

Significance of eye contact for communication

Eye contact is important in communication. Creating a bond with your child is important in parenting, and eye contact is part of this. **Scientists have discovered when two people hold each other's gazes, they connect on a whole new level. This is a foundation for successful communication¹, and for bonding.**

Why is eye contact so important?

Before your baby was born, their vision was already developing.² When you make eye contact with your them, you are telling them that they are safe and loved. It's part of a bonding process that began even before they were born. But sight bonding can't happen until your baby is born. So that first face-to-face moment is powerful for both of you—even if they can't focus yet.³ However, over the weeks, as you hold your baby, interact with when you feed them, you will notice their expressions and look forward to their smiles. **And one day, you'll be looking into their eyes—and they will look back! Eye contact!**

Brain Coupling⁴

Scientists have discovered that when one person is speaking and the other listening, the brain activity of the listener matches up with the speaker's. This is called brain coupling.⁵ And it happens when you make eye contact with your baby, too. When your baby looks into your eyes, they're starting to recognize a fellow-human. **They're laying the groundwork for communication and social skills.**

What happens if you don't make eye contact?

If you don't notice a lot of eye-contact happening, or if your baby shies away from eye contact, see your provider. *This can be a sign of a developmental disability.*

You may be overwhelmed or scared that your child might be diagnosed with a disability, such as autism. This is understandable. Being worried shows you love your child—but it's important to get support for you and your baby, as soon as possible.⁶ There are many organizations that can help families adjust. A baby with developmental challenges needs love and acceptance, just as much as any other baby. *Sometimes traumas experienced in childhood,⁷ postpartum depression, or other severe trauma⁶ can make eye-contact difficult and lead to the inability to bond.⁷*

If you experienced trauma earlier in life, or are suffering from postpartum depression, it may be difficult to make eye contact and bond with your baby.⁸ It is normal to be worried or overwhelmed, but if you feel more extreme emotions, such as indifference or hostility, you should ask your provider for help.

*A baby who never gets affection and loving eye contact will have trouble attaching to other humans. They may even develop attachment disorder. A child with this disorder has difficulty relating to others in a healthy way. They may show no emotions or only negative ones. **Or they may lack basic instincts about boundaries and self-protection.***

When Eye Contact is Bad

Not all eye contact is good.

Aggressive eye contact, when a person dominates another or stares at them aggressively, is damaging to anyone, especially a child.

- A mean look can make them shut down emotionally or become anxious and scared. It triggers a surge of stress hormones.

So, you can use eye contact with love, to set your child up to be happy and strong, or you can use it aggressively, which will set them up for a harder life.

How you can use eye contact with your baby.⁹

- Engage your baby's attention by holding them close, smiling, and even making funny faces.
- Hold toys for them to reach for, which also helps with their motor skills.
- When feeding your baby, look into their eyes to show your love. You can use other senses to help them bond, too.

Active listening means you stop everything you're doing and listen with both your ears and your eyes.

Hold their gaze and give them all the time they need to express their feelings. Even if eye contact with your baby is difficult for you, you can make up for this by bonding through touch and sound. Others can help your baby learn eye contact too. Visually impaired babies may have difficulty developing communication skills, but parents can bond with them through touch and sound.¹⁰¹¹¹²

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