

Re: Do children learn language more easily?

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Source: <http://sci.tech--archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2006-12/msg00214.html>

- *From:* Nathan Sanders <nsanders@xxxxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Sun, 03 Dec 2006 15:58:52 -0500
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In article <[xylrgs0lvypo.39yzhszcg4qz\\$.dlg@xxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:xylrgs0lvypo.39yzhszcg4qz$.dlg@xxxxxxxxxxxxx)>, "Brian M. Scott" <b.scott@xxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

On Sun, 03 Dec 2006 12:16:03 -0500, Nathan Sanders <nsanders@xxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote in
<news:nsanders-C9D25D.12160203122006@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> in
sci.lang:

[...]

There are cases of so-called `feral children' who have had no known linguistic input during the first five years or so of their lives, and they were unable to learn language in a way resembling human usage.

Do you know of any who weren't also grossly mistreated?

I assume you mean aside from the lack of linguistic input, which is itself gross enough mistreatment for my taste.

It's certainly the case that their childhoods were abnormal in other respects besides language, and one could argue that these abnormalities were sufficient to coincidentally account for their inability to learn language, but somehow not impacting certain other non-linguistic cognitive functions (for example, 'Genie' tested above average in various non-linguistic tasks.)

But we can move the realm of feral children to deaf children to get some more potential corroboration from more loving childhoods.

Children born deaf who learn sign language late have degraded language ability in comparison to other children born deaf who learned it earlier.

Further, even when learning sign language at the same age, children

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born deaf have degraded language ability in comparison to children who were born hearing (and thus received linguistic input during their early years) but learned sign language after losing their hearing later in childhood.

With a linguistic critical period, these and numerous other disparate facts are all accounted for by a single explanation that mirrors other human critical periods and biologically-timed processes.

Without a linguistic critical period, the data we have from feral children, deaf children, the universality in the timing and nature of stages of language acquisition, the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition, etc. are all unconnected, requiring multiple diverse explanations that coincidentally converge on an apparent, but ultimately illusory, critical period.

The multiple-explanation theory of critical period effects is not necessarily incorrect, but it's certainly not very Occam-friendly.

Nathan

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