# Supporting Parents to Help Toddlers With Autism Risk Make Social Connections

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*When Michael received a diagnosis of autism at age 24 months, his family was referred to an autism clinic. There, he received intensive, highly structured center-based individual therapy for 20 hr each week, and his parents were asked to continue the same program at home for an additional 10 hr weekly. The intervention focused on imitating sounds, following simple commands, and learning basic concepts such as color, number, size, and shape. Michael's mother, Mia, said that she wanted the very best for Michael and was willing to devote time to help him at home. However, she and her husband, Antonio, decided to explore what they described as more "child friendly" options that addressed Michael's interaction skills, their main area of concern. They ended their search with Brittany, an early interventionist who served families of infants and toddlers with a range of developmental concerns. Because of work schedules, the family agreed that Mia would attend weekly visits with Brittany, and then she would share the information with Antonio and Antonio's mother, who often provided child care for Michael. Mia told Brittany that Michael could make his needs known but was not yet using verbal language, and he seemed to be in his own world most of the time. So, when asked about her family's priorities, Mia said that they wanted Michael to become more interactive at home, which she hoped would help him to be motivated to talk.*

*Brittany felt a heavy responsibility and had a host of questions. What were Michael's most pressing needs, and what outcomes should be targeted to meet them? Her usual practice was to help families integrate developmentally appropriate activities into everyday interactions rather than to deliver formal instruction, but this seemed very different from Michael's program at*

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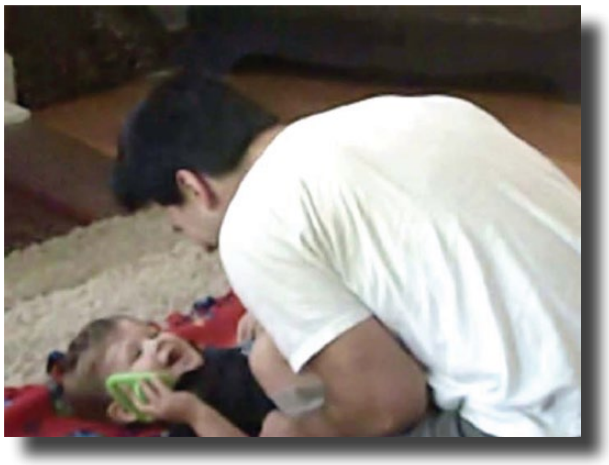
> “toddlers who are on the autism spectrum have more trouble communicating nonverbally for social than for instrumental purposes.”

*the autism center. Should she just follow that program but at a lower intensity level or trust her instincts by adapting her usual practice?*

Early interventionists (EIs) who work with families of toddlers with early signs of autism often face questions similar to Brittany's. The purpose of this article is to help EIs think through the "what" and the "how" of early intervention for toddlers with social communication difficulties, even if they have not yet received a diagnosis. What is most important for toddlers and families to learn? How can interventionists provide families with the tools to make good decisions in everyday interactions with their toddlers—decisions that support the most important goals?

## What Is Most Important for Toddlers With Autism to Learn?

Brittany found a starting point for planning Michael's intervention focus in the recently revised *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) diagnostic criteria. The criteria identify two primary areas of concern for individuals across the autism spectrum: social communication and repetitive and restrictive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Social communication difficulties become evident during the toddler period, but repetitive and restrictive behaviors may not be established until somewhat later.



Research is clear on how social communication usually develops and that it takes a different path for toddlers on the autism spectrum. Typically, very young infants begin focusing on their parents' faces, but 12-month-olds who are later found to be on the autism spectrum spend less time looking at others' faces (Jones & Ami, 2013; Palomo, Belinchon, & Ozonoff, 2006). By the middle of the second year, typically developing toddlers reliably engage in joint attention (described below), but those who will be diagnosed with autism have more difficulty with this early form of social communication (Adamson, Deckner, & Bakeman, 2010). Importantly, joint attention is a foundational milestone; when it appears, verbal language usually soon follows (Mundy, Sigman, & Kasari, 1990).

As a social form of preverbal communication, joint attention is a way of "commenting" or exchanging looks between an object and a partner solely to share attention about the object (Mundy, Sigman, Ungerer, & Sherman, 1986). Typically developing toddlers frequently exchange looks between objects and communication partners for the purpose of having fun and being social as well as for "instrumental" purposes such as

> “the most important intervention focus for toddlers with early signs of autism is social communication.”

requesting or following directions (Mundy & Stella, 2000). In instrumentally focused interaction, a partner uses the other as an “instrument” to meet one’s wants or needs, while social interaction is focused on the interaction for its own sake. However, toddlers who are on the autism spectrum have more trouble communicating nonverbally for *social* than for *instrumental* purposes. As an example, they may have no difficulty looking at a parent while pointing to request a desired object but have trouble doing so just for the purpose of sharing something interesting.

When infants and toddlers engage in joint attention, it can take two forms. They *respond* to parents’ joint attention overtures by exchanging looks between the parent’s face and an object the parent is showing them or, when children are the ones doing the showing, they are *initiating* joint attention. Although smiling sometimes occurs in nonsocial situations, if both partners are smiling while looking at each other’s faces, it is often a good sign that they are engaging in joint attention for the pleasure of social sharing rather than interacting for the purpose of requesting or following directions.

Research findings on repetitive behavior and restrictive interests in very young children with autism are less clear than are findings on social communication. (Recall the distinction between “instrumental” and “social” above to understand the idea of social communication.) One reason for this is that typically developing toddlers often show similar behaviors. However, if repetitive or restrictive behaviors are firmly entrenched, they may indicate more severe levels of autism (Watt, Wetherby, Barber, & Morgan, 2008). Effective strategies to minimize repetitive or restrictive behaviors at the toddler stage have not yet been reported, probably because these behaviors emerge inconsistently at those ages (Barber, Wetherby, & Chambers, 2012). However, if they begin to consume a significant portion of a toddler’s time, supporting social communication may be the best way to expand a toddler’s interests to include interaction with people.

Clearly then, the most important intervention focus for toddlers with early signs of autism is social communication. Returning to the opening vignette, Brittany does not yet have a good sense of what outcomes to target when promoting social communication for a nonspeaking toddler. However, armed with her new understanding of joint attention’s important role in social communication development, she begins to question whether the previous goals of imitation, following directions, and learning

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basic concepts are the best choices for Michael.

## Planning the Intervention Focus

### Keeping It Social

Brittany knows that Mia recognized something important in her priority of helping Michael become more interactive at home. Mia observed that Michael could communicate in instrumental ways to make his needs known but did not interact for the social purpose of sharing experiences with others. This leads Brittany to consider the essential differences between social and instrumental forms of communication in relation to Michael’s previous therapy goals—imitating sounds, following simple commands, and learning basic concepts. She wonders, “Does imitation serve a social or instrumental purpose?” After thinking it through, she realizes that it can be social if Michael imitates for the “fun of the game,” such as when he copies Mia’s playful hand clapping or makes funny faces with her. But if Michael imitates simply to comply with a request or command, it serves an instrumental function because it does not involve sharing playful experiences with others.

Also, Brittany decides that learning basic attributes of objects such as size, shape, and color would not address an important social communication need for Michael, nor is it something that is difficult for him. Michael already seems to be more focused on objects than on people, and Mia wants him to become more interactive on a social level.

These conclusions led Brittany to suggest a socially focused path for Michael’s intervention that is in line with Mia’s priority and with what Brittany is learning about joint attention. But Brittany wondered where to start. Would it be better to begin addressing social communication at the preverbal or verbal level?

### Building Foundational Competency

If a toddler on the autism spectrum is not yet talking, the EI’s first impulse may be to focus immediately on verbal language. However, while language is often challenging for young children with autism, a strong preverbal grounding can provide the impetus for it to develop more naturally. In typical development, verbal language emerges from preverbal social communication, appearing shortly after joint attention is established (Tomasello & Farrar, 1986). This preverbal foundation helps children understand how to communicate in socially meaningful ways rather than just to produce words. It provides the *social motivation* to communicate with others because it allows children to recognize others’ viewpoints and to become interested in interacting with them. Laying a socially oriented preverbal foundation can prepare children to take an active role in language learning, with less dependence on adult-driven “training” approaches. This perspective of interacting out of social rather than only instrumental interest naturally continues as toddlers learn to speak.

> “Approaching social communication as a mutual process can support parents’ positive views of their children’s learning potential and serve to deepen the parent–child bond. An important goal is to help the learner take an active role in learning rather than being a passive respondent dependent on others’ initiative.”

## Planning How to Deliver the Intervention

### Leveraging the Parent–Child Relationship as a Venue for Child Learning.

The supportive and familiar parent–child relationship is the forum within which typically developing toddlers learn to engage in joint attention, and this relationship is equally important for toddlers with autism (Siller & Sigman, 2008). Theories of change have centered on the importance of parent–child interaction as a powerful mediator of infant and toddler learning (Campbell & Sawyer, 2009; Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie, 2002). Parents are well suited for this work because they are a constant presence in the child’s life and can provide social learning opportunities through everyday interactions and activities. They also have an intimate knowledge of their children’s preferences and value a strong parent–child relationship. Integrating social learning within the parent–child relationship during everyday activities in the family’s natural environment also eliminates the need for separate generalization training to apply learning across settings. Helping children generalize or carry over what they have learned to their natural settings is a concern when professionals who do not have ongoing contact with the child throughout the day deliver intervention in separate settings.

### Using the Relationship to Promote Parent Competence and Confidence

Promoting learning through the parent–child relationship benefits parents as well as children. Understanding their powerful role in guiding their children’s social communication learning can strengthen parents’ sense of their own competence or self-efficacy and may have an important role in improving child developmental outcomes (Coleman & Karraker, 2003). Social communication is a two-way process, with both partners’ actions affecting the interaction. Approaching social communication as a mutual process can support parents’ positive views of their children’s learning potential and serve to deepen the parent–child bond. In Michael’s case, his grandmother also spent a great deal of time with him, and she spoke with him in her native language, Spanish. Supporting and preserving home language use is a recommended early childhood practice (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Therefore, throughout the intervention, Brittany frequently asked Mia how Michael’s interactions with her mother-in-law and Antonio were going, and they discussed ways to help those interactions be successful. Because the intervention explicitly focused on Mia’s competence in promoting Michael’s social communication, Mia was in a good position to share her learning with her mother-in-law in their shared native language. Mia was also in a good position to support Antonio in his interaction with Michael. This leadership role within her family further solidified Mia’s confidence in promoting Michael’s social communication and even helped her to feel more in charge in her sessions with Brittany.

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> “The point is to [the parent] keep the [turn taking] activity social, so the child responds to the parent for the fun of the game rather than to comply with requests or follow commands.”

### Encouraging Initiation

An important goal is to help the learner take an active role in learning rather than being a passive respondent dependent on others' initiative. Throughout the intervention, the EI often sits back to wait for parents' generation of ideas rather than providing ready-made solutions. Similarly, to promote child initiation, EIs who engage in recommended practice encourage parents to help their children take the lead when interacting with their toddlers (Division for Early Childhood, 2014). When the child is already familiar with a social routine that the parent usually leads, the parent might wait longer than usual to give the child a chance to initiate an interaction. For example, in a game of Peek-a-boo Mia usually hides her face then uncovers it. To encourage Michael's lead, she waits for him to manipulate the blanket. Another time, she might observe Michael playing alone and join his play by imitating him rather than initiating a new interaction herself. By continuing in this way, Michael learns that he can influence the course of interaction.

## Building Preverbal Social Communication Competency in Stages

The intervention focus described here, which was tested in multiple studies (Schertz & Odom, 2007; Schertz, Odom, Baggett, & Sideris, 2013), supports increasing levels of competence in social communication. Supporting early preverbal foundational competencies before promoting verbal communication has several advantages. Beginning where they can easily succeed can help toddlers be active in the learning process, which can enhance their motivation. Actively involving young children in the social learning process is a central tenet of developmentally and individually appropriate practice (Schertz, Baker, Hurwitz, & Benner, 2011). The research described in the first section provides clues for where to begin. Examples of activities that parents can use are provided in Table 1.

### Level 1: Attending to Others' Faces

Just as verbal language develops from a foundation of joint attention, joint attention depends on the ability to look at faces, an earlier developing competency. As we have seen, exchanging looks between a partner and an object is an important component of joint attention. Looking at faces is a simple action and, if the child does not yet look freely and often at the parent, this is a logical starting point.

Rather than working directly with Michael, Brittany wants to take advantage of the parent–child relationship, so she helps Mia understand the importance of guiding Michael to be more at ease and focused when looking at her during their playful interactions. Mia already has some ideas to make this happen. First, she takes the initiative by positioning her face within Michael's line of vision and responds with excitement when he looks at her face. Mia incorporates face-looking into games such as peek-a-boo, hide-and-seek, and mirror play during play and care routines, making it clear that looking at faces is the most

**Table 1**
**Parent-Invented "Idea Starters" to Promote Preverbal Parent–Toddler Social Interaction**

| Attending to Others' Faces | Reciprocal Interaction | Joint Attention |
|---|---|---|
| Mom puts her child in a laundry basket, a cozy, favorite place. This also helps the child stay oriented to Mom. Mom sings *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* as she gently pushes the basket back and forth. When Mom stops pushing or pauses in her singing, the child looks at her face. For each look, Mom gives her a big smile. | A child shakes her head "No" to all of Mom's play suggestions. Mom leans in close to her and says, "Noooo!", laughing and shaking her head dramatically. Mom pauses, pulls her head back, and waits for her child. If she looks at Mom expectantly, Mom shakes her head and says, "Noooo!" to encourage another headshake from her child. When the child understands this pattern, Mom varies it by answering with a nodding, "YESSSS!" | Mom builds a tower with cereal boxes and allows her child to knock it down. She exclaims, "Ohhh Nooo!" to encourage looks back to her face. |
| Dad plays some notes on a kazoo then pauses to look at his child. He continues this pattern of playing and pausing, waiting expectantly for the child to look toward the music and his face. When the child does so, he gives him a big smile, saying, "Music!" and plays a few more notes. | Throughout the day, Dad waits for his son to make spontaneous vocalizations. When he does, Dad mimics these sounds. He waits for more sounds and again mimics them, smiling expectantly to encourage the child to vocalize again. He continues this pattern as long as his child is interested. | Mom knows her son enjoys playing with balloons. She gets a bright red one, blows it up part way, and holds it out. She waits for him to look at it while shaking it. Mom lets it fly across the room. She repeats the routine but this time holds it until he looks from the balloon to her face. When he does, Mom says "Yay!" and lets the balloon fly. |
| Mom knows that her child likes tickles, so she uses a tickle game to encourage looks to her face. Mom says, "Here…comes…the…tickle…monster…coming…after…you!" and holds her hands up in anticipation of the tickles. Mom waits for the child to look at her and, when she does, smiles and tickles her briefly. | In the bathtub, Mom notices that her child is tapping on one toy with another one. Mom grabs a different toy and briefly taps the child's second toy. She pauses and waits to see if the child will pause or continue to tap. If the child keeps tapping, Mom continues tapping and pausing to create a space for the child to notice her pattern. When the child does pause, Mom smiles, makes an "ooohhh" sound, and takes another turn tapping. | Mom sits in front of her son and puts on a colorful hat. She leans in and smiles, waiting for him to notice. When he looks at the hat, Mom makes dramatic sneezing sounds and nods her head so the hat flies off. Mom leans in towards her child and giggles. She repeats this, pausing dramatically before the sneeze and waiting expectantly for her child to look at her. |
| As her child is finishing up lunch, Mom uses bubble gum to blow a big bubble and lets it pop. She says, "What was that?" She giggles and smiles when the child looks at her. Mom continues to excitedly blow and pop bubbles while they watch each other's reactions. | Mom begins a game saying, *The Alligator goes Chomp*! Before saying the word, "Chomp!" Mom opens her arms wide like an alligator's mouth, pausing and looking at her child expectantly. She waits for the child to slap his arms/hands together or say the word "Chomp!" Even if child does not do this, Mom continues this game, waiting expectantly for her child to fill the gap with an action or word. Mom sometimes switches this up with different animals and gestures/words. | Dad knows that his daughter loves for him to sing to her. During *Old MacDonald,* he holds little plastic animals up near his face, pausing expectantly for her to look from the animal to his face. |
| To help his daughter feel secure looking at his face, Dad has her sit in the corner of the overstuffed couch and he kneels on the floor in front of her. This secure position makes it easier for her to look right at his face. | | Mom places toys in plain sight but out of her son's reach. Holding him in her arms, she asks, "Where is the truck?" When he looks at her she points to it saying, "There's the truck." When he looks at it, she gets it and brings it close to her face to draw his gaze back to her eyes. |
| The child runs away from Dad, attempting to avoid interaction. Dad follows his child and peeks around the corner at him, saying in a teasing manner, "I see you!" | | Dad gathers some wildly colored ties, floppy hats, textured scarves, and big sunglasses for playing dress up. He shows one to this daughter and, when she looks at it, he dramatically puts it on to draw her look to his face. Dad encourages her to show him the pieces and try them on. |

*Note.* Many of the "idea starters" were adapted from those invented by parents to help their toddlers engage in social play. They incorporate gross motor activity, calming music, snacks, preferred toys, and surprise elements. Parents can use activities such as these strategically according to their children's interests.

> “When helping a toddler engage in joint attention, the parent can begin by showing an object to the child and encouraging the child to look at it. Then, the parent draws the child’s attention back to the parent’s own face. The goal is for the child, of his or her own volition (not in response to a request or command) to exchange looks between the object and the parent’s face, showing their shared interest and pleasure around the object.”

important part of their interaction right then. By making her face easy to see, she makes it more likely that Michael will choose to look at her, a step toward initiating interactions with others. She learns that it helps keep the play environment free of excessive visual distractions, such as TV noise or clutter. Soon, Michael responds to Mia’s lead more often and for longer periods as they play together. With this success, Brittany encourages Mia to help Michael take the lead in this looking-at-faces play by letting Michael decide when to look at her on his own initiative.

### Level 2: Reciprocal Interaction

In addition to focusing on a partner’s face, joint attention requires a sense of reciprocity. Reciprocity might be best described as turn taking: back-and-forth actions in which each partner waits for the other to take a turn before repeating an action or offering a related action. Parents can promote turn taking by introducing simple repetitive games with quick back-and-forth actions that are fun and easy for the child. The point is to [the parent] keep the [turn taking] activity social, so the child responds to the parent for the fun of the game rather than to comply with requests or follow commands. Waiting for a parent to take a turn can add to the fun if the social rather than instrumental aspect of the interaction is emphasized (i.e., it is a fun game, not a task). Again, one important purpose of back-and-forth play is to help the child enjoy interacting for purely social reasons. Engaging in turn taking helps children learn that there is a back-and-forth order when interacting with others and that taking turns is fun. They also learn that others have similar interests but different perspectives than one’s own and that each partner’s actions affect what the other partner does.

As Michael becomes more comfortable looking at Mia while they play, Brittany and Mia begin to consider how to help Michael become more reciprocal in his play. Brittany describes what back-and-forth play might look like using examples that other parents have tried. She talks about the importance of keeping turn-taking actions simple and repetitive at first and that a good starting point is to follow Michael’s lead by imitating his actions. Again, Mia sets the stage for Michael to take an active role by first removing distracting toys; then, she begins to watch and wait for turn-taking opportunities. Mia observes that opportunities are created when Michael completes almost any type of action, such as when he spins a puzzle piece on the table. Mia imitates this action and waits to see if Michael repeats it. Perhaps he will then offer a different action for Mia to imitate, such as banging two puzzle pieces together, and they each do their own different but related actions for a while. Mia keeps turn-taking sequences going for as long as Michael is interested. Each day Mia introduces rhythmic, repetitive, simple games, first imitating Michael’s actions, and then encouraging him to take the lead. Brittany helps Mia keep these back-and-forth play activities social and not work-like by making them fun, with plenty of smiling, joking, and laughing.

### Level 3: Joint Attention

As children engage more freely in looking at others’ faces and reciprocal back-and-forth

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interactions, they are ready to focus more directly on sharing attention with a partner in relation to interesting objects. Quiet interaction without a lot of distracting talking keeps the focus on joint attention. To review, joint attention is a form of “showing” or nonverbal “commenting” to share social interest in an object with another person. When helping a toddler engage in joint attention, the parent can begin by showing an object to the child and encouraging the child to look at it. Then, the parent draws the child’s attention back to the parent’s own face. The goal is for the child, of his or her own volition (not in response to a request or command) to exchange looks between the object and the parent’s face, showing their shared interest and pleasure around the object.

Helping the child *respond* to the parent’s joint attention overtures is a good starting point. Looking at an object is necessary for joint attention to occur but, because children with autism may focus more on objects than on people, it is important to help the child shift the balance of attention more toward the interaction partner. To do this, the parent emphasizes face-looking rather than object-looking as the most important part of the joint attention interaction. *Mia can do this by being especially responsive when Michael looks at her as part of the joint attention interaction. She prepares a “surprise bag,” hiding toys and interesting objects in a paper bag. She shows Michael the bag by holding it away from her face and shaking it. Then, she slowly draws an object from the bag, using excited expressions that add to the surprise element. When Michael spots the object, Mia draws Michael’s look to her own face with surprised sounds and facial expressions, such as “Oooooooo! Aaaahhhh!” When Michael looks at her face, she gives him a quick hug and a big smile to let him know she appreciates how he looks at her in relation to the surprise from the bag.*

As children respond to their parents’ “showing” or “commenting,” parents should watch for the child to *initiate* joint attention overtures—to actively show objects to the parent, instead of always being on the receiving end. Whenever this happens, it is important for the parent to respond with interest. The child could “show” something by simply exchanging glances between the object and the parent, so the parent should be alert for subtle signs. Initiating joint attention might also occur when a child holds an object out to show it to the parent. Parents can help their children initiate joint attention by watching and waiting rather than by always being the one to do the “showing.” A good balance of child and parent initiations is an important way to promote active engagement in joint attention that is likely to maintain over time through the child’s initiative.

> “An important goal for toddlers with autism is to develop flexibility in language-based social interactions rather than relying on prescribed ways of speaking.”

When Mia noticed that Michael had already begun initiating joint attention, Brittany introduced additional ideas other parents have tried as possible ways to strengthen his initiating. For instance, Brittany mentioned that another parent often reacted as if the child was showing toys, even if it was not entirely clear that he was doing so. So, when Michael was walking around the room with a toy, Mia reacted as if Michael was showing her the toy, by exclaiming, “What are you showing Mommy?” And after an expectant pause, she said, “You have a race car! Vroom, Vroom!” Similarly, when Mia and Michael were looking out a window or walking outdoors, she encouraged Michael to show her a truck that was passing by. After he looked back and forth between Mia and the truck, she reacted with excitement and commented on the truck. Expectant waiting is a key element in promoting a child’s initiation of joint attention. It requires parents to take a less active but closely watchful stance, waiting for their children to draw them in. Helping toddlers who are on the autism spectrum to shift into an initiating role with joint attention takes self-discipline for parents who may be more inclined to bring things to their children’s attention than to be in a receiving or responding mode.

Mia discovers ways to organize play to give Michael many opportunities to initiate joint attention. She again prepares “surprise bags” for Michael, but now she encourages him to draw an object from the bag and show it to her as she marvels at the new surprise. Mia also takes advantage of Michael’s strong interest in his toy train to help him initiate joint attention. As he plays alone with the train, Mia joins in the play by making a Kleenex box into a tunnel. She cheers after he drives his train through the tunnel and looks at her by way of “commenting” on the action. If he drives the train in her direction, she briefly comments with simple phrases such as, “You showed Mommy!” and then smiles broadly when he looks at her face.

By encouraging Michael to take the lead in joint attention, Mia is setting the stage for him to interact without prompting across time, people, and settings rather than always depending on her to structure joint attention activities. In the future, he will be faced with more complex and varied social demands that cannot be satisfied with scripted ways of interacting. Becoming competent in initiating joint attention will provide Michael with a solid foundation for the many social tasks that he will encounter in his future.

## Verbal Language

As children begin to reliably engage in joint attention and begin to use language, parents can

incorporate more verbal language into their play and listen for communicative use of words. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, once toddlers begin to engage in joint attention preverbally, they are more likely to begin to use verbal language on their own (Mundy et al., 1990). Just as it is at the preverbal level, verbally based social communication is promoted by interacting around shared interests rather than making requests, issuing commands, using physical prompts, or implementing nonsocial forms of reinforcement.

An important goal for toddlers with autism is to develop flexibility in language-based social interactions rather than relying on prescribed ways of speaking. *Since, by now, Mia, her mother-in-law, and Antonio have plenty of experience infusing social interaction throughout all of their daily activities, they will simply incorporate more language into their interactions with Michael, making sure to place more emphasis on the social aspects of their interaction than on the mechanics of speech production. They do this by incorporating naturally meaningful nonrote language into their social interactions and sometimes relying on verbal rather than only visual connections to engage Michael in social interchanges with them.*

## Related Considerations

### Special Interests and Strengths

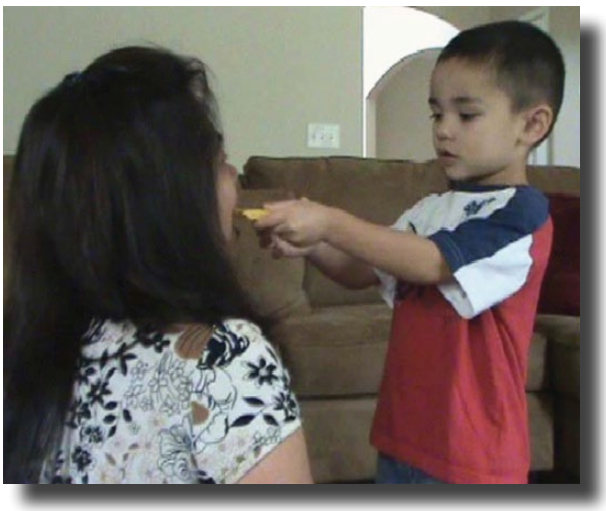
There are gaps in research related to repetitive and restrictive interests in toddlers on the autism spectrum. For example, we do not know whether, as toddlers on the autism spectrum become more socially competent and outwardly focused, their repetitive and restrictive behaviors become less pronounced. We also do not have models for addressing excessive repetitive and restrictive interests in toddlers; though, if these behaviors become problematic, approaches used with older children could be considered, such as those reported by Boyd, McDonough, and Bodfish (2012). It is important to observe whether toddlers' advancing social competency may itself result in reduced reliance on repetitive behavior as they become more interested in and interactive with people. Meanwhile, EIs should recognize that special interests may reflect unusual strengths and that leveraging them for social learning brings a number of advantages:

- Special interests can serve as a bridge to social interaction opportunities.
- Toddlers may be more actively involved in learning and take initiative when social exchanges incorporate their special interests.
- Encouraging development of strengths and interests allows parents to balance their understanding of their

children's challenges with an appreciation for their strengths.
- Building on strengths opens up opportunities for children to excel in school and work.

### Giving Positive Messages to Parents

Parents of toddlers with early indicators of autism or autism risk may receive negative messages from the media and even from professionals—messages that focus on limitations and "deficits." As a counter balance, it is important for EIs to communicate to families that developing social communication during early childhood is associated with important long-term effects, including more positive social outcomes into adulthood (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2012). While avoiding promises of a "cure," EIs can support parents' hopes for their child's social communication improvement. This kind of learning, if promoted naturally through the parent–child relationship, can help parents become invested in their children's growth and to understand their own unique and powerful role in supporting social communication outcomes. Ultimately, this sense of parenting self-efficacy can contribute to parents' more optimistic view of their children's potential (Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2010). Finally, understanding the importance of promoting social communication from within the parent–child relationship can bolster parents' motivation to continue supporting this important aspect of learning as the child grows.



## Concluding Thoughts

The framework presented here is not intended to provide a compendium of specific strategies or intervention protocols for parents to follow but a conceptual base upon which they can create their own activities that match the child's current social communicative competencies. The examples we provide are just that: examples to prompt parents' own ideas. This framework is based on an understanding that, through their intimate knowledge of their toddlers' strengths and interests, parents are best positioned to design flexible interactive exchanges that are consistent with their child's current needs and interests, family priorities, and cultural values.

Brittany and Mia now had a general workable plan that addressed Mia's priority for Michael to become more interactive. Brittany had a solid base of knowledge from which she could provide meaningful guidance for Mia, and Mia was gaining a clearer understanding of what to emphasize in her interactions with Michael and of how to build on his learning in steps. She felt empowered to use her growing conceptual knowledge to frame her interaction with Michael based on his current and evolving interests and competencies.

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