

UC Merced

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

Whoa! Aww . . . Ohh . . . Hee! and Mmm: Infants' nuanced distinctions about the probable causes of emotional expressions

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1jx0f95d>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 39(0)

Authors

Wu, Yang

Muentener, Paul

Schulz, Laura

Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed

Whoa! Aww ... Ohh ... Hee! and Mmm: Infants' nuanced distinctions about the probable causes of emotional expressions

Yang Wu
MIT

Paul Muentener
Tufts University

Laura Schulz
MIT

Abstract: Can infants map diverse positive emotional expressions to their probable causes? Across two studies (including one pre-registered experiment), we used a preferential-looking task to find that infants as young as 12-17 months (mean: 14.8 months) successfully matched non-verbal vocalizations elicited by funny, exciting, adorable, sympathetic, and delicious images to their probable causes (Experiments 1 and 2). Do infants also posit unobserved causes of emotional expressions? In both exploratory and pre-registered experiments, an adult peeked into a box and made one of two distinct positive emotional vocalizations (Experiment 3: “Aww!” or “Mmm!”; Experiment 4: “Aww!” or “Whoa!”). Infants reaching into the box retrieved either a probable or improbable cause of the reaction. Infants were more likely to search again on incongruent trials. These results suggest that infants make nuanced distinctions among emotions, and infer probable causes of emotional reactions.