

CAN EYE CONTACT IMPROVE RELATIONSHIPS?

by Rachel Beohm | Body Language Myths, Eye Contact, Nonverbal Communication, Nonverbal Skills, One-on-One Interactions



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Next to “Have a firm handshake,” the most prevalent body language tip out there may be “Look people in the eye when you’re talking to them.” In Western culture, we dearly hold to the **myth** that making eye contact communicates respect.

But I bet you can remember times when you felt deeply disrespected by the way someone looked at you. Anyone ever leered at you? Glared? Sneered? They may have been making eye contact, but they certainly did *not* communicate respect.

Years ago, I read Dr. Ross Campbell’s book *How to Really Love Your Child*. One of the three ways that Dr. Campbell suggests we learn to communicate love to our children is through Positive Eye Contact. “It is easy for parents to develop the terrible habit of using eye contact primarily when they want to make a strong point to a child, especially a negative one,” Campbell states.

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- Authenticity
- Confidence
- Group Dynamics
- Ideal Life
- Leadership
- Management
- Nonverbal Communication
 - Body Language
 - Myths
- Nonverbal Skills
 - Breathing
 - Eye Contact
 - Gestures & Hand Position
 - Listening
 - Pausing
 - Posture & Body Position
 - Presence
 - Presentation Skills
 - Space
 - Voice Pattern
 - Word Choice
- Receptivity
- Resources
 - Free Stuff!
 - Webinars
- Situations

Eye contact doesn't communicate respect. It communicates engagement. That's why people often look away when you bring up a difficult issue—they don't want to engage on that subject. That's why it's creepy when a stranger stares at you on the train—you don't want to engage with strangers. And that's why having a prop or a visual aid when discussing conflict can help keep everyone calm. By looking at the issue (the sales report, the attendance register, the dirty clothes left on the bathroom floor) instead of the person, you communicate that it's not personal.

You can damage a relationship by insisting on eye contact (“Look me in the eyes when I’m yelling at... er, I mean, talking to... you!!”) during negative interactions. But conversely, **you also can build relationships by looking people in the eye during positive interactions.**

I saw this in action several years ago once I had kids of my own. Ironically, I noticed how eye contact, or lack thereof, affected my relationship with my *husband*. We had two girls eighteen months apart. I was a harried, busy, preoccupied mom. My husband worked a lot of hours and suffered from frequent migraine headaches. Life was hectic. We lived together. We took care of the kids together. We even still managed to eat dinner together most nights. But I noticed that with a two-year-old and a six-month-old (read: babies who can't feed themselves without requiring FEMA to come in afterward), my husband and I might have a conversation over dinner but our eyes *never left our kids*.

It was starting to feel like we were roommates (with benefits) who shared a house but not a life together.

So I started glancing up at him sometimes. Jam a spoonful of mushy peas in a mouth, glance up at my husband. Wipe an avocado smear off my shirtsleeve, glance up at my husband. Grab the bowl of rice before it gets knocked off the high chair, glance up at my husband.

Suddenly, we were engaged again.

As gimmicky as it sounds, you *can* build trust, engender positive feelings, and establish rapport simply by looking people in the eye—IF you do it during positive interactions and from a desire to build the relationship.

When done *the right way at the right time*, eye contact *does* communicate respect.

So glance up every once in a while—from your computer, your phone, your textbook, your mushy peas—and look people in the eye.

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