

Issue 19, “Shhh....I’m thinking with my eyes!” Eye Contact and Relationships

In the last issue, I wrote about sleep and the sensory strategies that can make it better for us and our children. This issue will focus on how using our eyes make our relationships grow!

Brainwaves is a monthly newsletter designed to create some “brainwaves” within my community of colleagues, friends and clients.

Beginning at birth, a baby can only focus at a distance of about 12 inches, just right for looking at their mother’s face during feeding! Human eyes have a distinct colour contrast between the white sclera, the coloured iris, and the black pupil compared to other animals. This suggests that our eye gaze is critical in our communication with each other. Tomasello, et al, 2006 discusses that “...humans are especially reliant on eyes in gaze following situations, and thus, suggest that eyes evolved a new social function in human evolution, most likely to support cooperative... social interactions.” S. Hellar in her book “Too loud, too bright, too fast, too tight”, 2002, states that the eyes contain 70 percent of the body’s sense receptors and are the first to take in 90 percent of the surrounding environment. This makes them critical in understanding and learning from the world around us. (Check out a great you tube clip on my facebook* page about this.)



So, what happens when children can’t make “eye contact”? ...or can’t read social situations? ...or look at people, but don’t seem to understand what they see in a way that changes their behavior? What does that mean?

Well it could mean that they have a sensory processing disorder...that they can’t focus on understanding what they see because their clothing is itchy, scratchy and triggering immense feelings of discomfort on their skin. Or it could mean that they have attention deficit disorder and can’t focus their eyes on people’s faces because they are very distracted by other sounds and sights in the room. Or it could mean that they have autism and their peripheral vision is actually much stronger than their central vision <http://www.livescience.com/37167-autism-avoid-eye-contact-brain.html> Or that the brain with autism can’t processing vision and sound input “Like watching a foreign movie that was badly dubbed...” says

research out of Vanderbilt University Medical Centre

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/01/140114202653.htm>

Unfortunately, what it ultimately means is that the child will become socially unskilled because, simply stated, they will lack the lifetime of practice that typical children obtain by watching, staring and analyzing people's faces, gazes and gestures. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/02/120227094108.htm>

How can we change this? Well, the solution is actually the same, regardless of the reason. In the Relationship Development Intervention (RDI)® program, this is where we often begin.

The most critical way to help children/teens to practice focusing on faces is to;

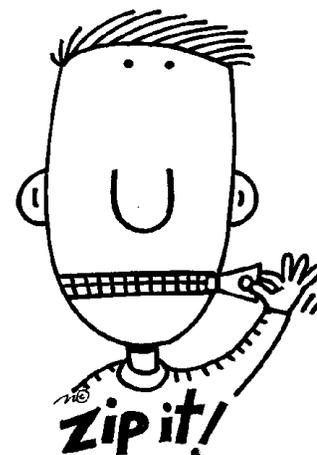
1) **limit the sensory distractions** in general in their environment.

For example;

- turn off the radio/TV and, especially the computer,
- take off your shiny jewelry,
- be aware of the visual input on the walls, floor,
- don't wear flashy, patterned clothing,
- put your pet in a room,
- speak at a reasonable or slower pace, or just stop talking altogether at certain times.

2) if you want to help them practice facial gazing, be sure they are calm and comfortable, and then slowly increase your use of gestures by **mixing bits of language with gestures** or by **only using gestures**. This can be hard for us to do because we are so used to talking and it can be hard for our children because they are used to us talking....and they don't like change!

3) if your child is one of those who does facial gaze but doesn't seem to change their behaviors according to what they see, you likely need to practice the no talking, only using gestures activities. You might be surprised to learn how much they don't understand when you only use gestures.



- *This article may be found as a blog on my website as well as a post on my Facebook page, search for "Winnipeg Occupational Therapist Discoveries in Therapy".