

The Issue of Eye Contact

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As society has developed a deeper understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), we have access to more information about the issue of eye contact, much of which has come from persons with ASD who have been able to report on their experience:

- “I can look at you or I can listen to you, but I can’t do both”. *Jean Paul Bovee, 1998*
- “When I look someone straight in the eye, particularly someone I am not familiar with, the feeling is so uncomfortable that I cannot really describe it. If I don’t look away, then whilst someone is talking, I find myself staring really hard and looking at their features and completely forgetting to listen to what they are saying.” *Luke Jackson, 2002*
- “Making eye contact with a speaker can result in a breakdown of communication. How much easier it is to hear someone if you can’t see his or her face. Then words are pure and not distorted by grimaces and gestures. I can listen better to the tone of someone’s voice when I am not confused by the unwritten words of their facial expressions.” *Wendy Lawson, 1998*
- “With people having autism and Asperger Syndrome, the nonverbal component can be so difficult to decode that it interferes with getting meaning from the verbal channel. As a result, very little, if any communication occurs.” *Stephen Shore 2001*

Usually, the need for eye contact belongs more to the neurotypical person than the person with ASD, particularly in the context of social interaction. **Social situations and conversations** are the contexts in which neurotypical persons expect eye contact therefore encouragement and

training for play and social interaction may be the most appropriate starting point.

- Clarify what is meant by eye contact. Parents and instructors need to be in agreement about what this means:
 - Establishing eye contact?
 - Sustaining eye contact? For how long?
 - Alternating looking between the other person’s eyes and mouth area?
 - Establishing eye contact and then looking at an object or in another direction?
- Analyze your own degree of eye contact. Most people do not sustain eye contact with a communicative partner. Eye contact may be established and re-established many times in neurotypical conversation.
- Observe the child to see if he or she tends to look more at the mouth than the eyes. Many persons with ASD find communication easier if they look at the mouth of the communicative partner as it allows for “lip-reading” which may help with language processing. The mouth and positions of the lips also convey many messages to the listener/observer.
- If eye contact is the instructional goal, use familiar and comfortable materials and activities. When in the early stages of instruction, use the same partner. Often, as a child becomes familiar with a social partner and the sound of their voice, he or she may be more likely to look at that person comfortably.

During **instructional interactions**, the goal is for the student to learn how to do the task,

which may mean that there is no eye contact involved. Do not assume that if you request and get eye contact, that the student will be able to follow your instructions or understand your message. Establishing joint visual attention with learning materials or a book will be more important than the social aspects of an instructional interaction.

- A student may need to look down at his or her desk or at the wall or even close his or her eyes in order to process the auditory input of verbal instructions. When sharing information or instructions verbally, provide a visual support, such as a sheet of instructions, a diagram or a sample of what a finished product should look like.
- Allow time for the student or child to redirect his or her attention. Research has shown that many persons with ASD experience difficulties with shifting their visual attention: looking from one person or thing to another in social and learning situations.
- Do not physically manipulate or turn a child's face to force him or her to look at you. The child may find this to be overwhelming and may then do this to other people.
- Creating and using a story written to increase social understanding may be very useful in helping a student learn why and when people usually establish eye contact. It is important for individuals with ASD to understand that people generally like it when a speaker or listener looks at them occasionally during an interaction.

When considering the work that must be done by the person with ASD to live in the world of the neurotypical, we must ask ourselves to what extent we can respect and accommodate individual abilities and preferences when it comes to the issue of eye contact. The ultimate goal is communication. If we insist on eye contact, we may prevent the person who has an ASD from deriving meaning from the experience.

Keywords: eye contact, social interaction, instruction, joint attention

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