

Babies are sensitive to rhyme, rhythm and phrases in children's songs

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All over the world, parents sing songs and recite rhymes to their young children. Researchers have known for some time that this has a stimulating or calming effect on babies, but it turns out that babies are

also sensitive to the language patterns in these rhymes. This is the conclusion reached by linguist Laura Hahn in her Radboud University Ph.D. thesis, which she is due to defend on 1 February.

The rhymes that many babies hear from their parents contain all kinds of poetic structures, such as rhyme, rhythm, and verse lines. Hahn studied to what extent babies recognize these [language](#) patterns. At the Radboud University Baby & Child Research Center, she had babies listen to [children](#)'s songs and rhymes.

In one of her experiments, Hahn used the HPP (Head Turn Preference Paradigm) method to investigate to what extent babies are aware of phrases, i.e. verse lines, in songs. The children were seated on their parents' lap and heard a word sequence from songs coming from the left or the right. They kept their head turned for a longer time towards songs that contained a word sequence as a full phrase. When the songs played only contained the word sequence as individual words, the babies looked away more quickly. "This suggests that babies that are able to recognize phrases in songs," says Hahn.

Larger vocabulary

Hahn also investigated whether babies can perceive rhyme in songs and spoken verses by having them listen to rhyming and non-rhyming and rhythmic and non-rhythmic verses. Both in terms of listening time and [brain activity](#), she observed differences between rhyming and non-rhyming stimuli, and these were partially influenced by rhythm, although not all observed differences were significant. "This requires follow-up research," says Hahn, who did discover a link between sensitivity to rhyme and rhythm in songs and verses, and the size of a baby's vocabulary. "So singing and reciting rhymes can have a positive effect on babies' language development."

Musical education

It is therefore not a bad idea to become more aware of the function of rhymes and songs. "We already know that songs and rhymes have socio-emotional benefits. It stimulates children or on the contrary calms them down. Now we also have a first impression of how babies become acquainted with language patterns through language play such as in songs and rhymes. This can come in useful, for example in day-care centers, for children with language development disorders or multilingual children," says Hahn.

All children can benefit from learning important [language patterns](#) in the attractive context of a [song](#) or rhyme. "But we do need more comparable research before we can draw hard conclusions about the effects of songs and rhymes on the linguistic development of [babies](#)," emphasizes Hahn. At the same time, she does see practical applications. "If we can introduce people to these patterns in an interesting way, and in this way help them to learn a language better, this could be an argument for devoting more attention to music and poetry in our interaction with [young children](#). At home, but also in school."

Provided by Radboud University

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