

ARTICLE

Make Eye Contact

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“Serve and return interactions shape brain architecture. When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words, or a hug, neural connections are built and strengthened in the child’s brain that support the development of communication and social skills.” — HARVARD CENTER ON THE DEVELOPING CHILD

Mutual eye gazes during snuggles or when changing a diaper can be a powerful way to develop secure and nurturing relationships. Eye contact can also be an important social skill. Around four months, babies typically develop the visual perception to see colors and smile back at you when your eyes make contact with theirs. You just need to pause and wait for them to notice you are making eye contact. Give the child a chance to respond. Engaging in interactions in this way supports a child learning about back-and-forth communication. Eye contact is an important part of early conversations with your baby, who can communicate with you through eye contact, body movement, and vocalizations. Your gaze signals to your baby that you are still engaged in the conversation.

When you make eye contact with young children, you are facilitating their learning and development. Research finds that babies make more vocalizations when engaging in shared gazes and brain activity is synchronized (Leong et al., 2017). In other words, infants prefer and gain benefits from making eye contact with their caregivers. This preference for direct gaze seems to be present at birth. Eye contact is important for developing social interactions, relationships, and language skills.

Some children may become overstimulated when you make eye contact with them. It’s important to not force children to make eye contact. Instead be patient and invite them to engage in mutual gaze. The preference for direct eye contact is also different among cultures (Uono & Hietanen, 2015).

So, as you practice the strategies below, remember some children will respond differently.

Ways to Practice Making Eye Contact with your Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers:

- **Invite your toddler to paint your face:** While this can be messy it is a fun way to have your child gaze into your eyes while they create their masterpiece.

- **Play peek-a-boo:** It's a great game that is enjoyable and teaches children so much (e.g., turn taking, mutual gazing, communication). Follow the child's lead when playing this game. For example, if an infant turns away, wait for them to look at you again before making eye contact and saying "Peek-a-boo". Children need more time to take in all the signals from their environment so you want to follow their pace. This way they won't feel overwhelmed.
- **Make Eye Contact on a Swing:** Stand in front of the swing while pushing your child and take the time to make eye contact and smile.
- **Put a Red Sticker on Your Head:** For some children looking directly into their adult caregiver's eyes can be uncomfortable and too much stimulation. Try putting a red sticker on your forehead between your eyes and when they focus on the sticker, smile or make a quiet joyful noise. This can teach the child to look at your face without looking directly into your eyes.
- **During Meals:** Take the time to practice making eye contact during feeding. With babies who are ready to eat food, you can bring the spoon to your and baby's line of vision. Wait for baby to look at the spoon of food and meet their eyes with a smile. When feeding toddlers and preschoolers you can wait to make eye contact with them before giving them a cup of water or giving them food.
- **Wait and Pause During Conversations:** When requesting your child follow a direction, wait for them to turn towards your face and then try and make eye contact before telling them what you want them to do.
- **Limit or Avoid Screen Time:** To support young children to pay attention to these social cues, it is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics to avoid screen time for children 18 months of age and younger unless they are video chatting and engaging in some back and forth social interactions.

When you make appropriate eye contact with your young child, remember that you are building brains and strong connections that may last lifetime.

References:

Leong V, Byrne E, Clackson K, Georgieva S, Lam S, Wass S. 2017. Speaker gaze increases information coupling between infant and adult brains. *PNAS* 114 (50): 13290-13295

Uono S, Hietanen JK .2015. Eye Contact Perception in the West and East: A Cross-Cultural Study. *PLoS ONE* 10(2): e0118094. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118094>



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Resources:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1504-let-s-talk-about-it-5-ways-to-build-babies-language-and-communication-skills-from-birth>

<https://www.insider.com/when-do-babies-make-eye-contact?fbclid=IwAR3CDitov8oclMaN36v0xK4aHXFlqUf4tCW5u2aoV0C3r3RvtFHRUSKoTRk>

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/building-babies-brains-through-play-mini-parenting-master-class/>