More Than Meets the Eye: The Importance of Helping Children with Asperger's Tune in to People's Eyes

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Think about the meaning of the following expressions, all of which deal with the eyes:

- **We see eye to eye (we agree with each other)**
- **The eyes are the window to the soul** (they convey information about a person’s thoughts & feelings)
- **Pull the wool over the eyes** (to conceal something from someone)
- **A real eye-opener** (make someone aware of reality)
- **Look me in the eye and tell me that** (implies you are seeking honesty)
- **More than meets the eye** (there is hidden significance)

All of these expressions allude in some way to an individual’s perspective or emotions. And really, that is what the eyes tell us, what someone is feeling and thinking. It’s no wonder that from an early age, infants start to focus on their caregiver’s face, especially the eyes. Babies seem to be born with the drive to seek out information from the eyes.

Much of our communication is conveyed through the eyes and face. While the whole face conveys basic emotions such as happy, sad, angry, or scared, it is only the way an individual uses his eyes and eyebrows that conveys complex emotions such as whether he is teasing or feeling unsure (Sussman, 2006, p.21).
The eyes also give us clues about the topic of conversation. Looking in the direction of someone’s gaze is often necessary to determine the meaning of someone’s words. For example, if someone says “Wow, look at that!”, it is necessary to follow that person’s gaze in order to determine what it is that he is talking about. Therefore, the ability to follow someone’s gaze is an important part of conversation in order to establish a shared reference during conversation.

The focus of an individual’s gaze also provides information about what that person is feeling and thinking. For example, imagine running into a friend at a coffee shop. You ask your friend if she would like to stay and join you for coffee. The friend replies, “Sure”. Depending on where your friend is looking, however, gives the real clues about her thoughts:

- If she says “Sure” and looks you in the face, she really wants to stay and have coffee with you.
- If she says “Sure” but looks past you, focusing on something in the distance, she is distracted by something or someone. Maybe she sees someone else she knows, or maybe she is trying to avoid seeing someone. Either way, she is not really thinking about you and is focussed on something else.
- If she says “Sure” but looks at her watch, she’s willing to stay for a little while but is in a hurry as she has other things to do.

Therefore, our eyes send messages which sometimes correspond to our words, and at other times contradict our words. Paying attention to peoples’ faces and eyes, as well as the focus of their gaze, is imperative in order to determine the true intent of their messages.

“Reading” the Eyes in Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism

Now imagine the difficulties you would face understanding social situations if you didn’t pay attention to peoples’ faces, especially the eyes, when they were talking. Using eye-tracking technology, researchers have shown that individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) do not focus on peoples’ eyes. When shown a film of actors conversing during intense social interactions, individuals with ASD looked at the actors’ mouths or at objects in the background instead of the actors’ eyes (Klin, Jones, Schultz, Volkmar, & Cohen, 2002).

But these difficulties extend beyond just the failure to look someone in the eye during conversations. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and High-Functioning Autism
(HFA) have difficulty understanding the information conveyed through the face and eyes. This is captured in the following quotations from individuals with Asperger Syndrome:

“People give each other messages with their eyes, but I do not know what they are saying”, Lorna Wing (in Schopler & Mesibov, 1992, p. 131)

“I lack the ability to see emotion in most facial expressions. I compensate for this deficiency by listening to the inflections in people’s voices and using logic to determine emotional context. The words people choose, their movements, or even how quickly they exit a meeting can provide clues to emotion”, a 48 year-old woman with AS (CNNhealth.com, 2008)

“Why would I want to look at you when I know where you are?”, Christopher, a teenaged patient of Dr. Tony Atwood (Atwood, 2007, p. 114).

Therefore, helping young children with AS and HFA “read” the social messages in someone’s eyes involves helping them first pay attention to the eyes, and then helping them understand what the eyes are saying.

How to Help Children with AS or HFA Tune into Eyes

Draw Focus to the Face

The first step in helping your child with AS or HFA tune into the eyes is to draw attention to your face. The easiest way to do this is to be face-to-face when interacting with your child. During a busy day, it can be difficult to do this. There are many times when we are not face-to-face with our children, such as when we are driving, cooking, etc. But whenever possible, try to face your child and get down to his level, as this position will increase the likelihood that your child will look at you.

Being face-to-face can mean sitting across from your child at the table and leaning in close as you share a meal or do an activity. It can also mean lying or sitting on the floor facing your child as you play together. When looking at books together, it is difficult to be face to face. So try to lean forward and towards your child whenever possible so he can see you.

Another way to encourage your child to look at you is to wait. Waiting a few seconds longer than usual after you say or do something often catches a child’s attention and encourages him to look at you.

You can try waiting...

- after you make a mistake – making mistakes happen on purpose is a great way to get your child’s attention and encourage him to look at you. You can forget to give
a spoon with your child’s yogurt and wait. You can put his shoe on the wrong foot and wait. You can put his favourite teddy bear in the wrong place and wait. In all of these cases, you should face your child, lean in close, and look expectantly. In this way, your child is likely to react and look at you.

- **before offering your child something you know he wants** – if you give your child everything that he wants or needs immediately, there aren’t any opportunities for your child to look at you. You can “play dumb” and wait with his favourite crackers on the counter. When he realizes you aren’t automatically dispensing the crackers, he will likely look at you and wonder what’s up!

- **during a familiar routine** – before proceeding with the next step in a routine, wait for your child’s reaction. For example, when your child is in the bath, “forget” to get the soap. If you wait while facing your child, it is likely he will look at you.

You can also adapt some simple children’s games to incorporate focussing on the face. For example:

- **Play Simon Says** – have your child copy what you do, and incorporate some actions and facial expressions that will draw attention to your face. For example, “Simon says close your eyes”, “Simon says blink three times”, “Simon says make a smile”, “Simon says make an angry face”. If your child doesn’t watch your face at first when you do the actions, you can point to your face so that he knows where to look.

- **Play a game of silly faces** – take turns with your child making silly faces. You can turn it into a copy-cat game and imitate each other’s silly faces. Scrunch up your nose, wiggle your tongue, open your eyes up wide, etc. Some children also enjoy doing this in front of the mirror.

- **Adapt children’s songs to draw attention to the face** – songs like “If You’re Happy and You Know it” can be adapted to include actions involving the face. For example, “If you’re happy and you know it make a smile” or “if you’re mad and you know it make a frown”, etc.

**Draw Focus to the Eyes**

Once your child is starting to look at your face more often, you can try to draw your child’s attention specifically to your eyes and help your child understand the messages your eyes send. One way to do this is to let your eyes “do the talking”. Instead of giving
your child an instruction or telling him where something is located, show him with your eyes. For example, if your child can’t find his shoe, don’t just tell him where it is. Turn your body and head towards the shoe and look at it and say “I see where it is”. If your child can’t follow your gaze to find the shoe, move closer towards the shoe and point to it.

Eventually, with lots of practice, the goal is for your child to look where you are looking, without needing you to point to the item or turn you body towards the item. But if he is having difficulty, be sure to add the extra cues of pointing and turning your head and body towards the item.

A game that emphasizes the power of the eyes is “I Spy”. You can pick an item in the room and tell your child “I Spy with my little eye something that is .... (red)”. Tell your child that you are looking at the item and stare at it. If your child has difficulty, use the same cues above, such as turning your whole body towards the item and pointing to the item. Eventually drop the cues if your child is having success with finding the item, and see if he can find the item using your eye gaze alone.

By helping your child pay attention to faces and eyes, you will help him start to realize the power of the eyes and the messages they send. Socializing will be much easier for your child as he will start to understand what people are feeling and thinking about just by looking at their faces and eyes. Your child will eventually become a more effective communicator, as he will notice the look on others’ faces during conversations and adjust what he says according to the emotion they express. By developing stronger “people skills”, your child will have more success and fun talking and interacting with others.

This approach to helping children with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism comes from TalkAbility™ (Sussman, 2006), a practical guidebook for parents who are concerned about their child’s social communication skills.

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