

Autism and eye contact

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Avoided at all costs at times

Most people take for granted the role eye contact plays with social interaction. In the case of children on the autism spectrum, however, the value or understanding of eye contact may prove elusive. It is a simple concept that has an interesting effect on the lives of children and families.

One of the first warning signs that can alert parents to the possible presence of autism is poor eye contact. This is of particular concern for young children after 2 years of age. The first instinct of many parents is to presume that the child has a hearing problem. The child may not react quickly to his name until after several attempts. Following an autism diagnosis, parents come to understand how eye contact is used or avoided by the child.

At first parents will adapt and work around the eye contact issue. Eventually many children can be taught to use eye contact when speaking. This is a good practice for life skills, but the child will make it known either verbally or in other ways if he is not interested in eye contact at certain times.

Eye contact, among other factors, also comes into play as the child gets older. Other children may be encountered at a park, school or public event. The typically developing child that approaches the autistic child in an attempt to make friends is likely to feel snubbed. (See [Autism and Customary Greetings](#)) This occurs through a combination of eye contact avoidance and little or no verbal response from the autistic child.

Parents and therapists will need to develop eye contact skills the best way they can. This can be through motivational or reward techniques. The child may eventually learn to equate speaking with eye contact and respond accordingly. This of course depends on the severity of the case of autism and traits of the individual child.

In the case of my own child, his eye contact has improved greatly over the years. Regardless of improvements, there most likely will always be certain moments that he resists eye contact. It is simply an uncomfortable thing for him to do at times. Ultimately the goal will be for him not to enjoy eye contact, but to use it as a life skill when social situations arise.