BARNET EYSEND

IDEAS TO ENCOURAGE

EYE CONTACT

In Early Years Settings



Barnet Early Years SEND Advisory Team is committed to supporting early year's settings to move to more inclusive environments for children with a variety of special educational needs and disabilities. This Document has been produced by Barnet Early Years SEND Advisory Team.

Why is Eye Contact Important

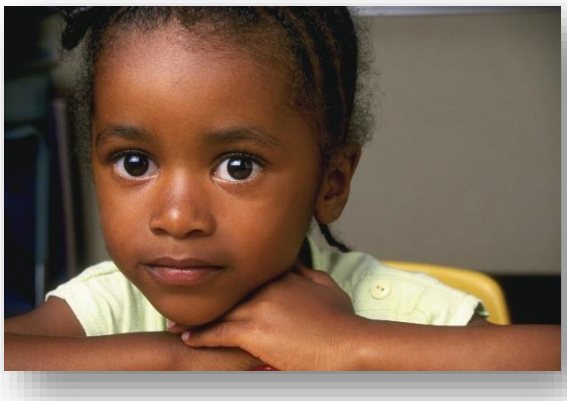
Introduction: Why is Eye Contact Important

Eye contact is important for social interaction. Generally people interpret looking at them as a sign that you are listening to them. If you do not look at someone the interpretation may be that you are not listening or are uninterested in what they are saying.



Children with difficulties in communication often have poor eye contact or may, in fact, avoid eye contact all together. Encouraging or prolonging eye contact helps children get more information about the spoken word through facial expression, lip reading and/or gesture or signs.

Below are some ideas and pointers on how to encourage eye contact with children. There are some general rules which are outlined first. It is worth trying to follow these although the main rule would be to encourage the child to want to look at you but never force them to do so. In addition, practitioners should be aware of cultural differences. In some cultures for example, it is considered disrespectful to look directly at someone. It is important for practitioners to be mindful of individual cultural norms.



HOWEVER, before designing programmes and activities to encourage eye contact for a specific child, please discuss the child's needs with relevant outside professionals and/or your SEND Advisor. For example, some of the suggestions in this document may not be appropriate for children with Autism

Some Basic Golden Rules

- Get down on the child's level and be relatively close (i.e. not the other side of a large room). It may be that you need to try out what is best for the child in terms of distance. (For some children, however, this may not be appropriate as close face-to-face contact could be perceived as threatening). Try to have as few distractions as possible.

- It is probably most appropriate to be opposite the child so that they have every opportunity to look at you.

- Call the child's name first before giving an instruction.

- For some children, gently stroking their cheek may help the child to remember what it is that you are expecting them to do. Be aware, however, that this may not be appropriate for all children.

- Be aware of visual difficulties (long-sightedness, squint etc.); if appropriate e.g. make sure the child is wearing glasses if needed.

- Be aware of how you are using language; use simple sentences and avoid 'clutter' or unnecessary words e.g. "Sophie, get the ball" rather than "Can you get that ball over there, Sophie?" It is also helpful to put the object of the sentence (in the above example it is 'ball') at the end of the sentence. For some children it may be helpful to say "Sophie, ball. Give me the ball" so that the child hears the important word early and more than once.

- Make sure that you give lots of praise for eye contact. This may be verbally ("Well done, Sophie, you are looking at me") in addition to your pleased/happy expression or it may be that you give the child an object that they want - see below.

- Try and make it as much fun as possible. The idea is to make the child want to look at you. Stop, for the meantime, if the child becomes frustrated. Making eye contact should be a positive experience!

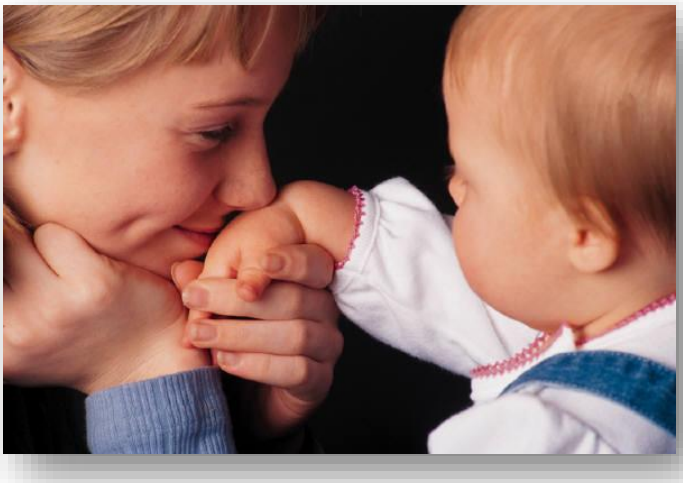
- Older children may benefit from being told that eye-contact indicates good listening. Give older children gentle reminders e.g. "Show me you are listening". Use visual cues such as the 'group rules cards' .

Ways to encourage Eye Contact

- **Point to your eye.**
  Sometimes just pointing to your eye will give the cue that the child needs to make eye contact.

- **Positive reward**
  Before giving the child an item that they have requested try to gain eye contact first. You may encourage the child to do this by holding up the object next to your eyes. If the child gives eye contact give them what they want. This will serve, together with verbal praise, as a positive reward and may encourage the child to make eye contact again when requesting an object.

- **Use the child's interest.**
  Use the child's interest as a starting point. For example, if a child enjoys puzzles/posting boxes try to hold back a piece that he wants (or each piece, if the child is able to be encouraged repeatedly to give eye contact without getting too frustrated) and encourage him to look at you before you give it to him. Other versions of this may be to try to get the child's interest by playing with the piece in an unusual way e.g. putting it on your head, throwing it and catching it, hiding it behind your back etc.



- **Peek-a-boo games**
  These generally involve hiding your face or the child's face with a scarf and pulling it off before saying 'peek-a-boo'. You could do the same with dark sunglasses, an unusual large-brimmed hat, a mask etc. In addition you can use any objects in the room that seem to take the child's interest: the curtains, under the table, behind the furniture or another person etc.

- **Songs**
  Songs are often a good place to start - particularly ones with anticipation such as 'Round and round the garden'. Encourage the child to look at you before you tickle them.

- **Rewards**

Use rewards that are exciting e.g. bubbles, music, puppets, visually exciting toys, to encourage the child to look at you. You may need to play with the toys and then hold back slightly and not 'act' until the child makes eye contact e.g. blow bubbles and then stop and wait until they look at you before you blow any more. Respond quickly so that they connect the reward with looking at you.

- **Moving Toys**
  If the child seems to be interested in a toy, pass it slowly from left to right so that the child can follow it with their eyes. Make it disappear behind your back or behind your head and wait for eye contact before you bring it out again.
- **Ball games and taking turns.**
  When throwing or rolling a ball or car etc. between you and the child, wait for, and encourage eye contact before passing it back to the child. One way of trying to achieve this is to encourage anticipation by saying, "Ready, steady..." and only saying "go" and rolling the ball/car etc.
- **Squeaky Toy**
  Hold a squeaky toy near your face and press it to make a noise. Stop the noise and wait for eye contact before you start again.
- **Use Peripheral vision.**
  Do something in the periphery of the child's visual field (e.g. wiggling fingers, operating a toy etc.) in order to get the child's attention and then bring your fingers/the toy towards your face.
- **Cardboard tubes**
  Play with cardboard tubes by looking through them or talking through them to encourage eye contact.
- **Face Paints**
  Face paints are an unusual and often inspiring way to encourage a child to make eye contact with you. You could try to use a mirror and encourage the child to look at you in the mirror.
- **Vary your pitch.**
  Try varying the pitch of your voice when you call the child's name. Sometimes just being a bit different can encourage eye contact.

Further advice

This list is obviously not exhaustive. Do let your SEND Advisor know if you have any other suggestions!