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Early Exposure to Pictures Facilitates Development of Referential Understanding

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Abstract: Exposure to representational media is common for infants in western culture, and previous research has shown that soon after their first birthday, infants can acquire and extend new information from pictures to objects. Here we explore the extent to which lack of exposure to symbols affects children's learning from pictures. Infants were recruited from a rural village in Tanzania and had no experience with symbols. After a picture book interaction during which a novel depicted object was labeled, we assessed infants' learning and transfer of the label from pictures to their referents. In a second study, we assessed infants' learning and generalization of labels using real objects. There was a significant difference in learning and generalization from pictures, but not objects, when compared with infants in western culture. Findings provide evidence for the role of early experience with symbols in children's ability to use pictures as a source of information.