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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 student 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 and may be unable to do so in a manner that is natural and comfortable.
- Many children with autism report that it is 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 students, senses switch in and out so that conversations become fragmented.

What you can do

- Praise the student's attempt to make eye contact even if it is only momentary.
- It is often more important for the student to learn how to orient his body and give non-verbal signs that he is interested in communicating and listening. For example, body facing toward the other person, nodding, saying 'uh-huh' etc.
- Hold something near your face, such as a work sheet, when explaining an activity.
- The student may become so stressed at having to look at a 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 student to look at the speaker. If the student is able to remain calm and attend to the speaker without making eye contact, it may not be worthwhile pushing this issue. However the student needs to know it is better to look *near* the speaker's face than to be staring out a window!