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Explanation-based discourse inferences support early word learning

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Abstract: Children can learn new words from non-instructive contexts (e.g., overheard speech). Recently, it has been proposed that one way that children do this is by using the surrounding discourse to constrain the interpretation of new words (Sullivan & Barner, 2015). However, little is known about what sort of discourse inferences children might compute when learning. In the present study, we adopt a discourse-coherence framework (e.g., Rohde et al., 2006) in order to explain how preschoolers (N = 96, M = 49.2 months, range: 28-65 months) learn new words from discourse. We ask whether young children compute adult-like discourse coherence relations across clauses, and provide some of the earliest evidence that they do. We then relate children's ability to compute these discourse coherence relations to their ability to learn a novel word from that discourse, demonstrating the relation between the computation of discourse coherence and early word learning.