

The Importance of Eyes for Communication

We have all heard expressions such as “our eyes are our windows into the world” and “our eyes are windows to our souls”. These expressions reflect the important role that our eyes play in human interaction. When we hear a person talking and s/he’s looking at us, we feel that s/he’s talking to us. If his/her eyes are looking off into space, we may interpret that s/he is thinking or imaging something. When s/he looks to the side, then we might think that s/he is listening to something. If our eyes aren’t looking at the person who is talking to us, that person is likely to think we are not attending. When we don’t “look someone right in the eye”, s/he may question our trustworthiness. When we don’t look at a person, s/he may think that we don’t like him.

Many students with severe multiple disabilities use their eyes to communicate. Others do not. For students who don’t, those who are interacting with him/her may get the impression that s/he isn’t understanding or paying attention. In addition, others may not know that the student is trying to communicate with them.

If students can learn to look at, or toward, the person who is talking to them, then others will realize that they **are** listening, and that they **do** understand and will be more likely to treat the student as if they understand.

Eye Contact and Greeting

A good time to encourage our students to use their eyes to communicate is during greeting routines. Below is a sample script that can be used to teach this skill.

Greeting Script

When greeting your student, do the following:

- Approach your student
- Get down to eye level
- Touch him/her firmly on the arm or shoulder
- Say “Hi [call the student’s name]!”
- Wait for your student to turn toward your face
- Wait and count to 10 silently
- If no response, say it again
- Wait
- First give positive feedback such as praise to your student for turning toward your face
- Then praise your student for looking right in your eyes to say “Hi”.

Using Eyes to Request

Your student might use eye contact to “say” that s/he wishes someone would get something for them or do something. When very young children are first learning to speak, they may look at an object then look at their parent to tell the parent that they want the object. This is called “joint attention”. Students with multiple disabilities can also learn to use their eyes to request, by following a training script such as the following:

- Entice the student with a motivating object or activity, such as nail polish
- Ask the student, “Do you want to ... (e.g. put on nail polish?)”
- Shake the object to encourage the student to look at the object or activity, (e.g. bottle of nail polish.)
- Then continue to shake the object as you move it toward your eyes
- When the student has looked toward you, say, “You looked into my eyes, so I know you want me to put some nail polish on your fingers”
- Put on some nail polish
- Gradually fade the movement of the object toward your eyes, until the student is looking at the object and then your eyes

How Can Students With Visual Challenges Use Their Eyes to Communicate?

Students who have little or no vision may have great difficulty looking directly into a person’s eyes. In this case, encourage the student to turn his/her head in the direction of the speaker or an object that is paired with an auditory cue.



Here the student is looking at the nail polish and then at the adult to ask for nail polish to be applied on her nails. Communication is clearly taking place! The student’s behavior (eye gaze) is affecting the behavior of the communicative partner (the adult holding the bottle of nail polish), and her behavior is resulting in an outcome she desires (having nail polished applied).

The Eyes are Powerful!