

How does playing with other children affect toddlers' language learning?

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Toddlers are surprisingly good at processing the speech of other young children, according to a new study. And toddlers who have more

exposure to other children, such as those in daycare, may be particularly good at certain word learning skills.

Researchers at the University of Waterloo examined the word processing skills of toddlers who spend most of their time with [adults](#) compared with those who have more [exposure](#) to [groups of children](#). They focused on how well the toddlers understood the [speech](#) of other children.

Although all of the toddlers were very good at processing child speech, the study found that toddlers who had more exposure to other children were better at associating a new word to a new object, an important part of word learning.

Child speech differs from adult speech in many ways. Even a child who is six or seven years old pronounces words a bit differently than adults. "We wanted to know if more exposure hearing other children speak would affect toddlers' ability to process child speech," said Katherine White, professor of psychology at Waterloo, who co-authored the study with Ph.D. candidate, Dana Bernier.

In the study, the researchers conducted two experiments with a total of 88 toddlers (and their parents), some of whom spent eight hours or less per week with other children, and others who had more weekly experience in child groups.

Experiment 1 compared their processing of instructions from a seven-year-old child speaker and from an adult speaker pronouncing a familiar or novel object's name in the standard way. Experiment 2 tested the sensitivity of the toddlers' speech processing by having the child speaker mispronounce the object names.

"Our study demonstrates that toddlers are extremely good at processing the speech of young children, and that this is true even for toddlers who

do not have a lot of experience with other children. This means that they could use this kind of speech, in addition to adult speech, to learn about their [native language\(s\)](#)," said White.

"However, we also found an intriguing difference in how toddlers processed new words that was related to how much exposure they had to other children."

"Most studies focus on how toddlers learn from adult speakers. But we think it's important to explore how toddlers process the speech of children of various ages and how much they use speech from other [children](#) to guide their [language learning](#)," said White.

The study, *Toddlers' sensitivity to phonetic detail in child speech*, by Dana Bernier and Katherine White, appears in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

More information: Dana E. Bernier et al. *Toddlers' sensitivity to phonetic detail in child speech*, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jecp.2019.04.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2019.04.021)

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