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The 'Goldilocks Effect' in Preschoolers' Attention to Spoken Language

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Abstract

How do children decide what language input to learn from? Here, we extend the idea that infants attend to stimuli at an intermediate level of complexity to the rich, naturalistic domain of spoken language. In our study, 2.5 to 6.5-year-old children watched two speakers alternate narrating pages of a textless picture book, before selecting which speaker they wanted to continue listening to. We manipulated the complexity of the speech, such that the Simple speaker used earlier-acquired words than the Complex speaker, but both introduced a rare target word each turn. We tested children's learning of the target words, tracked their attention via eyetracking, and measured their vocabulary via the PPVT. Children learned more words from the Simple speaker overall, and were more likely to select the Simple speaker with greater age and vocabulary, suggesting they discriminated between levels of speech complexity, and selected the more learnable level.