Dear Parents,

Thank you for participating with your child or children in the research being conducted in the Child Development Labs at UVa. Your support and participation is what makes it possible for us to learn about early development, and to train the next generation of developmental scientists.

This year represents a bit of a changing of the guard in the Child Development Labs, as the two senior-most lab directors (Judy DeLoache and Rachel Keen) retired, and are winding down operations in their labs. You can read a bit more about them and their accomplishments in the “About People” section of the newsletter. We are excited to report that two new labs will be opening in 2014, directed by two new faculty members. Stay tuned!

As usual, we report here on several of the studies conducted in the CDL during the previous year. We hope that you enjoy reading about this work, especially the studies to which you and your children contributed.

Our fourth annual Open House will be on September 22, 2012. We hope that your family can attend, and we encourage you to invite any of your friends with young children who might enjoy the chance to get together with other parents and children. This will be a good opportunity for you to learn more about the current projects at the CDL, as well as for your children to enjoy various fun activities!

Judy DeLoache
Child Study Center

Vikram Jaswal
Child Language and Learning Lab

Rachel Keen
Early Childhood Lab

Angeline Lillard
Early Development Lab

Open House – Sept. 22, 2012!

Last fall, we held our third annual CDL Open House. It was a huge success! We had over 300 families visit the Millmont Cottage. Visitors enjoyed live music, dance performances, snacks from Sticks and Panera, finger-painting, face-painting, and giveaways. Families also had an opportunity to have their children fingerprinted by the Albemarle County Sheriff’s Office, learn CPR from the Charlottesville-Albemarle Rescue Squad, and get an insider’s view of the Child Development Labs here at UVa. Thank you to all the friends and families (new and old!) who helped and attended. The Open House wouldn’t have been possible without you!

Our open house this year will be September 22, 2012 from 9-2! Once again, it will take place at the Millmont Cottage, at 1023 Millmont St. There will be games, new vendors, new safety information and instruction, exciting giveaways, and a lot more fun! We hope you will join us on September 22! For additional information, please call (434) 982-5368.
About People

As some of you may have heard, two of the four labs affiliated with the Child Development Labs are winding down their operations this year. Professors Judy DeLoache and Rachel Keen, two of the most well known developmental psychologists in the world, retired from UVa in May. Judy arrived in Charlottesville in 2000 and Rachel arrived in 2007. Both were elected members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences during their time here, and both have received countless awards in recognition for their research (all of which was made possible by the participation of families like yours).

Judy is most closely associated with research on symbolic development—some of you may have participated in studies about “scale errors” toddlers make where they, for example, earnestly try to sit on a doll-sized chair or put their foot in a tiny toy car. While at Virginia, she also conducted research investigating whether infants learn from TV shows designed for babies (nope), the origins of the fear of snakes and other critters, and whether kids can recognize people with whom they have video-chatted.

Rachel’s research has focused on perceptual and cognitive development, addressing questions about infants’ and young children’s problem-solving abilities. Some of you may have participated in studies investigating how children learn to use tools to achieve a goal. How do they learn to coordinate what they see with the actions they need to take?

In addition to their ground-breaking research, both Judy and Rachel have a well-deserved reputation as generous and kind mentors for countless undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty members. We will miss our daily interactions with them, and we wish them all the best in their retirement.

Graduate student Matt Lerner is now on clinical internship at the University of Chicago.

Recent Articles from the Labs

Please visit www.childdevelopmentlabs.org or feel free to contact us if you would like a copy of any of these articles!

The Child Study Center

Video Chatting with Toddlers

Video chatting is becoming a popular means of keeping in touch with family and friends. Graduate student Robyn Kondrad and post doc Kasey Soska wondered: if toddlers had only ever seen someone over video chat, would they recognize that person when they meet him or her for the first time in person?

We had 18- to 32-month-olds interact for 10 minutes with an experimenter over Skype. Next, the Skyper and another person whom the children had never seen before visited the
children in person. We asked the children to give or take something from the person they had seen earlier. It was not until 25 months that toddlers could correctly identify the person with whom they had video-chatted.

Attuned to Animals

Humans appear to be particularly attuned to other living things. This presumably helps us to quickly recognize other members of our species and to detect threats. This preference may explain why so many children are so excited to encounter animals and develop rich and lasting relationships with pets.

In a new study, post doc Kasey Soska and graduate student Matt Lerner looked at whether children between 8 and 16 years of age with autism spectrum disorders also prefer to look at animal videos compared to videos of mechanical objects. They’ve found that while many of the children with autism liked to look at the animals, some preferred, instead, to look at the mechanical objects; fewer typically developing children preferred to look at the objects. Both children with autism and with typical development who had more social impairments were less interested in looking at the animals and reported less enjoyment from animals at home. These results may help clinicians working with children with autism figure out whether popular “animal therapies” are right for individual children.

The Early Childhood Lab

Rhythm Perception

Graduate students Laura Getz and Robyn Kondrad are currently studying syncopation, which is a complex feature of rhythmic patterns. Syncopation refers to the displacement of the usual rhythmic pulse away from a strong beat (where it is generally expected) onto a weak beat (where it may sound out of place). Think salsa music! Adults are not able to hear differences between highly similar patterns that only differ in the location of notes on a strong or weak beat (non-syncopated or syncopated, respectively).

We asked if five-year-olds’ discrimination ability was the same as adults. We found that children, like adults, have difficulty detecting differences between highly similar patterns. This similarity in performance suggests the importance of informal exposure for music perception, and reinforces the idea that individuals exposed mostly to Western music tend to simplify patterns in their minds instead of internalizing all details of a complex pattern. We plan to continue exploring how exposure—both with informal exposure through music listening and formal music training—affects the ability to discriminate and produce such syncopated rhythms.

The Early Development Lab

Montessori and Executive Function

The EDL continues to do research on the impact of various television shows on young children’s executive function, following on the extraordinary media splash invoked by Dr. Angeline Lillard’s studies of SpongeBob Squarepants. Angeline's rafting guide in Wyoming this summer even knew about the findings!

Dr. Lillard is also conducting a study of the outcomes of Montessori education, following on our 2006 Science paper on that topic. Children in Hartford CT public Montessori
schools, as well as those who entered the lottery to attend Montessori but did not get in, are being followed for 3 preschool years to help us determine whether going to Montessori significantly changed their development relative to the development of those who did not get in. Our prior study of children in Milwaukee had shown significant positive change from Montessori or something associated with it, but replication in a different setting is needed. Lillard’s book on Montessori, as well as a DVD, are available on Amazon.

Identification with Fictional Characters

Graduate students Rebecca Dore and Eric Smith are investigating whether 7- and 10-year-olds adopt the stereotypical traits and behaviors of the protagonist in a narrative. In this study, children listen to a recording of a cheerleader or a professor describing a typical day in their life. To determine whether children adopt the characteristics of those characters, they are asked to rate themselves on several relevant traits, like how smart they are, and behaviors, like how good they are at shouting loudly. Next, children are given the choice between playing with an analytical toy (a Rubik’s cube) and a non-analytical toy (a yoyo). We expect that children who listen to the recording about the professor will be more likely to choose to play with the Rubik’s cube, rate themselves as smarter, and adopt traits resulting in actual behavioral changes.

Social categories & Perceptions of Pain

Past research has found that adults rate the pain of black people to be less than the pain of white people, even in the exact same events, like stubbing your toe or hitting your head. In collaboration with UVA social psychologists Sophie Trawalter and Kelly Hoffman, graduate student Rebecca Dore is examining when this effect first emerges in childhood.

Results showed that 5-year-olds do not differentially rate the pain of a black and a white child, but 7- and 10-year-olds do. Future research in this line will investigate interventions that might be used to prevent or decrease the effect.

Fantasy and Theory of Mind

Some researchers have suggested that engagement in fantasy play might help children learn to understand other people’s thoughts and minds. Graduate student Rebecca Dore has found evidence supporting such a relationship. Three- and 4-year-old children came into the lab at two different times, about 6 months apart. At both time points, children were assessed on how well they understand other people’s mental states. During the second visit, both children and parents responded to questions about the child’s fantasy orientation. The results showed that children who scored higher on several measures of fantasy orientation improved more in their understanding of others’ minds from the first to the second visit.

Imitating Novel Behaviors

Graduate student Eric Smith is investigating whether 4-year-olds imitate novel behavior demonstrated in four target modalities: (1) live; (2) film; (3) storybook; and (4) pretend play. Children witness an actor carry out moderately aggressive behaviors directed at an inflatable clown in one of the four modalities. This study is modeled from the famous study carried out by Albert Bandura in the 1960s. Eric’s version extends it by examining whether children are
more or less likely to imitate behavior they encounter in a storybook or during an episode of pretense. Thus far, Eric has completed data collection for the live, film, and storybook conditions. He is still collecting data for the pretend condition, but so far, children are imitating the most in the storybook condition. Storybooks may involve a more active role on the part of a child (e.g., simulating the protagonist’s actions) compared to passive observation associated with the live and film conditions.

The Child Language and Learning Lab

Trust in Ignorant & Inaccurate Speakers

Preschoolers learn a lot from other people. But, as earlier work in the CLLL has shown, they don’t blindly believe everything they are told. Graduate student Robyn Kondrad has investigated whether 4- and 5-year-old children think someone who admits when they don’t know the answer to a question is a more trustworthy informant than someone who always thinks she knows the answer, but turns out to be wrong.

We have shown that most 4-year-olds prefer to endorse information provided by the person who had earlier been wrong over the one who had earlier professed her ignorance. By age 5, kids begin to see the benefit of trusting someone who tells you when she knows, and admits it when she doesn’t.

Evaluating the Helpfulness of a Point

Previous work in the CLLL has shown that preschoolers expect communicative gestures, like pointing, to be helpful. In recent work, graduate student Carrie Palmquist explored whether this expectation leads children to develop preferences for people who point in more helpful ways than those who point less helpfully. Here, children watched as two different actors took turns hiding toys under one of two cups.

The more helpful, unambiguous actor, pointed to one of the two hiding locations while saying, “It’s in the cup”, the less helpful, ambiguous actor simply pointed to a picture of the hidden object (instead of a hiding location) while saying, “It’s in the cup”. Later, when children were given a choice of which actor they would rather have tell them about other hidden objects, children were more likely to select the unambiguous actor than the ambiguous one.

Teaching Virtues to Children

Most parents would agree that teaching their children about virtues like honesty and gratitude are important. In a new line of research, graduate student Marissa Drell is studying how parents and children talk about these types of virtues. When they come to the lab, parents are provided with several picture books to help start the conversation. Later, they discuss what they have read with their children. Stay tuned for more information about the ways we observe parents talking about virtues with their children!
From all of us at the Child Development Laboratories at UVA, we thank you again for your interest and participation in our research!

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