

ARTICLE

Looking at You

Article authored by:

Holly Hatton-Bowers, PhD, UNL & Julia Torquati, PhD, UNL

Did you know that your baby and toddler use your facial expressions, especially your eye gaze, to learn about their world? Eye contact is one of the most important ways we connect with other people. Babies are able to make eye contact almost as soon as they are born, and they love to look at human faces. Parents and infants create a close connection when they gaze into each other's eyes. This way of looking at each other is called mutual gaze and helps babies "feel felt," meaning they feel accepted and understood. Mutual gaze also helps parents feel accepted and understood by their babies.

You can take advantage of opportunities to make eye contact with babies throughout the day during feeding, diaper changing, playing, and providing comfort. Babies can communicate through eye contact as well, by directing their gaze toward you with curiosity, to share their happiness, or to ask for comfort when needed. Your gentle gaze can help calm your baby and helps build connections in their brains that support their development of emotions and learning language. For example, when they hear you use a new word, they will look to see where you are looking, and follow your eye gaze to try and figure out the meaning of the word!

Emotion is the first language your child understands. Your tone of voice and facial expression convey emotions, and even very young children understand what your facial expressions and tone of voice communicate. For example, your voice is higher or lower in pitch, louder or softer in volume, and slower or faster in rhythm depending on your feelings. Your face might convey that you are tense when you crease your brows, and babies can tell if you are smiling even when you are wearing a mask over your nose and mouth because they can see your relaxed forehead and crinkles in the outer corners of your eyes.

Infants and young children use eye contact with parents and other adults to learn about the world. They use "social referencing" to determine whether something or someone is dangerous or safe, such as the rumble of thunder or an unfamiliar visitor, by listening to your tone of voice and looking at your facial expression, especially around your eyes. Your facial expression conveys whether a situation is safe, encouraging your child to explore, or if it is dangerous and your child should stay close to you. When your child knows that they can rely on you to help them understand safety and risk, they can more confidently explore and learn about the physical and social world.



Helping kids grow healthier brains.

123connectwithme.org

Maintaining eye contact can be an intense experience for children and adults. Your baby will look away when they need a break, and then re-establish eye contact. Following your child's lead by engaging when they are ready, and waiting when they need a break communicates that you understand and support their needs. Respecting your child's need to make and break eye contact will also support their development of self-regulation, because this is one way your child adjusts their own behavior to match their need for stimulation.

Take time to enjoy gazing into your child's eyes, knowing that you are helping them to understand the world in which we live.

Resources:

Gazing into each other's eyes for relaxation:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3405-pleasure-gazing>