

Knowing looks: Using gaze aversion to tell when children are learning

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People use eye contact in a variety of ways every minute of every day but how often do you find yourself staring into space with concentrating on an issue or problem? Psychologists now know that people who are carrying out a complex task tend to look away from anyone else who is nearby. They refer to it as 'gaze aversion'.

Now they are finding out how to use changes in a child's gaze aversion to understand their educational progress. A group led by Dr Gwyneth Doherty-Sneddon at the University of Stirling, and funded by Economic and Social Research Council, has looked at gaze aversion in both children and adults.

They found that children aged 4-6 are more likely to avert their gaze when they are carrying out a task that they find difficult, or new to them. They also avert their gaze less if they are being tested by someone they know.

When observing 5-8 year-olds, the researchers found that gaze aversion is related to the complexity of the task being undertaken, rather than to other stimuli. The results were consistent for a variety of settings and for a range of tasks, such as balancing a beam with asymmetrical loads.

Dr Doherty-Sneddon said: "These results are important because they show that children avert their gaze when they are trying to carry out a task which is difficult or with which they are not yet familiar. In our most recent work we have investigated whether gaze aversion is

associated with transitional knowledge states. That means that gaze aversion is a useful thing for teachers, carers and parents to know about."

She says that, from the point of view of the teacher, gaze aversion is a positive sign. A child who is doing it is likely to be developing their understanding and is what Dr Doherty-Sneddon terms an "improver". By contrast, children who are not improving their performance, or who are regressing, use gaze aversion less often.

Keeping an eye on gaze aversion is especially valuable for teachers and social workers who are trying to understand the mental state of people with: Autistic spectrum disorders (ASD); Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); or Williams Syndrome, the genetic condition popularly called Cocktail Party Syndrome. "People with Williams Syndrome have been characterised as being hypersociable and using excessive amounts of eye contact, which is an interesting contrast to people with autism. Our gaze aversion work promises to provide new and important insights into the mental and social functioning of such groups" says Dr Doherty-Sneddon.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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