

spark*/spark*EL Backgrounder on

Eye contact

Eye contact is a form of nonverbal communication involving looking into another person's eyes. When we're really interested in what someone else is saying we make eye contact up to 60% of the time but only for a few seconds at a time. In other words, it's not constant and it's brief.

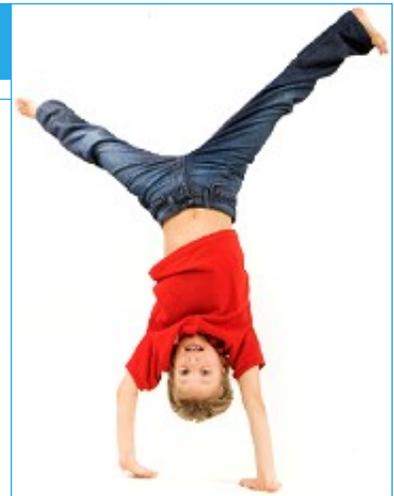
Eye contact has five main functions:

1. Providing information—like whether you're interested in the other person and/or what they're talking about or whether the person listening is understanding what you're saying.
2. Regulating interactions— when you reach the end of what you want to say, you usually make eye contact with the other person. In even young children, eye contact can coordinate visual attention between people and objects



3. Expressing emotion— eye contact can be a form of flirting and romantic attraction. It can also show general interest in the other person and a sense of closeness between people.
4. Exercising social control— direct, fixed eye contact can be a sign of hostility, aggression or anger.
5. Facilitating goals - eye contact can be useful in getting information or help, such as from a waiter or store clerk.

of interest so they notice or provide that object.



spark*, *Self-regulation Program of Awareness and Resilience in Kids.*, is an innovative evidence-based program that teaches children how to manage and regulate their behavior, thinking and emotions. **spark*EL** is spark* for Elementary-school-aged children.

Both programs are based on well-researched theory, current neurology, extensive clinical practice and **spark***-specific research.

spark* and **spark*EL** are comprehensive, practical and systematic and provides all information and resources needed to implement the program successfully.

Find out more at <http://spark-kids.ca>

Eye contact in children with autism

We know that the processing load of ongoing conversation is large. You have to put together what you want to say, say them and then check to see if the other person understands. Also, many people with autism indicate that looking at another person's face and eyes is over-stimulating and can overload them with information.

Poor or inconsistent eye contact can affect how correctly and consistently language and vocabulary are acquired. Poor eye contact might adversely affect educational gains in children with autism because of the importance of paying

attention to the teacher. Lack of eye contact can also suggest that children with autism aren't interested in other people or are a little 'strange'.

These are all compelling reasons for improving eye contact in children with autism. To date, direct training has resulted in some increase in eye contact but the functionality of the eye contact is questionable. Even with the shift to teaching eye contact within social contexts (using reciprocal imitation, peer modeling, role playing and 'naturalistic behavior modification techniques') has resulted in only modest increases in eye contact.

Approach to eye contact in spark*/spark*EL

What does this mean to our work with children with autism in spark* and spark*EL?

First and foremost, everyone needs to understand that eye contact is a **social tool** and not just a learned behavior.

We don't work directly on eye contact within spark* and spark*EL. We use eye contact as a meaningful social and communicative tool.

We make sure that the children understand why we make eye contact with other people. We

also help them understand when and where it's necessary and appropriate to make eye contact. We also work on eye contact so the children use it in ways that don't produce cognitive or sensory overload or make them seem strange to others.

Thus, we use a social-communicative approach to eye contact that places strong emphasis on its meaning and purpose. Some goals appropriate to this approach are shown to the right.

How do we approach eye contact in spark*/spark*EL?

Some important social-communicative goals for teaching eye contact to children (some of which are included in spark and spark*EL) include using it to:*

- *see if the other person is using gestures important to what he's saying (like pointing to something or some place)*
- *check to see if the other person is listening and understanding*
- *let the other person know when to speak (remember that we look up at the end of our turn as a speaker)*
- *let another person know you like them*
- *let another person know you're interested in what they're saying*
- *let another person know you're angry*
- *convince or persuade someone*
- *engage them get attention or help*