



## The amazing gaze: Babies learn by looking

By **Jan Fauli**

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Research tells us that babies follow a parent's gaze; this means that babies look at what their parents and other caregivers are looking at.

Babies at 9 months follow a parent's head as it turns, but babies at 12 months actually know that it's the eyes that are the important aspect involved in seeing. If Mom closes her eyes as she turns her head, the child won't be interested in what the head is turning toward. When the parent's eyes are open, however, the baby is highly interested.

Gaze-following is a landmark achievement in infant development. Once your baby develops the ability to follow your gaze, you can literally watch your baby as she watches you. Your baby is highly interested in looking where you look. Your baby wants to understand you and the world around him; one efficient way of doing so is to follow your gaze.

There are dozens of objects scattered around the house. How will a child know what they are? Since he can follow your gaze, he will soon learn the words that accompany all those gazes. Therefore, once children begin to follow Mom's or Dad's gazes, language development is right around the corner.

Consider Mom looking to a furry object and saying "dog," and then to a plastic cylinder and saying "cup." Since baby can follow the parent's gaze, he knows exactly what Mom's referring to. Baby cracks the language code by following Mom's gaze. The thing she is referring to when she says "d-o-g" is the very thing her eyes are pointed at.

**Andrew Meltzoff**, a University of Washington professor and co-author of the "The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains, and How Children Learn" (Morrow Press, \$19.95), explains it this way: "My colleague **Dr. Rechele Brooks** and I have shown that infants who are more advanced at gaze following at about 1 year of age also learn language more quickly than their peers. So we are beginning to collect empirical evidence that gaze

following is important for language acquisition. The fun little games parents play with their children ('I spy this ... ,' 'Oh, look at that!') are actually tutorials that help the baby learn to follow gaze and give them a boost in language development."

Gaze-following also helps children understand emotions. Let's say Mom sees Grandpa as he enters the kitchen and smiles. Baby followed Mom's gaze and learned that she's happy to see Grandpa. On the other hand, if mom looks in annoyance at someone's presence, baby learns something about that emotion and relationship as well. Following another's gaze is the first step children take in understanding the point of view of another person.

This drive of babies to follow a parent's gaze might at times frustrate parents. Let's say you'd really like to read just one chapter in your book. So you pull out your baby's most interesting toys and set them beside you on the floor. You think your baby will play with the toys while you read your book. No way. Your baby is watching your gaze. He wants to sit on your lap and see what you're seeing. You'll likely need to read your novel when baby naps.

Since baby follows your gaze, doesn't it also make sense that you reciprocate the favor? If your baby sees a bird flying overhead, follow your child's gaze and say, "That's a bird flying in the sky." Following another's gaze is deeply seeded in human social interactions. Parents do best by their children when they support their baby's ability to follow another's gaze.

*Jan Faull, a specialist in child development and behavior, answers questions of general interest in her column. You can e-mail her at [janfaull@aol.com](mailto:janfaull@aol.com) or write to: Jan Faull, c/o Families, The Seattle Times, P.O. Box 70, Seattle, WA 98111.*

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