

HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS USE EYE CONTACT: DOES IT REALLY MATTER - AND HOW TO TALK ABOUT IT WITHOUT NAGGING

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Have you looked directly into someone's eyes today when you spoke with them? Did it help you understand them? Or connect with them? Or did it make you feel uncomfortable? And (perhaps more interestingly) did this eye contact or lack of something you thought about or did you do it all automatically?

Eye contact is a concept that generally doesn't occupy much of our thinking. Most of us use appropriate eye contact automatically and without much thought. However, eye contact may be an extremely important part of maintaining connected relationships with others and something worth thinking about more often.

Here is a brief overview of what we know about eye contact; particularly in relation to how it is used by children and teenagers – as well as what we might consider if it is something our child potentially finds challenging.

The benefits of eye contact

Babies are interested in their mothers' faces within hours or days of being born. From just 2 days of age normally developing infants prefer looking at people who are looking at *them*. Babies also consciously turn their heads to make eye contact *with others* by 6-12 weeks of age and the amount of deliberate eye contact increases throughout childhood and adolescence.

Furthermore, with some exceptions (see below) most research suggests *more* eye contact seems to lead to *positive outcomes*. Some of this research has been done with children and young people. For example, studies have found that babies and toddlers under the age of 2 who make more eye contact have better *language development*. As they get older, children who make eye contact with adults when they are given instructions are more likely to *follow those instructions*. Other studies have found that when children make eye contact with people, they feel *less anxious* about them.

The benefits of eye contact in adults have been studied even more extensively. For instance, studies have found when we make eye contact with others, we are more likely to: be able to *accurately identify how people are feeling*, more accurately identify our *own emotional responses*, better manage our *anger and frustration* with people and better *remember their faces*.

Other research has found that when people make eye contact *with us*, we are more likely to consider them to be sincere and less likely to feel rejected or hurt by them.

Is more eye contact always positive?

As always, this research has limits. Many of these studies have been done in laboratory settings using static images and videos without any social contexts. Perhaps once this social contextual information is added, eye-contact is less important for communication than it has been found to be in laboratory settings.

It is also important to note that even looking at the studies - eye contact has not always come out as a positive force. For instance, some cognitive processing studies have suggested people are less able to do difficult thinking tasks when they are looking in someone's eyes. One study even found that teaching children to *break* eye contact while they were trying to solve a problem helped them do better at that problem.

Another study found that if someone is getting negative feedback from someone they don't know well, if someone is afraid or angry, eye contact can make them feel worse. Also, *long, unbroken* eye contact (ie "staring") is commonly found to increase people's discomfort in most situations.

Finally, much of the research conducted into eye-contact has been done in European cultures. People from other cultural backgrounds may view longer and more intense eye contact less positively.

Understanding children and young people who find eye contact difficult

Some children and young people find eye contact more difficult than others. For example, children and teens with *Autism Spectrum Disorder* often find making eye contact more difficult than others. One study found that many children diagnosed with ASD had less eye contact than neurotypical children from the time they were 2 -6 months of age. Other studies found this reduced eye contact in these infants often continued throughout childhood and adolescence (and adulthood). Another study found that some children/teens with ASD not only avoided eye contact but found it overwhelming and distressing - and had higher “brain activation” in certain regions compared to non-diagnosed young people.

It is worth noting however that several studies did *not* find any differences in eye contact patterns between people diagnosed with ASD and those without. It may be that only people with particular subtypes or levels of severity of ASD have different eye contact patterns than those without ASD.

Children/young people with other psychological conditions also have difficulties with eye contact. For example, several studies have found that children who have a diagnosis of an *anxiety disorder* also have more difficulties with eye contact – feeling more anxious when asked to give eye contact AND when others make eye contact with them compared to their less anxious peers.

Children with *ADHD and challenging behaviours* also have more difficulties maintaining eye contact with others. Some studies have found less eye contact between these children and their parents and some between themselves and their peers

Should we try to help our children increase their eye contact with others?

Although there are questions which still exist in the literature on eye contact, I think there is enough research to conclude that eye contact is an important and helpful social behaviour which helps increase social connection and emotional awareness.

In addition, there have also been interventions to increase eye contact in various groups (eg in children with ASD) which have successfully increased eye contact– and led to positive outcomes for these children.

Therefore, I think it is important for us to talk about eye contact with our children. However, given this can be a very difficult task for some young people, it needs to be done carefully, respectfully and gently.

This means we should never “force” children and young people to use eye contact nor make them feel they are in some way “bad” for not using it. Instead, we should let children take the lead on gradually increasing their eye contact in a way they feel comfortable.

Here are some ideas for how we might do this.

1 Provide information and invite them to decide whether this is a skill they would like to build

It can be useful to explain to children, young people and their families that there are many benefits of eye contact. We might say something like:

Looking at people’s eyes or faces (see my next point) can be helpful. Scientists have found it can help us feel more brave and confident with people, help us know what people want and are thinking and can help us get closer to them. It can help us know what to do and say in tricky situations and help us have better friendships.

Shall we think about how you might be able to do this a bit more often?

2. Acknowledge that it can be hard (while providing hope)

It can be helpful to let our children know that some people find this harder than others. For example, we might say something like.

Some people find it harder to look at faces than others. Some people find it makes them feel uncomfortable or anxious. Some people find it hard because it is hard for them to keep still. Some people find it hard because they have trouble remembering. Some people find it hard because they don't find faces as interesting as other people do.

It's not your fault if you find it hard to look at faces when you are talking with them, it's just the way your brain is right now. But if you would like to work on this, I can try to help you. Many people slowly over time do feel better about doing this, and get better at it.

3. Be flexible

Recent research suggests that looking at people's faces rather than directly into people's eyes – may be easier for some young people and yet still achieve all the benefits associated with more direct eye contact.

This means it may be more effective to teach children/teens who struggle with eye contact to look at faces – mouths, foreheads, noses for instance – rather than directly into eyes.

We should also remember that we don't need to ask young people to look at faces/eyes for a particularly long period of time, nor do we need to suggest they should make eye contact in all situations (as outlined above, eye contact can actually be counter-productive in some situations - eg for solving problems) and or to use extended eye contact (ie "staring"). We might explain this to children/teens by saying something like:

-It's okay to look at noses, mouths or foreheads instead of eyes if that is easier for you.

-We don't have to look at people's faces all the time or for a long time. It is okay to just look at people at the beginning and the end of when they are talking or when we are talking.

It is perfectly okay to look away from people's faces when we are trying to think or concentrate hard.

4. Have adults "show rather than just tell" children and young people about eye contact

As always, children and teens learn a great deal from watching what adults do, not just from what we tell them to do! This means as parents we should be mindful about using appropriate eye contact with our children. This of course does not mean staring, or providing so much eye contact that our children feel uncomfortable and sometimes it is best to turn our gaze away when talking in some instances.

However, providing good eye contact with our young people whenever appropriate at home (especially when we are providing instructions or listening to our child/teen talk) - is an important way of teaching young people this skill.

5. Increasing motivation and decreasing distress for eye contact

It is counterproductive for us to "force" our children in a punitive way to increase their eye contact or to constantly nag children about this issue – as we know, distressed and unmotivated children or teens are unlikely to change or learn this skill effectively in the long term.

Instead, we can try to use activities which increase young people's motivation and decrease their distress, for example:

- For younger children we can "gamify" providing eye contact – eg peek a boo, or charades, or using silly glasses, eye contact "who laughs first", play games where we use only eye contact to find an object. We can also use neutral or positive imagery when talking about eye contact – ie "rainbow" or "laser" eyes (imagining a laser or a rainbow joining eyes to faces).

- For both older and young children, continuing to calmly provide information about the benefits of eye contact (ie the information outline above)

- Some children/young people enjoy using a “track chart” where they self-monitor their progress in remembering to use appropriate eye contact
- Building up eye contact – ie encouraging eye contact in easier situations (ie with people and in situations in which they feel comfortable) and then gradually in more challenging ones
- We should consider trying to “earn” eye contact from our young people rather than just demand it, for example saying “I have something I want to tell you (then waiting), would you like to hear it?” rather than “Look at me!”

6. Helping children to remember to use eye contact

Sometimes young people do not find eye contact distressing, but simply “forget” to use it.

In this case, rather than increasing comfort/decreasing anxiety, it may be more important to work with them to find strategies to use to remember to do this. Young people need strategies they can use themselves, rather than relying on “verbal reminders” from mum/dad/adults. The following strategies may be helpful, depending on the age and the child/young person:

Using stickers (picture of an eye) in various places

Setting up “secret code words” we can say to our child when we are out to help them remember (which avoid young people feeling embarrassed in front of others)

Having children/young people set an alarm on their phone/watch occasionally to remember to use eye contact at school

Asking them to put a note in their pencil case/locker/computer cases

These types of strategies usually only work in the short term, and are often not well tolerated for long. However sometimes a short “burst” of these strategies over a few weeks can be enough to still increase the frequency of the behaviour even after they stop being as effective as they were when implemented.

All the best with supporting your child develop this skill – providing it is done respectfully and gently, I believe it is one of those “smaller” social behaviours which can make a large difference over the long term in helping young people create better relationships with their peers, families and other people in their life.