

Don't look now - I'm trying to think

March 7 2012

Children with autism look away from faces when thinking, especially about challenging material, according to new research from Northumbria University.

Although generally encouraged to maintain [eye contact](#) as a means of enhancing their social skills, researchers found [autistic children](#) follow the same patterns as other [children](#) when processing complex information or difficult tasks. Typically developing children and adults look away when asked difficult questions and [gaze](#) aversion has been proven in the past to improve the accuracy of responses.

Prof Gwyneth Doherty-Sneddon, Associate Dean for Research in the School of Life Sciences at Northumbria University, will present her findings on 15 March as part of Newcastle ScienceFest, a week-long programme of events being held in the city to celebrate scientific endeavour and discovery. The findings will also be reported in next month's Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry.

In the first study of its kind, researchers asked 20 children with autism – characterised by reduced sociability - and 18 with William's Syndrome – associated with hypersociability - to carry out mental arithmetic tests. Both groups engaged in gaze aversion while thinking and increased their gaze aversion as question difficulty increased.

Prof Doherty-Sneddon said: "Previous research found that children and [adults](#) tend to avert their gaze when thinking something through and this principle can now be applied to children with autism too.

“Although social skills training is important in encouraging eye contact with children with [autism](#), this research demonstrates that gaze aversion, at a certain point within an interaction, is functional in helping them to concentrate on difficult tasks.”

When trying to retrieve information from memory or work out complex problem-solving, looking at someone’s face can actually interfere with the processing of task relevant information. This is, in part, because [faces](#) are such rich sources of information that capture our attention.

She added: “This research will have a major impact in terms of the way teachers interact with these children. When teachers or parents ask a child a difficult question and they look away, our advice would be to wait to allow them to process the information and focus on finding a suitable response.”

More information: *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 53:4 (2012), pp 420–430.

Provided by Northumbria University

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