

## Eye Contact

“Please don’t insist that I look at you!”

The best way to induce anxiety for those who find eye contact difficult is to prompt the young person to look at you. When a young person is trying to listen to what you are saying, prompting them to look at your eyes will often interfere with them being able to listen to you. There are three primary reasons for this:

1. Some people have auditory processing problems. Research has shown that many people look at a young person’s mouth when communicating, rather than the eyes. This makes sense in order to better understand what another young person is saying.
2. Some people use peripheral vision to view things. For them, direct vision is too intense, so they look with their peripheral vision. Because of visual sensitivities, direct vision is too overwhelming to them. So, when they are looking at you, they will appear to be looking away from you and not attending.
3. Many adults with an Autism have explained that they become overwhelmed by the intensity of looking directly into your eyes. Since they cannot read the emotional information, it feels very intimidating and uncomfortable.

So, forcing a young person who is uncomfortable with eye contact to look at you is not increasing their understanding, but often inhibiting it.

Like everyone, looking at someone is much easier when we do it under our own volition, rather than when someone prompts us. Same goes for all communication. Generally, people who find eye contact difficult will look at you more frequently when they are indirectly invited to, not told to. Use the following tips and you will find the young person looking at you more frequently:

1. When talking to the young person, position yourself so you are in front of them and at their eye level. When your face is in their field of vision, it will get their attention better.
2. Use less words and more nonverbal language when communicating. Use more animated facial expressions, and exaggerated gestures to communicate, and the young person will need to reference your face to obtain the information needed. Use words to augment your nonverbal language while conveying most of information nonverbally.
3. When the young person stops referencing your nonverbal communication, try pausing briefly until they look at you to see what is happening. Invite the young person to check back with you regularly to stay coordinated with you by pausing patiently.

So, invite facial referencing; do not demand eye contact or comment negatively as this only induces anxiety.

Older teens and young adults can learn the value of giving eye contact, once they are able to choose to do it rather than forced. Since many people with Autism need to have rules for when to do things, a good rule of thumb is to provide brief eye contact / a glance when starting and again when ending your turn of interaction. So each time you take your turn, you establish brief eye contact and then again when you end your turn. This is one rule that several adults have commented works well for them.

Additional tips include; helping the young person with Autism learn some socially appropriate comments that they can use to indicate their attention, e.g. saying “yes” or “okay” or even



“hmm-hmm.” It’s important to help the young person understand that these little comments should come when the other young person pauses – not while they are speaking. This can be practiced with a familiar friend or family member.

The young person experiencing difficulty with eye contact can be encouraged to say to others, “I am paying attention even though I’m not looking at you.”

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