



# Research Brief

A SUMMARY OF A PUBLISHED RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Following the Child's Lead: Mothers' Interactions with Children with Autism

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Research on interactions between adults and typically developing children has shown that language development is enhanced when adults speak about something on which the child is focused. In this way, the adult and child can establish joint attention, which is attention between the adult, the child, and an object, event, or action.

Children with autism have a more difficult time with joint attention than do their typically developing peers, or peers with language delays and/or cognitive delays. They are less likely to initiate joint attention, and they are less likely to respond to bids from others for joint attention.

Previous hypotheses and research about the abilities of parents of children with autism to respond to their child's cues and establish joint attention during inter-

actions has provided differing views.

Some researchers have argued that parents of children with autism are less responsive during interactions due to frustration with their child's unresponsiveness. Others have found that parents of all children, including children with autism, respond consistently to their child's nonverbal cues in interactions.

This study seeks to investigate the responsiveness of parents of children with autism in comparison to parents of children who are typically developing. The study used 28 parent-child pairs; 14 pairs included preschool children with autism while the other 14 pairs included typically developing children matched for receptive language age with the autism group.

This Research Brief was based on an article, *Following the child's lead: Mothers' interactions with children with autism*, by Watson, L. R. (1998) published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 28(1), 51-59.

Parent-child interactions for each pair consisted of two 15-minute play segments taped within 3 weeks of each other. The interactions were videotaped, and then analyzed separately by two research assistants. The parent utterances were placed into one of three categories, (1) child-focused, (2) out-of-focus, and (3) other. The frequencies of parent utterances, child utterances, child-focused parent utterances, and out-of-focus parent utterances were analyzed in a statistical computer program.

There were no significant differences found between the two groups in the total number of utterances by either the parents or the children.

There were also no significant differences between the frequencies of child-focused utterances used by either group.

However, the groups differed in the frequency of out-of-focus parent utterances, with parents of children with autism using significantly more out-of-focus utterances.

**These results suggest that parents of children with autism are not less responsive to their children's interests than parents of typically developing children and that both groups rely on the same interaction strategies.**

Children with autism, therefore, have the same opportunities, but perhaps not the same capacity, to benefit from interactions

with their caregivers. *The higher frequency of out-of-focus utterances by parents of children with autism may indicate the parents' adaptation to some of their children's challenges in communication and social interactions.* The researcher hypothesizes that the higher frequency of out-of-focus utterances by the parents of children with autism is a result of the parents' efforts to direct, redirect, or maintain their children's attention. Overall, the interactions between the pairs in both groups were more similar than different, but the question of what type of interaction is optimal for children with autism needs to be further explored.



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