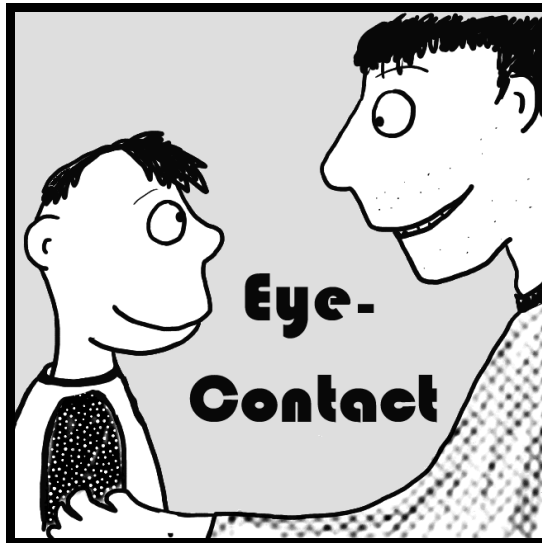


# COMMUNICATION SPOT •

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This month's topic for COMMUNICATION SPOT is **eye-contact**, something that is an important part of communication, but poses a difficulty for many children on the autism spectrum.

Eye-contact usually develops early in life when a mother and a baby will frequently maintain gaze for up to 30 seconds. This is a long time when it comes to eye-contact. A mother also monitors this gaze for an infant's interest and if the gaze is lost, a mother will change the style of her interaction. The baby is learning the rules of eye-contact – by looking away, it learns that it is communicating disinterest and that the topic is changed or the interaction ends. As we develop into adults, we usually learn the “rules” of eye-contact without even thinking about them. In fact, if I asked you to explain the length and timing of your eye-contact in different situations, you might have trouble. This is because what happens is subtle, but at the same time, complex.

## **So What /s Eye-Contact All About?**

If we are going to encourage eye-contact in our children, it is important to understand what it is all about. The saying “*he was trying to catch my eye*” describes someone who wants to talk to us. It's the first point of an interaction. If someone started talking to us *without* eye-contact, we might think a number of things: “Is he talking to *me or someone else?*” or “Is he *grumpy* at me?” or “Is he *shy?*” **Eye-contact starts an interaction.**

**Eye-contact also regulates turn-taking.** By looking at, or away from a person, we are setting the timing for another person to take a turn at talking. We look less at a person if we don't want them to have a turn and when we look at a person for a few extra seconds, it is "giving them permission to speak". A speaker's eyes are directed to their listener's for only 1-7 seconds each time, but listeners will look at a speaker for longer periods and far more frequently. When the eyes meet, there is a lot of information that the speaker gains from the listener's eyes. The speaker checks that they are indeed being listened to and they also interpret the listener's responses. Fleeting glances away may tell us that the listener is losing interest and that we need to change topic, or ask them a question to regain their attention. A prolonged stare from the listener may mean we have angered them or that they are flirting! Other information is also gained from the eyes. Eyes can close, open wide, eyelids can flutter and eyebrows can crinkle. So, **eye-contact also conveys a lot of non-verbal communication**, something that has traditionally been thought to be difficult for people with autism.

**In summary, eye-contact let's our listener know that we are talking to them, it regulates turntaking and it conveys non-verbal information.**

\*It should also be remembered that the rules of eye-contact can vary between cultures. In aboriginal cultures, for example, it is respectful to turn the eyes away from an elder when being spoken to.

### **Autism and Eye-Contact**

- Adults with autism have given us some brilliant insights into their feelings about eye-contact. One man I met explained that eyes were just "too confusing" that "they moved too much" and were "unpredictable". He had overcome this hurdle by learning to look at the speaker, on and off, at a spot at the top of their nose. This made it *appear* he was giving eye-contact and he found it worked well.
- Another high-functioning autistic man, Jean-Paul Bovee wrote about eye-contact saying "I can concentrate better not having to keep eye contact at the same time." He also expressed that looking at someone's eyes made him feel uncomfortable and that he had "no idea what messages (*he* was) sending." Bovee's comments have implications for when we try and teach our children about eye-contact.

- An interesting study by Kim M Dalton of University of Wisconsin-Madison looked at the brain responses of autistic and non-autistic teenagers as they viewed slides of faces. When the images consisted of a face looking straight at the viewer, the brain registered a much higher negative responses in the teenagers with autism. When these teenagers diverted their gaze from the image, their stress responses decreased. This surely gives us some evidence that direct gaze is stressful for many autistic individuals.
- But why? Is eye-contact stressful because the eyes' non-verbal messages are too confusing for people with autism? A very recent study, led by Dr. Elisa Back of the University of Nottingham showed that this was not the case. In her study, the children with autism were just as good as non-autistic children at "reading" strangers' feelings by looking at their eyes. This contradicts some of the earlier studies and anecdotes that indicated autistic people were unable to interpret information from the eyes.

### **Teaching Children with Autism About Eye-Contact**

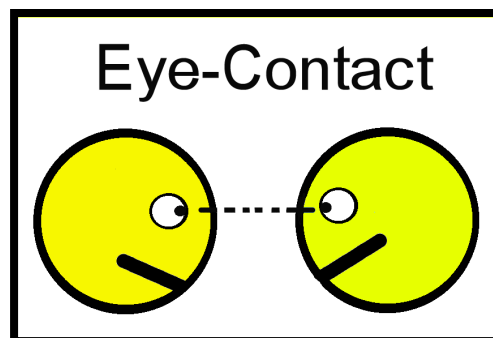
Firstly we need to acknowledge that eye-contact is not easy for children with autism, so *should* we insist on teaching it? I have cringed seeing some educators and parents starting almost every interaction with an autistic child with the words "LOOK AT ME". Apart from sounding straight off the set of Kath and Kim, it's not always the right thing to do. When children with autism *do not* use eye-contact, it is sometimes because they don't understand its importance, but more often it's because it's difficult and confronting. Some children will avoid eye-contact when they need to focus on the language being spoken.

**From my years of working with children with autism, I have found the following tips useful to consider:**

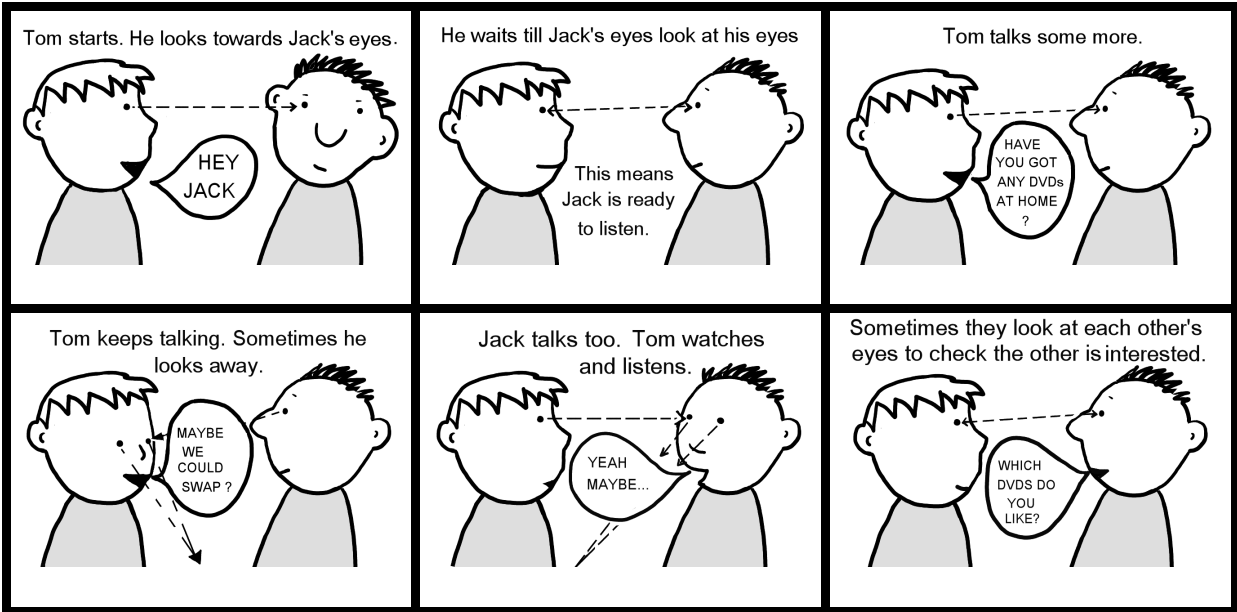
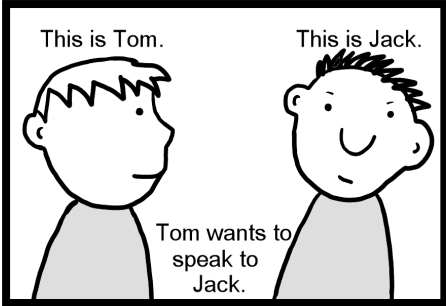
1. Like many areas of social communication, children with autism will need more explicit, detailed explanations about how , why and when to engage in eye-contact.
2. A child with autism may find eye-contact much easier in certain situations or with certain people. For example, you may start encouraging eye-contact with a familiar teacher, but do not expect the child to give eye-contact easily with an aunty who they see only once a year.
3. When discussing something stressful or complex with the child, it may be better not to expect any eye-contact at all. This can allow the child to focus more on the language of what is being discussed, without the added pressure of maintaining eye-contact. When talking about something "difficult" to a child with autism, I often find it useful to sit *next to*

the child and as I speak, I draw rough pictures on paper that complement the words I am speaking. This removes any need for eye-contact and works well to maximise the child's understanding of the language that's presented.

4. Teaching your child to look at someone's eyes *quickly* may be helpful. Be careful saying things like "You must look at someone's eyes when you speak to them", as this may result in an unnatural stare. Role-plays can help or alternatively, try videotaping some other children talking. As you watch, talk about the eye-contact between the children.
5. With some older children, even teenagers, you may be able to practise looking at a "magic spot" between the eyes if they are finding a direct look into the eyes confronting.
6. Remember that eye-contact is a two-way thing. Teach your child about looking at others' eyes, but also talk about what the other person's eyes are doing. If they are looking a way a lot, they may be getting bored or you may be talking too much.
7. When your child is wanting to speak to another child, teach them to look at the other child's eyes, wait for the child to look back and *then* start speaking.
8. With young children, who are just learning to communicate, you may wait for a fleeting glance before you respond to their request. Be guided by a speech pathologist or specialist teacher as to the level of eye-contact you should be expecting.
9. For higher functioning children, you may find "conversation cartoons" beneficial. Discuss the interaction that is taking place and talk about when eye-contact is and is not occurring. Point out that eye-contact is important at the start, but then as talking continues, it can be on and off. There is an example of a "conversation cartoon" at the end of this article.
10. The symbol below can be used in teaching about eye-contact. Cut it out and laminate to use as a handy visual reminder to prompt eye-contact in different situations. For example, you might be visiting grandma. Take out the symbol, show your child and say something like "Try and remember your EYE CONTACT with Grandma." Visual symbols can really help some children with the transfer of skills learnt in another setting.



When we start to talk to someone we try and look at their eyes.



These pictures and the EYE-CONTACT symbols are available free to download in a larger size and clearer resolution.

See [www.pelicanstalk.com](http://www.pelicanstalk.com)

and follow the links to RESOURCES FOR AUTISM.

This article is by Lucia Smith, Speech Pathologist. Illustrations are also by Lucia Smith.

If you have any questions, please email [lucia@pelicanstalk.com](mailto:lucia@pelicanstalk.com)