Speech and Language Therapy

Attention Autism

What is it?

Attention Autism is an intervention approach by Speech and Language Therapist Gina Davies which aims to work on the early fundamentals of language including awareness of others, attention, listening, shared attention, switching attention and turn-taking.

Attention skills are an integral part of how we connect with people, the world around us and how we learn. These early skills can be particularly difficult for children with Autism. Gina Davies suggests that the answer is to make your interactions irresistible by using activities that are worthy of the child’s attention. If the child is having fun, they will be more likely to join in and engage.

How does it differ from traditional therapy approaches?

Traditional therapy approaches are often not as effective for children with Autism compared with typically developing peers. For example, A child is shown a picture, the therapist explains that ‘The boy is riding a bike’ and then asks the child, ‘What is the boy doing?’ This requires many skills from the child including attention, listening, memory, social skills, language, and many other skills that children with Autism find difficult. This can often lead to confusion and lack of engagement in therapy.

Children with Autism are often visual learners and have a good memory for things they find interesting. Attention Autism uses these areas of strength to scaffold learning. It aims to engage children using highly motivating activities and using this as a base to introduce other skills including joint attention, turn-taking and vocabulary development. The aim is to get spontaneous engagement from the child rather than simply telling the child to listen, look and attend to an activity.

How does it work?

The approach consists of 4 stages. These steps follow the typical pattern of attention development shown in young infants, starting from highly distractible, fleeting attention, and working up to multi-channelled well-established attention.

**Children learn through play so remember to keep the activities fun!**

Stage 1: FOCUS- The Bucket

The aims are for the child to...

* Focus their attention on the adult led activity
* Engage their attention with enthusiasm
* Relax and enjoy these times
* To anticipate shared good times

**What do you need?**

A bucket filled with highly motivating, visually appealing items (e.g. wind-up toys, flashing toys). Take one out at a time to show the child. Do not let the child touch the toys, and do not use the toys for any other activities outside of bucket time.

**What is it?**

* Fill a bucket with highly motivating, past paced toys.
* Sing the bucket song: *‘I’ve got something in my bucket, in my bucket, in my bucket. I’ve got something in my bucket, I wonder what it is?’* to build anticipation.
* Produce an object that offers excitement immediately. Repeat for 3 or 4 objects.

**Things to remember:**

* Show first then add words
* Give time for thinking and stay quiet!
* Remember rushing adds anxiety
* Practice and make sure the toys work
* Get your colleagues/parents on board!
* Enjoy the toys

Stage 2: SUSTAIN- The attention builder

Offer an activity that has a sequence building to a final fantastic experience. This can get long or short as you like depending on attention levels. Additional vocabulary can be added at a later stage.

**It must be:**

* Highly visual activities
* Highly appealing activities
* The only thing available
* Delivered on the adult’s agenda

**Things to remember:**

* Keep it simple
* Go for things children love
* Avoid obsessions
* Add colour
* Organise everything you need in advance
* Check the background
* Make sure everyone gets a good view
* Sell it with body and soul

Stage 2 Attention Builder Activity Ideas:

**Salt Streaming**

You will need:

* A black piece of paper
* clear box filled with salt
* a plastic cup with a hole in the bottom

What to do:

* Place the black paper on the floor
* Open the box and fill the cup with salt (place your finger over the hole to stop the salt coming out)
* Hold the cup over the black paper and take your finger off the hole
* Let the salt stream onto the paper and make patterns with the salt
* Hold the cup up high so it is more visually appealing.

*Variations of salt streaming: Use rice, coloured sand, glitter, salt onto a different surface.*

**Flour Castles**

You will need:

* Flour
* Plastic container to place flour in
* Plastic cup (different sizes)
* Plastic sheet

What to do:

* Lay the plastic sheet out on the ground
* Place the plastic cup into the flour tub and fill it with tower
* Then place the cup upside down on the plastic sheet and lift up the cup to leave a cup shaped flour castle behind.
* Do this again until you’ve created about 4 flour castles.
* Then one at a time, squash the castle with your hands
* Take time folding up the plastic sheet and pouring the flour back into the tub.
* If children are still attending, make more flour castles.

*Variations of flour castles: Spray castles with food dye, use different shaped containers to make flour castle.*

**Sound Sprinkle**

You will need:

* Plastic sheet/wipable work surface
* Different containers (e.g. plastic bowl, tin sheet etc.)
* Rice/ couscous/ dried lentils
* Tinned spaghetti/baked beans/ custard
* Plastic cup/ bowl
* Bowl of water/ toy drum
* Funnel

What to do:

* Lay the plastic sheet on the floor and place your different containers down
* Count the containers as you put them down
* Use the plastic cup to scoop up your rice/couscous/ lentils
* Hold the plastic funnel over each container and pour your rice/ couscous into it – try to comment whilst completing this e.g. ‘pouring’
* Listen to the sound it makes – again comment e.g. loud/quiet

*Variations of sound sprinkle: Use different materials to pour (e.g. beans, small rocks), pour onto metal tray for different sound, pour onto a xylophone.*

**Football Frenzy**

You will need:

* Small paper footballs (cut out from paper, preferably tissue paper)
* Shower curtain
* Watering can
* Bottle of water and green food dye

What to do:

* Lay the shower curtain on the floor.
* Take out the bottle of water and place drops of green food dye in it. Put the lid on and shake it.
* Get the watering can and pour the green water into it.
* Stand over the shower curtain and pour the green water over the shower curtain.
* Then open the box with the paper footballs, stand over the shower curtain, and drop the footballs onto the shower curtain (hold them up high) and watch the drop onto the green surface. Drop one at a time

*Variations: Fish in the sea using blue dye and paper fish, drop numbers or letters onto surface, use different colours/topics to target curriculum vocabulary.*

Stage 3: SHIFT- Interactive game

Once the children are attending to an adult led activity for a longer period, it is time to begin modelling turn-taking skills and how to shift attention from self to the rest of the group.

Stage 4: 1, 2 & 3 TRANSITIONS- Table top activity

Once they have reached stage 4, it is time to practise attending to a self-led activity. The children should watch a demonstration of the activity carried out by an adult, take their pack of resources, go to their own space and carry out the activity independently. The focus should be on the progress and attention rather than the end result. The children should then come back together and share in celebrating the end result!