

'Pointing game' turns into directions for life

Seattle Times, The (WA) - October 5, 2002

- Author/Byline: Jan Faull, Special to The Seattle Times
- Edition: Fourth
- Section: Northwest Life
- Page: E2
- Column: Parenting

Parents with a 12-month-old child will soon play the Pointing Game. It's a good game where the child notices a familiar object, points to it, looks to you, and then you respond by turning your head in the direction of your baby's pointing finger and naming the object. The most familiar include clock, doggie, Daddy, Mommy, Grandma, cup, juice, ball and car.

The child usually responds by trying to say the word, but at first only gets it partially uttered with a "cl," "goggie," "Da," "Ma," "Gam-ma," "ju," "ba," or "ca." It doesn't matter, parents just know to say the word again, "Yes, that's a clock," and in time the child corrects himself; language development is under way.

There is, however, much more to the Pointing Game than learning words. When the child starts pointing at objects, a major step beyond language development occurs; it's what Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff and Patricia Kuhl, the authors of "The Scientist in the Crib," (Harper Perennial, \$14) refer to as "the cognitive triangle." At about 12 months old, a child's brain has developed to the point where he realizes that he's not the only one who sees an object, that you see it too, and that the two of you can talk about it together.

There is, however, another element of the Pointing Game that's critical to children's learning. While at the park, your child sees a dog, points at it and then looks at you. You walk quickly to your child, pick him up and affirm, "Yes, that's a dog." And then with a frown and a head shake, you add, "We don't know that dog; we never pet doggies we don't know." Your words, intonation and facial expression convey how you feel about the dog.

This exchange between you and your child is called "social referencing," which means the child, because he's attached to you, looks to you as his reference point for understanding and making sense of the world. He looks to you, not only to say the word "doggie," but for information about the dog. Your protection -- holding the child, cautioning the child about the dog, establishing a rule about strange dogs -- is exactly what the child is looking for when he turns to you to establish the mental triangle between you, him and the dog.

If your child is well beyond the Pointing Game, realize that even at 5, 10 or 15 years, he still looks to you as the reference point when learning how to keep safe and be successful as he faces new and challenging environments. If your child is pointing in the direction of puberty, realize that she's looking to you to explain what she's experiencing as she manages her changing body, mind and emotions. If your teen is pointing in the direction of driving a car, realize that he'll refer to you to explain about handling it safely.

Parents are powerful people in the eyes of their children. Although most parents don't always see themselves this way, it's important not to slough off this responsibility as children point themselves in a variety of directions and refer to you for guidance.

E-mail Jan Faull at janfaull@aol.com.

- Record: TSABP127
- Copyright: Copyright (c) 2002 Seattle Times Company, All Rights Reserved.