

# Eye Contact

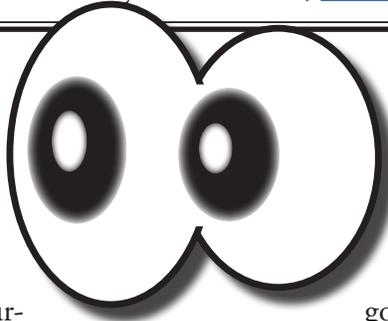
Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

“Making eye contact” is over-rated as an important “skill”—let’s put it in the same category as the antiquated notion that a limp handshake indicates a weak character. It’s time to stop judging people who may not always make eye contact, and time to stop torturing children and adults via therapies and other efforts to force them to make eye contact.

My son, Benjamin, has cerebral palsy. As a young child, he usually was not able to maintain his posture, hold his head up, listen, and make eye contact at the same time. He spent a lot of time with his head down, and his dad and I made the common (and unfortunate) mistake of assuming he had mentally “checked out” during these times. Imagine our shock and dismay (and ultimately joy) when we realized that our son heard every word we said (and memorized much of it) even though he didn’t appear to be “engaged” because he wasn’t making eye contact.

During years of physical and occupational therapies in Benjamin’s early years, therapists were insistent during eye-hand coordination and other activities. I remember a therapist trying to get Benjamin to hold a toy at “midline” and use his right hand and then the left to play with the toy. Benjamin’s head was often turned to the side, away from the toy, and the therapist repeatedly grabbed his chin and jerked his face back to the middle. As soon as she took her hand away, his head went back to where he wanted it. By this time, I realized Benjamin frequently used his peripheral vision (and I told the therapist to stop). He wasn’t being obstinate; he was positioning his head and eyes where they worked best for him.

When Benjamin began driving his three-wheeled pediatric scooter in first grade, several teachers complained to the principal that my son wasn’t a “safe driver” because (they said) “he didn’t always look where he was driving” (although he hadn’t run into anyone or anything). The principal



positioned himself about 30 feet in front of Benjamin, got down on the floor, and asked my son to drive toward him. He could see that while Benjamin’s head was down, his eyes were up—Benj could see where he was going, it just didn’t look like it because of the position of his head.

“Class, eyes up here,” is a common teacher instruction. My son’s teachers needed to know that Benjamin could not always get all of his body parts working in tandem. Just as when he was younger, he could not always maintain his body posture *and* keep his head up *and* look at the teacher *and* listen at the same time. Just because he wasn’t making eye contact didn’t mean he wasn’t *hearing and understanding* everything. (We learned, many years later, that Benjamin has a cortical visual impairment [CVI], as a result of premature birth and/or the intraventricular hemorrhage he experienced at birth. While his vision is corrected with glasses, the *signals* between the eyes and the brain are affected.)

The parent of a child with autism taught her seven-year-old son to say to his teachers, “If I look at you when you talk, I can’t hear you.” Like my son, this boy *needed to look away* in order to listen.

What must it feel like to be a child, and have an adult twice your size grab your chin or put both hands on the side of your head and forcibly move your head, over and over and over again? (This borders on child abuse.) What’s it like to have someone repeatedly snap their fingers or clap their hands, and yell at you—“Eyes up here!” or “Look at me!”—demanding that you do something you cannot do?

One of my son’s classmates was diagnosed with a sensory integration disorder. Ryan needed *to move* in order to listen and learn. His mom helped the teachers learn how Ryan learned best. While other students were usually seated at their desks during the teacher’s lessons/instructions, Ryan

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roamed the perimeter of the classroom, touching this and that. He heard and understood everything the teacher said. When it was time to do the work/activity, Ryan took his seat and/or joined his classmates in the group activity. No one had a problem with any of this. The teacher respected Ryan's need for movement, and his classmates in the general education classroom weren't bothered by Ryan's frequent roaming; it became the norm, no big deal.

Years ago, during my tenure on the board of a developmental disability agency, most people attentively watched the chairman of the board and/or the CEO during their spiels at board meetings. But one of the organization's executives routinely doodled *the entire time* someone else was speaking (and made no eye contact with the speaker). He had great responsibilities, was always on top of things, and obviously needed to keep his hands busy while listening. Yet no one routinely chastised him for "not making eye contact."

When I speak at conferences, it's not uncommon for a woman in the audience to approach me ahead of time to let me know that while I talk, she's going to knit (or crochet or doodle or something else). These ladies say things like, "I'll be hearing everything you say, but I need to keep my hands busy so I can listen better." And these are women who don't have any type of disability diagnosis! Why is it acceptable for people without disabilities to not always make eye contact, but it's not acceptable for people with disabilities?

I've often told conference participants: if you need to move around, put your feet up on a chair, or do whatever to be more comfortable during my talk, feel free to do so! Regardless of the "why" (whether one has a disability or not) we need to respect the words, body language, and/or needs of others. People know how their bodies work best, even if it doesn't meet another's standard of "what's appropriate."

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Let's remember that "making eye contact" is a product of our national culture. (Like slavery was at one time; just because something is the "norm" doesn't mean it's right.) In contrast, in some Asian cultures it's impolite to look someone else in the eye unless you have a very close relationship with the person. And in some American Indian cultures, children are never supposed to make eye contact with adults; it's considered rude behavior.

A first-grader was held back in elementary school because he would not (*could not?*) watch and then imitate the teacher's actions during circle time (e.g., the teacher singing, dancing, stepping in time to sing-songs, etc.). My son (and many other people I know) would not have been able to do this either. Shall we hold the child back in the primary grades forever?

What's actually going on? Is this really about the belief (and it *is* only a belief, not a fact) that making eye contact is absolutely imperative to a person's success?

Is it about one's notion of "appropriate behavior" vs. "inappropriate behavior"? Or is it about one person believing he/she knows best and trying to exert power and control over another? In too many instances, trying to force someone to "make eye contact" *does* become a battle of wills. And when children or adults with disabilities are unable to do what's demanded of them (causing those in "control" to feel they've "lost" the battle of compliance), people with disabilities *still* come out on the losing end, when they're held back in school, prevented from moving forward in their lives, and/or punished in some other way.

Some people are shy (as a child, I took cover behind my mother's skirts when new people were around and hid under the bed when the doorbell rang), some can't get all body parts in sync simultaneously, some need a visual distraction in order to listen—again, the "why" is irrelevant. If the person *could* always make eye contact, he/she *would!* Let's go beyond the optics—what it *looks like* a person is doing—and begin to see with our hearts and minds.