

The "Eyes" Have It

By Arleta James, PCC

Making eye contact is one of the most important forms of communication. Through our eyes we express joy, "first impressions", honesty, interest in others, confidence in ourselves, remorse, love, intelligence, compassion and friendship. In fact, looking at others is a first step toward making a friend, and eye contact allows those around us insight into our true thoughts and feelings. On the flip side, the negative behaviors of the child with a history of complex trauma often lead to parental and sibling looks of anger, disgust, loathing, rejection and of course, "the look."



Take a moment to think about the importance of eye contact using American standards. What would you think if your boss didn't look at you when he was speaking? Or, worse yet, if your boss didn't look at you when you were speaking? What would you think if your friend, husband or wife kept looking away as you were seeking their advice or help? Do you look up to respond when you are reading the paper or surfing the Internet? Are you shouting up the stairs to your children in the bedroom? Do you look away to the buzzing cell phone as your child is telling you something funny or important? What type of eye contact have you given your children over the past several days? What did your eyes convey? Is it what your children needed?

Reciprocal eye contact between parents, siblings and the adoptee that has experienced abandonment, abuse and neglect may require some effort. Even when mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters offer genuine, kind and loving eyes, the adoptee may look away or simply look through her family member. These adoptees don't want their eyes to be the "mirror to the soul." Battered, left and called ugly names, these children feel "bad", "unlovable", "unwanted" and they believe they caused the past trauma. "If I had been a better kid, my birthmother would have kept me." "I made my birthdad angry. He had to hit me." The traumatized adoptee arrives in the family with shattered self-esteem.

Self-esteem is the collection of beliefs or feelings that we have about ourselves, or our self-perceptions. How we define ourselves influences our motivations, attitudes and behaviors, and affects our emotional adjustment. We have a mental picture of who we are, how we look, what we're good at and what our weaknesses might be. Self-esteem is about how much we feel valued, loved, accepted and thought of by others—and how much we value, love and accept ourselves (Homeier, online.)

Patterns of self-esteem start very early in life. For example, when a baby or toddler reaches a milestone he experiences a sense of accomplishment that bolsters self-esteem. Simultaneously, the child—if in a healthy environment—receives praise and support from his parents. The child experiences feelings of parental love. ***In fact, parents are the most important influence on self-esteem*** (Sheslow and Taylor-Lukens, online.) Among the most damaging things parents can do to thwart the development of self-esteem is to abuse their children. The breakdown of the family is likewise a source of harm to self-concept (Emler, online.)

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships when New Kids Join the Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>)

Clearly, the child who experiences rejection lacks the foundation for self-esteem. Abuse and neglect compound the damage. For children with negative self-concept, challenges become a major source of frustration and anxiety, they have a hard time finding solutions to problems and they are plagued with negative self-thoughts—"I am stupid," "I can't do anything right" or "I don't deserve a family." Faced with a new and immediate challenge, their immediate response is "I can't." They frequently become passive, withdrawn or depressed. Poor self-perceptions are also linked to teenage pregnancy, eating disorders, suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts.

So, one step in the direction of healing the traumatized child is to improve his ability to communicate with his eyes. There are all types of nonintrusive ways to help the adoptee risk the intimacy of looking at those around him. Some of the suggestions listed some involve direct eye contact and others are about looking together:

- Look at each other and name the ways you are alike. Explore each other's features.
- Play peek-a-boo with young and older children—remember the child adopted at age 4, 6, 10 or 12 most likely didn't have this experience
- Let your child put eye shadow on you
- Have all the kids participate in staring contests
- See which child can make the funniest face
- Ask your child to look at you whenever you hand him a cookie, a laundry basket, etc.
- Cease conversations from separate rooms. Have the child come to you and speak with you.
- Have a candy-kiss hunt. Hide the kisses. For each one the child finds, he must look in your eyes for five seconds, get a kiss from you, then eat the candy kiss.
- Paint faces
- Pick daffodils and put them in water with food coloring—watch what happens overnight
- Turn off the lights and play flashlights. When you beam on the child, he has to look at your eyes for two seconds.
- Build a model plane. Pause for some brief eye contact and conversations while the glue is drying.

Don't these ideas sound fun? And, laughter, giggles and happy eyes forge strong connections among all members of adoptive families!

Interested in more ways to look at or with your child? "See" *Parenting the Hurt Child* by Gregory C. Keck and Regina Kupecky or *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships when New Kids Join the Family* by Arleta James.