

LOCAL NEWS

Peek-a-boo more than a game

Study suggests babies need to learn concept of object permanence

By Elizabeth Mattern Clark
Camera Staff Writer

Play peek-a-boo with babies, and they'll be fixated because an object — your face — seems to impossibly disappear.

Emerging science at the University of Colorado suggests that infants gradually learn that objects are permanent and don't disappear when they're hidden. The prevailing thought used to be that babies were born with an understanding of that "object permanence."

New findings by Yuko Munakata, an associate professor of psychology at CU, and professor Jeanne Shinskey, of the University of South Carolina, could help change scientists' understanding of how infants learn.

The study shows that 7-month-old babies will reach for a familiar object more often than a novel object when the toys are hidden in the dark. That counters what babies will do when toys are in plain view, which is reach for the newer, more novel object.

Munakata said the results show that babies might gradually learn the idea that objects are permanent and that they first apply the concept to familiar things, such as a bottle or a favorite toy.

"What's surprising about these results is that they suggest infants might have a better sense of object permanence for objects that are familiar," she said.

Scientists have thought that the understanding that objects can't disappear is innate. Others who have argued it is learned have described it as almost a single "a-ha" moment of understanding in infancy, Munakata said.

Instead, her research shows the understanding of object permanence might be learned over months or years.

"It really might be much more gradual, and you first get it for a really familiar thing like a baby's blanket," she said.

Infants as young as 2½ months will fixate on "impossible events," such as an object seemingly disappearing behind another, the study said. But babies won't search for objects hidden in the dark until they are several months older, and they won't search for objects hidden by covers until even later, the study said.


Steven Reznick, a professor who earned his doctorate at CU and teaches about infant cognitive development at the Univer-

sity of North Carolina, said Munakata does "beautiful work" in the field.

"The whole concept of 'innate' is in need of a makeover," he said. "The debates about whether something is innate or not have really turned out to be futile. If the question is, 'Is it experience or biology?' The answer is yes."

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