TURNING PAGES, BUILDING FUTURES

LEARNING WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

Join Before You Teach

What to try when your child's attention is always somewhere else.

Short on time? Jump to page 3 for the one-page Joining Planner.

Start Here

This resource is for the child who is happily absorbed in their toys, the one who doesn't always respond when you speak, or the toddler who doesn't look up when you walk into the room — and for the parent who has started to feel like part of the furniture.

The big idea: Your child's attention is already pointed at something. Join it - don't compete with it.

Attention isn't taken from one thing and handed to another; it's shared. Objects and screens are easier for many young children to attend to than faces are - that's information about where learning can start, not a problem to fix. When you join what your child is already doing, you step inside their attention instead of asking them to step out of it, and every look, laugh, and turn that follows is a chance for learning.

Try This: Six ways to join what your child is already doing

Notice what already holds their attention

Try: For the next few days, watch what your child does when nothing is required of them - which toys, sounds, games, and movements pull them in. You're not hunting for teaching materials. You're making a list of the things your child already says yes to.

Get close and get on their level

Try: Sit, kneel, or lie down so your face is easy to see, and your hands are in reach - close enough to hand over a toy, at or below your child's eye line. Communication lives in faces: the glances, the expressions, the way a mouth shapes words. Your child learns how it's done by watching yours.

Turn down the noise

Try: Keep one or two toys out and put the rest away. Screens off unless someone is really watching them. If the room is busy, move somewhere quieter. The goal is to reduce competing distractions. You're not banning anything - just giving your child fewer reasons to look somewhere else.

Say what you see

Try: Short phrases, no questions, no quizzes. "It's so tall!" "Crash!" "Going fast!" Describing your child's play - without interrupting or redirecting it - makes words meaningful and keeps you inside the fun.

Make it easier to keep playing

Try: Notice what your child is trying to do, then help make it happen in a way they can see. Deliver the out-of-reach piece, rewind the stopped toy, steady the wobbly tower, right where they can see you. Being the one who makes things happen gives your child a reason to notice you.

Become their twin

Try: For a few minutes, follow your child's lead and gently imitate their play when it feels comfortable and appropriate. Roll when they roll, bang when they bang, crash when they crash. Use their toy or an identical one, so nobody has to share. From across the room, it may look like nothing is happening. From your child's chair, someone just climbed into their world — and that's the whole trick.

You don't need all six. Pick one routine your child already loves - bath time, snack, blocks on the floor - and join it for a few minutes a day. Joining comes first; teaching comes second.

What to look for

You don't need to collect formal data to notice what, if anything, changes. Over a week or two, watch for:

- ☐ Your child looking at you, or glancing your way, during the activity
- ☐ Continuing the activity a little longer than usual
- ☐ Offering you something or bringing a toy to share an activity
- ☐ Copying something you did - or a sound you made
- ☐ Smiling, laughing, or waiting for you to do your part again

One small change is information - and a place to build from.

If it doesn't work...

If joining isn't landing yet, that is not a verdict on your child - it is information. Try:

- Start with watching only - for a few days, sit nearby, say what you see, and touch nothing
- If your child protests when you touch the toys, use a second set of your own instead of sharing theirs
- If your child leans away or turns their head, give a little more space - close enough to reach the toys is far enough
- If toys don't pull them in, watch for sounds and movement - clapping, spinning, bouncing - and join those instead
- If a sibling takes over the play, give each child their own set of materials, or have siblings join in turns
- If it feels awkward to you, start with five minutes in one routine - it gets easier for both of you with practice, and awkward is not the same as wrong

Remember: *You don't have to make your child look at you. Join what they already love, and looking at you becomes their idea.*

Want more practical ideas?

Explore more PAGE resources for communication, learning, participation, independence, and everyday routines. Explore PAGE Resources → Or, if you'd like occasional practical ideas delivered by email, **join the PAGE list at pageaba.com.**

Need help figuring out what to try?

Every child is different. If you're trying strategies at home and aren't sure what to change, PAGE can help you identify practical, individualized ways to support learning, communication, participation, and independence in everyday life. **Learn more or schedule a consultation at pageaba.com.**

LEARNING WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

The Joining Planner

Choose one routine your child already enjoys. Join it for a few minutes. Notice what happens.

The routine I'll join:

What my child already loves about it:

How I'll join in (circle one to start):

- **Get down on their level, face to face**
- **Say what I see, without questions**
- **Copy their play with the same toy or my own set**
- **Copy their sounds and silly noises too**
- **Hand things over one at a time**
- **Help make it happen, where they can see me**
- **Pause and wait for them to look at me**

What I noticed:

- **What did my child do?**

- **What did I do that seemed to help — or make no difference?**

This is a note to yourself, not a worksheet anyone will grade.

Pick one routine. Join first. Notice what happens. There is no required response. Looking, smiling, talking, or joining in are all possibilities — and your child may simply continue playing.