

# Infant cognition lab opens at Denison

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Rebecca Rosenberg plays with 7-month-old Atiya Kilili before conducting a study that looks at children's cognitive abilities June 29 at Denison University in Granville. (Photo by Zach Gray)

Written by  
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How often do new parents watch lovingly the expressions and gestures of their infant child? What thoughts churn in that new little mind, if any, they wonder? Why is their infant attracted to certain shapes and colors, and why does the child reach for one object instead of another?

A new infant and child cognition lab in the Department of Psychology at Denison University now is open to work with the public in finding answers to some of the age-old questions of nature and nurture in infants.

Babylab opened its doors just weeks ago and now invites local parents to join in the fun and exploration of their child's cognitive development.

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The lab is under the direction of Assistant Professor Reba

## IF YOU GO

» What: Babylab, an Infant and Child Cognition Lab at Denison University, for children ages 7 to 20 months.  
» When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday  
» Where: Denison University, Knapp Hall, fifth floor  
» For more details: Call 740-587-5665 to schedule your child's participation, log on to <http://babylab.denison.edu> or email [babylab@denison.edu](mailto:babylab@denison.edu).

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Rosenberg, who trained with several of the world's leading developmental psychologists.

"Dr. Rosenberg is among a relatively small number of developmental psychologists in the world who are working on the cutting edge issue of the nature of the baby's mind," said Harry Heft, professor of psychology.

Infants and toddlers between the ages of 7 and 20 months old are invited to participate in studies that explore short-term memory for hidden objects, their reasoning about objects made from different types of materials, and their earliest numerical knowledge, Rosenberg said.

"Infants know a lot more than we thought. We just need to know how to ask them," she said.

In one study, for example, the child watches as three yellow plastic ducks are placed on top of a black box. Rosenberg engages the child with the toys and then places them, one

by one, inside the box, out of sight, showing the child as she does so how the toy goes into the box. The child is then prompted to retrieve a duck. The study is looking at how infants spontaneously respond. Will the child reach into the box and retrieve a duck? Will the child continue to reach and retrieve all of them? Just how many objects will a child retrieve before losing interest?

"The studies take the form of simple games," Rosenberg said.

Parents are with their children at all times. The child either sits on their lap or in an infant seat. As the child engages in games with solid objects, such as the ducks, or watches non-cohesive objects, such as sand, sift to form a small pile on the floor of a "puppet stage," Rosenberg measures the baby's spontaneous reaction.

"How long do babies look at events? If they are interested, they'll look at it, and typically if it is new, they will look longer," she added.

"Since babies typically look longer at things that they find new or surprising, we can make inferences about how they perceive and understand our displays by examining patterns of looking across a group of infants," she said.

Adaline Henshaw, almost 2, was an early "trial run" participant. As the lab was being set up, Adaline and her mother, Dr. Erin Henshaw, a colleague in the psychology department, helped Rosenberg and her two student assistants, Dora Moore and Michael Wang, seniors, as they set up the studies.

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"Although she was too old to be a true 'participant,' Henshaw said, "she was able to help with a practice run of two different experiments. She had a very good time playing with the toys in the waiting room while the research assistants explained the study to me."

Adaline enjoyed the "memory chunking" experiment with the ducks and the box.

"Our biggest challenge," Henshaw said with some amusement, "was that Adaline, being a little old for the study, already has entered the 'mine' stage of childhood and was reluctant to give back the toys. Dora, the research assistant, was kind and patient and always made sure Adaline was still comfortable and enjoying herself."

"I really appreciated that the researchers took the time to explain the purpose of the study so that when Adaline participated, I was as curious as the researchers to see how she would respond," Henshaw said. "It seems like a fun game you might play to amuse a child, even though the results help us to understand something very important about infant cognition."

"Professor Rosenberg's lab is unique in that it is intended to operate on a continuing basis solely through the involvement and generosity of the local community," Heft said.

Participation in the Babylab studies requires only one visit, and although families might enjoy returning to participate in different studies as their child grows, there is no further commitment. The study takes only about 15 minutes to complete, and Rosenberg advises a 40-minute time period be allowed for time to play and get acquainted with the classroom and time to explain the study. Siblings can attend and play with the research assistants while there.

Small stuffed animals, T-shirts and other thank-you gifts go home with the infant as appreciation for participation, Rosenberg said.

"Adaline received a certificate and a small stuffed polar bear, which she really enjoyed," Henshaw said.

"Already we have seen Dr. Rosenberg's skill and knowledge in the care in which she has planned and carried out the design of her laboratory," Heft said. "If she can receive sustained support from the community, I have no doubt that she will make important contributions to our understanding of babies and children."

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