

“Eye Contact”

Culturally Responsive Health and Physical Education

Dan Timm

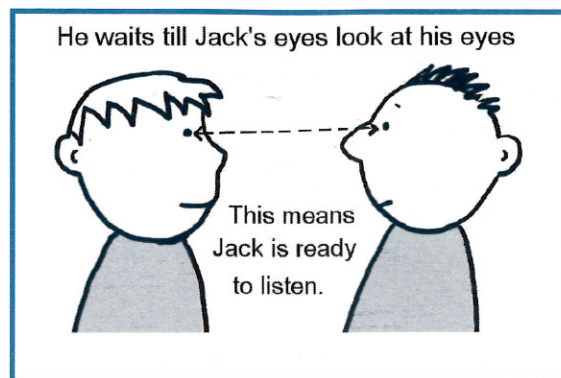
Waiting until all students are looking at the teacher is a common interpretation of attentiveness and respect. Looking at the teacher may demonstrate attentiveness and respect by students from some cultures but not for all cultures.

At an earlier time in my career, I was the physical education facility supervisor at a community college in Chicago. An individual of Hawaiian/Japanese ancestry applied for a lifeguarding position. During the interview, he never made eye contact with me, continually looking at the floor. Using my European American background as a reference, I doubted he could maintain order in a pool if he couldn't look me in the eyes, and did not hire him. A year later, he approached me again about a lifeguarding position. I hired him this time with reservation and he ended up being one of the best lifeguards the college ever had.

In later years as I became more knowledgeable about people's cultural backgrounds, I realized my lack of knowledge prevented me from hiring this individual the first time he applied for a lifeguarding position. The individual was showing respect for my position by not making eye contact. I felt guilty that I had not hired him the first time as I had deprived him of a position for which he was certainly qualified.

As indicated by my experience, unfamiliarity with cultural preferences for eye contact can lead to misunderstanding. European Americans tend to maintain direct eye contact with others regardless of social standing. Eye contact is often perceived as demonstrating trustworthiness or truthfulness or that the listener is paying attention. When speaking, European Americans make eye contact with the listener about 50% of the time. When listening, their eye contact significantly rises to 80% of the time.

Eye contact for African Americans differs with that for European Americans. African Americans make eye contact greater than 50% of the time when speaking but make infrequent eye contact when listening. This great difference in eye contact when listening could lead to confusion between a European American teacher and an African American student. The teacher may think the



student is bored, uninterested, unmotivated, or even rude because of the lesser eye contact. In reality, the student may be quite interested in the day's topic and lesson and is simply demonstrating his/her cultural listening norm.

Maintained eye culture is avoided in some cultures. In some Hispanic cultures (Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican), maintained eye contact is

believed to invoke the “evil eye” which causes injury or illness. Maintaining eye contact is thought to be a sign of disrespect among some American Indian cultures. For Japanese and Filipino individuals, prolonged eye contact is considered to be rude and Filipinos may interpret it as a challenge.

Knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds and cultural preferences could promote greater health and physical activity. Students tend to feel welcomed in a class in which the teacher takes time to get to know students. In a classroom in which the teacher is unfamiliar with students' backgrounds, students may not feel welcomed or safe and through association, desire to avoid the subject matter the teacher instructs.

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