

The Eyes Speak

Just as eye contact is important to adults in communication, it is also extremely important when communicating with children. But with an infant or a child, eye contact does something else. *Eye contact fulfills his emotional needs.* Without even knowing it, we use eye contact as a primary means of showing our love, especially to children. The more a parent makes eye contact with her child, the more a child is filled with love and the fuller his emotional tank becomes.

Parents can show *love* and *affection* through eye contact alone. They can also show *disapproval*. Sometimes parents get into the habit of making eye contact mostly when they are criticizing, telling the child what they did wrong, or giving instructions. If the parent doesn't also make positive, loving eye contact, the child might grow up emotionally insecure. Angry, threatening eye contact might be effective when the child is young because of fear or a child's desire to please, but as he grows older, the fear gives way to anger, resentment, and depression.

Even worse than giving limited eye contact is *avoiding eye contact with your child as a punishment*. This is cruel and very painful. Remember, eye contact feeds a child emotionally. It is a way of showing love for the child. When a parent purposefully avoids contact with her child, the parent may think she is teaching the child a lesson. For the parent it is about what her child did wrong. But for the child, it is about LOVE.

Children Learn What They Live

Children learn more in their early years than they do in all of the other years of their lives combined. If we give a child constant, loving, positive eye contact, he will learn that this is the way to show you love someone - unconditionally. If we use eye contact to punish or intimidate, this is what he will learn. Believe it or not, *this will affect his ability to make good friends and maintain emotionally intimate relationships later in life.* This type of learning is very difficult to undo. First of all, the child is not aware he is not making eye contact. Secondly, the child does not know he is doing anything wrong.

An example of how important eye contact with your child is comes from a research study on a pediatric (children's) ward in a general hospital. The researcher sat and watched the number of times the nurses and volunteers would enter each child's room. True, how sick they were or how much care they needed was part of it. But they went into some children's rooms many times more than necessary. When they figured out the reasons, they were startling. The more popular children received the most attention. Whenever nurses or volunteers had a free moment, they would pop into certain children's rooms because they found these children enjoyable.

What made the difference in why they found these children enjoyable? There were several reasons, such as alertness, verbal ability, and a happy attitude. But *the most consistent factor was eye contact.* The least popular children would initially look at the visitor briefly, then immediately look down or away. From then on, the children would avoid eye contact, making it difficult for the adult to relate to the child. If they had understood, the adults would have realized that the child needed to be loved and talked to. But because they didn't understand, they avoided the children, assuming the children did not like them or did not want to talk. By avoiding the children, they made them feel even more unlovable.

The same thing happens in so many homes. Patterns of poor eye contact are established by the parents toward the children. The children then learn that this is normal and respond with poor eye contact toward the parents. This makes the parents less responsive to the child. It's a never-ending cycle.

Failure to Thrive Syndrome

There is another important finding in research also done at a pediatric ward of a university hospital. The researchers were studying the strange condition known as Failure to Thrive Syndrome. *Failure to Thrive Syndrome is when an infant, usually between six and twelve months of age, stops developing.* Often he refuses to eat and stops growing. He becomes listless and lethargic (doesn't move much or respond to people or things). Sometime babies die for no apparent reason.

Why does a baby lose his will to live? In most cases the parents rejected the child. Many times they didn't even KNOW they were doing it. It was buried in their subconscious. They didn't want to deal with the feelings they had so they subconsciously rejected their child through their behavior. One of the ways they rejected the child was by avoiding eye contact and physical contact. Otherwise, they were okay parents, providing food and clothing.

The impact of the lack of eye contact and touch was dramatically proven during World War II. Many of the children from England's cities were sent to the countryside, where it was safer. They had food and clothing, but they did not have nurturing, love, and one-on-one contact with their caregivers. There were just too many children and too few caregivers!

Most of these children became emotionally disturbed and handicapped. It would have been far better to have kept them with their mothers. The danger of emotional damage was greater than the danger from a bomb!

Eye Contact Affects Learning

Isn't it amazing that something as simple as eye contact and touch can so deeply affect a child emotionally? Remember the line "A child will tell you how he is feeling through his behavior"? A child with an empty or low emotional tank will act out in negative ways. Most of the time, this covers anxiety and fear.

Dr. Ross Campbell, in his book *How to Really Love Your Child*, tells about how he instructs teachers in Headstart to work with difficult children. They have a hard time listening or focusing on the teacher. Most of the time they are so fearful they won't even approach the teacher unless absolutely necessary. And even then, they usually approach from the side and look down as they talk. Dr. Campbell tells the teachers to take the child on her lap and make eye contact while she hugs him. After a while the child settles down and responds much better.

Start Early

When you put your face 8 to 12 inches from a newborn, he will find your eyes and lock his gaze on yours. This early eye contact is a meaningful way of relating.

After a child is approximately six to eight weeks of age, you will notice that his eyes are always moving and seem to be searching for something. What is he searching for? Another pair of human eyes. His emotional tank is being filled when he finds your eyes and looks into them. We cannot start too early in giving a child continuous, warm, consistent affection. He simply must have this unconditional love to cope most effectively in today's world. And we have a simple but extremely powerful method by which to give it to him. It is up to each parent to use eye contact to convey unconditional love.

Resources include:

1. Campbell, Ross. *How to really love your child*. David C Cook, 2015.
2. Robson, Kenneth S. "The role of eye-to-eye contact in maternal-infant attachment." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 8.1 (1967): 13-25.
3. Keller, Heidi, and Gudrun Gauda. "Eye contact in the first months of life and its developmental consequences." *Advances in psychology* 46 (1987): 129-143.
4. Neil K. Kaneshiro, MD, MHA, "Failure to thrive." *Medical Encyclopedia*, NIH, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Updated 8/22/2013.