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The Emergence of Name Sound Symbolism in Children

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Abstract

Sound symbolism refers to the finding that certain phonemes are perceived to be better fits for particular properties such as shape (e.g., the Maluma/Takete effect). Sound symbolism extends from nonwords to real first names (i.e., the Bob/Kirk effect). Children begin to show sensitivity to sound symbolism at one year of age, however, the development of name sound symbolism remains unexplored. Additionally, previous work on name sound symbolism has highlighted people's tendency to associate femaleness with round shapes, and maleness with spiky shapes. We investigated the emergence of name sound symbolism and gender-shape association in five- to seven-year-olds, in comparison to adults. We also collected measures of children's language abilities. Results indicate that both associations are stronger in adults than children. Moreover, while gender-shape association is observable in children, name sound symbolism develops later, and language skills did not influence development. These findings provide insights into the development of crossmodal correspondences.

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