Prematurity is a bigger problem than most people think: 50,000 babies are born prematurely in the UK each year. Most studies of prematurity focus on medical care, but premature babies and their families have many special needs. We are beginning a major new study to identify the social and cognitive needs of premature babies. This study is a collaboration with Dr Shobha Cherian, Consultant Neonatologist at University Hospital Wales, and Dr Marc Bornstein, Head of Child and Family Research at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in the United States. PhD Student Alice Winstanley has recently returned from the United States and will start recruiting infants and their families in early 2010. To understand the needs of premature infants, we will compare the development of preterm and full term infants in a longitudinal design. We will ask families to bring infants to Cardiff University at 5, 13, and 18 months to participate in short tasks measuring social and cognitive skills. If you or someone you know is expecting a baby in 2010, please ask for additional study information by returning the enclosed flyer to our freepost address: Dr Merideth Gattis, School of Psychology, FREEPOST NAT14117, CARDIFF, CF10 3ZQ or sending an email to development@cardiff.ac.uk.
New Year’s Day feels like a birthday for us because it marks the end of another successful year for First Steps, a major longitudinal study of infant development funded by The Leverhulme Trust. More than 17 mums and babies have completed 18 months of diary-keeping and breakfasting to help us understand how social and cognitive skills are intertwined in development. In spring 2010, the youngest babies in the study will put the finishing touches to their diaries. We are looking forward to seeing the First Steps babies again for their second birthday so, that we can say “My, how you’ve grown!”

PhD Student Kate Ellis has been pulling strings — not to get ahead, but to get the attention of babies. Kate is interested in when babies first become able to share attention to interesting objects and events with others. Young babies like looking at faces, but find it challenging to switch attention between a face and a toy. To investigate when and how babies develop this ability to share attention, Kate pulls a secret string attached to a Jumping Jack, placed behind her back. Pointing and looking between the toy and Kate’s face counts as evidence of sharing attention. In September, Kate presented surprising new results to the British Psychological Society about the attentional abilities of 2-month-olds. We can’t wait to hear what she finds out about Jack!

PhD Student Nia Fowler has spent a lot of this past year smiling and frowning! Nia has taken responsibility for our emotion studies from Sarah May, who is now at the Waterloo Foundation — congratulations, Sarah! Although Nia has ended up with a few aching facial muscles, she also has new insights into when and how emotional expressions develop in infancy. Nia presented her results to the British Psychological Society in September: infants as young as 3 months old copy both happy and sad emotional expressions spontaneously. In 2010, Nia will be investigating how infant responses to emotional expressions change and develop in the second year of life.

Postdoctoral Researcher Dr Elena Sakkalou has spent most of this year singing to babies. Luckily for all of us, she has a lovely voice! Elena is interested in whether babies can learn intonation — an important feature of language — by copying another person. Intonation refers to the singing quality of speech — the way the voice goes up or down during a word, or across a sentence. In 2010, Elena will be conducting new studies on action understanding in 14- to 18-month-olds.

PhD Student Elma Hilbrink has developed a remarkable range of toys over the past year, including her friend Mr Duck with his yellow mittens. Elma is interested in whether babies under one year can learn how a toy works by watching someone else, or whether they prefer to work it out themselves. Elma also presented the results of a study on vocal imitation to the British Psychological Society in September. If Elma ever gets tired of doing baby science, we think she should start her own toy company!