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Authors

Yang, Yang

Wang, Li

Wang, Qi

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Children's Attention to Semantic Content versus Emotional Tone: Differences between Two Cultural Groups

Yang Yang

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, United States

Li Wang

Peking University, Beijing, China

Qi Wang

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, United States

Abstract: People from varied cultural backgrounds differ in their attention to particular aspects of emotional cues. Whereas semantic content explicitly expresses feelings, vocal tone conveys implicit information regarding emotions. This study examined the attention to different emotional cues in European-American and Chinese children. Participants were 121 European-American and 120 Chinese children (4-9 years old). They played two games in which they listened to spoken words and judged the pleasantness of the word meaning while ignoring the vocal tone (meaning game) or judged the pleasantness of the vocal tone while ignoring the word meaning (tone game). Preliminary results showed that European-American children paid more attention to word meaning than did Chinese children. Additionally, older (8-9 years old) Chinese children attended more to vocal tone than did their European-American counterparts. The results suggest that children acquire culturally specific attention bias by 8-9 years old.