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How children learn and use abstract concepts

New research sheds light on how children learn abstract concepts like 'idea' or 'freedom'. This research has implications for teaching in primary schools. It also has a significant impact on how children with atypical language skills are supported to learn.

Abstract words (e.g. 'hope', 'idea') help us communicate effectively with each other in a wide range of situations. The ability to grasp and manipulate abstract ideas is a fundamental element of all academic endeavour.

Despite their importance very little has been known about how and when children learn abstract words and concepts, or what factors support their acquisition.

It was also not known if children with atypical language development, such as children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) find it especially hard to learn abstract concepts.

The research project: *Learning Abstract Concepts: The Role of Linguistic and Affective Development* by Professor Gabriella Vigliocco, Professor Courtenay Norbury (both UCL) and Dr Marta Ponari (University of Kent) provides first evidence concerning these questions relating to how and when children learn abstract concepts.

Download the full report at
http://www.institute-for-multimodal-communication.org/research/impact/learning-abstract-concepts/

What the research found

Children learn the vast majority of abstract words and concepts between the ages of six and ten. However, they learn some abstract words earlier. These words refer to emotions such as 'happy' and 'sad' or have emotional content such as 'good' and 'bad.'

Up to the age of nine, the abstract words that children know often have greater emotional associations (e.g., 'truth', 'dream', 'fair') than those with non-emotional associations (e.g., 'role', 'habit', 'plain').

Crucially, when we taught children abstract words that they did not know, we found that they learnt more easily those with emotional associations (e.g., 'tyranny') than new abstract words without emotional associations (e.g., 'lucid'). This means emotional development is an important factor underscoring learning abstract vocabulary.

After the age of 10, children learn and know equally well both abstract words with and without emotional associations.

It had been assumed that children with DLD, and those children with ASD that have poor language, would find learning abstract words more difficult than concrete words. However, the research has found this not the case.

Key learning points

The teaching of abstract words and concepts should take into account that up to age 9, concepts with emotional association may be easier to learn than those without.

Speech and language therapy should equally focus on concrete and abstract words and to allow children with language impairments to access abstract ideas.