

Do Kenyan infants want their parents to talk to them like children?

This research project investigated the extent to which children respond to language that is geared specifically towards them.

Environment and culture shape what infants understand

How adults speak to the infants in their care matters to what the child understands, as even young infants have preferences on how they like to be addressed. These preferences are not universal across humans—even the youngest of humans. What type of language infants like is influenced by both environment and psychological differences. This study is part of work undertaken by ManyBabies, a global consortium of developmental researchers.

Background: How is infant-directed speech different in Kenya?

Talking in infant-directed speech (IDS), adults speak more slowly, in shorter sentences, at a higher voice, with repetitive melodies, and interspersed by longer pauses. Studies in Europe and North America have established that infants prefer to be spoken to in IDS, but that the quality of the interaction depends on the child's developmental needs and its environment. Does this also hold true for infants in Kenya?

Conducting the research

After a recruitment survey and obtaining consent, infants and caregivers played together with toys laid out on a neutral-colored carpet. Playful interactions between child and caregiver were videoed and observed for 20 minutes through a one-sided mirror. In a one-hour interview the caregiver was then asked about which words, sounds or items the infant was able to identify.

project facts

Key words

Adult-directed speech (ADS), early childhood development, environment, infant-directed speech (IDS), oracy

Behavioral themes

Language development

Research design

Lab experiment

Scope

n=60

Participants from Kawangware and Kibera counties in Nairobi: 30 infants (6-30 months old) with 29 female caregivers and 1 male caregiver (defined as caring for the child for more than eight hours/day)

Study period: 11/2022-1/2023

Location

Nairobi, Kenya (Busara Lab)

Partner

Princeton University/ ManyBabies study

Ethics approval

Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI)

These key findings emphasize learning from the conduct of the experiment as the study data is still being analyzed. Preliminary findings include: Psychologically-different children are able to say different words, even if they are of the same age. This means that it cannot be assumed that being part of an age-defined developmental cohort dictates oracy.

Findings on conducting the study include:

- » It is extremely challenging for caregivers to make the time to participate in a study, even if they bring children along (and thus do not need to secure child care).
- » Working with infants and caregivers (who are not always the parents) requires extra scrutiny on confidentiality and privacy, including being very transparent about how data is protected and spending extra time on explaining consent forms.
- » Using video to observe interaction can be technologically challenging as cameras left alone can go out of focus or switch off.

Implications

For early childhood development

practitioners: Early childhood programs that seek to support language development will benefit from findings that show how particularly oracy can be supported by being aware of environmental influences.

For parents: It will be helpful for parents to understand that the findings do not reflect their child's learning ability, but can clarify how they can use IDS in ways that support their child's language development.

Recommendations for future research

To broaden knowledge on how IDS works in non-European/non-North American settings needs further studies in other parts of the world. In the Kenyan context, understanding what shapes behavioral interactions between child and caregiver—and the child's preferences regarding IDS and ADS—will require further research.

Further reading

Broesch, T. L., & Bryant, G. A. (2015a). *Prosody in Infant-Directed Speech is Similar Across Western and Traditional Cultures*. *Journal of Cognition and Development*, 16 (1), 31–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15248372.2013.833923>

Hoff, E. (2006). *How social contexts support and shape language development*. *Developmental Review*, 26 (1), 55–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2005.11.002>

Kosie, Jessica E. ManyBabies Consortium (accepted pending data collection). *Quantifying sources of variability in infancy research using the infant-directed speech preference*. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*.

Nencheva, M. L., Tamir, D. I., & Lew-Williams, C. (2023). *Caregiver speech predicts the emergence of children's emotion vocabulary*. *Child Development*, 29, 585–602

Open science resources

The pre-analysis plan is available at <https://osf.io/fqp4b>

An overview of the ManyBabies study (MB1A: Infant-Directed Speech Preference in African Infants) is at <https://manybabies.org/MB1A/>

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