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Can children recognize pedagogical intent in the prosody of speech?

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Abstract

Although the ability to recognize pedagogical intent is important, very little is known about how children do it in ambiguous contexts. For example, when the context is unambiguous, children who receive pedagogical questions (where the intent is to teach) show superior learning compared to children who receive information-seeking questions (where the intent is to gather information) (Yue et al., 2018). Here, we asked if children could use the prosody of speech to recognize pedagogical intent. A total of 98 children (ages 4 to 6), received 24 trials where in each trial the same question was asked by two individuals: one with pedagogical and one with information-seeking prosody. We found that both 5- and 6-year-olds could recognize “who the teacher is,” while 4-year-olds performed at chance. Age was a significant predictor of performance. These results suggest that prosody can serve as an important mechanism for recognizing pedagogical intent in early childhood.