

Social Emotional Thinking with the Eyes

Young babies show strong visual fixation within the first two months of life. Long before they can reach, point or use words to make their desires known infants are able to communicate with their eyes. By directing their gazes they “reach” with their eyes towards the people and objects that interest them. As they become more independent their eyes help them to initiate and direct movement. Children gradually understand that the eyes can indicate a person’s thoughts and intentions and, increasingly, they learn how to interpret messages from the eyes of another person. This is a vital building block in the area of social communication and emotional development.

We all know that the eyes offer information about people and about the environment. However, children with special needs may require explicit teaching to help them to make informed guesses about the thoughts, feelings and intentions of others. A good place to start is by helping the child perceive facial features. This can be done by drawing the child’s attention to people - their faces and expressions - in pictures, photographs and in real life. The next step is to teach the child to follow a person’s eye gaze as part of a game to guess what the person might be thinking about. Some children may need a visual cue to help them follow eye gaze. This can be done by showing them how to draw an imaginary line with their fingers from someone’s eyes in the direction of that person’s gaze. What the person is looking at provides clues about what the person might be thinking. Guessing a person’s thoughts leads to speculation about what that person might be feeling or intending to do next.

There are other games that help children to practise following eye gaze. One is a turn taking game in which, instead of calling someone’s name, you look at the person whose turn it is. Another is a scavenger hunt during which children locate clues or objects by determining where your eyes are directed. You can incorporate eye gaze games while doing chores such as putting toys away or during household activities such as baking. In these situations you can use the eyes to point to each item to put away or to each step of the baking activity.

As children mature, you can teach them to think about what is happening around them, to observe clues about what is appropriate behaviour or what other people expect, i.e. “reading the room”. All of these activities support social emotional development.

Assisting children to understand how to make use of the information provided by and through the eyes helps them to develop connections to others and enhances interactions with social partners. This understanding is one of the entry points to the social mind and to the development of social emotional competence.



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