

Can Two 1/2- and 3 1/2 -year-old Children Learn Verbs Even when Irrelevant Events are Present?

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Abstract

Children learning verbs benefit from seeing multiple events. Study 1 asks whether children can learn verbs when irrelevant events are present, as is common in everyday contexts. Two- and 3-year-olds saw events in one of three experimental conditions or one of two control conditions. They successfully extended the verbs only in the experimental conditions. Three-year-olds were more successful than were 2-year-olds, though the younger children could extend verbs. In Study 2, children saw similar events while an eye tracker tracked visual attention to events. Over trials, children looked longer at relevant than irrelevant events, and maintained their looking to relevant events while increasing their looking to distractor events. Two-year-olds performed at chance, but 3-year-olds extended the verbs. Together, these results show children can ignore irrelevant events and extend new verbs by 3 years. Results reveal mechanisms for learning in everyday contexts when verbs are heard in varied situations over time.