Welcome
to our annual update on research at Cardiff University on social and cognitive development.

Parents’ Point of View

Our newest research project focuses on the experience of caring for a baby. In short, this project is all about parents’ viewpoints.

New parents are often given advice about how to care for a baby, whether from family, friends, or even strangers. There is very little data about whether parents adopt this advice and the effects it has on care giving.

Over the past year, we have begun to bridge this gap by asking parents to share their experiences of caring. The Baby Care Questionnaire asks parents about the strategies they use in caring for their baby, and about their baby’s behaviour. This is our first internet-based study, allowing us to gather responses from families across the UK. Some families in South Wales have also visited us at the Cardiff University School of Psychology to participate. Over 500 families have participated so far.

Research Director Dr Merideth Gattis commented: “The Baby Care Questionnaire is an entirely new approach to studying development and as such promises plenty of work ahead.” We will conduct several studies to establish basic issues such as scientific reliability and validity.

In addition, PhD Student Sabrina Luo (see Comings and Goings) will be exploring cross-cultural differences in parenting, and PhD Students Rebecca Sperotto (see Comings and Goings) and Alice Winstanley will be examining the needs of premature babies and their parents.

If you have not yet completed the Baby Care Questionnaire, please do! We are looking for parents who are expecting a child or who have a baby under 18 months old to complete the questionnaire, which can be found at www.surveymonkey.com/s/BCQ_Winstanley.

Parents without internet access can take part by requesting a questionnaire from us at 029 2087 6190.

Sage Advice

We have been seeking advice in more ways than one. This year we formed the Development@Cardiff Research Advisory Board. The purpose of the board is to help us evaluate and disseminate our current projects and to develop our vision for future projects. The board includes academic advisors, community advisors and parent representatives.

Research participant Natalia Lawrence completes the Baby Care Questionnaire with a little help from her baby daughter, Leila
First Steps Update

First Steps is a longitudinal study of development. For three years, we have followed baby milestones, including first smiles, first words and, of course, first steps. This year we reached two milestones of our own: we completed the monthly testing phase for the youngest baby in our study, and we tested all of the children again on their second birthdays. Thank you to all of our First Steps families for your participation in this landmark study. Below are a few highlights from our results.

Motor Control

PhD student Nia Fowler has been studying how babies use small eye movements to regulate their emotional experience. Studies by other researchers have shown that one strategy for regulating emotion is gaze aversion, or put simply, looking away. Nia’s research has identified an additional strategy, spontaneous blinking. Nia found that babies use blinking to regulate emotion from 3 months onward and gaze aversion to regulate emotion from 6 months onward. Nia presented her findings at conferences sponsored by the British Psychological Society and the Royal Society.

Communication

PhD student Kate Ellis-Davies is our resident expert on attention and communicative development. Kate has been following up on a study by former PhD student Oliver Perra, who found that by 3 to 4 months, most babies are able to follow the attentional focus of another person. Kate’s research has confirmed Oliver’s finding and extended it to other contexts.

Imitation

One of the first ways babies imitate is choosing a toy that another person has chosen. PhD student Elma Hilbrink has found that this tendency to choose the same objects as other people is related to copying people’s gestures later in development. Postdoctoral Researcher Elena Sakkalou has found further evidence that imitation is consistent across individuals: babies who imitate in one situation are more likely to imitate in another situation. Elma and Elena presented their findings at conferences sponsored by the British Psychological Society, the Experimental Psychology Society and the Royal Society.

Our Comings and Goings

Sabrina Luo is beginning a PhD on cross-cultural differences in parenting. Sabrina has experience of a variety of cultures, having moved from China to England and now to Wales. Rebecca Sperotto is beginning a PhD on how preterm birth influences the social and cognitive needs of babies. Rebecca recently completed an MSc in Neuropsychology at the University of Bologna. We are bidding a fond farewell to three researchers: Nia Fowler, Elma Hilbrink and Elena Sakkalou.

Making a Difference

We believe it is important we keep our participants up to date about the long-term results of these studies, so you can see how your valuable contribution makes a difference. Two papers based on studies completed at Development@Cardiff were published in 2010. Oliver Perra and Merideth Gattis published The Control of Social Attention from 1 to 4 Months in the British Journal of Developmental Psychology. Harriet Over and Merideth Gattis published Verbal Imitation is Based on Intention Understanding in Cognitive Development.