

# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

## Taking a Look at Eye Contact

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### What Is Eye Contact?

When we talk to others, we use more than just our words to communicate! We also communicate through our body language, gestures, and such facial expressions as eye contact. *Eye contact* is when we look directly at a person's eyes as we talk to him/her. Asking and answering questions, sharing stories, and greeting others as we pass by are examples of everyday situations in which we make eye contact with others.

### Why Is Eye Contact Important?

You can often tell where someone's attention is by following where his/her eyes are looking. Knowing the location of the person's gaze can help you follow the topic of conversation and contribute related information to the discussion. As well, when you make eye contact with someone that you are speaking to, you show the other person that you think what he/she is saying is important. Therefore, using eye contact appropriately can help us form connections with others for both socialization and communication.

### Making Eye Contact Easier

Making eye contact can be difficult for some children. Children who are shy or who have social anxiety, as well as children with autism or some developmental disorders, may struggle when attempting to make eye contact with others. There are different skills that you can teach children in order to practice making eye contact so that it becomes an easier and more natural part of conversation. Here are some suggestions you can give your children when teaching them



about eye contact and how to make eye contact appropriately:



- **Focus on the other person's face** – If you find looking directly at someone else's eyes difficult, try looking as close as you can to his/her eyes—look at his/her eyebrows, forehead, or nose.



- **Relax!** – When making eye contact, it is important to remain calm and at ease. Staying relaxed helps you focus on what you are saying to the other person as well as what he/she is saying to you. Take a deep breath, or find other ways to help yourself relax when making eye contact.



- **Don't stare** – When you make eye contact, it is natural to look away from time to time. When you look at someone for too long, it can make that person feel uncomfortable.



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- **Don't forget to listen!** – It is just as important to *listen* to the person you are talking with as it is to *look at him/her*. As you practice making eye contact with other people you speak with, don't forget to listen. Remember that communicating with others includes both looking AND listening!

## A Note about Cultural Differences in Eye Contact

This handout was written to assist teachers, parents, and children in the United States with understanding and using eye contact as an important part of communication. The use of eye contact in different countries and cultures varies greatly. For example, in some other countries, direct eye contact can be interpreted as

aggressive or disrespectful, and while it is more polite to make eye contact with someone you are speaking to in the United States, in other cultures, it is a sign of respect to lower your eye gaze when speaking to others.



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