



Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

750 First St., NE • Washington, DC 20002-4242

OFFICE: (202) 336-5926 • FAX: (202) 336-6184

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Contact Information:

Andrea Browning

Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

(202) 336-5926

abrowning@srcd.org

Children's Earliest Words Stem from What Interests Them

A child's first word is always a time for celebration. Whether it's "ma," "da," or "cookie," the fact that your child has begun to communicate verbally represents a significant step in his or her development – and your role as a parent. And while most infants understand a small repertoire of words by 12 months, there's little knowledge of just *how* they build those vocabularies. In contrast, researchers know a fair amount about how toddlers' language develops. While it might make sense to assume that younger babies learn language in much the same way as older babies, a new study published in the March/April issue of the journal *Child Development* finds that just isn't so.

It turns out that younger babies learn words for new objects based on how interested *they* are in the object, whereas older babies attach more importance to whether the *speaker* is interested in the object. These findings suggest that parents might want to talk more about what their babies are interested in rather than what they, the parents, are interested in.

To explore this issue, researchers from Temple University in Philadelphia and the Universities of Delaware in Newark and Evansville in Indiana conducted two studies. In both, infants were taught new words for "interesting" or "boring" objects. The "interesting" objects were brightly colored and made noise or had moving parts. They immediately captured the babies' attention. In contrast, the "boring" objects were dull in color and appearance.

In the first study, the researchers explored whether 10-month-olds used both what they see and hear (i.e., perceptual cues) as well as what the person holding the object does (i.e., social cues) to learn a new word. In the second study, they confirmed that the infants truly paired the new word, or label, with the *object*, not with a particular location of the object.

The findings suggest that attention to social cues, like eye gaze, while valuable and sufficient for later word learning is not necessary for infants to learn their very first words. Instead, infants learn words for things that *they* find interesting with little regard for what a speaker is doing. In other words, said lead researcher Shannon M. Pruden, a graduate student at Temple University, "10-month-olds simply 'glue' a label onto the most interesting object they see. Perhaps this is why children learn words faster when parents look at and label the objects that infants already find of interest."

The study holds significant ramifications for understanding how infants pick up language, said study co-author Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Temple University and co-author of the book, *How Babies Talk*. "The exciting thing is that a lot of people weren't even sure that 10-month-olds were paying attention," she said. But this study shows that not only are they paying attention, they're actually learning words.

And that means parents should pay more attention to what their infants are interested in and use that information to start a conversation. "So when you're at McDonald's, you shouldn't just talk to the woman next to you and assume the baby isn't picking up much," noted co-author Roberta Golinkoff, Ph.D., professor of education and psychology at the University of Delaware, "If you're holding a French fry and talking about divorce, your baby might learn that the word 'divorce' goes with a French fry."

Bottom line, she says: "Talking with children matters, even at this very early age."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 2, *The birth of words: Ten-month-olds learn words through perceptual salience* by Pruden SM (Temple University), Hirsh-Pasek K, Golinkoff RM (University of Delaware) and Hennon EA (University of Evansville). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.