

The eyes have it!

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Sarah here. Last week, Lisa talked about being your child's relationship coach. A couple of weeks ago (*Social Interaction in the Era of Face Masks*), I focused on the nonverbal information we lose in social interactions involving face masks. "The eyes have it" was my conclusion- our eyes help convey our emotions and can help listeners interpret meaning in otherwise socially ambiguous situations. This week, as we continue to focus on social relationships, I'm focusing again on this seemingly minor thing that can make or break social interactions: eye contact.

Take a look at these two pictures. In both photos, the pet in question is looking directly at the camera, seemingly with the intention of conveying something to the viewer.



Now, take a look at these two pictures. Both of these pets are looking to the side. What are they looking at? Any idea what their "expressions" are conveying? What are these pets feeling? Pretty tough to tell, right?



In the animal world, eye contact is often used to establish or challenge dominance- it can signal imminent threat. Harrod, Coe and Niedenthal (2020) found that eye contact was less tolerated among primates with a hierarchical social structure (like gorillas) than those with a more collectivist structure (like tamarin monkeys). Some animals—such as dogs, horses and goats—intentionally engage in eye contact *with humans* as a means of bonding or when seeking help, while other animals—like wolves—may avoid such eye contact.

In the human world, eye contact is integral to survival as well. Eye contact between babies and their parents is vital to bonding and facilitates the release of oxytocin, the “love hormone,” which among other things, facilitates milk letdown in mothers. But it gets even cooler (if you’re a science nerd like me). In 2015, Koike and colleagues used functional MRI to establish that when people gaze into each other’s eyes, they experienced *enhanced neural synchronization* in the part of the brain associated with empathy and social communication (the right interior frontal gyrus). That’s right- people’s brains sync up when they look into each other’s eyes!

when you and your friend are having a deep chat and connecting on everything you say



Do all brains react in the same way in response to eye contact? In 2013, von dem Hagen and colleagues found that adults without autism spectrum disorders (ASD) had increased activity in “social brain system” regions (medial frontal cortex, temporoparietal junction, posterior superior temporal sulcus region and amygdala) when presented with images of *direct gazes*, while adults with ASD had increased activity in those regions in response to images of *averted*

gazes. The authors suggested that these differences help explain why people with ASD may not spontaneously interpret eye contact to mean something about someone's mental state or interest (i.e., not assuming that "they're looking at me because they're interested in me").



Like most aspects of social engagement, the meaning of eye contact differs across cultures. Akechi and colleagues (2013) found that Japanese participants rated live models making direct eye contact as angrier, more unapproachable and unpleasant than did Finnish participants. But, in both Japanese and Finnish participants, eye contact resulted in shorter looking time, heart rate deceleration (which indicates orienting to external stimuli), higher ratings of emotional arousal and higher ratings of perceived dominance.

So, what does it all mean? Eye contact is key to human and animal survival. When everything works as intended, we may slow down to immediately attend to eye contact, even if we find it emotionally arousing. Although eye contact may be seen as a sign of dominance and we may not maintain it for long periods of time (especially in certain contexts, like eye contact with a stranger), it can guide our attention, help us make attributions about other people's interest and intentions and trigger chemical reactions in our brains and bodies that help us feel connected to others. Culture and experience impact how we view eye contact but across cultures, it affects our actions and informs our social interactions.

While I find all of this immensely fascinating, you may be wondering what it has to do with you and your kids. Understanding some of the science behind eye contact helped normalize and explain some of the things that I've experienced over the years. It also highlighted the fact that

social misfires due to eye contact issues may not necessarily be about you at all. When it comes to eye contact, I'm sure you have plenty of experiences to draw from, but I thought I'd share a few lessons that I've learned from my misadventures with eye contact.

When it comes to eye contact, know your context! Think about where you are, who you're with, your relationship to them and the situation. I'm a native North Floridian who went to grad school in Nashville, Tennessee. When I moved to Boston for internship, I knew my Southern accent would sound out of place, but I had no clue that my willingness to make eye contact with strangers would make me stand out like a sore thumb. Apparently making eye contact with strangers is *not* a thing that people do everywhere- but I didn't know this at the time. So, saying "good morning" to people on my commute did *not* go over well. It was almost as if everyone else had formal instructions about avoiding eye contact...



Remember that eye contact may be perceived as an invitation! While I'm generally okay with exchanging pleasantries with strangers, taking the metro when I worked in DC drove home the importance of knowing when to avoid eye contact. I mean, when someone who is talking loudly to themselves and moving around animatedly steps on the train, *everyone* avoids eye contact. Exactly how they do it differs- casually looking out the window, texting furiously, keeping their nose buried in a book, pretending to be asleep. But in that situation, avoiding eye contact *feels* like it will decrease the likelihood that the person who's behaving erratically will sit by you.



Just remember that avoiding eye contact doesn't always work the way you want it to...as Lisa and I can both attest to, sometimes the unpredictable or even downright scary person decides to plop down in the seat next to you even if you're doing your best to be uninviting. When that happens...well, being alert but avoiding eye contact is probably the way to go.



We all feel awkward about eye contact sometimes! It could be *because* we realize it can be powerful that people often feel awkward about making eye contact. This is something that middle and high schoolers often bring up with Lisa or I in session.

That awkward moment when you accidentally make eye contact with someone like 5 times in a row.

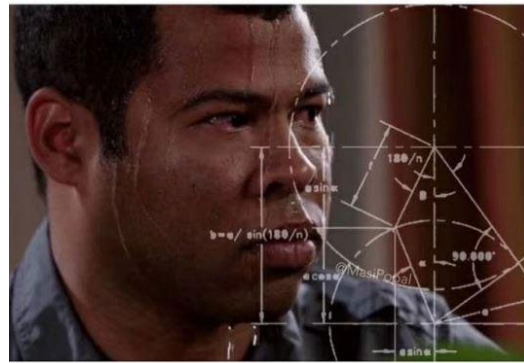


Just remember that we *all* feel that way sometimes *for a reason*. Eye contact draws our attention, feels more emotionally intense and can convey dominance. It can also bring about a lot of questions about what to do next depending on the situation (e.g., do I smile, do I say something, do I look away, do I act like nothing happened, do I keep looking at them?...). So...even if culturally and experientially, I learned to make eye contact, smile and speak when I see someone, it doesn't mean I don't feel awkward at times. I mean, who hasn't felt like...

That moment you make eye contact with another coworker while walking down the hall



When you're approaching someone in a long hallway and you're not sure when to begin eye contact



But here's what I tell my patients: think about the relative cost and consequence of making eye contact. If looking someone in the eye will provide an opportunity for a very unwanted conversation, then that's a pain. But eye contact is rarely going to result in life and death consequences. So, the worst-case scenario involves inconvenience, awkwardness or anxiety. Locking eyes with someone also rarely leads to them falling passionately in love or other dramatic outcomes. In many situations, eye contact is just a nice you can do to connect with others. It doesn't take much time or effort, but it can pay off for you and/or the other person. Think about the people working at grocery stores or gas stations. How many times have you seen people act like cashiers aren't even real people? They avoid eye contact, don't answer questions and don't engage them in any way. Why not encourage your kids to engage with others by using a little eye contact? In a way that feels authentic for your family, your culture and your child, of course. Helping your kids confidently use eye contact in these little polite and kind ways gives them good practice, gets them used to socializing and may help them and others feel good.