

UW study probing children's language skills

By Johanna Weidner, Record staff

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WATERLOO — Watching her first child's language grow fascinates Laura Gardiner.

The Kitchener mother hopes her son Jonathan's speech can help University of Waterloo researchers better understand childhood language development.

Gardiner signed up for a new study underway at the UW Centre for Child Studies aimed at discovering more about the way children's use of language evolves between the ages of two and three, a period of fast growth.

"Knowing more about how language is emerging typically at this time is helpful," said Daniela O'Neill, centre director and a professor in UW's psychology department.

But little research follows individual children through this critical age. Does language grow gradually or in spurts? Is the development different for boys than for girls?

"We just don't know a lot about that," O'Neill said.

O'Neill's centre did a national study a couple of years ago, surveying 3,500 children to get snapshots of language skills at certain ages.

In this new study, which needs participants like two-year-old Jonathan Gardiner, parents fill out a question several times during the year to track their child's language skills.

The questionnaire was developed by O'Neill and honed over a decade with help from students and parent the language use inventory has become a tool for speech-language pathologists and researchers.

"What we're really trying to capture is very ordinary, everyday kind of talk," O'Neill said.

Fundamental, early use of language in a variety of settings is what O'Neill is looking at in the study, fund the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

For the children involved, the study is far from boring. They play games with their mother and a research part of the research.



Language. UW researcher Daniela O'Neill recently started a new study toddler language development and how it grows between ages 2 and 3. Laura Gardiner (left) with son Jonathan, 2, at UW. Daniela O'Neill (center) toy grocery store scenario. Peter Lee, Record staff Source: Peter Lee staff

"He had a lot of fun," Gardiner said. "Jonathan and I read a story together and had a snack."

A snack is part of the research, too. It's another setting to learn more about a toddler's language, including different types of words, their variety and complexity.

Thousands of parents have signed their children up for studies, many returning since O'Neill founded the centre in 1995.

O'Neill keeps parents informed about ongoing studies and results on the centre's website (www.childstudies.uwaterloo.ca.) and on Twitter, where she lets parents know about new research and child development information.

There's no shortage of child development areas for O'Neill to explore. One study found a link between child story-telling ability and later math skills.

"I never stop thinking of questions," she said. "One thing leads to another."

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