

The Four Stages of Bucket Time

Gina Davies' Attention Autism builds shared attention in four stages. Master each before adding the next; the order is the programme.

FOCUS

Stage 1: the bucket

Irresistible items from the bucket, one at a time, adult-led. The only goal: eyes drawn to a shared focus.

In class: Light spinner, bubbles, wind-up frog. Big reactions, simple commentary: wow... it spins!

SUSTAIN

Stage 2: the attention builder

A bigger, watch-me activity that stretches shared attention over minutes. Still watching, not yet doing.

In class: Flour explosion, paint salad, balloon launch. Anticipation built slowly, payoff earned.

TURNS

Stage 3: turn taking

Some children take a turn while others watch and wait. Waiting IS the learning.

In class: Each child posts one ball down the gutter; the group watches every turn.

TRANSFER

Stage 4: table-top transition

A short individual task taken from the group focus to a table and back. The bridge to independent work.

In class: Watch the demo, collect your tray, do your version, return to the group to show.

Session Planning Cards

One card per stage. Plan the week's sessions in ten minutes; consistency between adults matters more than novelty.

Stage 1 plan

Three to four bucket items, rotated weekly so anticipation survives.

Say: "Items: __ __ __. Commentary words: two per item, repeated, simple."

Stage 2 plan

One build-up activity with a visible payoff. Rehearse YOUR part; the drama is the teaching.

Say: "Activity: __. Build-up steps: 3. The payoff moment everyone waits for: __"

Stage 3 plan

Turn order visible (photo strip), turns short, waiting praised by name.

Say: "Turn activity: __. Order shown how? Who needs to go first today, and who can stretch to last?"

Stage 4 plan

Table task mirrors the group demo exactly; success must be reachable alone.

Say: "Demo: __. Tray contents: __. Return-and-show moment planned? Yes/No"

Room, Bucket and Team Setup

Sessions fail in the setup more than the delivery. Check before the children arrive.

The environment

- Visual clutter behind the adult is minimal; children face away from windows and doors.
- Seating is set BEFORE the session: semicircle, named spots if needed.
- The bucket is sealed, exciting, and only appears at session time.

The team

- One adult leads; every other adult is silent and modelling watching.
- Supporting adults sit among the children, not behind them.
- Everyone knows today's stages and who handles a child who needs out.

The kit

- Stage items tested and working (dead batteries kill anticipation).
- Stage 4 trays prepared, one per child, identical to the demo.
- A finish signal exists: the session ends while attention is still won.

When It Wobbles

Common session problems and the adjustment that usually fixes them. Change one thing at a time.

A child cannot stay

Shorten the session, not the child. Start with two minutes of stage 1 and grow from success.

In class: They stayed for the spinner only? That is the baseline. Tomorrow: spinner plus one more item.

Attention drifts mid-activity

More drama, fewer words. Slow the build-up, exaggerate anticipation, cut commentary to key words.

In class: Whisper, pause, look in the bucket, look amazed, wait... then reveal.

Turn-taking causes distress

Make waiting visible and short. Photo turn-strip, first-then card, two turns each maximum.

In class: Ava, then Leo, then Sam, shown in pictures. Each turn under thirty seconds.

Stage 4 refusals

Drop the table task closer to the demo, or back to stage 3 for a week. The transfer is the hardest step.

In class: Same tray as the demo, one step only, adult alongside on the first two attempts.

Attention Autism: A 5-Minute Honest Briefing

What the evidence does and does not say. The distinction matters for EHCP meetings and parent conversations.

■ The mechanism is well evidenced

Joint attention is a robust intervention target: across 18 randomised trials, targeting it improved joint attention skills ($g = 0.53$), with knock-on gains in play and symptomatology.

■ It pays into language

Randomised evidence shows joint attention intervention produced greater expressive language gains a year on, most strongly for children starting with the least language.

■ The programme rides on the mechanism

Attention Autism's stages are a practitioner-friendly vehicle for joint-attention work: shared focus, sustained attention, turn-taking, transfer. Related structured approaches (JASPER) show promising results with similar ingredients.

■ The honest caveat

The branded programme has very limited direct trial evidence; what is evidenced is the joint-attention mechanism it targets. The four-stage sequence itself is also untested: monitor engagement and let individual children enter or pace the stages differently. Describe it that way in formal documents and track your own engagement data.

Evidence base

Song, J. et al. (2026). The effects of joint attention interventions for young children with autism spectrum disorder: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

Kasari, C., Paparella, T. and Freeman, S. (2008). Language outcome in autism: randomized comparison of joint attention and play interventions. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

Waddington, H.L. et al. (2021). The effects of JASPER intervention for children with autism spectrum disorder: a systematic review. *Autism*.

Davies, G. Attention Autism programme materials (practitioner training).