. Following your child's interest into a theme that your child understands makes the purpose of your actions clear to your child, and that helps him extract the meaning of your gestures and words. In the variation, varying or adding new play materials or actions to a game adds interest to the activity; keeps it from getting too repetitive and boring; and so helps your child stay motivated to keep participating in the activity and to continue learning, practicing, and strengthening new skills. Finally, ending and transitioning or moving on to the next activity in an organized fashion help you hold your child's attention through the transition and helps your child learn to anticipate what is coming next. The joint activity structure will allow you to help your child learn a wide variety of early social communication skills: understanding and using everyday language; imitating actions that similar-age children would do; playing flexibly and creatively with others.

*Jocelyn bought a new toy for 3-year-old Rasheed—a round wooden pegboard that held six fat red pegs and spun around. She thought this would be a good toy for him. The pegs were fat enough for him to hold easily, and the goal for using the toy was*

*clear. But it was hard to get her son's attention long enough to show him something new. She decided to show it to him while he was having a snack in his high chair. That was one place where he would sit for a while and look at her. So when Rasheed was finishing his crackers, Jocelyn set up the toy on the kitchen table, right in front of his chair. She put the pegs in the base one by one, while talking about what she was doing: "See, baby, here's a peg. It goes here. And another, and another. They go in." Once they were all in, she spun the base, and they circled around. (This was the setup phase.) Rasheed was watching intently as he finished chewing. Then Jocelyn took the pegs out fast, put the base on his tray, and handed him a peg. He struggled a little, and she helped him put it in. (This was the theme.) Then she handed him another, and another. She helped as needed, so this went easily for Rasheed. After he had done three, she put in one (her turn), and then gave him another. She put in the last two quickly to take a turn and to move the activity along so her son wouldn't lose attention. When they were all in, she spun it for him (variation), which he loved! Then she took out most of them and put them in a plastic container, but she left the last two in for him to take out. She helped him put each in the container (closing). Then she took the base off his high chair tray and got him down. Jocelyn had Rasheed's attention and participation throughout. She felt great about the success of this new play routine!*

## **Step 2. Start to Practice—Beginning Involves Setting Up the Joint Activity**

**Rationale.** The setup phase is important, because this is where you first hook your child's interest. You will use your child's toys as the setup that will allow you to demonstrate the theme, introducing a new action that you would like your child to understand and imitate. For example, the setup might be a group of blocks you know your child enjoys. At a moment when your child is unoccupied, you might set up the activity by getting out the container of blocks ("Let's play blocks; I've got the blocks. Sit down. Block goes on top, another block on top") as you take a few and begin to build a tower. Remember to include in the setup good body positioning, with you and your child situated face to face. Good communication relies on your being able to see each other's eyes, facial expressions, gestures, body movements, and words spoken.

Now the theme is set, and you pass some blocks to your child. Your child's turn could be imitating what you just did, such as stacking the next block onto the tower, or reaching and saying "ba" for "block"—as a way of signaling that she is motivated to continue the activity. Or she might start doing something else with the blocks. If she does, encourage her and help her build onto the tower or start her own. That's the theme. Go back and forth, each taking a turn and adding to the tower. Then make the variation happen—knock the blocks down! That's usually fun for children. Then start up again together. Another variation may be lining them up and then driving a car over the "road," or making them

into a square as a “house” for toy animals. When your child starts to lose interest, or you run out of ideas, it’s time to clean up. Clean up before your child takes off, by having your child help you put the blocks back in the container and put it back. Then it’s time to pick another toy. There you have it: a four-part joint activity, with turn taking throughout.

 **Activity: Choose Toys or Objects That Will Be Helpful in Establishing the Setup and Will Become the Theme of the Play**

We generally try to choose the same kinds of objects that other children your child’s age typically play with, both toys and household objects (for instance, pans, lids, or other kitchen and bath materials). This way your child will know how to play with these objects when she is with children of the same age. Your child probably already chooses objects to play with without your help. If not, you can choose one or two toys or other objects for play that you think will interest your child.

**Here are some ideas for selecting objects or toys for the setup:**

- Choose objects or toys that have several pieces or that will allow your child to do several different things with the toy. Toys that involve only one action or one piece make it very hard to take turns or to come up with both a theme and a variation. When there are multiple pieces or multiple actions (or both), you and your child can each have a turn doing something or making something interesting happen; this is the idea of shared control. Examples include building blocks, shape sorters, books, a bucket of play animals, toys in which balls are inserted and roll down a slide, and so on.
- **Caution!** Electronic toys are very difficult to use for joint activities, because children tend to want to produce the same action again and again. This makes it hard to take turns, come up with variations, or capture your child’s attention.
- Finally, if your child is already playing with a toy, try to start by joining in, rather than introducing a new toy. As discussed in Chapter 5, joining your child allows you to follow your child’s interest, rather than trying to entice your child to shift attention. You will be well positioned—in



**Helpful Tip**

If your child is already playing with an object, follow all the steps to “step into the spotlight.” *The best teaching moments come when we follow children’s leads rather than trying to make them switch. (It’s true—there is research on this!)*

your child's attentional spotlight, interacting, and ready to join in the theme. You can join into your child's theme, take some turns, and then initiate a variation.

- **Caution!** Avoid using toys that your child covets highly and/or uses for highly repetitive, ritualized actions. It is really hard to develop joint activities out of things your child handles in a special, repetitive, or ritualized way and wants to have all to himself. Sometimes it's possible—it never hurts to try—but if your child resists your taking a turn with it, or will not vary the way he handles it, the pattern may be difficult for your child to change.



### Helpful Tip

Sometimes children want to hold little favorite things in their hands all the time, but will put them down to play with other toys. If so, and you can still get joint activities going even with the favorite things present, then the favorite things are not interfering and you don't need to manage them. But if a child spends all his time focused on holding or manipulating the favorite toys, and you cannot draw him into anything else, it is probably a good idea to start to limit the all-absorbing toys. Put the highly preferred toys up and away and allow your child to play with them only at certain times, such as in the car, at bedtime, in the high chair while waiting for dinner, or during the hour that you need to prepare dinner.

- What if your child is absolutely not interested in objects? Go back to Chapter 5 and build up your repertoire of sensory social routines first. Once they are well established, begin to work cause-and-effect object play into the sensory social routines. **Cause-and-effect object play** is play in which you perform an action on a toy or create a “big event” with the toy—you make something interesting happen as a result of an action on a toy. For example, you could play chase (a sensory social routine), but at the end of the chase, pick up a ball, chase your child with it, and then throw the ball in a basket! Use maracas in a dance during a musical sensory social routine that you and your child already enjoy, shake the maracas, and then hand them to your child to shake as part of the routine. Notice that in these descriptions of joint activities with objects, we are breaking the rule used in sensory social routines about not letting children play with the objects. That's because now we are elaborating on the basic sensory social routine to include turn taking and building children's interest in shared object activities. In other words, you can use the familiar sensory social routine



as the setup and theme for the play, and then use the object as a way of varying the theme (variation).

## Summary of Step 2

If you have followed along and carried out the preceding activities, you will have discovered activities with objects or toys that will be used as the main theme of a joint activity. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for taking turns and teaching during joint activities—knowledge you will use in **Step 3**. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some activities that work for each statement.

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### *Activity Checklist: Am I Setting Up a Joint Activity with My Child?*

- \_\_\_ My child is playing with toys or objects that other children his or her age would be using.
  - \_\_\_ The objects or toys have multiple pieces that can be shared during play.
  - \_\_\_ Different actions can be performed with the object or toy, to prevent my child from doing the same thing repeatedly.
  - \_\_\_ Any mechanical toy or object with an on-off switch has been removed and hidden, or the batteries removed.
  - \_\_\_ I remember to situate my child in front of me and sitting or standing comfortably—sitting on the floor, sitting in a chair that fits, or standing at a table that is a good height for playing.
  - \_\_\_ I remember the rules for how to follow my child's interests, join in, and imitate or elaborate on my child's action in play.
  - \_\_\_ I am conscious of the four parts—set up, theme, variation, and closing—as we go through them.
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*Kylie's parents thought about the different objects that Kylie enjoyed that also would be good for developing joint activities and turn-taking skills. They decided to experiment with only those toys involving multiple pieces. They rearranged Kylie's toys, with the multipiece objects or toys being in sight and other toys moved to closets or placed in storage (for the time being). The result was a play area containing plastic blocks, animal puzzles, markers and stickers, dress-up items (necklaces, purse, hats, bracelets, sunglasses), play dough, farm animals, and toy drums. Kylie's parents*

*decided to include Kylie's favorite books as well as some new ones, because they wanted to encourage and share this interest with her. They figured that they could take turns turning the pages of a book with Kylie. They placed each toy in a clear plastic shoe container, so that all pieces could be kept together but would still be visible to Kylie when she and a parent were deciding which one to use for play. That way they would encourage Kylie to ask for help getting things out of their containers, and would also prevent Kylie from becoming disorganized by having too many toys available at once. They found that doing so helped organize Kylie's play from the start, because parents and child were able to select together which shoe container to take to the table, couch, or floor. Similarly, when it was time to clean up the play, the shoe container was in close proximity for Kylie's parents to teach her how to put away all items and place the container back on the shelf before selecting the next shoe container.*

**What about Rasheed?** *After reviewing the activity checklist for Step 2, Rasheed's parents decided to get rid of his electronic toys. Not only was it extremely difficult to get their son to look at his parents while he was fixated on the toys' sounds and lights, but the more time he spent with these toys, the more he engaged in arm flapping and body rocking. Rasheed's parents understood, however, that their son might need encouragement and help to develop interest in nonelectronic toys. Before starting on joint activities, they set out different objects and toys to find out what he might like. They watched Rasheed play with a ball ramp toy (placing a ball at the top and watching it roll down the tunnel), push pegs through their holes, and touch the pages of books that had textures on them. His parents were thrilled that Rasheed paid attention to and seemed to enjoy a few nonelectronic toys. Also, his selection of toys involved multiple pieces (balls, pegs, pages) that could be touched, handed over, taken turns with, and imitated during play. Rasheed's parents now felt that they had an initial blueprint for starting joint activities with their son, and revisited the Step 2 activity checklist questions with these new routines in mind.*

### **Step 3. Set the Theme**

**Rationale.** You need to create a theme inside the play—something that you and your child can each take turns doing to turn the activity into a shared interaction—so that the activity does in fact become a joint activity and turn taking can occur. If your child sets the theme (for example, picking up a rolling pin to roll play dough, rolling the car back and forth, or starting to stack the blocks), follow your child's lead and take a turn doing the same thing. When it's your turn, you could simply imitate what the child is doing using other pieces of the material. For example, your turn could be adding another block to the tower, using a second rolling object on a piece of play dough, or taking another ball and inserting it into the tube after your child has done so.

## What If Your Child Doesn't Take the First Turn?

If your child doesn't take the first turn, or if you want to demonstrate a new toy, you can show the child what to do and then give the materials to your child, or you can demonstrate and then give your child his own materials just like yours and help your child copy what you just did. For example, to play with play dough, you might make a shape out of the dough with a cookie cutter and then label the shape by saying, "It's a star." In your first turn, you have set a theme: you've shown your child how to use a cutter to make a shape and also provided a new word to build your child's vocabulary. Or if your child likes bubbles, you might puff your cheeks and blow air out of your mouth in your turn with the bubbles, so that your child looks at you and you have a chance to demonstrate the gesture. You could then say the word "blow" after doing this to name the action, and then label "bubbles" when you've blown some. Eventually you will find a joint activity in which the two of you can take turns.



### **Activity: Name Objects and Actions While Engaging in Turn Taking**

Adding words to your play as just described is something that most parents do automatically. It's good to add some words, name objects, add sound effects, and label the actions. But for a child with ASD, it's particularly important to keep your language simple—almost as simple as your child's, as described in more detail in Chapter 13. If your child is not talking yet, then keep your language short and direct. For example, if the activity involves play dough, you can label objects and actions like "dough," "open," "roll," "push," "poke," "cut," and the names of the cookie cutters (e.g., "square," "circle," "tree," "plane"). Appropriate two-word action and label phrases might include "Open dough," "Cut dough," "Push square," "Take out," "Put in," "Blue dough," "Top on," and so forth.



#### **Helpful Tip**

To learn about turn taking, your child needs to be watching you take your turn. If he doesn't seem to be paying attention, shift your position if you're not already face to face. If possible, position materials in front of your face, so that your child looks at your face as well as the materials. Do not be afraid to take a toy quickly, say "My turn," take a turn, and then give the toy back. That usually brings attention! Your child may fuss at first because he doesn't know the routine, but if you take short turns and always give the object back right away, your child will become accustomed to the turn-taking routine.

**Here are some ideas for words to go with joint activities:**

- During toy play, as your child is taking her turn, think of what the object or material is called, and name it out loud when your child is holding, touching, or reaching for it. Do the same for simple actions that you and your child do with the object—“put in,” “take out,” “shake,” “roll,” “bang,” “open,” “close,” “scribble,” “clap,” “hop,” “up,” “down,” and so on. Repeat the word when it is your turn to use the object.
- Do the same during social games without objects. What actions, gestures, and body movements happen during songs and physical games? Start giving names to all of these opportunities.

### Summary of Step 3

The theme might feel a little repetitive in these first few turns, but that’s necessary so your child can learn what will happen next and also learn to wait for your turn. But it should also be interesting and fun, and that means your child gets her turns quickly. Once you and your child have gotten the hang of this, it should feel balanced, with roughly equal numbers of turns. *In play, partners are equal.* See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for taking turns and teaching inside joint activities—knowledge you will use in **Step 4**. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each statement.

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#### *Activity Checklist: What Is the Joint Activity Theme?*

- \_\_\_ I have found objects or games that provide opportunities for turn taking with my child in play.
  - \_\_\_ I follow my child’s lead and imitate his or her action when taking my turn.
  - \_\_\_ I have my child’s attention when taking my turn.
  - \_\_\_ I use simple language to name the objects and actions during play.
  - \_\_\_ My child and I take turns, acting as equal partners, to create a theme when playing together.
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**What about Kylie?** *For Kylie’s parents, the biggest challenge was how to take turns without upsetting Kylie. Her parents continued practicing the setup with Kylie—helping her take down the shoe container she wanted to play with, and setting up the materials at her table or on the floor. Kylie had become accustomed to this routine and understood that her parents were there to help and support her interest—to play and have fun! Once the materials were set up, though, Kylie’s parents weren’t sure*

*how to continue their involvement or take their next turn in the activity. They desperately wanted to play with and show her things they thought she might enjoy, but they didn't want their turns to upset her.*

*So they reviewed Chapter 4 and paid particular attention to the strategies of following their child's lead and using imitation for becoming more involved play partners. Having the toys already organized in the shoe containers and having multiple pieces made it easier to take the next object out and do exactly what Kylie had done with the prior piece: put in the next puzzle item, stack the next block, bang the drum, or scribble on the paper with the marker. They continued naming the objects and Kylie's and their actions: "Cow, put in," "Block, on," "Bang, bang, bang," or "Marker. Here's paper. Open marker. Scribble, scribble, scribble." They also started paying attention to the pace and how rewarding the play was to Kylie, because they wanted to make sure that Kylie would pay attention to their turns without finding it a negative experience. They decided their turns needed to be fun, fast, and focused, so they made quick motions with their turn—putting one piece in the puzzle, placing one block onto the tower, hitting the drum once, or scribbling once on the paper. They also started experimenting with new actions, gestures, and sound effects to add to their turns, such as making animal noises when placing pieces into the puzzle, having the block "blast off" from the ground and land on the tower, or drawing stars and hearts (Kylie's favorites) on paper.*

*Kylie soon started paying more attention to her parents' turns, and then smiling and laughing at the sounds or effects added to the play, and finally imitating their actions in her turn. She liked their play better. Sometimes she still wanted to play with toys her way and didn't gravitate toward their ideas right away, but that didn't concern her parents anymore. If things started to deteriorate, they felt confident with their "repair plan" and applied the same strategies of helping, imitating, and narrating play before gradually taking more deliberate but fun turns in the activity. The outcome was a repertoire of common themes or play actions that both parents and daughter could construct and enjoy together.*

#### **Step 4. Elaborate the Joint Activity—Add the Variations**

**Rationale.** When we play, we pick an idea or theme and repeat it during play, but we don't remain stuck or limited to repeating the same theme over and over again in the same way. The natural tendency in play is to start a play theme and after a little while begin elaborating creatively on the theme, to add interest and enjoyment. This is the basis of creative play. One minute children might be playing house, and the next they're action heroes flying around the room to save the day. Or an activity that started off as squeezing play dough through fingers can turn into making animals and then making those animals run, hop, and crawl across the table. Children's play typically evolves and varies as it goes along, and we want children with ASD to be able to participate in creative play with their peers, as well as to initiate and contribute their own ideas during play. That's

how they learn about different concepts: make-believe, role play, ways to carry out conventional or customary actions with everyday objects. Adding materials, ideas, or actions to the initial theme is called *variation* or *elaboration*. It highlights different aspects of an activity so that a child learns different concepts, including that objects can be used in many different ways (flexible play); it helps develop your child's creativity and imagination; and it also prevents boredom so the learning can continue.

### **Activity: Try Different Ways of Varying or Elaborating on the Theme**

There is no right way to vary or elaborate on a play theme. The only “wrong” way, in fact, is if you start directing the play, expecting the child to imitate every new move you introduce. Be sure that the theme is really well established first (you have repeated it several times), and that you are following your child as much as you are asking your child to follow you. If variations are hard to think of, just do something different with the same materials while your child is looking, and if she doesn't copy you or try something else, then help her do what you just did. Praise your child for trying. Then let your child do whatever she wants to do with the materials.

#### **Here are some ideas for varying the theme:**

- Add new materials. After taking turns with a toy or object, begin to add more pieces to the play activities, and show your child how to add them to the theme. For example, if the theme is scribbling on paper with a marker, add a marker of a different color; add some stickers that you can peel off, put on the paper, and color over; or add chalk and show your child how chalk can also be used to make marks.
- Vary the actions. After taking turns performing an action, change the action slightly. For example, if the theme is stacking blocks and you have established the theme of taking turns putting a block on the stack, begin lining them up rather than stacking them. And then maybe drive little cars over the lined-up blocks as if they were a road.
- Add more steps to the action you are performing. For example, if the theme is putting pieces in a puzzle, and you and your child have been taking turns taking each piece out of a container and putting it in, then the variation might be taking all the pieces out of the puzzle, spreading them around on the table, and then showing them to each other and naming the pictures before each one goes in. Or a different variation, for a child who can make simple requests and name the pictures, could be requesting a certain piece from the other person.

## Summary of Step 4

If you have followed along and carried out the preceding activities, you will have developed different strategies for varying or elaborating the joint activity. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for taking turns and teaching inside joint activities—knowledge you will use in **Step 5**. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each statement.

---

*Activity Checklist: Am I Varying or Elaborating  
the Joint Activity?*

- I know how to add new materials to the initial play theme I have established with my child.
  - I know how to add new actions to the initial theme.
  - I know how to add new steps to the initial theme.
  - My child seems comfortable with the variation—playing with objects; smiling at times; focused on the play; and calm, interested, or happy/excited—and continues to take turns.
- 

**What about Rasheed?** *In place of the discarded electronic toys, Rasheed's parents set out a variety of other toys to see what he might enjoy, which turned out to be a ball ramp toy, a peg toy, and a book that provided textures to touch. These toys were used to set up joint activities with Rasheed. Rasheed chose which one to play with each time, and his mother imitated his actions to establish turn taking and initiate the first theme. With the ball or peg toys, turns involved each partner's pushing through or placing the object in the hole, whereas books involved Rasheed's holding them and turning pages, and Jocelyn's touching the textures and pointing to pictures after each page was turned. She also made sure to name each object or picture and action happening in the play: "Push ball," "Peg in," "More ball," "Open book," "Turn," "There's a mouse," "That's soft," and so forth.*

*Jocelyn then thought that expanding on the play theme might increase her son's interest and time spent in the activity. She decided to start with adding materials to the activities, so as not to disrupt or change the actions Rasheed had become accustomed to and enjoyed. For the ball ramp toy, during her turn, Jocelyn showed Rasheed how to hit the ball with the hammer to make it go down the ramp. She repeated the action with the new item during her turns while Rasheed continued using his hand to push the ball in, but she exaggerated the motion with sound effects and alternated between hitting the ball slow-fast and light-hard with the hammer. After a few turns of modeling the hammer, she then handed it to Rasheed and*

quickly helped him hold it to hit the ball. She alternated between having him use the hammer and letting him use his hands, so he wasn't turned off by the new theme's seeming too hard. She also offered choices at times between "ball" versus "hammer" and "hit" (with hammer) versus "push" (with hands), so Rasheed felt that the interaction and the turn taking were balanced. She continued naming each object and action in the activity, to help Rasheed understand and begin to imitate single words related to the things he wanted to do.

Once adding materials (such as the hammer) proved successful, Jocelyn decided to try introducing other new actions. First she started showing him other actions to do with pegs. For instance, instead of hammering them, she showed him how to stack them into a tower with the connectors on each end and then, once the tower was a reasonable size, how to roll the tower across the table. Rasheed was not expecting this change, but he watched intently as the multicolored tower rolled from his mother's side of the table over to him. Jocelyn then said "roll" and helped him push it back over to her. She added another peg to the tower and rolled it again, helping Rasheed now do the same. After a few back-and-forth rounds, Rasheed began rolling the tower by himself with smiles and delight, until the tower became too long to roll and fell apart into pieces. But that didn't worry Jocelyn, because now she had another action to name—"Uh-oh, pegs fell off"—and an opportunity to build the joint activity with several themes all over again!

## Step 5. Close the Joint Activity and Transition to the Next

**Rationale.** After you have played for a while, one of three things is bound to happen. Either your child's interest wanes, or your interest wanes, or you cannot think of anything else to do and the play has gotten really repetitive. When there's nothing more to teach, or you or your child loses interest, it's time to put the toy away and transition to something else. This is the closing. In an ideal closing, one of the two partners makes a move to end, and you keep operating as partners: Follow your child's lead, but offer guidance through the closing.



### **Activity: Maintain the Balanced Partnership While You Close and Transition**

**Here are some ideas for closing the joint activity and moving on:**

- If you see signs that the activity has lost its teaching potential, suggest something like "Are you all done? Should we finish?" and get out the container that holds the pieces, putting a piece in and encouraging your child to do the same. The two of you will put the pieces away together, close the container together, put it back where it goes together, and then make a transition to a new activity.



- Or your child may signal you that he's finished. If your child refuses to play with the materials any longer, pushes them away, starts to move away, starts being very repetitive in a way that makes it hard to take turns, or shows loss of interest by losing energy, suggest that it's time to be all done and help the cleanup begin. Some children, after they learn the routine, may say "All done" on their own or begin to put materials away and lead you through the process of closing.
- If the activity becomes really repetitive, but your child wants to continue, offer a new activity that will be very attractive to the child so that she stays motivated to play with you. Present the new toy to your child while she is still playing repetitively with the first one. Offer it to her, operate it, and make it look really great. See if your child will reach for it—if so, do a trade, giving her the new toy and taking away the old one (get it out of sight fast). Chances are that this will work well, and you will then be at the initiation phase of a new joint activity. If it doesn't work well and your child protests, go ahead and give a piece or two back (but a minimal amount), and then try again in a few minutes with a different toy. Eventually your child will get bored.
- When you transition to another activity, how do you decide whether to do a sensory social routine or a joint activity with objects? We recommend going back and forth between sensory social routines and object-focused joint activity routines to keep things lively and varied. Sensory social routines are best at times when you want to optimize your child's arousal and motivation for learning. Some children have a preference for one or the other. For example, for a child who prefers object-oriented joint activity routines, you may have to make a concerted effort to add sensory social routines; for a child who does not enjoy objects, you'll have to build up object-focused joint activity routines more gradually. Over time, and as your child's play gets more mature and sophisticated, you will find that you will naturally start incorporating more and more social exchanges into object-focused joint activity routines. The two kinds of routines will naturally become more similar over time. Think about preschool children playing dress-up or action figures. There are as many social elements to their play as there are object-focused actions. However, all the way through preschool and into kindergarten, school programs provide both kinds of activities. Free play often involves more actions on objects, and circle time generally involves songs, finger plays, and other sensory social routines. Book activities and pretend play often blend both. Making sure that you are using the same kinds of play routines other children your child's age are using, in both your sensory social and your object-focused joint activity routines, prepares your child for group learning experiences.

## Summary of Step 5

If you have followed along and carried out the preceding activities, you will have developed all of the stages or steps of a joint activity and now have several routines that you and your child can do daily and share with one another. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for taking turns and teaching inside joint activities. If not, start experimenting during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each statement.

---

### *Activity Checklist: Am I Closing the Joint Activity and Moving On?*

- \_\_\_\_\_ I know when my child is losing interest in a joint activity.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ I know when the activity is becoming too repetitive or too over- or understimulating for my child to learn from.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ My child helps me clean up the joint activity.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ If my child resists closing an activity, I use repair strategies (offer a choice, activate new toy, trade materials) to help my child transition to the next joint activity.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ I can help my child transition to a new joint activity while maintaining my child's attention and interaction.
- 

**What about Kylie?** *Kylie's parents were concerned about her lack of interest in sensory social routines. Without objects, she just didn't seem to care. But they had seen how much Kylie enjoyed being tickled with objects, and recently she loved it when Dad used an animal puzzle piece and made the animal sound before placing it in the puzzle. They knew from reading Chapter 5 that props can be used to support children's attention to people's faces and bodies during these routines, so Mom began taking turns with Kylie hitting her toy drum with a stick or hands. After a few rounds of this exchange, Mom covered her face with the drum and started a game of peekaboo. She did this a few times, exaggerating the "boo" and even tickling Kylie after appearing from behind the drum. Next Mom placed the drum in front of Kylie's face and said "boo" for her as she pulled the drum away and tickled her daughter. Kylie liked this game for a few minutes, but then started backing away as if to say she was done. Mom responded by acknowledging that Kylie was "all done with peekaboo" and took out a party horn to blow. Kylie had not seen this toy before and quickly approached Mom to take the horn. Kylie's mom blew it a few times; each time, she first sang, "If you're happy and you know it, blow your horn," followed by the "toot-toot" of the horn. Then she held the horn for Kylie to blow, and each time Kylie*

*exhaled air, Mom would blow the horn and sing a verse of the song. She wasn't sure Kylie really liked the song, but it didn't matter so much now, because at least there were two sensory social routines that Mom could do in between more object-related games. Mom also realized the importance of practicing these more often throughout the day, so that Kylie could become more familiar with the routines and over time enjoy them more.*

## **Step 6. Create Joint Activities during Other Daily Routines, to Foster Multiple Areas of Development**

**Rationale.** All kinds of daily caregiving routines have a joint activity structure. For example, mealtimes have an initiation (getting your child into his chair, putting on a bib, wiping off hands), a theme (putting food out so your child begins to eat), one or more variations (you eventually sit down too, usually near your child; interact with your child; eat something yourself, and perhaps share some of your food with your child; respond to your child's requests and refusals; offer a cup and something different to eat), and a closing (asking, "Are you all done?"; wiping off hands and face; untying the bib; taking off the tray; getting the child down).

In Chapter 5 we have discussed the importance of finding ways to include as much time as you can for brief social interactions with your child during your everyday caregiving routines. Thinking about each daily routine as an opportunity for a joint activity may help you think of new ways to carry out these interactions. It is sometimes difficult to set aside enough time to sit down and play with your child, so figuring out how to engage in joint activities during the daily care routines that make up your day is a way of ensuring that your child gets plenty of practice and learning opportunities. We have just reviewed the four phases of a mealtime that fit within each of the four steps for carrying out a joint activity. Take a minute and think through bath time. See if you can think of how the four steps (initiating/setting up a joint activity, establishing a theme, elaborating on/varying the theme, and closing the activity/moving on) would fit there. After you think it through, read on and see how yours is similar to, and different from, our "script":

**Initiation/setup:** Going to the bathroom, turning on the water, taking off clothes

**Theme:** Getting into the water, soaping up, and rinsing off

**Variation/elaboration:** Talking about body parts as you wash them; playing with the suds and bubbles; playing with the bath toys; pouring and dumping water; splashing, kicking, and blowing bubbles; and many more

**Closing transition:** Getting out, drying off, and putting on PJs

Now how do you create the kind of interaction we have described earlier, so your child is really participating and taking turns in the activity? Your child

could participate in the initiation by walking into the bathroom with you (instead of being carried), by helping turn on the water, or by putting her hands under the water and feeling it; by throwing bath toys into the water; by helping take her clothes off, even if it just means pulling her shirt over her head or socks off her toes and putting the clothes in the hamper; and by responding with outstretched hands and maybe some words to your offer to be picked up and put in the water (rather than picking up your child from behind and placing her in the water).

How can your child participate in the theme phase? By taking a turn washing her belly, chest, arms, and legs with the washcloth; by handing you the soap; by helping rub the shampoo into her hair; by holding the cup while you fill it with water; by pouring water on her soapy chest or belly. These are all opportunities for turn taking, with accompanying language and modeling.

The variation phase is probably the easiest to think through, because it is the playtime that goes with bath time. It is an excellent time for playing together in this back-and-forth way. Instead of putting soap on the child's belly, put it on her head. While playing with the rubber ducky, place soap on top of the ducky ("Soap on ducky!").

The closing can involve your child in putting the bath toys in a container; putting the soap in the soap dish; sitting down for drying; offering hands and feet when you request them for drying; helping to pat wet hair with a towel; rubbing lotion on belly and legs; helping comb through hair; and so forth. All the activities you typically do can also include your child and become very rich in language and social learning experiences.

Does this take more time? Absolutely—it's taking all your typical activities and turning them into back-and-forth play and teaching opportunities that your child can absorb. It's much easier to do these caregiving routines without much of a structure; after all, we often just want to get the bath finished! It is easy and fast to change, dress, or feed your child while a video is on and your child is watching. However, when you add the four steps of a joint activity and the turn-taking structure into your daily routines with your child, you're providing a number of important learning elements for your child. You are helping your child learn what is coming, how the whole activity goes, when it will begin, and when it will end. This makes it more predictable for your child and gives your child ways to participate instead of being a passive receiver of your care. You're helping your child learn the meaning of words, of gestures, and the structure of daily life. You're helping your child learn to imitate, to watch and do, to pay attention to other people, and to respond when someone addresses her.

Almost every activity you do with your child can become a joint activity routine: brushing teeth, having your child help with a cooking project, dressing and undressing, going for a walk, bedtime routines, and outings. When a child's daily life includes all these learning opportunities in ongoing interactions with you and other caregivers, your child is getting intervention all day long. You are also likely to find this more fun, because you will be finding your child's smile

throughout these exchanges, and nothing is more satisfying to a parent than a happy, enthusiastic child! The following activity will give you tools for identifying potential joint activity steps inside your daily play and caregiving activities with your child.

 **Activity: Figure Out a Joint Activity Structure for Your Daily Activities**

Spend a few minutes over the next few days observing how you and your child do the six types of activities discussed in Chapter 4:

1. Toy or other object play
2. Social play
3. Meals
4. Caregiving (bathing/dressing/changing/bedtime)
5. Book activities
6. Household chores

**Here are some suggestions for thinking about your daily routines in terms of joint activities:**

- For each of the six types of activities just listed, think about how much you use the four-part joint activity structure within them. Which of these include a setup, theme, variation, and closing/transition to the next activity? Which ones lack this structure and might benefit from it? As you identify activities that would benefit from more of a joint activity structure, use the form on page 136 to think through and plan out how you could build a joint activity structure around it. (Make extra copies of the form if you need more space.) Start by making a list of potential themes—the actions you could do in each step that your child would enjoy. If you're not sure how your child might respond, don't worry. You can always try it and make changes based on what worked and didn't work. After you have identified the theme, identify a variation for that theme. Then think about the closing. How can you and your child together close up the activity so your child is participating in the closing? Finally, think about the setup the same way. How can you and your child together begin the activity so your child is expecting what is coming next and is ready to participate?
- Next, try to answer these questions from your observations during this step. For each of the six activities:
  - How can my child and I set up the joint activity?
  - What is the theme of the joint activity? How do we take turns with the theme?

- How can I vary or expand the joint activity? How will we take turns in the variation?
- How can my child and I end and transition to the next joint activity together?

**Now here are some specific ideas for structuring your daily routines as joint activities:**

● **Book activities:**

- ➔ **Setup:** Choose a book from a choice of two, and then get positioned face to face.
- ➔ **Theme:** (Child's turn) Child opens book and looks at picture, which you point to and label. (Your turn) You point out next picture and label. Repeat a few times.
- ➔ **Variation:** You add something different—perform an action in an action book, or add sound effects, or count the ducklings, or add a related song. Variations also include going farther in the book, adding more pages, having your child point, asking questions. Don't struggle to think of variations unless the book activity seems to be getting too repetitive.
- ➔ **Closing/transition:** Your child helps put the book back where it belongs, and goes to choose another toy.

● **Diapering:**

- ➔ **Setup:** Hand your child the diaper (this tells your child what is coming next), and walk together, hand in hand, to the diapering area. Get your child to extend hands for the pickup.
- ➔ **Theme:** Have your child hand you the diaper, the wipe, and so on.
- ➔ **Variation:** Play a social game while your child is still lying down after the clean diaper is on (pattycake, chase/"I'm gonna get you," bumblebee, etc.).
- ➔ **Closing/transition:** Your child sits up, put hands up to be lifted off, throws the dirty diaper in the trash, and leaves the area.

● **Meals:**

- ➔ **Setup:** Your child puts hands up to be lifted into high chair, helps put bib on, chooses drink or food first.
- ➔ **Theme:** First your child and then you begin to eat or drink.
- ➔ **Variation:** New food, new choices, giving you bites, imitation games,

using spoon or fork, trying new foods, pretending to give a doll or stuffed animal a bite.

- **Closing/transition:** Have your child hand you the dish, the cup, the spoon; help wipe hands and face; help wipe tray; reach for the pickup to get down.

- **Outdoors:**

- **Setup:** Get shoes and socks; have child sit down near door; put on jacket, shoes, and socks while child helps with each. Open door, close door.
- **Theme:** Whatever activity your child chooses. Turn taking can involve signaling to you for pushes on the swing (swing the child from the front rather than the back so you can interact, touch feet, etc.), throwing the ball back and forth, digging together in the sand, catching your child at the bottom of the slide, or the like.
- **Variation:** A second activity.
- **Closing/transition:** Put away the balls, shovel, or other equipment. Take hands to walk inside. Take off shoes, socks, jacket, and put away. Wash hands and get drink of water.

- **Dressing:**

- **Setup:** Get clothes out and put on floor, bed, or wherever you dress.
- **Theme:** Hand child shirt and help child put shirt on head; wait for child to pull shirt over head; and so on.
- **Variation:** Each additional piece of clothing.
- **Closing/transition:** Finish with a song, applause, closing drawers or closet doors, looking in the mirror and labeling clothes, or other ritual.

## Summary of Step 6

If you have followed along and carried out the activities above, you now have ideas or “blueprints” for what kinds of joint activity routines you can embed in all your daily activities. You are now thinking about these activities more as child participation opportunities. These activities will serve as the framework for taking turns and teaching various skills to your child. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with plans for using the joint activity structure to engage your child in many more back-and-forth learning opportunities throughout your daily activities. If not, start experimenting with the joint activity structure during play and caregiving routines until you have found some methods that work for each.

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*Activity Checklist: What Kinds of Joint Activities Can I Do with My Child?*

- \_\_\_ I know how to set up a number of games with toys or other objects my child likes to play with, or social games without toys.
  - \_\_\_ I know how to carry out the theme or main action of the game that will make my child smile.
  - \_\_\_ I have ideas for how to vary these activities or add new materials or play actions that I think my child will like.
  - \_\_\_ I have ideas for how my child will help me end the activity and choose the next one.
  - \_\_\_ I have ideas for how to use the four-part joint activity structure during my child's mealtimes.
  - \_\_\_ I have plans for how to use the four-part joint activity structure for outdoor play.
  - \_\_\_ I have tried the four-part joint activity structure for book activities.
  - \_\_\_ I am using the four-part activity structure inside bath times and other caregiving activities.
- 

### Chapter Summary

This chapter has focused on how to develop a back-and-forth “dance” with your child during four-part joint activities with toys, social games, and daily caregiving routines. Developing this turn-taking way of interacting with your child and devising these joint activities to frame play and daily caretaking routines involves increased learning opportunities for your child, increased language exposure, increased social interactions, and the opportunity to participate and learn the ins and outs of daily life. Now it's your turn—have fun!



## Four-Phase Joint Activity Record

Example	Setup	Theme	Variation	Closing/ transition
Toy or other object play Trains	Choose which trains to use and where to sit.	Take turns laying down the track, connecting cars, and pushing trains around the track.	Trains can crash, go up or down bridges, go through tunnels, circle fast or slowly around track. Or add people or animals to ride in or on top of trains.	Put trains and track into container and choose next activity.
Toy or other object play				
Social play				
Meals				
Caregiving (bathing/dressing/changing/bedtime)				
Book activities				
Household chores				

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## **Refrigerator List**

*Goal: To teach your child the back-and-forth structure of joint activities.*

**Steps:**

- ✓ Position yourself and the important materials between you and your child.
- ✓ Stay in the spotlight! Make sure your child is watching your turns.
- ✓ Narrate; label; and put in simple words, songs, and sound effects.
- ✓ Frame play and caregiving activities with the four-part joint activity structure:
  - initiation/setup
  - theme
  - variations
  - closing/transition
- ✓ Maintain a turn-taking, back-and-forth style through each of the four parts of your joint activities.

# 7

## *Talking Bodies*

### The Importance of Nonverbal Communication

**Chapter goal:** To provide you with ways to help your child (1) learn to express desires, feelings, and interests by using body language, and (2) learn to understand your body language. Nonverbal communication is a foundation for speech and language.

#### *Why Nonverbal Communication (Body Language) Is So Important*

Although most of us think of speech when we think about children's communication, there is much more to communicating than speaking. Long before their speech develops, most babies and toddlers become very skilled at getting their messages across by using their eyes, facial expressions, hand gestures, body postures, and sounds. They also learn to understand their parents' body language very well. Bodies talk! Recognizing and using nonverbal communication teaches them that one mind can choose to send thoughts and feelings to another—through eye contact, actions/gestures, and sounds—and that the other mind can interpret these messages that travel from the body, through the air, into the eyes, and into the mind of the partner. This is what communication is all about.

Through body language, your child will come to understand that he can interpret your thoughts, feelings, desires, and interests, and that you can interpret his. This is why nonverbal communication is so important: It allows your child a new way of understanding other people and himself as people with inner lives, with mental states that can be shared. In other words, you can read each other's cues, which in a sense means reading minds! This is how we interact with each other—by sharing what is going on in our minds and hearts.

And it's not just that nonverbal communication allows a child who doesn't speak a way to express himself. Nonverbal communication, most language researchers believe, provides a crucial foundation for speech development. Once a child understands that communication exists, speech and gestures take on meaning. Speech becomes an additional communication system, built on our first communication system, which we call *talking bodies*.

### **What's Happening in Autism?**

Autism interferes with learning about others' minds. Young children with autism have lots of difficulty learning that messages are sent from one person to another, from the mind, through the body, and into the eyes, ears, and mind of the other. This process of choosing to send messages and "reading" others' messages may not seem to exist for them. Many young children with autism seem unaware that communication occurs between two people; they do not recognize the importance of gaze, gestures, speech sounds, and facial expressions. A child who doesn't know that there is meaning in those signals will not pay attention or look for meaning. Some children move their parents around and push their hands toward things to try to send messages. Some young children with autism do not use any clear signals at all to communicate their needs or wants. Their parents have to decide when it is time for the child to eat, to be changed, to go to bed, without many cues from their child. Other children may fuss or demonstrate distress, but they don't communicate what their unhappiness is all about, so that their parents have to work very hard to figure out what their child needs.

### **Why Is It a Problem?**

When a child doesn't communicate at all, or communicates distress but not the cause of it, her parents may get so accustomed to making decisions for her that their child no longer has any unmet needs. Life is easy! Everything is being managed by someone else! Why would a child whose every need is met be motivated to start communicating?

These autism-caused barriers to nonverbal communication can severely delay all communication development, and these barriers to communication can remain in place for many years—holding up speech and language development, preventing social exchanges based on shared meaning with parents and others, and severely limiting children's access to learning. Before early intervention was available to most children, it was not uncommon for us to see some children as old as age 8 or 10 who were still completely unaware of communication. They were without speech, gesture, or alternative communication, which meant that they were also without social exchanges or interactions with peers and siblings.

*Juliana's parents don't know what to do about their 2½-year-old's mealtimes. Instead of sitting in her high chair at mealtimes, their little girl wants to have access to her cereal, sandwich, and fruit bars while she is moving about the house, cup in hand. To accommodate her—since she screams, throws herself back, and will not sit when they try to put her in the high chair—her parents keep a little stash of food (cereal bowl, crackers, bits of breakfast bars) on a low shelf in the kitchen where she can always reach them. But this means that crumbs and sticky little fingerprints end up everywhere.*

*When Juliana wants something special, she pulls her mother by the hand to the kitchen and stands in front of the pantry or the refrigerator. However, when her mother opens the pantry, Juliana has no way to communicate what she wants, since she has not yet learned to point or speak. Her mother has to hold up one item at a time and offer it, and Juliana cries and gets upset each time her mother offers her something she doesn't want. Since Juliana has no clear gestures, her mother might have to offer 10 different choices to find something she will eat, and Juliana often takes only two bites and then rejects the food and begins the process all over again. This goes on many times a day and is an ongoing source of stress for both Juliana and her mother. Juliana's aunt criticizes her mother for "spoiling her," but Juliana is on the slender side for her age, and her mother is really worried about her nutrition. She has no idea how to solve this problem. She wishes that Juliana could communicate what she wants by pointing or labeling.*

## **What You Can Do to Increase Your Child's Nonverbal Communication**

Developing nonverbal communication—talking bodies—builds a road to speech and language and lays down a two-way communication road to other people. Here are five specific steps you can take to help your young child with autism develop a talking body and take more responsibility for communicating his needs, interests, and feelings—that is, for being a more active communicator:

- Step 1.** Do less so your child does more.
- Step 2.** Wait a little.
- Step 3.** Create lots of practice opportunities.
- Step 4.** Persist.
- Step 5.** Position yourself.

In the following pages, we describe how to carry out each of these steps, give you some ideas for activities to try, and suggest what you can do to solve problems that may come up.

## Step 1. Do Less So Your Child Does More

**Rationale.** Young children with autism, like all young children, need to learn to use gestures, eye contact, expressions, and sounds to make choices, to indicate what they want, to share their feelings, and to reject things they don't want. Doing less to anticipate a child's needs—giving choices among objects, rather than giving your child free access to everything; offering your child more than one choice; or offering your child things you know she does not want—encourages her to communicate.

### **Activity: Figure Out How to Encourage Your Child to Communicate More Throughout the Day**

Spend time over the next few days observing your child during the six types of activities discussed in Chapter 4:

1. Toy or other object play
2. Social play
3. Meals
4. Caregiving (bathing/dressing/changing/bedtime)
5. Book activities
6. Household chores

### **Here are some ideas for encouraging your child to do more to communicate:**

- In each of the six activities just listed, think about the theme of the activity and how you can help your child do more during the activity. Can you break up his cracker into several pieces for your child to request, or place only a few cookies in his bowl before he has to ask for more? Can you offer more choices during the activity to increase your child's participation? What about the setup? Do you think your child can be more involved in helping you open up containers, take materials out, choose which items to use? Remember the four-step joint activity sequence of setup, theme, variation, and closing/transition that you have learned in Chapter 6.

*“Often parents feel that without verbal language, or with this diagnosis of autism, their children are incapable of doing things. They think they are helping them by overdoing things for their children, but they are decreasing independence and hindering the learning process unintentionally.”*

- Next, for each one of these four phases, make a list of what actions you could do that will help your child participate more in the activity. (We have provided a form for you to use to keep your list right in this book if you want to. It's near the end of this chapter.) If you're not sure how your child might respond, try it and make changes based on what worked and didn't work.

## Step 2. Wait a Little

**Rationale.** One way of doing less is by waiting for a cue from your child before you hand over what she wants. Start to wait for your child to communicate with you about what she wants. You will build up your child's repertoire of communicative behaviors—gaze, hand gestures, sounds—and your child's awareness that each of these ways of communicating sends a message and gets her what she wants.



### Activity: Wait, but Actively Watch for Your Child's Cue

When your child clearly wants something—to be picked up, to be given a drink, to get a bath toy, to reach a favorite object that you have retrieved from under the couch—hold the desired object up in front of your body and wait. Wait for a small gesture, wait for brief eye contact, wait for a vocalization. Wait for your child to do something to communicate what he wants. Look for eye contact, an outstretched hand, or a vocalization—some sound or gesture that is your child's expression of his desires or feelings. When you see that gesture or hear that sound, quickly give your child what he is requesting with that single communication.



#### Helpful Tip

Although most young children tend to use their voices, hands, and eyes all together to cue their parents, children with autism tend to use these separately. Eventually your child will learn how to combine gesture, gaze, and voice to communicate wants, needs, feelings, and interests to you. In Chapter 13, we'll discuss how to help your child combine these behaviors in communications.



### Activity: Problem-Solve to Minimize Your Child's Frustration

Here are some ideas for problem solving as you wait and watch:

- **What if your child uses crying and screaming as the communication, like Juliana?** Waiting will only result in more crying. If your child uses crying to communicate, then you will have to start to offer the choice *before*

your child has the idea, before the crying begins. If your child is approaching you to be picked up, notice that the approach is coming before your child fusses to be picked up, bend down, and extend your hands toward your child's hands. As your child extends his hands to you (there is the gesture), follow with a pickup.

**What about Juliana?** *Juliana's parents started initiating the trip to the pantry. While Juliana was doing something else, they would line up three or four favorite foods from the pantry along the edge of the counter. They would then find Juliana, take her by the hand, and say something like "Let's get some food." They would then walk to the kitchen, bend down beside Juliana, and point to the objects: "What do you want?" As Juliana reached for one of the items, her parents would take it down, hold it in front of her, and offer it partway, so that she had to reach again toward them. As soon as Juliana reached, they would give her the food, because Juliana had communicated with the reach.*

- **What if your child just stands there and doesn't do anything?** Get down a favorite item, squat down so you are face to face with your child, and offer the object partway to your child: "Do you want bunny [or other favorite toy]?" As she reaches to take it, say "Yes, you want bunny," and give it to her. Your child has communicated with a gesture—the reach!

### Step 3. Create Lots of Practice Opportunities

**Rationale.** For your child to learn how to use his body to communicate, he will need lots and lots of practice. You can create many opportunities every hour that you are with your child, by not ignoring his needs but finding ways to hold back a little from giving things to your child without requiring him to communicate. The idea here is to create communication temptations.



#### **Activity: Creatively Hold Back before Giving Things to Your Child**

**Here are some ideas for creating communication temptations:**

- Before you pick up your child, offer your arms—but wait to pick your child up until she looks at you or raises her arms in response to you. The look can be fleeting at first.
- When your child needs a drink of water, put some water in his cup, bend down so you are face to face, and hold the cup in front of you—but wait to hand it over until your child looks, vocalizes, or reaches.
- Create situations in which your child needs your help. Sometimes children have access to everything they need without needing to communicate to



anyone for help. If this is true for your child, you can begin to keep your child's favorite toys, cup, snacks, or other special objects visible but out of reach (on a shelf or in a closed clear container), so that your child has to request your help to get what she wants. What would this look like? Your child may reach to the shelf, may bring you the container, or may stand there and fuss. You can say, "What do you want?" If your child reaches or points for the object, gestures to be picked up, vocalizes in a way that is not crying or fussing, or looks at you for help, say, "You want the [object]" as you get it. Then say, "Here's the [object]."

- If your child stands there but doesn't make any communicative action, help your child make a clear request with his body. You can pick up the desired object and move it closer to elicit a reach ("Want [object]?"), offer your arms to elicit an arms-up gesture to be picked up ("Want up?"), or position yourself at your child's level and right in front ("What do you need?") to elicit a brief look or a sound of some type. Pick up the child right away or get the object if your child gives you eye contact or makes some type of sound other than fussing in response to your question.
- If your child is fussing about wanting an object and is headed toward a bigger upset, offer your arms for pickup, pick her up after she extends her arms, lift her toward the object, and watch for a reach. If there is no reach and no gesture, pick up the object with your free hand, but keep it out of your child's reach; then wait until the look, reach, or vocalization occurs before giving it to her. Or, while your child is still on the floor, pick the object up off the shelf and move it slightly closer to her to elicit a reach before you give it. Because you give her the object right after the gesture, sound, or eye contact, she will learn that it was one of these nonverbal cues that resulted in your handing her the toy.
- When you give your child something, it might still be in the closed container. Then your child will need to give it back to get your help to open it. If he doesn't readily give it back, extend your hands and say, "Need help?" He will likely hand it to you, but if he doesn't, help him put it in your open hand. Then open it and give it back right away, saying something like "Here's the [object]!"
- Instead of getting the one cereal box from the shelf that you know your child wants, get two, including one your child doesn't like. Hold the two cereal boxes in front of your child to elicit a reach or touch to the one she wants. Or give the child the one she doesn't want, and when she begins to protest or refuse to take it, say, "Janie says no" (with a vigorous head shake) while you offer your open hand to take back the unwanted cereal. Then immediately offer her preferred cereal box to her, and when she reaches to it, say, "Janie says yes, Cheerios!" while you nod your head yes and start to

pour the cereal. Now Janie has communicated two feelings nonverbally—protest and desire.

- Instead of picking up your child repeatedly to swing, tickle, or hug him, do the action once and then put your child down. Then look expectantly at your child and wait a second to see if your child comes back for more (“Want more swing?”). If so, there is some body language! Do it again right away (“Yes, Ethan wants swing!”). If your child looks at you but doesn’t act, respond right away and swing. If your child stands there but doesn’t communicate in any way, reach down and offer your arms and wait for the child to reach back. If he does, proceed to swing. If your child does not respond to the offer and is still there waiting, go ahead and deliver the swing or other action again (“Swing!”). Do it a couple of times and then stop again, offer your hands again, and wait, just like you did before. See if your child will reach for your hands, look in your eyes, or make a sound communicating that he wants you to repeat the game.
- Instead of blowing bubbles, a balloon, a windmill, or a noisemaker repeatedly, do it once or twice so your child gets interested. Then get ready to do it the third time, but wait! Stand there with the bubble wand or other toy posed at your mouth, and look right at your child’s eyes. Ask “Blow?” and make a little blow, but don’t blow the toy. Your child may look right at your eyes, may try to blow, may reach out, smile, or make a sound. If your child does any of these, blow! Do this repeatedly, waiting for a communication before many of the blows. But give a couple of “freebies” too, so that this is easy rather than hard, and your child gets plenty of effects to keep her motivated.
- Mealtimes and snack times at the table are great times to practice. Before you put the food on your child’s high chair tray, hold it in front of you and in front of your child, offering it but waiting for your toddler to communicate somehow that he wants it. Give five Cheerios on the high chair tray instead of filling it, so that your child has to request more again and again. Pour a little bit of milk or juice into his cup rather than filling it, so that he has to request more and more. Don’t set out cups of water or snack items for your child to help himself to. Offer all these as choices so that your child needs to request them.

Later in the chapter, we discuss how, over time, you will begin to ask for more elaborate communications—such as using a point instead of just a reach, or using both gesture and a vocalization at the same time. For now, the goal is to help your child develop a talking body by learning to use simple nonverbal communications like eye contact, sounds, reaches, directed smiles, and other body gestures.

*“We used these techniques at mealtime, but it was always tricky to decide exactly how hard to push my son to respond, [since] he was underweight and we didn’t want to reduce his nutritional intake. One helpful suggestion was that we should always provide food or drink on request, but could give a less favored item if he didn’t give any indication of a want or preference. That helped us be consistent, rather than worrying that he would lose weight due to our efforts. You could also use this technique for snacks or desserts instead of mealtime.”*



### **Helpful Tip**

Consider behaviors your child might use when wanting something to happen:

- Wanting your attention: raising arms; looking up at you; making a sound; touching or tapping you; holding up an object to show you
- Wanting something out of reach: pointing to or asking for the object; giving a closed container for you to open; nodding for you to retrieve the object; showing where the object goes; looking at the object and reaching
- Refusing or being “all done” with something: giving an object to you; putting an object on the table or in the container; shaking head; verbalizing “no” or “all done”; throwing the item away (if appropriate), leaving

### **Here are more ideas:**

- Instead of plopping all the bath toys into the tub, offer one or two while naming each, and wait for your child to communicate the request before you hand it to him.
- Instead of having your child’s toys all out and available, organize some of them in clear shoeboxes (with snug lids) on a shelf, and have your child choose a box. Once she gets the closed box, wait for a nonverbal communication that your child needs help to open it. Offer your hand and ask if she needs help.
- Instead of dumping out the pieces of a puzzle all at once, keep the pieces and offer them to your child one at a time as you name each one, or as a choice between two (“Bear or horse?”). Elicit a reach, gaze, or another nonverbal communication for most of them. Name it as your child gets it: “Bear! You wanted bear!” Give a few here and there as freebies when your

child looks at them (“Here’s pig!”) to keep motivation high. Do this when playing with any toys that have multiple pieces.

- When changing your child’s diaper, give her the diaper to hold and then ask for it when it’s time to put it on (hold out your hand and say, “Give me diaper!”). If she doesn’t give it to you, then take it: “Give me diaper. Thank you. Here’s diaper.” When putting your child’s shoes on to go outside, tell your child to sit down on the floor or couch in front of you. Put her shoes and socks between the two of you, and have her hand you each shoe and sock one at a time (help as needed) to put on as you ask for them (“Give me sock,” “Give me shoe”). Narrate as you put each item on, as described in Chapter 4. With dressing, have your child hand you each piece of clothing when you ask for it. Help as needed, and narrate as you go.
- When bathing, ask your child for each hand and each foot. Ask for the shampoo and washcloth. Offer each toy before you give it. For each, name objects as you go, offering choices or help as needed. Doing all these caregiving activities in this way gets your child actively engaged in the activities and gets your child attending and responding to you, rather than being a passive participant in the process.

We have described many ways you can help your child develop a talking body and use her body to communicate, but how should you respond when she does it? With your body *and* your voice. Follow through on your child’s communication—do the action or give the object requested, and narrate! Add some words to describe what the child wanted, or what he or she was doing, or what was happening:

- “You want cereal.”
- “More juice.”
- “Get the bubbles.”
- “Bang bang” (when banging toys).
- “No milk” (when your child refuses).
- “Blow balloon.”
- “Up.”
- “More swing.”
- “Pour water.”

*“My son wasn’t willing to help with dressing or shampooing at first, but using narration while guiding him helped us reach the point where he would participate.”*

In Chapter 13 we discuss in much more detail how to choose your language.

The ideas listed for this step show how many times an hour you can set up an opportunity for your child to communicate with you by using body language. You

might find that your toddler can communicate with you as often as 60 times in an hour of play or caregiving activities—once a minute—if you really slow down and stop handing things over and doing things *to* your child, and instead *involve* your child in the activity and draw out nonverbal communication *from* your child.



### **Activity: Choose Certain Gestures to Teach**

We have been discussing at length how and when you can encourage your child's gestural communication. But which specific gestures are good choices to teach first? In choosing gestures, you will want to consider two issues: (1) what gestures you can easily prompt, shape, and elicit from your child during the teaching/learning phase and (2) what messages the gesture needs to convey.

There are three main types of messages that very young children tend to deliver in the preverbal communication period: desires for social interaction, efforts to control other people's behavior (called "behavior regulation"), and efforts to share attention with other people about interesting objects and events—joint attention. We will hold off discussing joint attention until Chapter 10 and focus now on gestures you can help your child learn to convey her desires for social interaction and behavior regulation.

Young children communicate their desire for social interaction with all kinds of body language. They look intently and smile to invite an interaction or to respond to a fun game. They reach to people they want to play with. They make gestures to cue parents to sing favorite songs, to tickle them, to chase them. They reach for more when their parents start and then stop a social game. They use their voices to call, laugh, or chuckle. They come right up to parents to gain their attention and begin an interaction. They clap, wave bye-bye, give high fives, and make gestures for simple games like peekaboo at parents' request.

In Chapter 5, you worked on developing many of these gestures with your child during all kinds of social activities. You very likely have already helped your child develop gestures like looking, smiling, reaching, and carrying out some gestures as ways of beginning a social game with you or continuing these games when you pause. You have also been working on teaching your child the "arms up" gesture when requesting a pickup or hug. Other communications in this group that are often easy to teach young children with ASD are looking and waving during greetings and high five. We will briefly describe how to go about teaching your child each of these.

- To teach your child to look and wave during greetings, begin by developing a very clear routine with your child for "hi" and "bye." When you go into his room for the first time each morning, and every time you return to him from being away—in another room, on an errand, after a nap—say "Hi!" with a big smile and an exaggerated wave as soon as you see him. Then walk right up to your child and repeat the "hi," smile, and

give a big wave when you are right in front of him and face to face (you'll have to squat down if your child is standing on the floor). Then take your child's arm at the wrist or below and help your child wave as you say, "Hi, Mommy." Do the same thing whenever you are leaving, "Bye-bye." Say, "Bye-bye!" and wave when you are close to and right in front of your child so you can prompt him, and then, as you walk away, turn back and repeat it just before you walk out. Try to find multiple times each day to repeat these greeting routines when you are approaching or leaving your child. You can also cue other people to use the same greeting routines, and even make stuffed animals do these greeting routines. Always help your child respond, with a wave and with your words, "hi" or "bye-bye." After a few days of this, continue your routine, but try to provide less of a prompt when you cue your child to respond. Instead of taking your child's hand and prompting the full wave, try waiting a few seconds and then prompting more from the elbow than from the wrist. Be very consistent with this, offering many practice opportunities a day. It is quite likely that within a month your child will begin to respond to your greetings with a wave, eye contact, and perhaps even the words.

- High five is another gesture that is a good early choice. To teach it, choose a time when your child is sitting facing you and you are at eye level. Offer your open hand to your child, aimed toward one of her hands, saying, "Give me five," and then with your other hand, take your child's hand and slap it gently against your palm. Follow with a tickle and then practice it again a few times. Practice every day, multiple times, providing less help each day than the day before: Instead of operating your child's hand, drop back to her wrist, and then in the next few days drop farther back, to her lower arm. In a week or two you will likely see her responding to your offer of your open hand and your verbal request for "high five" by placing her hand on yours. Once she places her hand on yours without any help, start to practice the gentle slap that goes with high five by playing a kind of two-handed patty cake. This will very likely evolve into a full high five in the next few weeks.

Young child's behavior regulation communications generally have two meanings: requests ("Do this for me") and protests ("I don't want that; no"). You have been focusing on developing clear requests for desired objects and interactions through communicative reaching for several chapters now. A second important request that young children need to communicate is to ask for help.

- You can teach your child to hand you things and look at you to request help. We have already discussed the use of baggies, plastic containers, and other barriers you can place around desired objects, so that your child

needs to hand them to you, and look, to request help in opening them. Other objects that easily support requests for help are windup toys, flashlights with difficult switches, bubbles with tight lids, juice boxes and food containers that need to be opened, and so forth.

In all of these situations, you can offer your child the closed, familiar container, which your child will take but will be unable to open. You then offer your open hand (the “give me” gesture), while you ask, “Help?/Need help? Sure, I’ll help you!” Help your child give it to you and then open it fast and give the object back right away (this is the reinforcer for his gesture). Practice this often, with many materials. As your child becomes skilled at putting the object in your open hand, close your hand so your child has to do more to get your help, by putting it against your closed hand. The next step is to have your hand available but on your lap, so your child has to do more to put the object in your hand. As the last step, hold something else in your hands so your child has to do a full approach and offer to you to request your help. Every time your child makes a help request you say, “Help?/Need help? Sure, I’ll help you!” (or the like) and give help right away. Over the course of this procedure, your child may very well begin to imitate your word “help” while she gives you the object with which she needs help.

- All children need to have some way to communicate “no.” Providing a gesture for “no” may replace crying, throwing, or other unwanted behavior that your child currently uses. Teaching children to shake their head “no” is a rather difficult task until they have mastered facial and gestural imitations. The first protest gesture that most toddlers use is to push unwanted things away. You can easily teach this to your child once your child has a clear requesting gesture for desired objects. Pushing away for “no” is easiest to teach during a meal. The meal should be made up of at least one finger food your child likes a lot and one that she does not like (raw carrots, celery sticks, or green pepper slices work well). Begin by offering your child several bites, one at a time, of a preferred food, like a cracker. (“Want cracker? Yes, you want cracker.”) Wait each time for the reach request before you hand it over. Then, after three or four bites, offer the unwanted food instead of the cracker, in the same way you offered the desired food (“Want carrot?”), moving it toward your child. If your child takes it, wait until she starts to put it down or get rid of it. Then take it back, saying, “No, you don’t want carrot. You want cracker.” And freely give a cracker (“Here’s your cracker”). After a few more bites of the preferred food, offer the carrot again. After enough repetitions of this routine, your child will start to push away the carrot before it gets too close—that is the behavior you are trying to teach. As soon as she starts to push it away, pull it back while saying, “No, you don’t want carrot; you want cracker,” and then freely give the desired food.

Once your child begins to push away unwanted food at mealtimes, you can practice this in toy play as well, occasionally offering an unwanted object (a tissue, an empty small box, etc.) when you are handing toys over one at a time—as you might during a puzzle routine, building block towers, or putting shapes in a shaper sorter—at your child’s reaching request. Teach your child to protest by pushing things away and giving things back to you, always using the “no” script.

The gestures just described are the first ones that we teach in our intervention work, and they provide a very strong initial foundation for communication.

#### **Step 4. Persist**

**Rationale.** With all of these new routines, your child will likely not understand at first what you want, and may fuss or resist because you have changed the way you are doing things. You will help things go smoothly by making it easy for your child to communicate and get what she wants. But persist so that learning occurs.



#### **Activity: Keep It Very Easy for Your Child**

**Here are some ideas for keeping these new routines easy for your child:**

- Look for communications (gaze, reach, sounds) you know your child can easily produce.
- Help your child do what you want him to do (reach, point, raise arms).
- Hand over the desired object or activity really fast after your child communicates, so your child quickly learns that this communication—no matter how small—is powerful. It has big effects and brings rewards.
- Be sure that each of these new routines is leading up to something your child wants, so there is a reward at the end. High chair choices mean food! Pointing to toys on the shelf gets toys! Maybe handing over a diaper at the changing table is followed by a favorite tickle game or by a moving mobile or music to see and hear, or by a favorite toy to hold for a few minutes while the diaper is changed. Get a hands-up at the end of diapering before you lift your child down from the table or up from the floor.
- Once you have had a success, keep repeating the new routines. You are likely to see your child learn your new way pretty quickly, and your child will begin to anticipate the routine, your expectations, and your cues. Over time, you will see your child use more and more nonverbal communications in your routines.



## Step 5. Position Yourself

**Rationale.** When people communicate, they face each other. Especially for fostering eye contact, you must be facing your child, and your face should not be too far away from the child's face. Communicating with your child face to face also makes it much easier for your child to get the idea of directing her eyes, voice, and gestures to you, not just out into space somewhere.

### **Activity: Find Ways to Position Yourself Face to Face with Your Child and Put the Desired Objects between You**

All the ways we have suggested in Chapter 4 for positioning yourself to promote your child's attention to you can be used here. Even for a book activity, try to position yourself in front of your child on the couch, on a bed, or on the floor (with the child in a bean bag chair or sitting with his back against a chair or couch) so that you are an active and communicating partner in the activity, not a faceless book-reading machine. When you are in front of your child with books, and draw your child's attention to pictures with your pointing, words, and sound effects, your child has much more experience of you as the *partner* in the book activity, rather than being a voice from behind and a hand on the book. Your child sees you form the words and sees you gesture, and begins to understand reading as a social rather than a visual activity.

## Summary of Steps 1 through 5

If you have followed along and carried out the preceding activities, you will have found a number of ways to increase your child's nonverbal communication—use of gestures, gaze, and expressions—to communicate his wants, feelings, and thoughts. You will find yourself doing more *with* your child, and less *to or for* your child. As a result, you are probably beginning to see your child use much more body language to communicate spontaneously. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for helping your child develop nonverbal communication—knowledge that will also help your child develop speech and language. If not, try to experiment with the preceding activities until you have experienced some success with each of the statements in the checklist.

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*Activity Checklist: Am I Doing Less So My Child Is Doing More?*

- I know how to wait for my child to communicate; I do this many times a day.
- I have found many opportunities during the day for my child to communicate.

- \_\_\_ I have made communication opportunities for my child during many different play and caregiving routines, and we do these most days.
  - \_\_\_ Once I expect my child to communicate, I know how to persist and to help my child so we usually have success.
  - \_\_\_ I routinely position myself in front of my child, and close to eye level, so it is easy for my child to direct communications to me.
  - \_\_\_ My child is learning how to use his or her body to communicate in many more situations at home than he or she used to.
- 

## ➔➔➔➔ **What You Can Do to Increase Your Child's Understanding of Others' Nonverbal Communication**

Children with autism are often remarkably unaware of the meaning of other people's nonverbal communications. It is not unusual to see a young child with ASD who does not understand the “give me” gesture of an open hand or the meaning of a point. Your child may not understand the significance of an angry or sad facial expression on another person. Sometimes people interpret the child's lack of interest or response to others' expressions as a lack of cooperation, but many children with ASD just do not understand what is being asked. We need to teach young children with autism to pay attention to people and what they are doing and help them understand what others' body language means. Children without communication problems seem to learn this effortlessly. For children with autism, however, we need to throw a spotlight onto other people's body language so it really stands out for them. How can you do that?

Here are three steps you can take:

**Step 1.** Exaggerate your gestures.

**Step 2.** Add predictable steps.

**Step 3.** Provide needed help.

### **Step 1. Exaggerate Your Gestures**

When you are playing with toys with your child, highlight your own gestures in your toy routines, along with your speech. Ask your child to give you pieces, to pick up pieces, or to put them in, by extending your hand for the pieces or pointing to where they go while you speak. Use your hands and body as well as your words to convey this, and then help your child follow through. Use hand and body gestures that are relatively easy for your child to imitate, such as reaches, points, open hands, and pushing away—gestures that can easily be incorporated into your joint activity and sensory social routines.

- Object-based gestures: showing, pointing, giving, putting in/taking out, turning, pushing, crashing, rolling, banging
- Sensory social gestures: showing, pointing, clapping, patting, jumping, creepy fingers, tickling, stomping

Have your child help to set up or clean up an activity or to take the next turn, using your body to communicate this by showing her how, by handing pieces, pointing, using hand gestures. Ham it up! Help your child follow through; be sure your child achieves her goal as soon as she follows through; and give your child lots of praise for following through. All of your routines are vehicles for body language.

### Here are some ideas:

- When dressing, show and label each piece of clothing before you put it on. When you involve your child in helping or giving, use big gestures like holding your hand out for your child to give.
- When diapering, show the diaper and name it before you give it to your child to hold. When you ask for it back, use a big gesture to get it, and a give the child big “thank you” afterward.
- At mealtimes, give your child a few bits of food on the high chair tray, and then point to one for him to eat: “This one—get this one!” Help your child follow your point to get it. If he doesn’t, then next time, give just one and point to that one before your child gets it. That way, your child *has* to be following your point.
- At bath time, ask for a hand or foot to wash by pointing, asking, and holding your hand out. Ask for the bath toys at the end, and point to them to be put away, one at a time.
- During sensory social games, exaggerate the gestures for chase, tickle, swing, spin, “Itsy-Bitsy Spider,” and other songs and finger plays. Get down on eye level, face your child, make a big excited smile, position your hands dramatically, and then start the game with big energy. Help your child anticipate what is going to happen from your face and body posture, and build her excitement and anticipation.

## Step 2. Add Predictable Steps

It will help your child a great deal to understand your gestures in routines if you add routine steps and sequences to the play and care routines, and then use a gesture or other nonverbal action to cue your child to take the next step. Carry out your activities or games in predictable steps, repeating the routine in

step-like fashion a few times in a row, so that your child understands the steps of the routine and can anticipate what is next. Then the next time you repeat the sequence, pause at one of the steps, use an exaggerated gesture, and wait for a response.

*Lindee has built a very predictable routine around bubbles for her 18-month-old son, Anthony. The bubbles sit on a bookshelf above Anthony's reach, along with other favorite toys.*

**Setup:** *First (Step 1), Lindee says, "Want to play?" while she offers her hand. He takes it, and they walk together over to the bookshelf. Step 2: Then she turns to face him, and she waits for him to extend his arms and look at her for a pickup. If he does this, she says, "You want up," and picks him up. If he doesn't, she extends her arms and says, "Want up?" Then she waits for his arms and eyes before she lifts. Step 3: She lifts him toward the shelf, and he reaches towards the bubbles. Step 4: With her free hand she picks up the bubbles, saying, "You want bubbles! Here are the bubbles," and hands them to him. She then puts him down. Step 5: He tries to open the bubbles but cannot, and she extends her hand: "Need help?" He looks at her and puts the bubbles in her hand. Step 6: "Open. Open bubbles," she says as she opens them. She pulls out the wand and positions herself to blow.*

**Theme:** *Lindee looks right at Anthony's eyes, says, "Blow bubbles?", and makes a little blowing gesture with her mouth. Step 7: Anthony looks directly at her, smiles, and blows. She immediately blows a stream of bubbles for him. He smiles, reaches for the bubbles, and bats them.*

**Variation:** *Step 8: Lindee catches a big bubble with the wand, holds it out to Anthony, and says "Pop?" He points his finger and pops the bubble as she says "pop." Step 9: She extends her finger and pops another as he watches, which he then imitates, poking while she says "pop." Step 10: The bubbles are all done, and Anthony looks around, sees the bubble container right there, and picks it up. He hands it to Lindee with eye contact, and the process begins again.*

Look at this episode. It takes 2–3 minutes, and inside this routine are 10 different communicative steps. Anthony produces one or more nonverbal communications inside each step, several each minute. For a child who 3 weeks ago produced absolutely no communicative gestures, this is a huge transformation. And the set routine that Lindee uses to do this simple game helps Anthony anticipate each next action and cue her for it. He is now an active communicative partner, fully engaged and co-constructing each step of this simple routine. If a simple bubble routine can foster so many communications, imagine how much can be done with a more elaborate routine like a meal or a puzzle.

**Here are some examples of talking body signals you could use throughout your interactive routines during the six target activities** (toy or other object play, social play, meals, caregiving, book activities, and household chores):

- Use a hand or body movement to “ask” whether your child would like to continue a song or game.
- Use eye contact and an expectant look to “ask” whether your child would like to receive or take an object, cup, or food item.
- Use a sound effect to cue the child that you are about to create an action with an object.
- Smile or laugh and wiggle your fingers to indicate that you are about to tickle your child.
- Extend your hand to indicate that you are about to play a physical game.
- Mimic the blow gesture to indicate that you are going to blow bubbles or blow up a balloon.

The example with Lindee and Anthony illustrates one of the reasons we place such importance on using the structure of joint activities for play and for care routines. It is much easier for your child to understand what you are indicating and saying if she already knows what will happen next. So, as much as you can in all your daily child routines, think about a consistent setup, theme, variation, and closing. This is every bit as important for bathing, diapering, dressing, meals, and so forth as it is for object and social play. If you need a reminder, go back to Chapter 6 and review the section on joint activity routines.

### **Step 3. Provide Needed Help**

An effective way to teach your child to “ask” for help, by giving materials to you or by looking at you for help, is to use something that is a little too difficult for your child to do alone. While you are providing the help your child needs, you will also be using different gestures to help your child learn to understand non-verbal communication.

#### **Here are some possibilities:**

- For a child who likes puzzles, you could use a puzzle that’s a little too difficult for your child to complete alone. As you and your child are completing the puzzle together, *point* to the holes for each of the pieces, while saying “It goes here! Here!” When your child follows your point, then the pieces go in. Voilà—there is the reward for noticing and following your point!
- You might put the puzzle pieces for a favorite puzzle in a plastic container or bag that your child cannot open himself. Give him the puzzle and container of pieces, and wait for him to need your help. When your child

realizes he can't open it by himself, ask if he needs help, *using an open hand to request it* along with words. Then, when he puts it in your hand, open it and give it right back. His reward for responding to your open hand and making the request is getting access to the pieces.

- You might start a windup toy that your child loves to watch. Don't wind it up too much! When it runs out, wait to see what your child does. She may look at you or give it to you. If so, say, "You want more?" as you wind it up and do it again. If not, ask your child to give it to you by using an *outstretched hand* and words. Then, as soon as your child gives it to you (even if you need to help), wind it up fast and get it going again.

In addition to these activities in which you are providing help, sensory social routines can be used to teach children the meaning of nonverbal communication. When you are playing games like chase/"I'm gonna get you," airplane,

"Ring-around-the-Rosy," pattycake, or peekaboo, *highlight your expressions, gestures, and body movements*, so that your child learns the relationships between your movements and the game. Your movements and words will "label" the game for your child. Playing games and performing caregiving activities in a kind of ritualized way—the joint activity structure—with toys, with sensory social routines, with diapering/dressing/bathing/bedtime routines, and with mealtime routines will help your child learn to associate your gestures, facial expressions, and words with the routines. You are teaching your child how to read and interpret the meaning of your face, gestures, body movements, and words.



### Helpful Tip

Just as with increasing your child's nonverbal communication to you, increasing your child's understanding of your nonverbal communication requires that you create lots of practice opportunities, persist, and position yourself to get your child's attention.

Tape notes or reminders to yourself in the areas where you provide your child's care and play—over the changing table, over the bathtub, on the kitchen table, by the child's bed, on the wall by the play areas—to remind you to set up routines and gestures.

## ▶▶▶▶ Planning Activities to Increase Nonverbal Communication

It might help you get into the swing of incorporating all the preceding steps into your daily routines if you use the two forms discussed in this section to plan. First, think of an object-focused joint activity and a sensory social routine

that your child really enjoys doing with you. Imagine going through the steps and sequences of that routine. What gesture could your child use to request these preferred actions, movements, or consequences from you? Look at the two examples in the form on pages 160–161, and then try filling out a few more activities to practice with your child this week. Make extra copies of the form to record information about additional activities besides those listed on the left, if you like.

For some parents, it is helpful to dissect the day into the six types of play and caregiving activities or routines that occur throughout the day, and then to break down the joint activity steps that each routine involves. When you do this, you have a framework for thinking through the different gestures, actions, facial expressions, and words that go with those steps. The form on pages 162–163 provides you with some examples that other parents have developed. Try one or more of these out, varying the steps to fit your own home and materials. Be sure to narrate each step, provide clear gesture cues, and cue your child to take some active role with every step. Next, try writing out a “script” for yourself for an activity in one of the form’s blank rows. Then try out the script during the activity, and see if it helps you break down the activity into simple steps that each contain a simple narration and a nonverbal communication for you and for your child (see the case example of Lindee, Anthony, and the bubbles, above). You may be surprised by how quickly your child begins to participate in each step and how much more your child begins to communicate with his or her body.

If you have followed along and carried out the preceding activities, you will have found a number of ways to increase your child’s awareness and understanding of your nonverbal communication—your use of gestures, gaze, and expressions. You will see your child’s understanding in the gestures, sounds, and looks he uses to respond to you. See if you agree with most of the statements in the following checklist. If so, you are now armed with important skills for helping your child learn to understand nonverbal communication—knowledge that will also help your child learn to understand and develop speech and language. If you do not feel successful yet, try to experiment with the preceding activities until you have experienced some success with each of the statements in the checklist.

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*Activity Checklist: Am I Helping My Child Learn to Read  
My Body Language?*

- \_\_\_\_\_ I have found many opportunities during the day to highlight my body language for my child.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have created gestural communication opportunities with my child during many different play and caregiving routines, and we do these most days.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When my child uses a nonverbal cue (no matter how small), I try to

follow through, so my child will learn that he or she can talk with the body to get what's desired.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I have figured out ways of using my own body to communicate during play, and I exaggerate my expressions and gestures so my child will notice them.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ When I communicate to my child by using body language and simple words, I know how to persist and to help my child respond so we usually have success.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ I routinely position myself in front of my child, and close to eye level, so it is easy for my child to see my communications.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ My child is learning how to "read" my body language in many more situations at home than he or she used to.
- 

**What if your child doesn't start signaling you in desirable ways?** *Bethany's mother came into a parent coaching session with this concern: "The only messages Bethany communicates to me when I try to wait for a signal are crying and screaming. She tries to grab an object as soon as it is visible, so I can't figure out how to hold it back so she can provide me with a gesture. What should I do?"*

*The therapist knew Bethany well enough to know that she did not like change. The therapist suggested that, rather than holding objects back, the mother try giving her daughter items in containers, plastic zipper bags, or jars that she can hold on to but cannot open. This way Bethany could have some control over the object, but would still have to signal that she needed help. To help Bethany request help with a gesture rather than by crying, her mother needed to have her hands right in front of Bethany's so she could quickly ask her if she needed help, and then open it quickly for Bethany and give the bag right back to her before Bethany would have a chance to start crying.*

*A second strategy the mother began to use was to use lots of baggies—just two or three crackers in each (for snacks), one toy in each (for toy play with little objects), one color in each (for crayons)—in activities when there were lots of chances to practice. Having this happen frequently also helped Bethany get used to the new demand and get over crying. This took some time, but her mother knew from experience that Bethany did best at learning new things when they were repeated frequently. Practice over time developed the skill into an automatic, independent behavior. And there was little frustration, since Bethany reached her goal quickly and easily—getting the item out of the container/baggie when she handed it to her mother.*

*The mother also tried a suggestion we have discussed above: She offered Bethany something she liked before she started to fuss. She held out a preferred toy, as well as a nonpreferred toy, slightly out of reach. When Bethany reached for the preferred toy, her mom quickly gave it to her, so she could learn that she could reach for things instead of only fussing when she wanted something.*



## Planning Activities to Encourage Nonverbal Communication

Activity	My child likes to:	I can join by:	My child can request with his or her body by:	The body language I am waiting to respond to is:
Toy or other object play Trains	Roll the trains back and forth	Handing trains for him to roll Handing tracks for him to connect and roll the trains back and forth on Rolling another train back and forth	Handing me the box of trains he cannot open Pointing to which train he would like to have Telling me which color train he would like to have Giving me a track that he cannot connect on his own Pointing to or telling me where to lay a track down Giving me a train when he wants mine	Giving me a train or track Pointing to a train or track Saying a word while looking at me
	Hear the "choo-choo sound"	Making "choo-choo" sound while rolling train back and forth or crashing my train into his	Making a "choo-choo" sound, looking at me, doing both, or crashing or moving his train near mine	Making a sound with or without looking at me Copying me with his train
Social play Tickle	Have her legs and tummy tickled	Tickling her legs and tummy	Scotting her body closer to my hands to be tickled Saying "tickle" or the name of a body part to tickle Showing me her tummy Raising her legs Looking at me Looking and laughing/smiling at me	Body movement directed toward me Saying a word while looking at me Looking at me Looking and laughing/smiling at me

(cont.)

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**Planning Activities to Encourage Nonverbal Communication** (cont.)

Activity	My child likes to:	I can join by:	My child can request with his or her body by:	The body language I am waiting to respond to is:
Meals				
Caregiving (bathing/ dressing/ changing/ bedtime)				
Book activities				
Household chores				

## Breaking Down Activities into Nonverbal Communication Steps

Daily routine	Steps	Talking body options
<p>Caregiving (bathing/dressing/changing/bedtime) Getting dressed</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Getting clothes ready to put on</li> <li>2. Putting on shirt</li> <li>3. Putting on pants</li> <li>4. Fastening buttons or zippers</li> <li>5. Putting on socks and shoes</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Handing clothes to caregiver to be put on, one by one, on request</li> <li>2. Pulling shirt down over head, raising each arm for shirt, pulling down over belly</li> <li>3. Standing up on instruction, lifting each leg for pants, helping pull over leg, helping pull up over hips</li> <li>4. Pointing to buttons or zippers or pulling them through when they are almost finished</li> <li>5. Sitting down on instruction, handing over each piece, and raising foot for each sock/shoe to be put on, helping pull sock up or push shoe on, standing up on instruction at end</li> </ol>
<p>Household chores Cleaning up dirty clothes</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Picking up clothes</li> <li>2. Opening hamper</li> <li>3. Throwing clothes into hamper</li> <li>4. Closing hamper</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Picking up requested dirty clothes from floor and carrying to hamper or handing to caregiver</li> <li>2. Vocalizing for hamper to be opened</li> <li>3. Vocalizing or pointing to which item to be thrown into hamper from choice of two</li> <li>4. Following gestural or verbal instruction to close hamper</li> </ol>
<p>Toy or other object play</p>		

(cont.)

**Breaking Down Activities into Nonverbal Communication Steps** (cont.)

Daily routine	Steps	Talking body options
Social play		
Meals		
Outdoor play		
Book activities		

**How do you build on success?** *For Robert, who learned how to gesture to get items from a bag very quickly, his dad “upped the ante” and used the same format to teach additional gestures. Robert’s father added a second expectation: When he opened the bag upon Robert’s physical request, he held up the two objects inside and offered them to Robert, who needed to point to the one he wanted. Robert reached for the desired object, and his dad said, “Point,” while modeling a point and then shaping Robert’s hand to a point as he touched the object. As soon as Robert touched the object with his point, his father gave it to him.*

## Chapter Summary

Our first way of communicating is with our bodies and facial expressions. Long before speech emerges, most young children learn that people use body signals to send messages back and forth. They become quite skilled at communicating many kinds of messages nonverbally, before they can say their first words. Speech develops later, out of an elaborate nonverbal communication system. As you help your child with autism learn to use his or her body, eyes, and voice to send and understand simple communications, you will gradually continue to add expectations and opportunities for gestural communication, starting with easy or familiar gestures for your child to use and slowly teaching some new ones. You are teaching your child a critical life lesson about how we communicate and interact with one another, which is not by grabbing, screaming, crying, or manipulating bodies until a need is met. Instead, we send messages to others about what we want, feel, and want to share, and we attend to their messages as well. Our messages are about the thoughts, feelings, desires, and needs that motivate us to approach, engage, and converse with others, and we do this through our facial expressions, gestures, postures, eye contact, and finally words. Your child’s spoken language will develop out of this framework.



## **Refrigerator List**

***Goal: To provide you with ways to help your young child with autism learn to express desires, feelings, and interests using body language and to understand your body language***

**Steps:**

- ✓ **Do less so your child will do more!**
- ✓ **Pause and wait—for a gesture, eye contact, or a vocalization.**
- ✓ **Add gestures to steps of joint activities during play and caregiving routines.**
- ✓ **Exaggerate facial expressions and gestures during play and caregiving.**
- ✓ **Divide up materials to practice “give me” gestures during play.**
- ✓ **Build in barriers so your child needs help.**
- ✓ **Point to objects and pictures, and wait for your child to follow.**
- ✓ **Put simple words to your child’s body language and to yours!**
- ✓ **Build steps for communication exchanges into key activities—social and toy/object play, meals, caregiving (bathing/dressing/changing/bedtime), and household chores.**

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