

The power of pointing

In the fifth article in our series on children's communication from birth to three, we explore the reasons why babies and toddlers point, and the role this plays in moving them towards beginning to use words.



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WE KNOW that babies and pre-verbal children point in order to try and get what they want, but there is another function of pointing, one that is crucial for effective communication. In this article, we explore why babies and toddlers point and the role that this plays in moving children towards the stage where they begin to use their first words.

Baby Ibrahim is nine-months-old and sitting in the kitchen in his high chair, impatiently waiting for dad to give him his favourite meal of pureed carrots and broccoli. Ibrahim gets quite desperate just before mealtimes, and it is essential to give him food quickly, to avoid him panicking. Much as his dad would like to involve Ibrahim in chat while he is feeding him, Ibrahim is not really able to focus on anything else until he has finished his first course. Once Ibrahim has relaxed, he starts to look around the kitchen, and then does something quite miraculous – he points towards a box.

The miracle of pointing

Ibrahim has been 'using' pointing, accompanied by various vocal sounds, for a few months now, which indicates to me that he is well on the way to becoming an effective communicator. But why is it a miracle? We take pointing for granted. When we point, we are telling another person we want them to look at something. We assume they will understand that there is something like an invisible laser beam that emanates from the end of our index finger in an exact straight line until it reaches the solid object that we want the other person to concentrate on.

While we will almost certainly use language to attract our friend's attention and to describe what we are looking at, we will at the same time look at each other's faces to confirm that we are both focusing on the same thing – for example, a bird, or the bus that we need to catch. Between adults, all this happens in a split second. It happens just as quickly for babies too and the miracle is that no one sets out to teach babies how to perform this highly complex piece of non-verbal communication. For most children it happens perfectly naturally.

Ibrahim has just pointed to the box and is saying, with some enthusiasm: 'Uh, uh, uh!' Both baby and dad know that Ibrahim's special baby biscuits are in that box. Dad points to a banana and says: 'No, Ibrahim. You've had a biscuit already. Look at this

great big banana that Daddy's got for you.' Ibrahim does not look at what Dad is pointing at. He has seen the banana earlier and is ignoring it.

What Ibrahim does look at is his dad's face. He then points and looks at the box of rusks, and begins protesting. Dad rushes to the fridge and comes back with a pot of strawberry yoghurt. Dad holds it up by his own face, points to the pot of yoghurt and says: 'Look Ibrahim, here's your favourite yoghurt!' Ibrahim looks at the yoghurt, looks at his Dad's face and stops protesting.

This type of everyday interaction, which at first glance looks very simple, shows just what a sophisticated communicator Ibrahim is. He is conveying a complex message, that goes something like this: 'I want a rusk from that box. If I stretch my index finger at the box, then look at Daddy's face and make a noise and move about, he will understand what it is that I want. If I don't get what I want, then I will point some more, but make a louder noise and move around a lot more quickly. If I still don't get what I want then I will stop pointing and take extreme measures (crying).'

This type of pointing, when a young child points at something that he wants, is referred to as proto-imperative pointing – pointing, instead of using words to show what he wants.

It is very important for communication, and social development, because it allows the child to convey messages to adults, even though the child is still several months away from using first words. It also takes place within a relationship where the baby knows that his pointing will have some impact on the adults who care for him, because it directs their attention to the object that he wants. If the adults respond to this pointing, and talk about what the baby wants, then baby will learn that talking is a positive and interesting thing to do. Amazing though this achievement is, it is only half of the story.

Ibrahim at 14-months-old

Ibrahim is now 14-months-old, and his main passion continues to be food, though his interests have broadened to include his big brother's and sister's toys, the television remote control and his most sought after object, mum's mobile phone.

Spend a short amount of time in Ibrahim's company and you will be exhausted. He seems to be constantly on the move. Not in a destructive way, though he does



Toddlers use proto-declarative pointing instead of words, to declare to someone that they are interested in something and want to share that interest

leave plenty of destruction in his wake, but because he is full of energy. While much of his energy is directed towards learning to walk and climb, Ibrahim shows a particular fascination with his hands – what he can do with them, and what they can get for him.

He loves to be picked up and spoken to. He babbles conversationally, but as yet has no single recognisable words. However, he has developed a fascination with *Jingle Bells* and will sing ‘da da da da da da, hey!’ as often as he can. You could say that he loves the sound of his own voice. In short, all the elements are in place for him to become a ‘talker’.

This has all come about through a combination of having an outgoing personality and being involved in regular interaction with his parents and carers. As a result, he gets huge satisfaction from being with other people, and thrives on their attention and playfulness.

The proto-declarative point

Pointing to show a shared interest

The combination of Ibrahim’s sociable personality and positive experience of communication, as part of his regular everyday experiences has led him to use pointing in a very different way. While he still points to show what he wants, he has moved forward to another remarkable behaviour – pointing to share an interest with an adult. It all began with the pigeons.

Ibrahim hates sitting in his buggy, so if weather and time permits, his mum will carry him while she takes his big sister to nursery. On the way, they will

invariably pass a small flock of pigeons that swoop, land and peck at food left for them by a neighbour. They also scatter when big sister takes a run at them, providing Ibrahim with a very exciting spectacle. So now, every time that mum is carrying Ibrahim outdoors he looks for pigeons. When he sees one he points, looks at mum’s face and shouts, ‘Uh!’ Mum will reply: ‘Yes, it’s a pigeon, can you see another one?’ Ibrahim then looks around and points at more of them.

Ibrahim is not pointing because he wants a pigeon, or because he wants to be put down so he can run after them. His message is: ‘I can see pigeons. They are just the best things. Can you see them as well? Talk to me about them.’ Ibrahim is using proto-declarative pointing – pointing, instead of using words, in order to declare to someone else that he is interested in something and wants to share that interest.

Reaching this stage of pointing is a milestone along the road towards using first words. If adults are able to respond to this pointing, then it will provide the focus for many conversations, where the child initiates the topic of conversation. These types of interactions are exactly what Ibrahim needs to move him towards using his first words and to the world of talking that lies just round the corner.

Children with autism and developmental delay

In painting a picture of Ibrahim’s development as a communicator, I have highlighted the role his



A baby will use proto-imperative pointing instead of words to convey a message

family and carers have played in bringing him to the stage where he is pointing at objects for the pleasure of sharing an idea with another person. He is communicating to us: 'I like that bus coming along and I hope you like it too. Let's talk about it together.'

However, we cannot assume that reaching this stage will be an automatic process. Many children with autism point for what they want, or can be taught to do so. However, some find it extremely challenging to develop proto-declarative pointing, as part of a wider difficulty with understanding other people and how to communicate with them by sharing interests.

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen and colleagues at Cambridge University found that if two key types of behaviour – pretend play and pointing to share interest – were not evident by 18-months-old, this could predict that the toddler would go on to develop classic autism (Baron-Cohen, 1995; 2008).

However, before anyone suggests that a child's lack of pointing to share interest might indicate that

he has autism, they would need to find out about aspects of his experience at home, including whether or not he has been involved in the many thousands of positive interactions needed in early life to bring him to the understanding that it is good to share your enthusiasm with other people.

Children with developmental delay, for example, may be slower than others to begin pointing to share interests, as are children who have had limited experience of communication, possibly due to a lack of parental involvement or even neglect.

Working towards pointing for shared interest

From my experience, young children with speech and language delay often use crying and protesting as a way of getting what they want or need. This is largely due to frustration at not being able to communicate effectively using words. Such children benefit from being involved in activities where they are encouraged to look, point and talk with an adult about what they can see – for example, hiding games with toys, sharing lift-the-flap books and games where they have to choose between two objects and point at the one they would like.

Children generally begin to point for shared interest when they are outdoors or looking out of a window at something moving, because what they are looking at is often at a distance, moving and possibly making a noise. This will include all forms of transport, animals and people they know.

Ideally, the adult and child should be at the same eye level, to make it easy for the child to know that the adult is instantly interested. This means that the adult will need to pick the child up, or sit with him side-by-side outdoors. However, leading the child by the hand for a walk in the garden or park can be an exciting starting point, as long as the adult is able to stop and get down to the child's level to talk about interesting things.

Hiding soft toys or puppets around the garden, and particularly up high and just out of reach – in trees or tall shrubs – can excite children enough to begin pointing, first to indicate that they have found something, then that they want it, and finally to let the adult know that they want to be picked up to take the puppet down.

Pointing for need, and for shared interest, develops as part of a young child's emerging communication. They are important signposts that imply children are moving towards using words, and that they can share their interests with other people. Once pointing has become established, we continue to use it throughout life, alongside talking, to emphasise what we mean. eye

References

- Baron-Cohen S (1995) *Mindblindness*. MIT Press, Massachusetts, USA
Baron-Cohen S (2008) *Autism and Asperger Syndrome: The Facts*. Oxford University Press: Oxford

Key points

- We take pointing for granted
- When we point, we are telling another person that we want them to look at something
- We assume they will understand that there is something like an invisible laser beam that emanates from the end of our index finger in an exact straight line until it reaches the solid object that we want the other person to concentrate on
- Pointing for need and pointing for shared interest is a development along the pathway of shared communication and eventually toward the use of first words