

Following the Child's Lead

About this strategy

In the absence of attention, any attempt at learning is missed, and any attempt at relating is doomed to failure. By attention, we refer to the ability to recognize the presence of a partner, to be in a relationship with that partner, ready for interaction and learning.

Follow the child's motivation is one of the common components of all natural behavioral interventions that take into account the child's development. This strategy involves constantly observing the child's current interest, letting the child lead the interaction, adopting more of a listener role, providing space, and allowing the child to take on the role of a leader in interactions where they can do so.

In this type of interaction, the child will be the one to make the first move, and the adult will be the one to follow. The adult will learn to observe what the child is doing, what captures their attention, how they communicate (sometimes at the level of looks, gestures, body movements, vocalizations), and what they are trying to communicate.

Once these communication intentions are observed, the adult immediately responds in a way that supports the child's initiative. For example, the adult describes things that capture the child's attention, using language that takes into account the child's language development level, helps the child, honors their requests, shares attention and emotions, imitates their vocalizations or appropriate actions that the child performs with objects or their body (this mirroring is also called "contingent imitation" or "reciprocal imitation").

Contingent imitation is another common component of natural approaches developed for early intervention. It involves a kind of turn-taking interaction, where the adult imitates the child's behaviors during face-to-face games. This mode of interaction is considered the foundation of social learning.

Follow the child's lead is a strategy that builds the framework for a reciprocal interaction.

What benefits does this strategy bring?

- Increases the frequency and duration of gaze towards the adult.
- Boosts the frequency of joint attention behaviors: referential looks (looks towards the interacting adult and what they are doing - dyadic relationship - or towards the adult, an object, and back to the adult - triadic relationship), gaze following (following the adult's gaze in the direction they are looking), pointing, and showing (the child points or shows to share attention on an event with the adult).
- Significantly enhances the level of engagement of children with autism in play interactions with adults.
- Encourages the physical proximity of the child to the partner.

- Increases the frequency and duration of object manipulation when toys are involved in the interaction between the two.
- Boosts the child's communication initiations.
- Prolongs the duration of interactions between children and adults.
- Functions as a "social glue" because it helps the child become aware of the presence of another partner by capturing their attention.
- Prepares the child to imitate the partner and teaches the child about reciprocity.
- Reduces the likelihood of problematic behaviors emerging.

Here are the steps involved in implementing this strategy:

1. Select interesting materials and activities for the child.

When preparing activities to practice this strategy, the adult chooses games or routines in which the child has previously shown interest and enjoyment. The selection is guided by questions such as "Which activities does my child take the initiative in, where they act, propose, and are motivated?" "What are the activities or moments of the day where I could give them space to be a leader?" "How does he like to play?" "So, what specific materials do I need?"

2. Choose materials and actions at the child's developmental level.

Prepare for each activity and possible options to enrich the environment, inspiring the child to initiate new actions. For example, if my child likes clay and I've often noticed that he likes to tear, shape, and cut it, in addition to clay, I can prepare options such as other materials that can be related to clay and are at the same complexity level. For instance, I can bring toothpicks to leave marks, various stamps, a toy grinder, small animals to press into the clay, etc. The purpose of these extra materials is not for the adult to use them in a directive manner ("Look, make marks like this!", "Press with the stamp!"), but to extend the duration of interaction if these objects inspire the child to initiate new actions with them.

3. Eliminate potential competitors and manage distractions.

In preparation, the adult tries to choose an interaction space that allows the child to stand out. They will rely on previous experiences with the child to decide what modifications to make in the environment so that the child is not distracted by other stimuli. For example, if the presence of a noisy environment usually distracts the child a lot, they will try the strategy in a place where there are no other people at first. If the presence of many toys makes the child run around and quickly switch from one toy to another without performing a concrete action, then the adult may decide to modify the space. If the TV being on in the room captures the child's attention completely, they may decide to interact when the TV is off. Maintain this kind of analysis throughout the entire interaction.

Always pay attention to things that capture the child's attention and how they interfere or not with the purpose of the strategy. Additionally, in organizing the environment, the adult will consider the child's state so that they are not under or overstimulated. Regarding visual, auditory, and sensory stimuli, the adult chooses and modifies their placement in the environment so that the child can participate optimally in activities.

4. Face the child at their eye level.

The adult will try, as much as possible, to always face the child when interacting with them, whether they are playing, at the table, in the park, at the store, during bath time, etc. Sometimes, the adult can sit next to the child (for example, if imitating their drawing, looking at a book together, etc.). The adult will maintain a distance of about an arm's length from the child (enough to touch them) and will lower themselves to the child's eye level. These positioning details help the child notice the presence of the adult more easily. Additionally, the adult will always consider the feedback communicated by the child regarding the distance. If the child shows signs of discomfort, the adult will increase the distance slightly. The adult's position should convey that they are available, receptive, but not dominating or intrusive.

5. Avoid questions and instructions.

Throughout the interaction, the adult will not make demands on the child, will not be directive, and will not take the initiative by modeling steps. The adult will maintain the role of an observer who pays attention to the child's initiatives and follows them.

6. Observe the activity the child engages in, the actions they take, how they communicate, and join them in play.

After the child chooses an activity, the adult joins them instead of redirecting them to another concern. Observe how the child acts. Notice what captures their attention. Observe how they communicate. Some children communicate using body movements (e.g., moving away, getting closer, running), actions with objects (e.g., putting a toy back in place), gazes (e.g., looking at a partner, looking at a motivating toy), gestures (e.g., nodding in a sign of NO, pushing away an unwanted object, pointing to a desired object, showing something to a partner to attract attention), sounds or words, emotional states (e.g., smiling, frowning, starting to cry). Maintain this role of an observer throughout the entire interaction.

7. Interpret the meaning of the child's gazes, facial expressions, gestures, actions (body), and words.

Once the ways in which the child communicates are observed, however subtle, the adult seeks to understand what the child is trying to convey. What is the intention behind these communication signals? What needs do they correspond to? What do these signals symbolize? The adult actively listens. This conveys to the child: I am here, I am interested in you, I see what you are doing. The adult will later choose the appropriate way to respond based on these interpretations.

8. Provide assistance to the child to fulfill their ideas.

When the adult observes that the child needs help, they offer support.

9. Imitate the child's gestures, facial expressions, physical movements, and actions with objects.

The adult takes on these forms of behavior and precisely imitates them within a maximum of 3 seconds from the moment the child emitted them. Mirror these behaviors as faithfully as possible (e.g., mimic the intensity with which the child performs them). The adult only imitates appropriate behaviors of the child, not problematic behaviors.

10. Imitate in the child's visual field.

To increase the chances of being noticed, the adult mimics the child's behaviors within their sphere of attention.

11. Narrate the actions they do together.

The adult describes in words the action that both he and the child are doing, even at the moment the action is happening, to model language and emphasize the correspondence between them and the child.

12. Comment on what is in the child's line of sight.

When the adult observes that something attracts the child's attention, they point to that detail and precisely describe the element that captures the child's attention. For example, if the child is looking at an elephant drawn on a cube, the adult will not say "cube" but will say "elephant" and point to that image.

13. Use language at the child's developmental level.

The adult identifies the child's level of language development. How many words does the child spontaneously use? The adult will then speak at the same level of language development, adding one word. For example, if the child is not yet speaking, the adult will speak with one word or use specific sounds. If the child spontaneously speaks with two words, the adult will use three words in interaction.

14. Expand the child's communications.

When the child uses words during interaction, the adult imitates and expands by adding another word (especially valid for children who are early in language development). For example, if the child says "car," the adult expands it to "green car." If the child says "Masha," the adult says "Masha fell." For children with an advanced level of language development who engage in symbolic play, the adult will have responses that correspond to the role assigned by the child. For example, if the child initiates a doctor role-play, where they take on the role of the patient and the adult is the doctor, the adult's responses will not imitate what the child says but will take into account the child's initiatives (if the child says "My head hurts," the adult may say, "I think you have a fever").

15. Be available, sensitive, enthusiastic, not persistent.

The adult is always attentive to the child's state. Some children need a little time to withdraw into play on their own. The adult can wait a few seconds for them to regulate themselves and return to interaction, even if they sometimes retreat into self-stimulation. If the child doesn't come back, the adult can go back to them, trying to join them. When the child is not engaged at all, the adult employs strategies to regain the child's participation (for example: using social routines, bringing other play options, introducing other activities).

20. Balance turns by responding to each initiation with a single action.

The adult tries to participate equally with the child in the interaction. After each turn of the child, the adult takes their turn (where the adult can choose a specific type of response). Immediately after completing their turn, the adult leaves space for the child to have a chance to communicate again (through gazes, emotions, actions, gestures, words). This promotes spontaneity and initiation, creating an interaction based on turn-taking between the two.

21. Consistently apply rules in interaction with the child.

The fact that the procedure follows the child's motivation does not exclude the interaction being governed by rules. These rules are established by the entire team, based on the particular case of each child. The adult helps the child adhere to these rules, using behavioral principles for behavior management. Here are a few examples of rules: the adult and child play with materials in a clearly defined area (e.g., within the boundaries of the carpet), the child does not snatch toys from the adult's hand, the child manipulates objects without hitting them, etc.