UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO MISSISSAUGA

Infant and Child Studies Centre

FROM THE DIRECTORS

The Infant and Child Studies Centre at the University of Toronto Mississauga would like to start off by thanking all the families who have participated in our online studies over the past year. We are learning so much about early development in infants and children and your help has allowed our graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to continue their research. It is our pleasure to share some of our recent findings with you. Please share this newsletter with anyone else you feel would be interested in learning more about our studies or would like to participate.

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HOW DO I PARTICIPATE?

For more information on how you can participate, email us at: **juniorscientist@utoronto.ca**

NEWEST MEMBER OF OUR CENTRE

PARTICIPATE ONLINE AT HOME!

We are very pleased to announce the addition of our newest researcher, Dr. Christina Vanden Bosch der Nederlanden, who will be starting in January 2022 as an Assistant Professor. She previously worked as a Postdoctoral Fellow at Western University studying how children with and without dyslexia track speech, and whether putting words to music could help poor readers track speech as well as their typically developing peers. Her Language and Music: Auditory Lab will study how children learn about music, language, and everyday sounds in real world listening settings to better understand the skills children must acquire to learn to communicate.

GROWING UP IN A PANDEMIC: HOW IS IT AFFECTING CHILDREN?

During the pandemic, Ontario experienced one of the longest lockdowns in the world. How is this affecting our children's vocabulary development? PhD student Priscilla Fung of the CLASS lab investigated this by comparing vocabulary scores from 11- to 34-month-old children before and after the pandemic. Preliminary results based on nearly 1500 families suggest that overall, Ontario children's vocabulary has not been measurably affected by the pandemic. Incidentally, a similar study carried out in Europe came to a similar conclusion. This is great news for parents concerned about their children's early language development! However, we did find that some children's activities during the lockdown changed substantially. For example, although we saw screen time increases for all families in our study as expected, lower income families reported that a greater percent of this screen time was passive (e.g., TV) rather than interactive (e.g., Zoom). We also found that lower, but not higher, income families decreased reading times after the onset of the pandemic. Both interactive screen time and reading time were found to be related to high vocabulary scores. Read and interact more with your child, these activities make a difference!

PARLEZ-VOUS FRANCAIS? LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE AND WORD LEARNING

Is your child learning a new language? Dr. Félix Desmeules-Trudel, a postdoctoral researcher in the CLASS Lab, investigated how the sounds in a child's first language can affect second language learning. French and English speaking children were introduced to cartoon aliens with made-up names that contained sounds used in French, but not in English . After learning the names, children did a recognition task where sometimes the pronunciation of the names was changed slightly to reflect how words can be pronounced differently by a single speaker. Both French and English speaking children demonstrated robust learning of the made-up words, however, English speaking children were not as accurate at recognizing different pronunciations as French speaking children. This research shows that children are excellent learners despite unusual conditions (e.g., learning using a laptop/tablet in the home) and that language background influences the way they learn new information. Familiarity with specific speech sounds is an important part of overall word learning and early exposure to a variety of languages may be beneficial to further learning later in childhood. In general, these findings support the success of children learning a new language from home!

WOULD YOU TAKE OUT THE GARBAGE? OR IS IT TRASH?

Objects frequently have multiple labels (e.g. trash can vs. garbage can). In some cases, labels are used interchangeably, while in other cases there is a clear preference for one over the other. How are these community norms formed and how do children come to acquire them? Often the use of one label over another has a clear social motivation. For example, when a journalist describes one politician as smiling and another as smirking, they are doing more than providing a label; they are signaling to others what political group they belong to. CLASS lab PhD student Jida Jaffan aims to better understand when and under what circumstances children begin to use language to signal group membership. In an upcoming study, children will be assigned to either a red or green team, and then will participate in a trivia game. The answers to some of the questions will have multiple possible answers. Will children use the same label as their teammates (no matter whether that label is preferred or dispreferred by the community), thereby signaling their group membership?

GENDER ATTITUDES IN KIDS

Intergroup bias is the tendency to be more positive towards members of your own group than an out-group and has been found in children. For example, children tend to ascribe positive characteristics (e.g., smart) to the same gender and negative characteristics (e.g., boring) to the other gender. PhD student Diana Peragine of the BIG lab asked whether this intergroup gender bias is based on how similar children think they are to other boys and girls. We interviewed 6- to 10-year-old children on their perceived similarity to other boys and girls. After that, children rated the extent to which they thought positive and negative characteristics applied to boys and to girls. We found that intergroup gender bias was more pronounced among girls than boys. Also, the more girls perceived themselves to be similar to boys, the more negative characteristics they attributed to girls. These patterns help us understand the importance of gender in the development of intergroup bias.

CARTOON CASTING CALL

Historically, children's entertainment has been more likely to use foreign accents to depict villains compared to heroic characters. For example, villains like Scar from *The Lion King,* Jafar from *Aladdin*, and Cruella de Vil from *101 Dalmations* all speak with a foreign accent but the heroes do not. To understand the extent to which children associate foreign accents with cartoon villains, postdoctoral researcher Thomas St. Pierre of the CLASS Lab, asked children to help choose voice actors for cartoons. They listened to actors auditioning for roles as either heroes or villains and were asked to choose which character they thought each actor was more suited for. Some of the actors had a foreign accent, while others had a Canadian accent. Children were more likely to find foreign-accented actors better suited for villain roles, which is reflective of how foreign accents have been depicted in children's media.

WHO SPEAKS TODDLER?

Moms are pros when it comes to understanding their children's first words and know if 'nana' means banana or grandma. Other adults, especially those who do not routinely interact with children, often report struggling to comprehend toddlers. Do moms have a special skill for understanding their own child or even all children? Do other adults who regularly interact with children have this same skill? CLASS Lab PhD student Madeleine Yu investigated how experience with children impacts adults' comprehension of toddler speech. As predicted, Madeleine found that moms understood their own children better than unfamiliar children. Surprisingly, she also found that adults who spend very little time with toddlers performed as well as mothers and early childcare educators in comprehending unfamiliar toddlers. The only listeners she found to have a special skill at understanding all children were speech-language pathologists. These findings suggest that frequent interactions with toddlers may not be enough to improve comprehension, but it is enough to improve the comprehension of the particular children you interact with. Keep up those conversations with the toddlers in your life—you may be the one who understands them best!

THIS BOWLING BALL FLOATS — OR DOES IT?

By listening to what people tell them, children learn about the world. Some things are surprising, such as the existence of germs, but cannot be tested. However, children can verify simpler surprising claims, for example, that a larger object floats while a smaller one sinks. In a recent study, we examined the reasons why younger and older children question surprising claims. When younger children are told something surprising about an object, they believe what they are told and want to learn more about it by playing with the object. In contrast, when older children are told something surprising about an object, they wonder if what they are told is really true and proceed to verify the information they have been given by testing the object.

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