



Somerset Hills  
LEARNING INSTITUTE

## **Do You Hear What I Hear**

Sandra Gomes, an Assistant Director of the Institute, recently finished her Masters thesis on joint attention. Joint attention is defined as two people actively sharing attention with respect to an object or event and monitoring each other's attention to that object or event. An example of this skill is a child pointing at a passing airplane, looking at his mother and saying, "Mommy, look at that plane," and then glancing back at the airplane to share in the sight.

For many children, sharing enjoyment, interests, or achievements with their parents is an everyday occurrence. In fact, the skill is generally displayed in typically-developing children around 9 months of age. For children with autism, however, the lack of joint attention, which plays a fundamental role in language and social development, is a core deficit.

"I was dismayed by the lack of research studies designed to teach children with autism to initiate bids for joint attention," explained Gomes, a Caldwell College doctoral student. Although many developmental psychologists have assessed joint attention skills, only a handful of behavior analytic researchers have taught the skill. And, only one study by Joyce MacDuff and colleagues has taught children to make a comment during joint attention bids using auditory scripts and script-fading procedures. That comment was the question, "See?"

Gomes' research study extended the findings of MacDuff et. al. by employing the same procedures to teach participants a variety of comments. Gomes developed the scripted statements used in her study by observing same-aged, developmentally typical children – collecting normative data.

"Another exciting component of Sandra's work is her use of sound. Previous studies have neglected to include sounds, like fire engines or popping balloons, as circumstances under which a child should display joint attention skills," said Dr. Kevin J. Brothers, Executive Director of the Institute.

Of the 4 students with autism who participated in Gomes' study, each has maintained the skill. Participants' parents have also reported that their children are using the skill at home and in the community.

"The Institute is proud to conduct research studies. It is an aspect of our mission to pioneer comprehensive intervention models that may be used nationally and internationally for the benefit of people with autism," said Dr. Brothers.

Gomes plans to build on her work on joint attention through her doctoral dissertation.

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