



# FOM

## Shared Attention



Huseby and Tambartun Resource Centre

STATPED SKRIFTSERIE NR 21 (English)

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## - Shared Attention

Knut Brandsborg, Mette Cyvin (red.)  
Rita H. Jeremiassen and Toril Loe

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# FOM

## Shared Attention

This project deals with shared attention between sighted adults and young children who are blind. Good communication between the adult and the blind child is of significant importance for the child's development. Shared attention is a crucial part of this communication. This project focuses on a small section that falls within a larger field dealing with early interaction and communication. Increased knowledge in this field might be of vital importance for young blind children and their parents.

By shared attention, we mean that the adult and the child have their attention focused toward the same object, event, experience or activity simultaneously. We have chosen to use FOM (Felles oppmerksomhet) as an abbreviation for this concept.

We have put together a collection of video clips that serve as good examples of shared attention between blind children and their parents. It is now our hope that you, as readers, will benefit from these parents' experiences. To show what shared attention looks like when both parties interacting are able to see, some examples of communication with sighted children are also included in the video clips.

The video clips are collected on video and DVD. This booklet is designed to be read with or independently from the video.

Both the video and the booklet are the results of many years of collaboration between Rita H. Jeremiassen and Toril Loe, from Tambartun kompetansesenter, and Knut Brandsborg and Mette Cyvin at Huseby kompetansesenter.

Media technician Ole Bjørn Lier was responsible for digitalizing and editing the video material, and for the preparation of the layout of the booklet. Trond-Hugo Knutsen was responsible for DVD production.

Mette Cyvin acted as editor, gathering the material and arranging the final draft of the booklet.

Knut Brandsborg

Mette Cyvin (editor)

Rita H. Jeremiassen

Toril Loe

## **Target group for the Booklet**

This booklet is written primarily for the parents of young blind children.

Educators for the blind and special needs education professionals can use the video when working with parents and educators. Together, the video and the booklet could serve as useful guides to take with you. One could play for the parent's video clips with examples illustrating the various issues that deal with communication and shared attention amongst young, blind children.

At the same time, each parent will prefer to find a style that is suitable for themselves and their child. As counsellors on the education of the blind we should be respectful of this. The balancing act will be to engage in a dialogue with the parents regarding issues that relate to shared attention. In this manner, we are able to contribute our educational expertise and give parents the chance to choose their own way. We believe that this video footage can be of assistance in this kind of dialogues, together with a conscious stance of one's own philosophy of guidance counselling.

The material may also be of relevance for other children. Partially sighted children may, in varying degrees, have communication problems similar to those we observe in blind children. Children with uncommon types of eye contact may also benefit from communication that is based on other senses than sight. We are thinking of some multi-handicapped children. Therefore, the FOM video and booklet can also be of interest for persons who have contact with children who are multi-handicapped or partially sighted.

We hope and believe that this booklet will provide inspiration, and that it can give ideas to you who read it!

## **Nordic project - shared attention with children who are blind**

### **Background and history**

The guidance counseling material is the result of a process that began in 1992 with two Nordic conferences about blind children with communication difficulties.

Since then, seven Nordic meetings regarding this target group have taken place. Participants have come from Refsnæsskolen in Denmark, Ekeskolan and TRC in Sweden, as well as Tambartun, Skådalen, and Huseby kompetansesenter in Norway. We have met to discuss, learn from one another, and systematize our experiences with these children. The collaboration has consisted of expanding our theoretical understanding, clarifying ideas and notions, limiting our target group, increasing our common competence in video use and video analyses, as well as sharing our experiences in guidance counseling.

At the gathering in 1997, it was decided that a Nordic project would be started, called "Blind Children and Shared Attention". The plan was to carry out many separate projects under a common umbrella. For different reasons, not all of the centers were able to follow

through with the plan. What is presented here is the result of collaboration between Refsnæsskolen, Tambartun and Huseby.

The material is based on a foundation of collective thought and understanding which has been built upon 11 years of gratifying and valuable Nordic cooperation.

### Project Goals

1. To expand our knowledge on interaction between blind children and their caretakers with a focus on shared attention.
2. To expand our knowledge on guidance techniques for issues related to early interaction and shared attention for blind children.
3. To use the material from this project to draw up a plan that can be used for guidance and dissemination of knowledge.

### Problems we have addressed along the way

- Clarification and analysis of the concepts shared attention and joint attention.
- Why is shared attention important?
- How is shared attention established during interaction with a child that cannot see? How does the child demonstrate shared attention?
- What type of shared attention is it? What is the attention focused on?
- What has occurred before the establishment of shared attention? How can it be sustained over time?
- Why and how does it break down?
- Who is taking the initiative to uphold or break it down?
- With an emphasis on the perspective of assets: what proves to be successful in establishing and maintaining shared attention with a young blind child?
- What are the most important aspect regarding this issue to pass on to other professionals and networks working with young blind children? What is the best way to communicate this?

### Video and Booklet Preparation

*Daniel Stern writes:*

*"As a research tool for exploring human behaviour - especially nonverbal interactions - the television camera has been as important as the microscope was in revealing hitherto unseen organisms."*

*(Daniel Stern, 1992, s.16)*

As Daniel Stern says, video is a useful tool for studying human behaviour. The main part of our work on the project here in Norway has dealt with carefully studying video clips in order to observe communication between young blind children and their parents. Video provides the opportunity to replay the same situation many times, studying different components each time.

Studying literature and having discussions in the beginning of the project helped us reach an adequate common understanding of the concept of shared attention, FOM. You can read about some of the conclusions we have reached in the next chapter. Keep in mind that some of the video clips are taken directly from old footage of instruction sessions with blind children and their parents over the course of many years. As a result, the technical quality may vary depending on whether or not the footage is recent.

## What Do We Mean by the Concept 'Shared Attention'?

Shared attention takes place when an adult and child have their attention focused toward the same object, event, experience or activity simultaneously.

Definitions of shared attention can both be simple and complicated. We have read foreign articles that discuss the concept in a scientific manner; however such an approach seemed unnecessarily complex within this context. Our concern has been to find a practical way to view the concept of shared attention and joint attention. Although we are backed up by theoretical knowledge, our primary wish is for this to make sense to parents and professionals.

In this context, we have chosen to interpret and broaden the notion of shared attention and joint attention beyond its strictest definitions; thus arriving at various forms of shared attention:

- Being with each other, mutual attentiveness towards one another.
- The adult follows the child's focus of attention; which means that the adult directs his/her attention towards the same object as the child and expresses it.
- The adult and child have shared attention concerning:
  - an object
  - a game
  - an activity
  - noises, sound
  - an earlier event
  - an experience

The child clearly shows that his/her attention is focused on the same place as the adult's attention.

- The child is fully aware that the adult is also focusing on the same thing, and clearly shows that his/her attention is focused on the same place as the adult.
- On this level of interaction, the concept "joint attention" is commonly used. Stern also uses the label "secondary intersubjectivity"

When shared or joint attention is present in interaction, it is as though things begin to flow, much like a dance. Most of us have experienced how uncomfortable it can be to stomp around in a waltz without the same interpretation of the rhythm as the partner. Just as it is difficult to dance without shared attention, the social interaction with small children is equally difficult when shared attention is missing.

Rhythm is another key word that is involved in the concept of shared attention. Turn-taking, that is, taking alternate initiatives, is very important for social interaction. Imagine a game involving knocking on the floor. First, the child knocks, followed by the adult. Then, possibly after a pause, the child smiles and gives a response. Although turn-taking is



not directly defined under the notion of shared attention, it is an element that we acknowledge as playing a role.

## Why Focus on Shared Attention?

Infants attract attention from adults with such force that many simply must go over to the little bundle of joy lying there in its carriage. We want to look at, talk to, and smile at the little one, and we feel extremely happy when the little one smiles back at us. It seems to be a profound part of human nature to feel a need to try to obtain contact with an infant.

The young, blind child reacts differently in communication than what we are used to with sighted children. Eye contact is, of course, lacking, which means that we do not experience an immediate connection. Fewer gestures may lead to the adult interpreting the child as tired or uninterested; and therefore, blind children may be “left alone” more often than they really need. When the child turns his/her head away, it may be a sign that they are listening more intently to you. But what do we adults perceive? We can misinterpret it as a sign that the child is cutting off contact with us. Thus, finding an approach for good social interaction with young, blind children may be of utmost importance for parents.

Recent years’ research on infants has shown how important the child’s initiative is for social interaction and contact. The blind child does not stimulate us adults to interact as effectively as a sighted child. At the same time, we know that parents have a strong wish to create a connection with their child, and that they would do everything possible to reach a meaningful level of interaction with him/her. It is for these reasons that we have searched for clues as to how one can attain a basic level of communication with the blind infant.

Our project, in its entirety, is devoted to shared attention as a phenomenon. A fair amount of literature already exists concerning pre-speech and motor skills development amongst blind infants. Parts of this literature mention shared attention. What is new is that we have been given the opportunity to extract shared attentiveness as a phenomenon; as well as to study and thoroughly present it with relation to children who are blind.

By choosing to express shared attention as a phenomenon, we must emphasize that we have omitted other issues. The abundance of information regarding early interaction means that others might have studied other aspects of this topic and reached equally important insights.

*FOM  
I sense that you are here  
Because I am sitting up against you  
on the bench  
Together we are exploring a toy car  
with our hands*

*Mette Cyvin 2003*

## **Factors Promoting Shared Attention**

What can we do to facilitate shared attention together with young blind children? Certain factors seem to increase the chance that shared attention can take place between the blind child and the adult. Below, we introduce some useful points that may be of great significance for interaction. These topics appear throughout the video examples. At the end of this booklet, you will be able to read more about each point.

- 👁️ Physical contact
- 👁️ The child noticing that she is being seen by the adult
- 👁️ The use of hands during communication
- 👁️ Awaiting the child's initiative
- 👁️ Positive guidance
- 👁️ Arranging for the situation
- 👁️ Voice use
- 👁️ Emotional contact

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## 1 Dialogue – “Conversation” With Mother Maria, 3 mo. – sighted



“Maria and her mother are carrying on a conversation based on eye contact. The dialogue is maintained without the need for physical contact.

The early dialogue is an important prerequisite for obtaining shared attention.”

Maria is lying on her back on a blanket. Her mother leans over her and they have a “wordless conversation” together. At the same time as they are assisted in communication by the use of eye contact, the mother and child maintain contact by jabbering and making noises with their voices.

We chose to include an example of the early dialogue between a sighted child and her mother. In doing so, we are placing eye contact and non-verbal communication in the limelight; something the child can grasp through his/her visual perception. This example may trigger you, as readers, to think about sight and communication. Sight and communication are interconnected, and sight plays a greater role in communication than we normally assume.

This is quite evident in communication with the youngest children.

“In each others’ gaze” is a term that Anne Carling introduced in her book (1989) in which she emphasizes the importance of eye contact in early interaction. One of the first things that can unsettle us with regard to the child, is if eye contact is difficult to achieve.

Further on in the booklet and video examples, we will look at other possible ways of achieving a similar type of contact to that between Maria and her mother in this example.

What does early dialogue and shared attention look like when the child cannot see?

## 2 Dialogue – “Conversation” With Father Ole-Martin, 5 mo. – blind



“Ole-Martin and his father carry on a conversation based on mutual touch and taking turns making sounds. They have shared attention towards the father’s face.

Physical closeness is important when the child cannot see. It is a way of creating and maintaining reciprocity during interaction.”

Physical closeness is important when the child cannot see. It is a way of creating and maintaining reciprocity during interaction.”

Here, Ole-Martin and his father are in a situation similar to the previous example. Ole-Martin, who is blind, is lying on a mat while his father leans over to jabber with him.

This is an example of how the early dialogue can be formed when the child cannot see. Among other things, this example illustrates that sound is more important for the blind than the sighted. The fact that the voice is used to maintain contact may play a considerable role in interaction. Is it possible that the voice can function in a similar manner as eye-contact for the blind child? Anne Carling discusses “being in each others’ gaze”. Can one be in each others’ voice and sounds?

It cannot be emphasized enough how important physical closeness seems to be for the young blind child.

It does not seem adequate to develop and maintain shared attention to just nearly have body contact with the child. In this context, physical closeness means touching. The above video example shows the father leaning over the child. In addition, the father’s elbow is in physical contact with the child’s hip. He is stroking the child’s head in order to enhance interaction and maintain contact. The father is creating a small, limited space with his arms and body. In the previous example, Maria established contact with her mother through two senses at the same time: sight and hearing. In this example, Ole-Martin also receives simultaneous confirmation through two sensory channels: touch and hearing.

In one sequence of the video example, the father is touching the child’s hands in a little interplay of touch. At the same time, he is so close to the child’s face that there might be contact through breath as well.

- contact can be established by voice use
- physical closeness, so close that there is physical contact and touch
- contact by means of hands, body, and breath

### 3 Playing Peek-a-boo Ingrid, 8 months - sighted



"Ingrid and her mother are playing a hiding game with a cloth.

The game is maintained by eye contact and movements.

Ingrid displays anticipation and joy related to the game and shows this with her whole body, facial expressions and sounds."

Ingrid is sitting in her child seat. Her mother is nearby, but without direct physical contact. She carefully throws a cloth over Ingrid's face.

Ingrid's mother creates anticipation in Ingrid, which is noticeable by how Ingrid is looking at and smiling to her mother before the cloth approaches her face.

We can also observe Ingrid's anticipation through her arm and body movements.

Her joy seems to be closely tied to "making something happen"; taking away the cloth herself, seeing and being seen, and evoking a reaction from her mother.

How can one create anticipation and maintain a game when the child cannot see?

## 4 Playing Peek-a-boo Ole-Martin, 5 mo. – blind



"Ole-Martin and his parents are playing a hiding game. The parents are attentive to their child's reactions and follow his initiative in the game.

The child realizes that his initiative affects his surroundings."

Ole-Martin is sitting on his father's lap. His mother is sitting beside them, and carefully places a cloth over Ole-Martin's face, just enough for him to feel it. She simultaneously creates anticipation and releases excitement by saying "Boo!" when she takes away the cloth.

A blind child is dependent on being able to feel the cloth. The excitement is released when he feels that the cloth is being taken away.

After a while, Ole-Martin's mother waits for him to take the cloth away himself. The child's own initiative in the game is acknowledged when his mother says "Boo..."

Various forms of Peek-a-boo games are fun for young children. They also have an element that is useful in interaction; turn-taking.

Sharing joy and laughter can, in itself, be a form of shared attention. We believe that the chances that shared attention will take place increase, when, for example, the adult exhibits joy using her voice.

- physical contact
- the child feels the cloth, which creates anticipation until it is taken away
- the mother expresses passionate involvement and warmth in her voice
- the mother waits for the child's initiative and gives confirmation
- joy and excitement in the game can increase the quality of shared attention

## 5 Do You Want Up? Jørgen 8 mo. – blind



"Jørgen makes a noise and lifts his head. His mother says: "Do you want up?", and confirms this through her actions.

The mother gives a clear answer to the child's initiative."

Jørgen is lying on his back on his mother's lap. There is physical contact in that Jørgen can feel his mother's body. At the same time, she is holding her hands on his stomach and stroking him.

Jørgen is given a response to his initiative through words, i.e. hearing, and also through an action he can clearly feel.

Jørgen takes initiative by making a little noise and lifting his head slightly. It is not easy for an outsider to interpret what Jørgen wants, but his mother understands immediately and says: "Do you want up?" as she lifts him up.

- the mother waits for an initiative from the child
- the mother provides a verbal response
- the mother emphasizes this with an action the child is able to feel



## 6 Playing With Toes

### Jørgen, 8 mo. – blind



"Jørgen and his father have obtained shared attention towards Jørgen's foot while playing a game. This is achieved by both of them touching Jørgen's foot while his father talks about it.

Touch provides Jørgen with information he cannot achieve through sight."

Jørgen and his father are sitting closely together here. His father maintains close physical contact with Jørgen by the use of his hands. He touches Jørgen's foot, and then Jørgen touches his own foot.

The fact that his father touches his foot at the same time as Jørgen is preoccupied with it could be a way of expressing: "Yes, I see your foot. There's your foot". At the same time as his father expresses this with words, he also provides Jørgen with a recognizable touch.

- through touch, Jørgen's father provides him with a response Jørgen can recognize
- he also responds with sound by saying something about Jørgen's toes
- there is close physical contact, closely up against one another

## 7 Playing With Necklace and Foot

### Hanne, 12 mo. – blind (3 mo. premature)



"Hanne and her mother are experiencing shared attention towards mother's necklace and Hanne's foot. Her mother creates a good tone by the use of her voice, closeness, and passionate involvement.

The use of hands is an important aspect in the interaction. Hanne's mother confirms her by touching Hanne's foot together with her."

Hanne is sitting closely and securely in her mother's arms. There is close physical contact here. In addition, her mother is touching Hanne's hand and jabbering with a warm tone of voice that creates a good, intimate atmosphere.

Her mother takes Hanne's sock off and sees to it that Hanne can get a hold of it. Her mother helps her by only taking the sock partially off. This technique is called scaffolding.

When Hanne touches the necklace, her mother acknowledges the action verbally while touching the necklace at the same time. "Yes, there's the necklace. There it is.", says her mother.

- close physical contact
- the mother arranges the situation so that shared attention can take place
- by partially taking the sock off, the mother is assisting the child in completing the task (scaffolding)
- the mother guides the child with her hands, which we call positive guidance
- a sympathetic, warm, happy tone of voice creates a good atmosphere

## 8 Can I Have the Hammer? Håkon, 12 mo. – sighted



"Håkon and his father are playing a give and take game together. The father acknowledges and follows his son's initiative.

The rhythm of the dialogue is based on eye contact, commentaries, and gestures."

Håkon and his father are sitting on the floor facing each other. There is no close, physical contact, but we can clearly observe that they maintain a connection through eye contact.

Eye contact also governs taking turns when Håkon and his father give the hammer to one another. Håkon sees that his father is holding the hammer forward, takes it, and the action is verbally acknowledged by the father.

What governs turn-taking when the child cannot see?

## 9 Where Are You – Do You See Me? Ole-Martin, 10 mo. – blind



"Ole-Martin moves around in such a way that his mother interprets this as an initiative to play.

She builds up anticipation in Ole-Martin by waiting for his initiative and preparing for repetition."

Ole-Martin and his mother are together on the floor. There is no close physical contact between them. Although the distance is not great, their contact is based upon sound and the mother acknowledging what Ole-Martin is doing. His mother is alert to Ole-Martin's initiative and responds in a manner that he can recognize and understand.

Earlier, we have emphasized the importance of physical contact. In this sequence, we see a good example of how one can confirm for the blind child that they are being seen, even without the use of touch.

Ole-Martin swings back and forth and stretches himself out. He makes joyful noises to which his mother responds: "Wow! What a tough boy...!" By doing so she is saying: "I see what you're doing", in a way that Ole-Martin can comprehend.

We see a further example of turn-taking by the use of banging noises. Ole-Martin and his mother have a banging game in which they take turns banging the same rhythm on the floor. Ole-Martin's mother responds to his banging. In the previous example, we observed how eye contact was the governing factor in turn-taking. Here turn-taking is governed by using sound.

- the mother is alert to the child's initiative
- she acknowledges the initiative with words the child can hear
- the mother expresses pride and joy in her voice
- the mother is attentive to the child's banging
- Ole-Martin and his mother obtain turn-taking by echoing each others' rhythm of banging noises

## 10 Attentiveness Toward Sound

### Andrine, 8 mo. – sighted



"Andrine and an adult investigate a rattle together using their hands. Their eye contact strengthens the sensation of shared attention.

The adult confirms this with his/her gaze. Andrine becomes aware of a sound outside of the room and turns towards it. With a sound and glance, she's asking: 'what's happening out there?' The adult acknowledges and responds to this verbally."

Andrine and the adult are in close contact on the floor while investigating a rattle with their hands. Pay attention to how Andrine looks up at the adult, and then back at the rattle.

Later in the clip, Andrine hears someone yelling outside. She turns her head and her whole body towards the noise. The adult confirms.

How can we follow a blind child's focus of attention when she does not use a glance to show us where her attention is focused?

## 11 Listen, Daddy Marita, 12 mo. – blind



"Marita becomes aware of the sound of her mother in the bathroom. She expresses this with an attention-grabbing sound. Her father verbally confirms that he understands where her attention is directed."

Marita stands and supports herself on the living room table. She makes a noise that shows that she is preoccupied with something. Her father interprets that she is hearing running water and her mother in the bathroom. "Yes, that's mom in the bathroom", he says.

Marita's father is confirming that he understands where she is focusing her attention, and therefore, can take part in shared attention.

Dad is alert and attentive, and realizes that Marita makes a little noise.

He tries to ascertain what she means and is very intent on following her focus.

The signals from blind children that indicate that they are preoccupied with something are often minor and not very evident. Marita makes just a little noise. She does not turn her gaze or her body toward the perceived sound.

- a noise or a small bodily gesture can express where the blind child's attention is focused
- we may have to interpret to locate the child's focus
- amongst blind children the signals are often minor and not very evident

## 12 Hopping Game

### Ole-Martin, 12 mo. – blind



"Ole-Martin gestures with his body. His mother interprets this and says, 'wow, are you going to hop now?'"

The mother builds up anticipation by waiting for the child's initiative."

Ole-Martin is squatting on the floor in front of his mother. She and Ole-Martin have probably played the hopping game before, as she understands that Ole-Martin wants to hop.

Mom responds to Ole-Martin with her voice and with her words. She manages to wait long enough for him to hop before she takes another initiative. By repeating the hopping, by smiling and making noises, Ole-Martin is showing that his attention too is focused on his mother and the hopping game.

- anticipation in game-playing is brought about by taking breaks and by voice use
- the mother smiles with her voice, clearly showing happiness and warmth
- his mother sits close to Ole-Martin and has contact with him by using her hands

## 13 Fun with Rocking Jørgen, 12 mo. – blind



"Jørgen and his father play a rocking game together. Jørgen expresses delight.

His father acknowledges Jørgen's swinging through the use of sound and movement."

Here Jørgen is standing on his father's knees while his father holds his hands. Jørgen begins by swinging back and forth a little.

His father follows this up by intensifying the swinging so that it becomes a type of game. He whistles and says "hoi" to the rhythm of the swinging.

- rhythm is a key word that enters into the notion of shared attention. Here Jørgen and his father share joy related to rhythmic swinging
- the father maintains physical contact with Jørgen so as to acknowledge him through bodily contact
- the father also acknowledges Jørgen's swinging by making funny, whistling noises



## 14 Box Game

### Andrine, 12 mo. – sighted



"Andrine's mother helps Andrine just enough so that she succeeds in the game, while at the same time acknowledging her in various ways.

Support and guidance help the child continue playing the game as well as allowing her to experience success."

Andrine and her mother are looking at the little box. Their gaze tells us where their attention is focused.

There is not much speaking throughout the sequence, but words are not necessary in order to maintain shared attention.

Are words more important when a gaze cannot be used to maintain shared attention?

## 15 Toy box Hanne, 2 yrs. – blind



"Hanne and her mother have shared attention regarding toys, sounds, and actions.

Her mother supports and acknowledges Hanne's actions with words."

Hanne and her mother are sitting on the floor. Both have their attention concentrated on a toy box, and they are both preoccupied with the toy box and its contents.

They maintain contact using words and sounds simultaneously. We can see that Hanne notices her mother's preoccupation with the same object because she approaches her mother as if waiting for an answer. They both take turns taking the initiative in the game and conversation. They talk about the objects in the box and discuss what these objects are called.

After a while, a game arises in response to a clicking-sound and the opening and closing of the box. "Click click, open the box", they reply in turn.

In this example, Hanne and her mother experience shared attention regarding each other and the object, the box itself. In addition, they mutually share attentiveness towards an activity and the sounds involved in it.

They are sitting close together.

- shared attention is supported by words
- sounds, such as clicking noises, can support shared attention
- the mother is completely present and is extremely attentive

## 16 Jonas and the Cat

### Jonas, 2 yrs. – blind



"Jonas's mother arranges for shared attention by holding the cat in such a way that Jonas has the opportunity to examine it.

Her attention is focused on the same place as Jonas' and she verifies this by her use of words and by her actions. With good preparation of the environment, she is contributing to an opportunity to explore and share experiences together."

Jonas and his mother are on the sofa when she notices that Jonas wants to grab the cat, Milla. It is difficult for young, blind children to get rich and varied experiences with all types of objects.

Studying animals with your hands can be difficult since the animals move and disappear quickly. "Kitty", Jonas says, as the cat disappears in a flash towards his mother. This illustrates how quickly things can disappear for a blind child.

Here we see a good example of how Jonas's mother arranges for him to study the cat. She physically holds onto the cat, keeping it in place. In this way, she increases the possibility for shared attention to take place.

Jonas and his mother have obtained shared attention regarding the cat. We observe this by the fact that they are both touching the cat and talking about it together. We can witness the "golden moment" when Jonas gets to touch Milla's paw. At this point, there is full concentration and shared attention.

- the mother "brings the world to the child", she does this by holding the cat in place so that Jonas can study it
- the mother creates a comfortable atmosphere for the situation. By holding the cat and speaking in a warm and congenial tone, she creates an exciting moment out of something that could have turned out somewhat frightening

## 17 Jigsaw Puzzle Ole-Martin, 2 yrs. – blind



"Mom sees that Ole-Martin grabs a puzzle piece and interprets this as his initiative to play a new game.

Mom organizes the activity and gives positive guidance with her hands so that the child can have the opportunity to succeed."

Ole-Martin and his mother are sitting on a mat in the corner of a playroom. His mother notices that Ole-Martin has a puzzle-piece in his hand, locates the jigsaw puzzle, and starts to help Ole-Martin so that it is easy for him to play with it. She is sitting close to him.

Ole-Martin's mother organizes the interaction practically in order for him to be able to reach the toy. She positions his body so that he sits directly in front of it and at the same time says to him, "Sit with your feet forward". Then she says: "here's the jigsaw puzzle!"

- there is physical contact between Ole-Martin and his mother
- the mother responds to the child's initiative
- the mother organizes the situation, in a practical sense
- the mother assists with supportive hand-guidance

## 18 Little Slide – Big Slide Ole-Martin, 2 yrs. – blind



"Ole-Martin sits down on his mother's thigh. She calls this "the little slide", and extends the game to include a larger slide.

The mother is contributing to broadening the child's comprehension of the concept 'slide'."

Ole-Martin's mother is sitting on her knees. She and Ole-Martin are going to play a game they know well called, "the little slide". The game consists of Ole-Martin sliding down his mother's thigh on his backside. She uses her hands to help guide and support him.

Through this game, Ole-Martin gains an understanding of the concept 'slide'. He and his mother have shared attention toward the game and the concept 'slide'.

His mother broadens the concept by introducing a big slide. "Do you want to slide on the big slide", she asks him and shows him where it is. When Ole-Martin slides down the big slide, he is given verbal support from his mother. "Oh boy!" she says enthusiastically as he climbs back up. Mom is encouraging Ole-Martin's actions with words.

- the mother arranges for the activity by showing with her hands how the child should sit on her thighs and slide down
- concrete experience with his own body during shared attention with his mother provides a thorough understanding of the concept 'slide'
- playing and happiness seem to be motivational for learning new concepts
- his mother is also verbally supportive when Ole-Martin slides down the slide
- the mother exhibits joy and enthusiasm in her voice

## 19 Making Coffee Ingrid, 3 yrs. – sighted



Ingrid is playing – 'making coffee'.

The child continues playing the game, independently of an adult's physical proximity."

Ingrid is in her toy kitchen playing 'making coffee'. Her mother and aunt are nearby, but are frequently out of sight.

Ingrid is playing independently and, every once in a while, communicates verbally with her mother. She explains to her mother what role she is playing in the make-believe game.

How can we achieve shared attention with a blind child during role-play?

## 20 Making Coffee Ørjan, 3 yrs. – blind



"Ørjan is assisted by an adult so that he can continue playing a game. The adult provides him with verbal support and hand guidance.

The child is dependent on physical contact with the adult in order to continue playing the game".

Ørjan, an adult, and some children are sitting around a table. They have a toy coffee set and are pretending to drink coffee.

Role-play can be more difficult for blind children. It may be helpful to provide the child with the knowledge of various roles. How does a postman really behave? What does he do? It could also be helpful if nursery schools visited different environments; allowing for direct, close contact and sufficient time for the child to explore.

The active involvement of an adult during playtime can also be helpful, as we are able to observe in this example.

The adult uses words to explain to Ørjan how he should pour coffee. She reinforces this by actions as well.

When she leaves the table to get a cloth, it seems as though Ørjan stops playing his game.

- verbal support from the adult lets the child know that they are both preoccupied with the same thing
- in this case, the adult is actively involved in role-playing

## 21 Swimming Games

### Jonas, 3 yrs. – blind



"Jonas and his mother have shared attention towards swimming; something they have experienced together before.

Jonas's mother talks about experiences which he has the chance to remember or recognize. She is connecting these experiences with the present."

Jonas and his mother are out in the yard. Jonas is bending over a plastic wading pool while his mother dries him off with a towel. He is having a good time talking and splashing in the water.

There is close physical contact between mother and child. Jonas's mother is standing behind him, maintaining close bodily contact while she dries him off. She is also establishing close contact by the way she chats and jabbars with him. There is an overall good feeling.

Using playing in the water as her starting point, Jonas's mother introduces a conversation about an earlier event they have experienced together.

They talk about the time when they were at the beach and swam in the ocean. His mother says, "It's colder in the ocean", referring to the event in a way that Jonas has experienced with senses other than sight.

It can be very helpful to the child if we use words that refer to sensory perceptions other than sight. Which sounds were there? How did it feel? This especially applies to conversations without a focus directed towards here-and-now experiences.

- close physical contact
- the mother uses words describing bodily sensations which Jonas has felt before, and ties in a previous experience with their present shared experience



## **Factors that Promote Shared Attention**

Parents and other adults do a lot of this quite naturally. Even so, it may be wise to become fully aware of what the needs of a blind child are. It may be necessary for sighted adults to be given reminders. The blind child is dependent upon us being on the same channel as they are. The more we are able to tune into the blind child's sensory channels, the better; and that does not always come naturally to sighted people.

### **👁 Physical Contact**

It is interesting that Anne Carling (1989) tells us that bodily contact may be just as vital as eye contact in certain cultures. In East Africa there is a stronger emphasis on bodily contact with young children than there is in our culture. Carrying the child on their back provides mothers with both contact and communication with the child.

When a child is an infant, it is only natural that they experience close, bodily contact. We have asked ourselves whether it may be important for the blind child that physical contact continues to a higher age than for the sighted child.

Physical contact for a blind child means that you must be right next to the child. Physical closeness means being really close, and often includes bodily contact; sitting on the lap, sitting up against one another, as well as the touching of hands or feet.

### **👁 The Child is Aware that He/She is Seen by the Adult**

Our concern throughout this project has been to show how we may communicate so that the child understands that he is being seen; when his sight is such that he cannot see our smile, facial expression, or eyes.

“Yes, I see you, my little boy. You’re so wonderful!” This is information that a sighted child often receives from eye contact and words.

For a blind child, parents can use their voice and words as reinforcement. We see an example of this in the video. One mother says with pride in her voice, “Wow, What a tough boy!” when the boy does certain movements.

We believe that the effect is even greater when reinforcement is given in such a way that the blind child senses it, in addition to the words. An example of this can be that the blind child sits on the lap with their back towards the stomach of the adult. The child is then able to feel the adult's body and breath. The adult can respond to the child's initiative with words, and in a manner which the child is able to feel. For example, when the child coughs, the adult can say: “Oh yes, you just coughed”, while at the same time making a coughing sound and a “coughing movement” that is fitting.

If the child is preoccupied with his toes, the adult can talk about toes and touch the child's toes at the same time to reinforce the action. The same can be done when the child is

preoccupied with an object. The adult can talk about the object and simultaneously touch it, making sure that the child is able to feel the adult's hand during exploration. We view this as a parallel to joint attention among the sighted; looking at something together, looking at each other, and then back at the object.

When a blind child and an adult touch each others' hands at the same time as they touch an object, they are "looking" at the object together. The child is able to tell that someone sees that he is "seeing".

Words are used to reinforce to the child that he/she is being seen. By also giving reinforcement to the child through other senses, he/she will have a stronger feeling of being seen.

## 👁️ The Use of Hands in Communication

*"The hand is the soul's instrument; our hands' movements and gestures reflect what we are feeling, wishing for, and want to express. Body language is a part of our personality. The hand is an organ for communication, as important as the eye or the ear."*

*(Gunilla Jangdén, s. 65, 1994)*

Sighted children normally obtain acknowledgement through at least two sensory channels simultaneously: vision and hearing. Most often when we look at something together, this is accompanied by words. Blind children are in danger of receiving acknowledgement through only one channel: hearing. This provides a much weaker basis for being able to experience shared attention. It can be especially difficult for young blind children to connect a specific experience to words. There is a risk that the child will experience our language as meaningless if a basis for what we are discussing is lacking. Yet, if we use our hands simultaneously with the blind child, he/she too has access to two sensory channels. The child can "see" with her hands together with the adult, and at the same time have the experience verbally expressed (such as we have discussed in the previous paragraph).

In addition, hand contact and joint use of hands provide information that may be difficult to communicate using words or the voice. How is the other person feeling right now? Is she tense, open, uninterested, curious? How is she reacting to what I am saying or doing? This is information that the sighted obtain by seeing each others' facial expressions and body language. Together with the blind child, we need to explore alternative routes of communication.

## 👁️ Wait for the Child's Initiative

When we say "wait for the child's initiative" we are not saying that you should passively wait. It is of no use to sit and read the newspaper while waiting. What we are talking about is an active process where you are always alert towards the child's signals. This is usually

a process that occurs naturally for parents. They really want to understand what their child is preoccupied with. But when dealing with blind children, it can be more challenging. The child's signals are often minor or uncommon, and can be difficult for the sighted to perceive.

To wait for the child's initiative means being awake and alert. What is the child telling me? It means interpreting sounds and body language. The adult tries to understand what the child is preoccupied with when the child does something. Much of this is about getting to know one another, and usually gets easier day by day.

Waiting for the child's initiative involves being less concerned with initiating what we have called "the adult's projects". For example, one's own project could be to make the child play with a toy. The adult tries to give the toy to the child and direct the child's attention towards it, even though the child might be occupied with something else. When this happens, it is often difficult to obtain shared attention with the child.

We notice that some parents are good at trying to slip in an initiative. "Hey, do you feel like touching this doll?" If there is no response from the child, the adult continues to be on the same theme as the child and may try an initiative again later so as to prolong the game. To a large extent, the adult makes sure to maintain the attention towards where the child's is. Instead of trying to persuade the child to go along with the parent's suggestions, the parent follows the child's initiative much more. In the earliest interactions, it is the adult that must make sure that his or her attention is directed toward the child.

It is often said that it is important to wait for the child's initiative. This "waiting" is an active process for the adult and requires a high degree of presence.

## 👁 Positive Guidance

Positive guidance means being a practical organizer and a guidance counselor for the child. In this context we define positive guidance as being the adult's arrangement of a situation so that shared attention can take place. The adult can arrange and organize in practical ways so that the blind child is able to get a hold of toys and have the chance to explore her surroundings. The adult is attentive and notices that the child hears a noise and is preoccupied with, for example, a microwave oven or a washing machine. It is then the adult's responsibility to make sure that the child, together with the adult, can explore the source of the noise.

Positive guidance is showing the child the world. We often say that the adult must bring the world to the blind child. Because they lack one of the senses that provide them with information from a distance, the young, blind child has a short distance of attention. Positive preparation and guidance for blind children involves helping them understand everyday objects. The adult should acknowledge when the child has started to explore something. In this way, shared attention is established towards the item.

## 👁️ Arrange for the Situation

When interacting with the child, you can try to be attentive towards the child's wishes, actions, his/her condition, feelings, and body language. To a large extent, you will adjust yourself towards the child and her focus. The child will remember something as important and meaningful if you describe, give names, show how things work, and show emotions about what you are experiencing together. Children need an interpreter in order to create a world that is coherent and meaningful. The child needs you as her interpreter, especially during the first years of life.

Infants and toddlers often need help focusing their attention. You can help them with this by calling on and guiding their attention towards objects in their surrounding environment. It is difficult to talk about something and act together without a shared or joint experience of objects within ones surroundings. It is common to see the child preoccupied with one thing and the adult with another.

Children need help practicing their self-control and their ability to plan. To a large extent this takes place through interaction with the care-givers, who guide the child in a positive manner, arrange for the facilitating conditions, and help prepare step-by-step plans.

In order for the child to fully develop, an adult needs to be a "participating leader". It is important that the child develops her own initiative in the activity, and that the care-giver supports and guides the child's initiative through social interaction. In this way, the child obtains a richer and broader experience than he/she would have obtained without this support.

The extent to which support is given must be adjusted according to the child's level of skill and the task's level of difficulty. As soon as the child begins to master the task, assistance should be reduced so that the child experiences mastering the task on her own. Through the "scaffolding" technique employed by the adult, the child will reach a higher goal, just as if he/she were to stand on a ladder. Assistance should take place when the limit of what the child can manage alone has been reached in a particular situation.

## 👁️ Voice Use

The voice cannot lie. It is the mirror of the soul. With the voice, we can sing softly and gently, or we can scold and make noise. The voice seems to be another point of contact that promotes shared attention with the young blind child. How it is used seems to be extremely important.

As we have observed in the video clips, the voice is used in at least two ways in this context. Words and the voice can be a tool used for experiencing mutual contact. The adult and the young, blind child maintain contact through a constant jabbering with each other, almost acting as a parallel to eye contact. We often experience that somewhat older blind children talk a lot. One of the functions of this flow of words is to maintain contact.

The other way in which the voice is used is to provide feedback so that the child feels seen and loved. We believe that the videos illustrate that varied voice use expressing emotion helps the child experience that he is seen and appreciated. It's possible to say "you're a wonderful boy", just by the tone of voice you employ.

A mother has expressed it in the following way: "Now I realize what you mean by the fact that one can smile with one's voice". It is possible to express warmth and joy through one's voice, thus providing a motivational factor in shared attention.

In a book called "The young blind child", the voice is mentioned as a supplement to body contact. Concrete advice is to use the voice together with body contact. The authors recommend that parents vary their voice, altering between whispering and talking loudly. They recommend exaggerating variations in using the voice, yet to speak slowly and calmly in short intervals.

The adult's voice establishes contact with the blind child. Through the voice the child gets feedback about themselves and what they do. Even if we all are different and have a personal style with regards to how we use our voices, it may be helpful to consciously consider how we use our voice when relating to the child.

## 👁 Emotional Contact

*Train yourself to listen to what the other is saying using your undivided attention, and try to grasp the personality of the speaker as much as possible.*

*Marcus Aurelius*

Emotional temperature and contact has a lot to do with being present. The child will notice that you are completely present and available.

It can be difficult to be completely present in the moment in a modern world that is full of competing impulses.

Maybe this is something everyone can enjoy practicing? As Marcus Aurelius phrases it, one must train oneself to be able to listen to another person.

Practice and reflection is necessary in order to be completely emotionally present for the child. The moments shared together with the child are important in the child's life.

*I am me  
An important person  
The most important one in the entire  
world*

*But I cannot be/ cannot become  
me without others.*

*If so, I am/ I will be  
nothing- invisible- and I do not want  
to be so.*

*In relation to you- the most important  
person in the entire world.*

*Kiss me!*

*Arild Nyquist - 94*



## **FOM**

### **- Shared Attention**

This project deals with shared attention between sighted adults and young children who are blind. Good communication between the adult and the blind child is of significant importance for the child's development. Shared attention is a crucial part of this communication. This project focuses on a small section that falls within a larger field dealing with early interaction and communication. Increased knowledge in this field might be of vital importance for young blind children and their parents.

A DVD is provided together with the Textbook.

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Ordering: Huseby kompetansesenter  
Gamle Hovsetervei 3, 0768 OSLO

Phone: +47 22 02 95 00

Telefax: +47 22 92 15 90

E-mail: [huseby@statped.no](mailto:huseby@statped.no), [tambartun@statped.no](mailto:tambartun@statped.no)

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