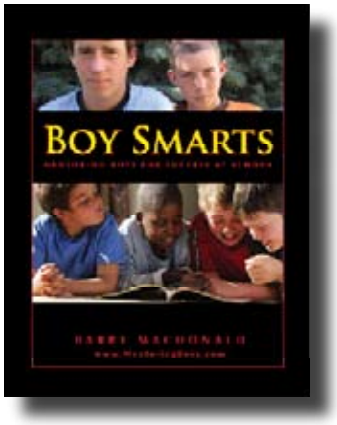
Barry MacDonald's Boy Smarts Newsletter
November 2013 - MentoringBoys.com

"Look at Me When I'm Talking to You!"

Does demand for eye contact lead to better understanding?



Recently, I was visiting an elementary school and overheard the school principal questioning a ten year-old boy about a playground misadventure. As the principal bore down with questions, the boy jiggled his foot, squirmed, and looked away. "I'm trying to help you," the principal announced, moving closer. "You need to look at me when I'm speaking with you." The boy lowered his eyes, hanging his head—as if trying to protect himself from a barrage of words.

As boys seem to willfully look away when we educators and parents are trying to ensure our message is registering, it is all too common for us to feel exasperated. Why is this boy so rude? Why can't he show he is listening by looking into our eyes, or at least into our direction?

When was the last time you insisted that a boy look at you during an emotionally charged moment, and what was the result?

Did your demand for eye contact lead to better understanding?

As adults, we may put a lot of energy into requiring eye contact from children. Are we trying to teach a social skill, or expressing a need of our own to feel heard and validated? I can't count the number of times I've heard adults exhort a boy—usually in a stern or impatient tone: "Look at me while I'm talking to you!" However, I don't think I've ever heard a child demand eye contact from an adult, with the possible exception of a young child seeking attention, tugging on the arm of a busy or preoccupied parent.

If we consider research findings around eye contact, we may realize that it can signal very different messages depending on the culture, and the power dynamics in a situation. While eye contact may serve as a sign of trusting connection, it can also alert us to competitive or hostile encounters.

Boys such as the one in the school hallway who appeared to be resisting the principal's authority may have been emotionally flooded, and he may have experienced the principal's demand for eye contact as intimidating. By looking away, the boy may have been trying to regulate his own intense emotions and focus on composing a response. In a charged situation where the boy's nervous system is on red alert, eliciting the fight/flight/freeze response, looking away may have seemed like a safer option than looking directly into the powerful principal's eyes.

Recently, a new study has attracted global attention by taking advantage of the latest eye-tracking technology to investigate the effects of eye contact in situations involving persuasion. Researchers from the ***University of British Columbia***, ***University of Freiburg*** (Germany), and ***Harvard University*** concluded that demanding eye contact is more likely to sabotage a message rather than strengthen it.

A series of experiments found that spending more time looking at someone's eyes as they spoke was only associated with greater receptiveness among participants who already agreed with the speaker on that issue.

Last week I had an opportunity to catch up with the ***UBC*** investigator Dr. Frances Chen to discuss implications for parents and teachers. She suggests that when parents and teachers insist that a child look them in the eye to focus their attention that they may actually be sabotaging their intent to get their message across, or at least adding more emotional intensity to an already emotionally charged interaction. She encourages adults to consider how a child's avoidance of eye contact and looking away may signal feelings of stress. "It's an interactive process, both parents and teachers should be attentive to a child's state of mind and not force eye contact when a child is overloaded or threatened. Remember that relatively subtle, even subconscious, non-verbal behaviours can have a big impact on receptiveness to your message," she states.

Here are a few more considerations for you to ponder the next time you find yourself tempted to demand eye contact from a boy:

Avoiding Eye Contact Can Help Thinking

Researchers from **Durham** and ***Northumbria Universities*** found that people tend to look at others when talking to them, but look away when thinking. The 2012 study entitled ***Face-to-face interference in typical and atypical development*** found that even normally developing children needed the break in eye contact to process the information being presented. Debbie Riby, the lead researcher, said: "One of the really important things for teachers to be aware of is that we shouldn't expect children to keep looking at us when they're trying to think. Forcing a child to look at a person's face while they listen to descriptions of abstract shapes interferes with their ability to understand the description given to them. Children perform the same task much better if they are able to look away from a face when they are thinking."

Looking Away Makes Vision Easier

Sustaining natural eye contact requires that we sometimes avoid the eyes of the person in front of us to attend to our peripheral vision. Our peripheral vision acts as like an anchor and keeps our eyes relaxed and our vision balanced. Insufficient peripheral vision makes eye contact feel more like staring. To experience this concept first hand, put your hands up to the side of your eyes to block your peripheral vision. Now see if it feels comfortable to engage in easy eye contact with the person in front of you. How long before you feel your eyes either fixed in a glassy stare or wanting to look away?

Eye Movement Eases Emotional Regulation

In ***Boy Smarts: Mentoring Boys for Success at School***, I suggest that, "Boys need movement like tires need air—both operate poorly without." Drawing from my personal experiences growing up, I described how when I was in trouble and my mother was disciplining me, I would fidget and move from side to side. "She would ask me to stand still. I would stop transferring my weight from leg to leg and begin twitching my fingers. Of course she would tell me to hold still again. I would avoid eye contact and she would demand it. Despite my very best attempt to be motionless, my body would begin to vibrate. It turns out that I was not alone and many boys react similarly. Movement seems to help boys process information."

Fidgeting and looking away can assist the brain to integrate and process information between the right and left hemispheres. The more integrated these neural pathways are, the better the brain functions, and the more children will be able to take in and absorb what they are hearing.

Compliance Hinders Collaboration

For decades teachers were taught that if a child did not comply with demands for eye contact that it was quite likely a red flag for Autism, ADD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or Tourette's Syndrome, to name a few. I recall a 1984 study entitled "Eye contact as an antecedent to compliant behavior" that concluded that a teacher's demand for eye contact is an effective precursor for increasing compliance in learning. Today, we recognize that with the exception of rules around safety, demanding compliance simply does not lead to receptivity to learning, but instead fosters resistance and resentment.

To strengthen communication with boys, we must move increasingly toward a style of parenting and teaching that emphasizes collaboration and relevant problem-solving.

In ***Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion***, I suggest that parents and teachers appreciate how forcing compliance is not the same as collaborating with a boy, or meeting his needs. In the chapter titled ***Should I Reward My Son With Cash for Grades?*** I suggest that we ask whether we are working with a boy in a respectful and authentic collaboration or simply demanding obedience and compliance, as we might do with a dog. I suggest that before we rush to threaten or apply a punitive sanction, we ought first ask ourselves broader and deeper questions:

—Is there a pattern to the misbehaviour? If so, what might the pattern reveal?

—What might a particular boy be saying through his behaviour that we have not understood?

—How might we look beyond his recalcitrant behaviour to better understand what he needs?

—If the boy is old enough, who might respectfully seek his input and invite him into authentic partnership? How could we work collaboratively to a positive outcome that he can be part of?

Listen to What is Not Being Said

Instead of listening—really listening—it's all too common to focus on what we're planning to say in response, or how we might direct conversation.

Instead of really listening, we might intellectualize or analyze what a boy is saying: "Sounds like you have a case of the pre-game jitters to me."

Instead of really listening, we might cut off a child's rambling story to lecture or preach—or even interrogate: "What did you do to make him so angry?"

Given that about 75% of communication is non-verbal, how we respond to non-verbal messages—lack of eye contact in particular—is critical. We have learned from much recent brain research that the brain attunes to deeper meanings by mirroring non-verbal messages. By making space for children to listen in their own way, we say: "You are a person of worth. I respect you and want to understand you." Our own mirroring of non-verbal expressions might not speak to a boy's conscious brain, but it will speak to his deeper brain, helping him to recognize that we are on his side.

Eye contact means many things. From early infancy we seek connection, acceptance, and refuge by looking into the eyes of another. In western culture we learn that eye contact signals interest, assertiveness and confidence, and that it is a powerful tool of social influence.

Traditionally, however, eye contact is not a sign of deference, and in many cultures around the world, children are considered rude if they look boldly into the eyes of an adult. Looking, and being looked at, can make us feel vulnerable; there's a reason hikers are warned not to stare down a bear. A boy may experience the demand for eye contact as a disguised request for submission. He may also find himself in a double bind, where looking at someone, especially an angry someone, seems riskier than looking away.

When we as adults get anxious about a lack of eye contact or what boys are not saying in words, we need to attend compassionately, in the moment, to our own reactions. By attending to our own inner worlds of thoughts, emotions, and even bodily sensations, we can be more attuned to a boy's emotional rhythms, and respect his ways of expressing himself, even through silence. When the noise stops—even our own noise—what might we notice in quiet spaces? • • •

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