Baby signing: the new baby talk

Well before they can speak, toddlers can communicate using gestures alone. But will learning to baby sign help comedian Alex Horne and young Tom have their first father-and-son chat?

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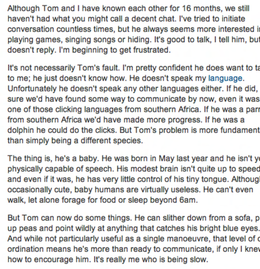

Talk to the hand: Alex Horne drives home his point to his 16-month-old son Tom using baby signing Photograph: Suki Dhanda for the Observer

Although Tom and I have known each other for 16 months, we still haven't had what you might call a decent chat. I've tried to initiate conversation countless times, but he always seems more interested in playing games, singing songs or hiding. It's good to talk, I tell him, but he doesn't reply. I'm beginning to get frustrated.

It's not necessarily Tom's fault. I'm pretty confident he does want to talk to me; he just doesn't know how. He doesn't speak my language. Unfortunately he doesn't speak any other languages either. If he did, I'm sure we'd have found some way to communicate by now, even it was one of those clicking languages from southern Africa. If he was a parrot from southern Africa we'd have made more progress. If he was a dolphin he could do the clicks. But Tom's problem is more fundamental than simply being a different species.

The thing is, he's a baby. He was born in May last year and he isn't yet physically capable of speech. His modest brain isn't quite up to speed and even if it was, he has very little control of his tiny tongue. Although occasionally cute, baby humans are virtually useless. He can't even walk, let alone forage for food or sleep beyond 6am.

But Tom can now do some things. He can slither down from a sofa, pick up peas and point wildly at anything that catches his bright blue eyes. And while not particularly useful as a single manoeuvre, that level of co-ordination means he's more than ready to communicate, if only I knew how to encourage him. It's really me who is being slow.

We don't know what words man said first. Some experts have speculated that primitive language was developed from random sounds; early homo, they say, might have based his first words either on the noises he heard, like the splash of falling water or the thud of a rock smashing into a skull; or on his own instinctive cries, like a gulp of surprise at the sight of falling water or a yelp of effort caused by smashing a rock into a skull.

But some believe that language was developed from signs rather than noises. Gestural theory suggests that man first communicated with hand and body movements and developed language from there, probably around the time they needed their hands free for tools (for smashing rocks into skulls more effectively).

The origin of language theories can never amount to much more than educated conjecture. But anyone who owns a child can observe firsthand how their speech slowly emerges. Tom, for instance, has yet to say his first proper word. He did go through a phase of saying "bra" every time he looked at a woman, but that was surely just a coincidence.

As well as "bra", Tom has been able to say "dada" and "mama" for almost a year now, but I'm not counting these as proper words. Babies throughout the world tend to start with such sounds, and this in turn is why so many languages' words for mother, father and baby have similar shapes; father can be expressed as "daddy" in English, *baba* in Albanian, *ubaba* in Zula, *p¯ap¯a* in Maori and *atta* in Latin. We've chosen these terms to mirror the repetitious consonants that babies seem to like so much.

As with all their basic skills, babies start talking at different ages. Einstein famously didn't say a word until he was three years old, Picasso said *plz* (a shortening of the Spanish for pencil) at 18 months, and one of the babies in our NCT class said "foible" before she was one. It's probably best not to worry too much about when they say what. They'll all get there in the end. But when I Google "my baby can't talk yet" I can't help but grow a little concerned. A typical 18-month-old, says the website of the Child Development Institute, "has vocabulary of approximately five to 20 words". Perhaps we will count bra, mama and dada after all. Just two more in two months and he'll be normal.

As far as I can tell, Tom hasn't deliberately mastered a sign for any particular object yet, but he does point incessantly, wave goodbye and clap when excited. So perhaps his gestures are advancing faster than his speech. Perhaps, with a helping hand, this could be our shortcut to satisfying communication.

We'd like Tom to talk to us as soon as possible so that we can find out what's on his mind, rather than whether his mind is average or not. I'm desperate to know what he's got to say for himself. And, more than his opinions on culture and politics, I mainly want to know how he's feeling, if only so that my wife and I no longer have to guess. One whingey afternoon we thought he might be hungry, tired, teething or just a generally grumpy human being before finally realising he was hot. If only we'd all known there was a simple gesture for it.

Baby signing was invented with just such a situation in mind. The basic premise – that babies can communicate before they can talk – was investigated thoroughly by the scientist Joseph Garcia, among others, in the late 1980s. While working at Alaska Pacific University, Garcia suggested that even at six months, hearing babies of hearing parents can begin learning basic sign language for ideas such as eat, drink, milk, more, no and hot. According to his theory, a hot baby with a basic grasp of signing would simply move his open hand across his forehead to make his parents instantly remove his unnecessary jumper.

It wasn't until a few years ago, however, that baby signing really took off in the UK. It seems odd that, despite having the means to sign since the birth of language, we've only recently decided to share this information with our babies. Deaf communities have always known that infants can sign before they can talk, but hearing parents hadn't thought to follow suit.

Today, though, there are countless baby sign groups offering hundreds of classes in the UK alone. My wife took Tom to one such class when he was just a few months old, having heard about it from another mum, Sam, who'd read about it on the National Child Trust's (NCT) website. Her son, another Tom, was born six months before ours and had just about mastered the signs for milk and food, which is all you really need to survive at his age. More importantly, Sam told the group that she and Tom both loved the class itself, and that really got everyone's attention. When mums discover a new fun, cheap and healthy thing to do with their babies, the news spreads like wildfire.

The first time round, however, baby signing didn't work for us. We all needed to find our feet before our hands. In fact, despite our good intentions, no one in our NCT group had stuck with the signing. It might make things easier in the long run, but at a time when you're trying to get your head round suddenly keeping another human alive it's hard to prioritise. But after 16 non-communicative months I felt it was time to try again, so I took him along to a local baby sign class run by TinyTalk, which claims to be "the biggest and best baby-signing organisation in the UK, Ireland and Australia".

There wasn't a lot of focus on vocabulary or grammar. Instead there were colourful mats to sit on, colourful books to look at, colourful toys to play with and a cuddly monkey to ape. Eight babies were herded by eight parents in the general direction of our teacher, Lisa Peycke, herself a mum of two, who spoke, sang and signed to us in a manner that was admirably patient without being condescending.

With a degree in linguistics from Bangor University, Lisa had left a job in HR to become a signing instructor soon after becoming a mother. It was, she says, the perfect job, especially since her own kids have taken to signing so well. Her eldest had 40 signs at his disposal at 13 months and her youngest signed her first word, milk, at just five months. Those are impressive stats.

At first glance hers was much like many of the other parent-and-baby classes we've attended, where we're encouraged to sing songs, clap hands, listen to stories and gossip. Tom seemed to enjoy himself and so we did too. At Lisa's class, for the first time in his short life, he was the oldest child in the room and seemed to revel in this role, sitting silently like a village elder for 40 minutes before eventually cracking when some biscuits were brought out.

The signing aspect of the class was underplayed and far from overwhelming. Lisa signed throughout the songs and stories, we tried to join in, and the babies watched each other. But by the end of the hour I found I had learnt at least half a dozen signs, more than enough to get me going with Tom back at home. I left impressed. I've always been suspicious of baby education, of teaching them the front crawl at six weeks or Mozart in the womb, but this was different, mainly because it was really aimed at the parents.

The idea is that I will now use the signs I've learnt every time they're relevant to Tom. Every time I put him down for a nap I'll do the sign for sleep, while also slowly and deliberately saying the word. Eventually, in theory, Tom will connect the ideas and not only recognise the sign but make it himself if he feels sleepy. And because I will have deliberately used the word "sleep" each time, he will, in time, start copying that, too.

As well as the communication aspect, those who promote baby signing report huge benefits for everyone involved, including larger expressive and receptive spoken language vocabularies, more advanced mental development, a reduction in problematic behaviour and improved parent-child relationships. To those who think signing might slow down speaking, they say the opposite occurs: encouraging sign language empowers babies to focus the topic and context of conversation and ultimately makes them more interested in words. There's even research indicating that simply pointing at things aids the process of object naming and language development, so I'm now telling anyone I meet that my son is really rather advanced.

Whether or not any of this rubs off on Tom we'll have to see. But instinctively it feels good to be trying to connect with him. Any sort of focused interaction must be a good thing. Having said that, I have to admit feeling a little embarrassed in the class itself, memories of my French oral flooding back as I, the only bloke in the room, tried to sing in tune and remember the actions to "Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" (yes, I realise now the clue is in the title).

Luckily, if you can't overcome your inhibitions, there are plenty of other more private baby sign options. After our second lesson I bought myself the TinyTalk *Let's Sign!* DVD, one of several interactive introductions to the language currently available. There are also numerous signing demonstrations on YouTube, and if you watch Cbeebies, I like to reassure myself, all parents do at least once a day, you'll be familiar with the work of one Justin Fletcher. Justin is the very soul of CBeebies, the star of the genuinely amusing *Gigglebiz* (Arthur Sleep, anyone?) and, most importantly, the presenter of *Something Special*. In this Bafta-winning show he takes kids with disabilities and learning difficulties on gentle adventures around the country, speaking to the children on screen and at home using a system called Makaton that mixes speech, signing and graphic symbols. As children grow more competent and confident with speech, the signs and symbols are gradually phased out, in just the same way that baby signing slowly gives way to baby talking.

I'm determined to continue with baby sign language, inspired by both Lisa and Justin. Neither came from a signing background and both managed to learn well over 100 signs in a matter of days. More importantly, they make signing look easy, not ridiculous. If they can do it, if Lisa's daughter could do it at five months, then I can do it, too.

After just a couple of weeks of practice, Tom managed to sign his first word. Or at least I think he did. When I slowly asked him if he was sleepy, he certainly raised his hands to the side of the cheek as if to copy my action, and I was thrilled, even if it might just have been another coincidence. We're getting there. In the short term I'm hoping we'll help each other get to the elementary level of baby signing in a few months, because it's not just him I want to have words with. Tom's going to become an older brother at Christmas, and baby signing could just be how our family of four first gets to know each other. It'll hopefully be our helping hand, our secret language, our way of telling each other if we're a bit hot.

Alex Horne is a comedian and writer. He has just released *The Horne Section*, a CD of comedy, jazz and poetry (alexhorne.com)

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