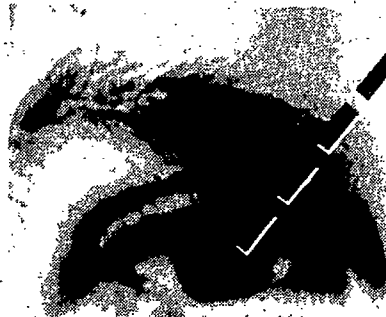


Seeing is believing

Story by
Mike Latona

Photos by
Greg Francis

ON THE MOVE



When Sarah McKinley recently attended a diocesan retreat, she said, she refused to make direct eye contact with anyone in her small group the first night.

"I can't look in the eyes of someone I don't know," explained Sarah, 17, a parishioner at St. Mary's Church in Bath.

Near the end of the retreat, one small-group member approached Sarah and said he had initially thought she was a snob - but was pleased to find out otherwise. They had come to know each other during the weekend at Watson Homestead in Painted Post.

"It took me the whole first day (to make eye contact). It's a trust issue," Sarah said.

Her experience and her concerns indicate the messages that can be sent depending on one's willingness - or unwillingness - to make eye contact. And according to Josh Sheridan, eye contact is a more crucial form of communication than most people realize.

"You don't think about it often, but it does make a difference," said Josh, 15, from Church of Christ the King in Irondequoit.

Chris DeMillo, also, believes that a look is worth a thousand words.

"If your eye contact is good, you can send and receive a lot of things," said Chris, 16, from St. Patrick's Church in Seneca Falls. He explained that people can tell a lot about each other's moods or personalities by maintaining steady eye contact.

"I like to see the facial expression," he said.

On the other hand, Chris said, he's bothered when someone won't meet his gaze during a conversation.

"I don't like it. You know someone's lying, because they won't look you in the eye," Chris said.

Sarah agreed, saying that if friends don't maintain eye contact, "I don't think they're telling me the truth."

People who lack good eye contact are also not displaying the best of listening skills, Josh pointed out.

"If they're looking around the room, it's like they have no interest in what

you're saying," he said.

"I'd feel rejected," agreed Eric Heaton, 15, from St. Patrick's Church in Owego.

On the other hand, Josh said that a reassuring gaze can put somebody at ease when a difficult subject is being discussed.

"When it's on a more serious note, I tend to look someone right in the eye to let them know I'm behind them," Josh said. "When you're opening up to somebody and they're looking at you, you know they care about what you're saying and you know they're with you."

Of course, it's one thing to make eye contact with a friend - and quite another matter when it's someone you're not as familiar with, Chris said. He explained that he tends to fear the worst when somebody stares at him for no particular reason.

"Maybe they're trying to tell me something, like to zip up my fly. I assume that something's wrong with me," Chris said.

And Sarah, who admitted earlier in the story to a very common syndrome - shyness - said she gets uncomfortable when attractive guys catch her gazing at them.

"I can't look at them for more than a second," Sarah said. "It makes me feel weird; I don't want them to think I like them. They might think I'm staring and I'll think, 'Uh, oh, what if they know?'"

Chris, also, said it's a risk to maintain eye contact with someone you're attracted to.

"You want to see their expression - but if it's a bad one, you feel like an idiot," Chris said.

Yet Josh and Eric noted these situations often lead to positive results. For example, Josh said he recently received an ego boost when he caught a girl checking him out in class.

"It didn't make me feel uncomfortable," Josh commented.

"If it's somebody I like, I let them know it by looking at them. And that gets the conversation going," Eric added. "If you're more outgoing, the more people you get to know."

And Josh said he thinks there is legitimacy to the term "love at first sight."

"I do. If you're right for someone, you just click," Josh said.

Here's a slightly more common scenario: How do these teens react

when they're walking down the street and a stranger is coming the other way?

For Eric, he said he'll look the person in the eye no matter what, yet he doesn't expect much more than a small smile or nod in return.

"Most of the time they won't be mean to you, but they're generally not nice to you, either," he said. "That's the general reaction."

Sarah and Josh said they can only make smooth eye contact with strangers on the street who are significantly younger or older than them.

"If it's somebody my age, I stare straight ahead. People judge too much right now (at this age)," Sarah said.

"People your age, you have to live up to their expectations. But older and younger people, it's not quite as much," Josh remarked.

Overall, Eric said, a suitable level of eye contact is going to be determined by how shy, or outgoing, somebody is.

"It depends on your personality," he said.

COMING NEXT WEEK:
The environment

