



# Four Tips for Helping Children with Autism Make Eye Contact

**By Lauren Lowry**  
**Hanen SLP and Clinical Staff Writer**

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) don't pay as much attention to people's eyes as other children do. When eye contact doesn't come naturally, it creates challenges with communicating and interacting because eye contact:

- shows that you are paying attention
- shows that you are interested in what someone has to say
- helps you understand how someone is feeling (e.g. Do they seem bored? Happy? Sad?)
- allows you to figure out what someone is really trying to say (whether he or she is being truthful, making a joke, hiding something, being sarcastic). The eyes can reveal the meaning behind someone's words.

Being able to "read" someone's eyes is a really important part of sending and receiving messages and being able to connect with people. So it's something we want to encourage in young children with ASD.

There are many things you can do to help your young child develop his ability to notice others' eyes and to use eye contact. You can't force a child to make eye contact or try to teach it at a moment that doesn't have any meaning for him. Children need to learn about eye contact during natural, everyday interactions with the important people in their lives. If your child is really engaged and connected during an activity that is meaningful to him, he'll be motivated to use eye contact and he'll learn about why we look at each other when we interact.

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If you follow your child's lead during meaningful, daily interactions and follow these four simple tips, you will set the stage for your child to look at you:

- **Be Face-to-face** – The first step in helping your child notice your eyes is to make sure you are in a physical position that will encourage eye contact – that is, being face-to-face and at his physical level. If your child is lying on the floor, get down on the floor with him and face him. If he is sitting at a table, sit directly across from him, maybe on a low chair so you can be eye-to-eye with him. Positioning yourself in this way will make it easier for your child to see your eyes and it will make it easier for you to see when your child looks at you. If you're right there at his level, it's also more likely that he'll notice you and want to share a fun moment with you by looking at you.
- **Wait, wait, wait** – Another way to help children learn about eye contact is to wait during key moments in your daily routines and activities. By waiting right before a key part of an activity – like right before you let the car go down the ramp, or right before you blow some bubbles – it builds anticipation and gets your child's attention. If you are face-to-face when you wait during these moments, it's more likely your child will look at you to see what's coming next and use his eyes to ask you to keep the activity going.
- **Give your child a reason to look** – Doing something unexpected or doing it the wrong way is a great way to get your child's attention and encourage eye contact. If you playfully put your child's shoe on the wrong foot, accidentally offer a spoon instead of a fork, or put a puzzle piece in the wrong spot, it will likely get a reaction and encourage your child to look at you to ask you to fix it.
- **Choose the right activity** – Many young children with ASD find it difficult to shift their attention between a toy and a person while they play. This means that encouraging eye contact while playing with a toy can be tricky. An easier time to encourage eye contact is during People Games, like Tickle, Chase, or Hide and Seek, when it's just you and your child playing together. Without a toy to steal the attention, the focus can be on the people in the game. If you wait right before a key moment in the game, it's likely your child will look at you to show his excitement and ask you to continue with the game.

The most important thing to remember about eye contact is that children need to learn about it and practice using it during motivating, everyday interactions. Children are most likely to look at others when they are having fun and really engaged in an activity. Using the tips above to encourage eye contact during these motivating moments will help your child learn about why and when we look at others' eyes.



These ideas are from the Hanen More Than Words® guidebook for parents of children with autism or social communication difficulties. For a limited time, **save 20% on this resource with code AAM2019**. [Learn more](#)

## About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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