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Can infants categorize scenes?

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Abstract

Human adults are extremely good at inferring the overall meaning of scenes in a single glance—their gist—such as "a park" or "a kitchen". However, little is known about categorical knowledge of scenes and the extraction of scene gist in development. In two preferential-looking experiments, we investigated whether 12- and 18-month-old infants categorize scenes based on gist and the role that verbal input plays in extracting such conceptual commonality. Whereas 12-month-olds showed no evidence of scene categorization, 18-month-olds categorized scenes when the images were presented with a label void of meaning in the familiarization phase. The observed facilitating effect of language on categorization, previously already shown in studies with objects, seems to emerge at a later age for scenes, possibly due to their inherent complexity. Our findings show for the first time that by the age of 18 months, infants can categorize visual scenes based on abstract commonalities.