

Study looks at how children learn new words

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Is it a plane? Is it a car? Is it a thingywhatsit? A new research project at the University of Sussex (UK) aims to find out more about how children acquire language.

Psychologist Dr Jessica Horst has set up a laboratory to test a theory that toddlers and young children do not learn new words as quickly as previous studies have suggested.

Dr Horst, who is inviting children and their parents to take part in the study, says: "The theory is that children learn language through something termed 'fast-mapping' - a short exposure to an object is enough for a child to learn an object's name. Some research suggests that between ages two and six children are learning up to nine words a day. I expect to show that word-learning is through repetition over a longer period."

In her Word and Object Reasoning Development Laboratory (Word Lab), Dr Horst will specifically be investigating how children learn the names of objects (nouns) and the words that describe their actions (verbs). She will present familiar objects, such as a ball, and unfamiliar objects, such as a strange shape, to two-year-olds and ask the child to select the objects by name. She gives the unfamiliar object a new name.

"In my previous research I have found that children might remember the name of the new object briefly, but have forgotten it five minutes later," she says. "There is a lot that we still don't understand about language development. Some people think it's a magical process - it just happens

through fast-mapping. But my studies suggest that this is not how children learn. This research will hopefully feed into what we know about language delay and the practice of speech therapy."

Dr Horst is looking for 84 children to take part in two studies. The first study involves studying the attention 30-month-old toddlers pay to familiar and unfamiliar objects. The second looks at word acquisition in younger two-year-olds. Plans are underway for children under two and for preschoolers. Each interview lasts no longer than 12 minutes and parents are required to stay with their children. Each participant will receive a small gift. To find out more, contact Dr Horst at:

www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/1-2-12.html

Source: University of Sussex

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