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Eye contact

Points to note

- Eye contact is a non-verbal communication skill that children with autism do not develop naturally.
- The child may feel very uncomfortable looking directly at someone when speaking or being spoken to. He may not understand how long he should hold his gaze, or is unable to do so in a manner that is natural and comfortable.
- Many children with autism find it very difficult to concentrate and listen to someone speaking while also looking at them. Some students will be able to make eye contact when they speak but not when they are listening. For some children, senses switch in and out so that conversations become fragmented.

What you can do

- Try to link the child's gaze to something he enjoys. Hold an interesting object near your face to gain his attention. Give lots of praise and/or rewards even if the child makes only momentary eye contact. Tell him "Good looking!"
- It is often more important for the child to learn how to orient his body and give non-verbal signs that he is interested in communicating and listening, for example, facing his body toward the other person.
- The child might become so stressed at having to look at the speaker that he cannot take in what is being said. In this case it will be necessary to judge whether or not it is beneficial for the child to look at the speaker. If the child is able to remain calm and attend to the speaker without making eye contact, it may not be worthwhile pushing this issue. However it would be better to instruct the child that it is preferable to be looking *near* the speaker and not staring out a window!