

Eye Contact

Why is eye-contact important?

Eye-contact is a very important part of communication and interaction. Babies are naturally attracted to faces, and have usually learned to give eye-contact by only a few weeks old. Looking at faces gives babies and children the chance to learn about other people, as they begin to understand facial expressions, body language and how sounds are made. Looking and watching another person is also the first step for a child learning to copy actions and sounds and leads on to good listening and good conversation skills.

As the child becomes increasingly skilled at non-verbal communication, eye-contact can communicate powerful messages without words: for example a child may request an object, or draw an adult's attention to it, simply by looking at the object, looking up at the adult and then looking back at the toy.

Some children find eye-contact very difficult and uncomfortable. It is best taught through games and enjoyable activities. Never force a child to give eye contact.

How to develop eye-contact: general advice

Keep it fun! If a child is excited or enjoying themselves, they are more likely to join in and look at you.

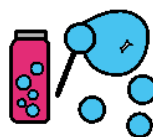
When playing, get down on the child's level so you are face-to-face. This makes it easier for them to look at you. This may mean sitting or even lying on the floor!

When you are playing, remember to include little pauses where you stop what you are doing and wait for a couple of seconds. This is a good chance for the child to give you eye-contact to show that they want you to carry on.

Repeat each game a few times, so that the child slowly learns what it is you want them to do, and understands what is coming next.

If the child does not look at you or show any interest in what you are doing, you could try copying their actions and sounds. This may encourage them to stop and take note of you. (See Intensive Interaction information).

As the child finds it easier to redirect his or her attention, it may help them to look at you, if you gently call their name.

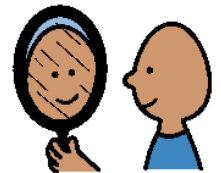


Activities to encourage eye contact

- **Bubbles:** Wait for the child to look at you each time before you blow any bubbles. If necessary, call their name and hold the bubble pot up to your eyes. Enjoy looking at the bubbles and popping them together.
- **Peek-a-boo:** Hide your face with a scarf or bib, then pull it off. Keep smiling and looking at the child as you surprise them. You can use lots of different objects to hide behind: a towel at bath-time; a bib at tea-time; a book or duvet at bed-time; a hat, or sunglasses when out and about.
- **Balloons:** Blow up a balloon and pinch the end to keep the air in. When the child looks at you, let the balloon go so it flies around the room.



- **Tickles:** Tickle the child's tummy until they begin to giggle, then stop and wait for eye contact before carrying on.
- **Mirror games:** Smile and look at the child in the mirror. Pull funny faces, wave or tilt your head to keep their attention and make it fun. If the child has learned to copy, they may be able to pull funny faces too. Don't forget there are suitable mirrors all around – in the car, at home, and even shop windows.
- **Chasing games and Hide and Seek:** Peek out at each other around corners.
- **Action Songs:** Sing songs together such as 'Round and Round the Garden', 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' or 'Incey Wincey Spider'. Once the child is familiar with the song, stop singing occasionally and wait for eye-contact before continuing.
- **Noisy/Wind up toys:** Make a noise with a toy or wind the toy up and watch it moving together. Encourage the child to give you eye contact before you wind it up again.
- **Funny faces:** Use funny glasses, hats and masks. Put them on and off yourself and the child and encourage the child to look at you and in the mirror.



- **Binoculars/Telescope:** Make binoculars or a telescope from old cardboard tubes. Look at each other through the tube.
- **“Ready Steady Go” games:** Encourage the child to look at you before you/they do an action such as pushing them on a swing, rolling a ball, knocking a tower of bricks over, sending a car down a click clack track.

