In this article, 4 Steps to Promote Joint Activity Routines between Children, Parents During COVID-19, published in Special Ed Connection, Nov. 4, 2020, Lauren Franz, MBChB, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development, provides advice to therapists who coach parents to build joint activity routines. These routines are a key component used in the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM), a play-based, relationship-focused early intervention for young children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Visit the Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development website at Autismenter.Duke.edu to access a variety of helpful resources, including the Online Caregiver-coaching Modules for the Early Start Denver Model.

4 steps to promote joint activity routines between children, parents during COVID-19

Parents who struggle to connect with their child with autism may be showing heightened frustration because of the pandemic. They may not be able to engage their child in activities despite continuing to stay at home.

But parents can work on building joint activity routines, or routines that involve joint engagement and a joint positive affect, with you remotely, said Lauren Franz, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Duke Center for Autism and Brain Development in Durham, N.C. Building such routines will help ensure you and the parents have a framework to teach the child new skills.

"We can't teach until we join," Franz said. "To support a child's social-communication growth, we have to think about how to join with the child first. What joint activity routines are we already engaging in with the child and what is motivating for the child?"

Follow these tips to promote joint activity routines between parents and young children with autism:

1. **Set up the activity.** Find out what motivates the child and suggest the parent offer the child a choice of snacks or toys or whatever the child likes to engage with to build toward joint attention between the child and parent. Franz said. For example, the parent can give the child a choice of an apple or a granola bar.

To raise the parent's likelihood of success, suggest he follow the child's lead. "It's OK for this to be on the child's terms," she said. So the parent can track the child's focus of attention and join the child in an activity already in progress. Also ensure the parent is face-to-face with the child and close enough to touch her, Franz said. At the same time, ensure the parent recognizes signals that he is too close for the child's comfort.

Suggest the parent remove any other background noise that may compete for the child's attention. Franz said. Have the parent use simple words and short sentences to communicate.

Also, advise the parent against taking away something from the child to try to join the activity. Franz said. Find another way to join, she said. For example, if a child is creating the alphabet out of toy trains, rather than take a train to add to a letter, the parent can draw the letter on a piece of paper, she said. This way the parent isn't getting in the child's way or taking materials away from her. You can work over time toward the goal of using the trains to make letters together, but you have to work up to that.
2. Choose a theme for the activity. Help the parent determine the point of the activity or what’s going to happen as she tries to join an activity with her child, Franz said. For example, it may be for the parent and child to eat a granola bar together.

3. Devise variations. To promote flexibility in the child, come up with slight changes to the activity, Franz said. These may include adding to the activity, such as adding a second snack into the mix, or changing how often you take turns eating pieces of the granola bar. “Think about what you can do to switch it up,” she said. Incorporating different words to explain what is going on in the activity is another option, Franz said. But help parents recognize that the child may not be ready to vary the activity and may become disengaged in the theme altogether; it may take some time to extend the activity and for the child to be more open to variation.

4. Close the activity. Naturally end the activity to help the child transition to the next one, Franz said. For example, encourage the parent to support the child putting the wrapper for the granola bar into the trash can. It is important to recognize when the child is done or has lost motivation to do the activity and it is time to move on to something else.

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