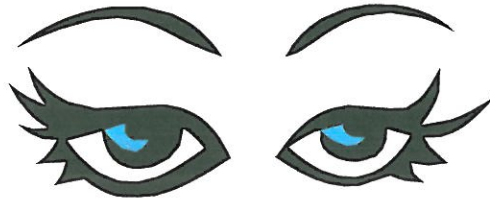


## *The "Eyes" Have It*

*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

---

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, [Arletaj@aol.com](mailto:Arletaj@aol.com), *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships when New Kids Join the Family* (Indianapolis: Perspectives Press, 2009.)