This is Psychological Frontiers: Exploring Human Behavior. I’m Dawn Albertson.

Babies are better listeners than you might think.

How many times have you been annoyed when watching a badly dubbed film where the movements of the characters’ lips don’t match the words in the soundtrack? We expect that what we are seeing and hearing should match because we are experiencing them in a unitary way. We call this ability to combine information from two or more senses intermodal perception and research suggests that this is an ability we are born with.

Nineteenth century psychologist, William James, described the perceptual world of infants as a “blooming, buzzing confusion.” Modern research tells a very different story. Infant perception is a much more organized activity than James imagined. Scientist Elizabeth Spelke of Harvard University illustrated this in a study examining intermodal perception in infants. Spelke was interested in how young infants combine sights and sounds. In her study, she showed 4-month-olds two films running side-by-side. One film showed a toy donkey bouncing up and down at a slow rate while the other showed a toy kangaroo with a rapid rate of jumping. A rhythmic sound was introduced that matched either the slow film or the rapid one. Spelke measured the infants’ gaze and found that the infants would focus on the film that matched the particular rhythmic pattern they were hearing and they would switch their focus when the sound pattern was changed. What this shows us is that the infants recognized the correspondence between what they were seeing and hearing.

It’s clear that William James’ characterization of the confused perceptual world of the infant does not accurately portray the extent to which infants actively and competently use their senses to construct a reasonable understanding of the world around them.

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