



A Sensory Life



The Most Powerful Sensory Signal of All...Eye Contact

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Regulated = Natural, Meaningful Eye Contact

Dysregulated = Fleeting or No Eye Contact

Eye contact is very complex. It is a sign of nervous system organization and regulation as early as birth. This continues throughout life and true functional and meaningful eye contact is only possible when the brain and nervous system are in ready state and regulated. Requesting a child to make eye contact is an "empty" form of communication. When a parent, teacher, or caregiver requests eye contact, or "look at me", or "find my eyes", the child may look out of fear or an attempt to "obey", but it is not meaningful or purposeful. All it did was make the parent or teacher feel in control of the situation. When one does this with a child it promotes a SPLINTER SKILL, and one only triggered by the verbal cue, and it is a forced response by the adults around them.

A child who struggles with sensory processing and self-regulation is very likely to have difficulty with eye contact.

This can happen for a few reasons:

- The child may be overwhelmed by the visual input when required to look at someone, and is simply unable to sort out what is relevant in regards to the visual stimuli.
- The child may be preoccupied with sorting out all of the other types of sensory input, such as sound or someone also speaking to them.
- If the child struggles with sensory defensiveness, eye contact may simply be too much to handle, when it is all so uncomfortable in the first place.

Here are some important points to remember:

- **Let eye contact happen naturally.**
- Do not force eye contact or request it.
- Lack of eye contact is a sensory signal that the nervous system is possibly dysregulated or in a state of sensory overload.
- Lack of eye contact can be due to the fact that visual input is too hard to process and is distracting when trying to learn or engage within the environment.
- **When a child is not looking at you, it does NOT mean they are not listening...actually they may even be listening better this way.**

TRY THIS: Have a conversation with another adult and both of you insist on making direct eye contact the **WHOLE** time, you will quickly see that one of you in the conversation will "look away" briefly. And while you are trying to maintain the direct eye contact you will also find it to be incredibly uncomfortable.

What if our society decided that we needed to "hold hands" every time we engaged in a conversation with someone? Or what if it was required to sniff someone first, before engaging in a conversation? This may sound crazy or absurd...but this is just as uncomfortable as eye contact for those who have sensory challenges.

"I can look at you or listen to you, but not both". *Temple Grandin*

