



Autism Tip Sheet

From the Elida School District Autism Team

Eye Contact and Body Language

Communication features listed in the DSM (Diagnostic & Statistical Manual) criteria for autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) include:

- Impaired understanding and use of nonverbal communication, such as eye gaze, facial expression and gestures
- Impaired ability to understand and maintain reciprocal interaction (i.e., the give-and-take or turn-taking quality of interacting with another person)
- Lack of using verbal or nonverbal means to bring, show, or point out things of interest
- Impaired ability to initiate and maintain a conversation
- Ritualized use of language when interacting with others

The act of making eye contact is extremely stressful for some people affected by autism. When others give them leeway to communicate in a more-comfortable manner (without eye contact) – they can generally engage in conversations and participate in school, work, and social interactions.

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In the classroom, the individual can simply be asked if he or she is listening to the teacher. A content question can be asked of the student to gauge his/her attention. Ask the student if he/she is comfortable with fleeting eye contact (to look up toward the speaker then look away). The student can be asked to look at content on the board or another relevant area in the room if making eye contact is too difficult for him or her.

Researchers are unsure of the exact reason, but studies suggest that children with autism have less understanding and ability to "read" facial expression and other emotional cues (Underwood et al., 2012). Even when students are proficient in content areas or the use of language, they can still struggle with nonverbal cues. They may only notice extreme expressions of emotion and miss more subtle social and emotional messages. They easily misinterpret the meaning of these messages.

In the classroom, teachers can pair verbal with nonverbal messages to "cue" these students. Teachers should be aware that students may have difficulty understanding sarcasm in speech and written text. A student with autism may also have difficulty understanding the meanings or actions of other students or even characters in books, as taking another's perspective can be difficult. The following may be helpful:

- use concrete examples
- use verbal and facial cues together
- use comparisons and contrasts

(Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence) OCALI Internet Module: Language and Communication