

Parentese...if you please!

What does research tell us about the speech preferences of preverbal young children?

The higher pitch, slower rhythm, simplified content, whimsical vocabulary, and compact length of *infant-directed speech*—commonly referred to as “baby talk” or “parentese”—is just what preverbal young children like to hear from the adults in their lives.

Researchers at the Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) analyzed 34 studies of infant-directed speech in order to compare the effects of this style of speech vs. adult-directed speech on the behavior of infants younger than 1 year old. The children’s attention and preference were measured in terms of behavior such as visual fixation on the source of the speech, head turns, and positive affect in response to either type of speech.

The analysis showed that infants clearly preferred infant-directed speech, showing increased social responsiveness in terms of listening and attending to it. It also showed that the degree of preference increased somewhat with age of the infants, presumably because the older the infants, the more able they are able to detect the differences between infant-directed speech and regular adult-directed speech.

In evaluating the studies, CELL researchers were able to identify the conditions under which infants showed the greatest preference for infant-directed speech: (1) when the infant-directed speech is spoken in a naturalistic manner (mothers talking to infants as they normally would), (2) when the differences in rhythm, stress, and intonation of the two types of speech are greatest, and (3) when the infants



are provided with lots of opportunities to listen to infant-directed speech throughout their infancy.

The researchers concluded that interspersing infant-directed speech into adult-infant conversations is a promising way to optimize infants’ social attention and responsiveness to adult-initiated interactions.

This *CELLnotes* summarizes findings reported in Dunst, C. J., Gorman, E., & Hamby, D. W. (2012). Preference for infant-directed speech in preverbal young children. *CELLreviews* 5(1), 1-13.

