

your clothes, your jewelry, or the coins in your pocket. This is distracting to the other person, and he or she will be less able to focus on your message.

7. Keep your facial expressions friendly or neutral. Make sure that your face is sending the same message as your words.
8. Show that you are interested when you are listening to another person by looking at him or her as he or she is speaking. Looking elsewhere creates the impression that you are not interested. You don't have to stare (which can also make the other person uncomfortable), but it is important to maintain eye contact.
9. If you like to crack your knuckles, save it for a time when you are by yourself.

These suggestions are just a beginning. You will think of more by paying attention to others and noticing what effect their body language has on you. You can also ask a teacher, parent, sibling, or friend to coach you. Ask him or her to give you feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of your body language. You may be doing things that you are not aware of, for better or worse.

### WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Glass, Lillian. *I Know What You're Thinking: Using the Four Codes of Reading People to Improve Your Life*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002.

Wainwright, Gordon. *Teach Yourself Body Language*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2000.

### SEE THESE HANDOUTS ON RELATED TOPICS

- Assertiveness Skills (for Teens)
- Building People Skills (for Teens)
- Building Positive Teen Relationships
- Expressing Feelings Responsibly (for Teens)
- Listening Skills (for Teens)
- Personal Negotiation Skills (for Teens)
- Workplace Skills (for Teens)

# Understanding Body Language (for Teens)

## WHAT IS BODY LANGUAGE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Body language is the nonverbal part of communication. It is the way a person moves his or her body when communicating with another person. It involves any kind of movement—the way a person sits, stands, looks, or listens. If you think about it for a minute, you will understand why body language is such an important part of communication. Think of a time when you were talking with someone and he or she did any of the following:



- Rolled her eyes while you were talking
- Avoided making eye contact with you
- Tapped his foot while you talked
- Leaned forward while making a point
- Stood up while you were talking to him, although you were still seated
- Stood too close to you while you talked

Show that you are interested when you are listening to another person by looking at him or her as he or she is speaking. Looking elsewhere creates the impression that you are not interested.

- Sat at a desk with his back to you as you walked into his office, and didn't get up after you entered
- Kept her arms crossed tightly across her chest while you asked her questions
- Kept his hand over his mouth while he spoke
- Looked out the window while you talked

These are just a few examples of how a person's body language might be sending a message that is very different from the verbal message. How a person uses his or her body can make you feel uncomfortable, confused, and angry, or it can place you at ease.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

While it's dangerous to make assumptions about any situation, it is important to realize that your body language has an effect on anyone you interact with, and that others

may draw certain conclusions about you based on it. Let's return to the examples on the first page of this handout. Think about what effect each of the behaviors could have on another person.

#### **When the other person:**

Rolls his or her eyes as you speak

Avoids eye contact

Taps his or her foot

Leans forward while making a point

Stands up before the conversation is finished

Stands too close to you

Sits with his or her back to you after you enter the room

Keeps his or her arms crossed tightly across the chest

Speaks with a hand over his or her mouth

#### **It could mean that he or she:**

Is annoyed, disagrees, is making fun of your point, is disrespecting you

Is shy, guilty, nervous, fearful

Is impatient, nervous, preoccupied

Is enthusiastic, bossy, pushy, emphatic

Is in a rush, is ready to end the conversation, wants you to leave

Is from another culture, is trying to intimidate you

Does not respect you, is too busy to talk to you, doesn't want you to stay long, is engrossed in something else

Is feeling self-protective, is nervous, angry, afraid . . . may also be cold

Doesn't want you to listen too closely, lacks confidence in what he or she is saying, is concerned about his or her breath

Looks continually out the window during the conversation

Is preoccupied, is not listening to you, feels more powerful than you, wants you to feel uncomfortable, wants to be somewhere else

It is important to remember that no single gesture or movement always means the same thing. It is important to consider the overall feeling of a conversation, including the words being spoken, the tone of voice and the situation or context.

### TIPS FOR USING BODY LANGUAGE TO STRENGTHEN YOUR COMMUNICATIONS

The following suggestions will help you communicate effectively with others:

1. Make eye contact with the other person. When you look a person in the eyes, you come across as more powerful, positive, and sincere. The other person will be more likely to take you seriously and will be less likely to disregard your message.
2. Turn your body toward the other person. This is a sign that you want him or her to hear you and take your message seriously.
3. Stand up straight. You will come across as more confident than if you slouch.
4. Allow a respectful distance between yourself and the other person. If you sense that the other person is uncomfortable, back up a little.
5. Keep your body open. Keep your arms relaxed.
6. Avoid nervous movements like fiddling with a pencil, your hair, the buttons on