



What's the Point of Pointing?

Lauren Lowry
Clinical Staff Writer and Hanen SLP

Pointing is much more than just one of those cute things that babies do! It marks a huge milestone in a child's development. Read on to find out why.

When do infants start to point?

Infants begin to point between 7 and 15 months of age [1]. First babies point using their whole hand, but about three months later they start to extend their index finger to point [2].

Why do infants point?

There are two reasons why babies point:

- **To ask for something** – for example, sometimes babies point to ask for a toy that they can't reach or for more cookies. This is called ***imperative pointing***.
- **To draw someone's attention** – for example, sometimes babies point to draw someone's attention to an interesting object or to someone new who just walked in the room. This is called ***declarative pointing***.

Why is pointing important?

Pointing is a sign that a baby has developed certain social and communication skills. It shows us that the baby can get someone's attention, send a message, and attempt to influence someone's actions or reactions to whatever it is he is pointing to...all with his tiny finger. This is really complicated stuff!

Another reason that pointing is important – it makes the adults in the baby's life talk about whatever the baby is pointing to. In this way, pointing encourages adults to label items that the baby finds interesting, and this helps the baby learn words.

The more children point early in their development, the better their language abilities are later on.

Pointing has been linked to language development. Research has found that the more children point early in their development, the better their language abilities are later on [3].

But not all pointing is considered equal – a recent study showed that twelve-month olds who point with their index finger (versus with their whole hand) have stronger language skills at 24 months [3]. These findings were so strong that the researchers suggest that looking at toddlers' index finger pointing could be used to screen children for language delay.

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How to encourage pointing

One of the best ways to encourage pointing is to make a point of pointing yourself! Babies start to understand what pointing is all about when their parents and caregivers point to things during everyday life. At first, you can make it easier for a baby by pointing to things that are close by, like an interesting toy that's near where you are playing together, or a motivating snack that's just slightly out of reach. Then later you can try pointing to things that are a little farther away, such as something interesting across the room.

Pointing is one of those exciting “firsts” that delights parents. It provides a window into what the child is thinking and gives us a new way to communicate with a baby before the words come. This huge milestone shows us that a baby is on the right track for developing language and communication skills.

If you are concerned that your child hasn't started pointing yet, talk to your pediatrician or a speech language pathologist. For more information about how to encourage pointing and other gestures, have a look at our article [“The Importance of Gestures”](#).

References

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2. Lüke, C., Ritterfeld, U., Grimminger, A., Liszkowski, U., & Rohlfing, K. J. (2017). Development of pointing gestures in children with typical and delayed language acquisition. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 60*, 3185-3197.
3. Lüke, C., Grimminger, A., Rohlfing, K. J., Liszkowski, U., & Ritterfeld, U. (2017). In Infants' Hands: Identification of Preverbal Infants at Risk for Primary Language Delay. *Child Development, 88*(2), 484-492.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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