



## BabyLab Podcast Season 2 Episode 1: Why babies are smarter than you think!

[Transcript: English]

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Speaker 1 (Emma) 0:30

A LiSTNR production. From the second we're born; we're learning and growing. And just because we can't talk, don't underestimate just how powerful our little brains are. Behind the 'goos' and the 'gaas' is an information processing powerhouse, ready and primed to begin making sense of this wonderful thing we call life. But how do we even know what's going on inside our heads when we're babies? And how can we use that information to create an environment in which we can grow and thrive? I'm Emma Watkins, a children's entertainer, and a lover of all things science and research. And this is the BabyLab podcast, where I team up with parents, as well as experts from the MARCS BabyLab at Western Sydney University who are gaining valuable insights into how babies learn, grow, and interact. Over the next eight episodes, we'll look at some of the incredible work being done at BabyLab and break it down for you. So, you can become a more confident and informed caregiver for your special little person. But let's not get ahead of ourselves just yet, it's probably best to start at the beginning. Even before birth, babies are learning. Their senses are already developing. And during these crucial months, their brains are undergoing a powerful transformation. So that when the time comes, and baby opens their eyes for the very first time they enter the world with all the tools they need to soak it all in.

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 2:45

So, you're born with a lot of the machinery that you need. But really right from the beginning, babies are in the business of using visual input to tune their visual processing system and to afford them the best possibility of being able to recognize and understand what's happening in the world around them.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 3:03

That's Dr. Genevieve Quek, a visual cognitive neuroscientist, and a research fellow at the MARCS Institute where she studies how exactly a baby's vision develops.

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 3:17

So, when we open our eyes and we walk around the world, you have a sense that vision is kind of automatic, that it's sort of something that comes without you having to invest any effort at all. But actually, vision is incredibly effortful. Just the sheer amount of sensory input that's coming into your eyes at any one time is really enormous. Despite all of that your brain is able to very rapidly extract meaning from what you're seeing. And by that I mean recognize what you're looking at. Part of what we do in the BabyLab is explore the kind of recognition that babies can do and really the lower limits of that in terms of their age.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 3:52



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If you were to walk into BabyLab at Western Sydney University, which you can by the way, you'd find yourself in a hive of research dedicated to unravelling the mysteries of infant development. And it's at Institutes like BabyLab that researchers like Dr. Quek have gained invaluable insights into how babies learn, in turn, providing caregivers with the ability to create the best learning environment possible. And all of this research wouldn't be possible without the many parents bringing their little ones into BabyLab to be worked with.

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 4:30

My name is Maggie, I am the mother of Isla, who is seven and a half months old.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 4:37

Maggie and her daughter have been a part of Dr. Quek's research into how babies process the world visually. But even before heading to BabyLab, Maggie had already recognized just how clever her little girl was.

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 4:49

It's amazing how you can watch a baby and you see things ticking over in their brain almost. I was very, very impressed that six months old, I introduced an open cup to her, and she knew straightaway what to do with it, she knew to drink from it. I didn't have to teach her how to drink from it. And then I gave her a Sippy cup and she knew that was water and like any type of water she knows to drink from it. Even her bath water and the pool water probably not great, but she kind of, it's almost like an instinct. She knew that water is for drinking from kind of a thing.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 5:27

It's an interesting topic in terms of instinct and intuition and acquired knowledge and there seems to be a very different discussion from different people about what that really means. What are those other things that you can see Her picking up from you now,

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 5:43

I won't say from me, but she's seen our cat scratching on the scratching post. And so now she scratches on the scratching post.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 5:50

That's not what I expected you to say.

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 5:53



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But she knows that a spoon is used to eat with, I never had to teach her how to use a spoon. As soon as I put a spoon in front of her, she was able to pick that up and just start eating. She has started to recognize animal pictures in books. The other thing I found interesting is just recently, her soft toys, I believe, because they've got faces on them, she almost thinks they're real. And she's just so excited to talk to them and hold them. I guess she's mimicking sort of things that she's seen us do as people and she doesn't realize it's not a person, I think because it's got a face, she thinks it's a person.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 6:39

This isn't going to be the last time you hear us talk about faces in this season of BabyLab. Babies love them. And it's not just because of the silly faces we pull. Faces are actually an incredibly important learning tool for babies.

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 6:54

I think anyone who's interacted with a baby can tell you that they orient to your face, they're very interested in the face and expressions that you make. And of course, the language and the sounds and the singing that you might be doing while your face is in their visual frame. So, we know that faces are really important to babies and are a really strong social stimulus for them. That's part of the research that I do is exploring face perception in adults as well as babies. But we think that actually babies have far more recognition capability than just faces. Faces are a great visual stimulus to study recognition in babies because they're such a strong visual input for babies. But part of the research we're doing now is exploring how babies recognize objects.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 7:35

I'm so interested as to what types of objects are really useful for young children to be recognizing.

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 7:44

We couldn't say that one type of object is more important than another except for faces as I've highlighted as a kind of exceptional visual stimulus for babies. Babies are, as I said, in the business of tuning their visual system. And that actually means that a wide variety of visual input is exactly what they need to be able to really drive that visual system. What's interesting to think about, at a very young age, infant vision is extremely coarse. So, in the first three months of life, for example, vision is very blurry, they don't see color, their range of vision is pretty short, sort of eight to 10 inches, which is kind of the distance it would be if you were actually holding the baby. So, they don't have very good vision at that stage. And so, all these lovely things that go in the nursery, these lovely pastel...



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Speaker 1 (Emma) 8:28

Color palette

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 8:29

Teddy bears hanging on the mobile or whatever, they don't actually see terribly well. What they do see really well is strong visual input. And by that, I mean high contrast high luminance stimuli. So, one of my favourite gifts to give to friends of mine who are expecting is a very non aesthetic, black and white, baby mobile, that's full of checkerboards and radial patterns and things that are quite abstract looking maybe or boring, possibly for adults. But for babies, for very young infants, it's actually super stimulating because it's full of the kinds of hard edges and high contrast differences that we know really fire the visual system at that early stage.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 9:09

I want to take you back a second to something really interesting Doctor Quek said there.

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 9:15

What they do see really well is strong visual input. And by that, I mean high contrast high luminance stimuli,

Speaker 1 (Emma) 9:22

High contrast and high luminance stimuli. Does that remind you of anything?

Unknown Speaker 9:27

Hi, do you want to play a guessing game? Hello? Anybody home? Think, McFly, think. Did you just double dip that chip? Double dipped? What, what are you talking about? Do I need the long rope to save Boots?

Speaker 1 (Emma) 9:41

Ah yes, the old talking box. We'll actually cover screen time in a lot more detail later in the series. But in a modern world, it's an important factor to look at when discussing how a baby's visual skills develop in these crucial early months. And it's not just the TV anymore. Since COVID changed the world in 2020, screens have become a far more common way for families to stay connected.

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 10:07



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The only time she does have screen time is when she talks to her grandparents in the UK, but she loves screens. It's very fascinating too. As soon as there's a TV or something on her eyes become glued and it's just, she's not there.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 10:24

Going back to using FaceTime to communicate with Isla's grandparents. Are you noticing any recognition with her every time that happens?

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 10:34

Yeah. So, at the start She was just excited because it was a screen

Speaker 1 (Emma) 10:39

Right?

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 10:40

And we started from when she was born. But now, so her grandparents have teddy bears and stuff and put on silly voices. And she absolutely loves it. She's squealing. She wants to like jump into the screen and

Speaker 1 (Emma) 10:53

Great

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 10:54

Yeah. So, it's she's changed so much over time.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 10:58

Wow

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 10:59

It's now that she's recognizing there's someone on the other side of the screen, where I think at the start, it was just maybe the light of the screen. It wasn't necessarily recognizing that there's actual people there. But yeah, now she's started to really recognize what's going on and what's on the screen.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 11:15

Even though she hasn't had much screen time, as you've mentioned, that screen time with her grandparents, and there's some sort of reaction or interaction to Isla directly. Do you notice her paying a different attention to that than something that she's just watching?



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Speaker 3 (Maggie) 11:30

100%

Speaker 1 (Emma) 11:31

Right

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 11:32

Yeah. So, she will interact with her grandparents where, when it's something on the screen, she just kind of freezes. She's just frozen, and I'm trying to interact with her. And she's just kind of, I don't know, not there. She's kind of zonked out into what's whatever's on the TV.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 11:52

And this is when novelty comes into the equation. Babies love new things. And the research backs this up. As a baby grows, and it experiences more of the world, it becomes less focused on the things it has seen before, and more focused on new stimuli. And sometimes this means it might be hard for mum to compete with a colourful and ever-changing screen.

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 12:17

If I show you something, let's imagine I showed you a picture of a cat. And then another picture of a cat.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 12:22

And I love cats

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 12:24

Well, that's a good example then. So, I'm showing you this cat, you're loving it at the start. It's really enjoyable for you, after a while, it's very boring. This is just the same cat again and again. And now we introduce something new like a dog or a car or any other kind of stimulus. We know that when you get this new stimulus arriving in front of you that your brain has a different response. There's a strong response to that novelty of 'aah, that's something different, that's something new, I'm interested again', we know that's true in adults. And we also know that's true to some extent in babies as well.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 12:50

So, mom's face isn't novel anymore.

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 12:57



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That's not to say that mom's face is not important to baby. It absolutely is.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 12:58  
She's a highlight

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 12:59  
Oh, massively.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 13:00  
So, novelty is key, but at the same time, repetition plays a role as well.

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 13:04  
I think so although I wouldn't say that it has to be really training, right? You don't need to train your baby, 'this is a cat, this is a dog', right? I think we do that a little bit. As parents, we're often you know, as you read the book, or whatever you like, this is what this is, you know, you sort of labelling objects as you as you encounter them. That's certainly useful and part of learning. But lots of the learning that kids do is, to use a machine learning term, unsupervised. You start to extract for yourself, what are the rules of this environment? And what are the rules that put this world together that make things more similar to each other, or more different and so on? And that's obviously a massive part of what kids are doing. It's that kind of unsupervised learning as well. I don't mean, you're not in the room. I mean, I mean, you're not,

Speaker 1 (Emma) 13:48  
You're not guiding

Speaker 2 (Genevieve) 13:49  
you're not sitting on top of the kid labelling saying this is this that is that this is this one, this one is like this one, and so on, kids figure that stuff out for themselves. And it's through interaction and experience and obviously watching you as well, that they're able to start to learn the rules of how the world goes together.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 14:05  
Do you think that she's picking up things from other people just as much as what she's picking up from you?

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 14:10



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For sure. I think she also likes older kids. She's only just started to become interested in other kids. And, you know, seeing another kid crawl. So, she's now crawling all of a sudden, but just she observes things, and then starts doing what others are doing. So, it's really interesting. Yeah.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 14:27

What's been one of the most significant impressions that she's made on you?

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 1 14:33

Ooh

Speaker 1 (Emma) 14:35

Sorry.

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 14:35

That's a big question.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 14:36

Was that too much?

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 14:36

No. I can't say I was prepared to be a parent. She's my first

Speaker 1 (Emma) 14:43

Right

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 14:44

And I never knew that I could have so much love for someone ever the way I do for her. She's just my world. It's, it's incredible. When she, I had a C section, they pulled her out and I was just like, whoa, like, you've been growing inside me. And it just blows my mind all the time that my partner and I have created such a beautiful little baby and that she'll eventually grow to be an adult and whatever we do, will have an impression on her. So yeah, it's a big task. It's a hard task.

Speaker 3 (Maggie) 14:56

What are you doing with your cup Isla? Really? Are you trying to drink from your cup?

Speaker 1 (Emma) 16:09





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So hopefully now you've got a better understanding of some of the most important parts of a baby's visual development, and how it can be enriched in those early months of life. But vision is only part of this interconnected puzzle we call the brain.

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 16:24

My name is Antonia Goetz. And I'm from the MARCS Institute and I look how babies learn language.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 16:31

Just like with vision, the research behind infant language development has been vital in broadening our understanding of how babies learn, and in turn, providing an environment with the best opportunities for this learning to take place.

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 16:48

We have language, we all speak language. And the question is, how do we acquire this? And how does it happen in the first year of life? And so, during my studies, I was focusing on child and infant language development. And I was like, completely fascinated by the fact that babies learn language and they're absolutely smart.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 17:11

What's the most surprising thing to you through this research that you've managed to, I guess, shock yourself about how intelligent babies really are?

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 17:20

That's probably when I did the first study with a three-month-olds. So, I was thinking kind at three months, they're so tiny, they're just occupied and kind of like eating, pooping, maybe,

Speaker 1 (Emma) 17:33

Sleeping

Speaker. 4 (Antonia) 17:33

Sleeping

Speaker 1 (Emma) 17:34

Crying

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 17:35



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Exactly. So that, that is all, that, they are actually able to learn languages, and they are learning the rules, and in a very quick time. So, they were exposed, for example, I don't know, maybe two to three minutes to some rules. And after that, they were able to learn, they showed kind of like, 'Oh, I know what this means'. And that's incredible for me, like three months of age.

Speaker 5 (Adele) 18:03

So, I'm married to my husband, Michael. We've got three girls. So, my eldest is seven, and her name's Casey-Anne. My middle, crazy one we like to call cyclone Ellie. Yeah, so she's two, Eliana, and I've got a five-month-old Samara.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 18:23

Like every parent, Adele Lockman just wants to provide the best environment for her three beautiful daughters. And now armed with the experience of having raised two newborns, she feels a lot more comfortable with her five-month-old Samara.

Speaker 5 (Adele) 18:38

I think with my first it was like one of those daunting moments of 'I don't really know what I'm doing', and you just kind of have to go with it and like you take all the advice that people give you, but ultimately, it needs to then fit in with your lifestyle.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 18:52

I wanted to ask you about your third child who's obviously still very young.

Speaker 5 (Adele) 18:56

Yeah

Speaker 1 (Emma) 18:57

What do you notice in terms of that little one picking up language in a visual sense?

Speaker 5 (Adele) 19:02

I can definitely see the way she reacts and so I just go off her interaction and her facial expressions. So, a lot of things you know, if we're reading her a book or singing to her or showing her different pictures, or you know, her sisters might come up and be like, 'Look what I drew', right up in her face, it's great. But you can just see like, how big her eyes become, or she'll start to laugh, or she'll do this like really cute 'Ooh' yeah, so yeah, I'm just like this is awesome because Casey-Anne was five years older than Eliana, so she was very much that wise one whereas Eliana is like in her face. And I think that Samara loves it. Like she just loves her coming up and like being animated and in her face. And so, I'm really interested to see



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what her language is like when she starts to talk because she's got that really close personal relationship with our crazy toddler.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 20:01

At this point, it's becoming clear that in terms of infant development, exposure to stimuli is everything. And with three girls running around the Lockman household, it sounds like exposure to language is in abundance for little Samara. But how does all this language exposure convert to learning for a baby? And does the type of language matter?

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 20:24

What is important when babies learn language and how what they need to get is their parental communication. How to speak with babies. And we use these kind of like funny voices going up and down. But this is also for attracting the baby's attention. So, when I speak to a baby it automatically comes so that I use kind of like 'Hello little baby. Look at you. You're so cute.' And that happens so automatically and it's baby's learning from these ups and downs of the voice. So, uh, but also, it's giving the attention, its emotions, always have kind of like I'm smiling to babies. That's all what it comes to. Language development, social development and a relationship between parents and infants.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 21:10

I want to do a little experiment with you to really emphasize how important tonality and exposure can be for an infant learning a new language. Because although most of us can't remember a time when we couldn't express ourselves verbally, this is how babies experience the world. This next clip is an example of how spoken English might sound for a baby

Unknown Speaker 21:33

Keller, here are Raisa Donnelly's Miller's 10 Wooper Meza chop Kell we Moses and Mitch and Cam, but the man Northcote Provos any samphel How like in order to provide the Taffy cash represent to explain a Camry or LEA making him on bully tut, you need to love him and datian with Ortega.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 21:51

So, although you couldn't understand the words that were being said there, you probably could understand the emotion of the speaker, we knew they weren't mad or upset. And that all comes down to tonality.

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 22:05



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If you think about when you listen to foreign language, it's super difficult to figure out what is the beginning of the word, what is the end of the word, you're just very puzzled, and you don't really don't know what's going on there. And by using these ups and downs of the words, I can highlight, for example, the beginning of the word. And that's quite handy. For example, in English, they usually the first syllable is stressed. So, it has a higher pitch at all. So, if we go for a table, we say table, not tay-bell.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 22:34

Yes

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 22:36

And this is by emphasizing these stressed syllables. it's actually helping the baby to identify the beginning of the word. And I say like, 'Hey, little baby, look at this table.'

Speaker 1 (Emma) 22:47

That was so nice. I mean, I feel like there's obviously a lot of nuance in this particular kind of linguistic approach. And I wonder if parents will, as you said, there is some sort of learnt behaviour to be able to change your voice and dynamic for children, for sure. But what are ways that parents can affect the dynamic of their voice to help children acquire language?

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 23:14

Using the high-pitched voice. Even if people say, like, 'I'm not using this voice to my child, because that sounds stupid. I feel so weird.' But as soon for example, the baby starts smiling. Sooner or later, everyone does it.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 23:26

Do you notice that when people actually try and refrain?

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 23:29

Absolutely. So, when they come to the lab, they say, say for example, to our BabyLab and doing the studies, they are asking us kind of like, 'oh, what should I do? What can I do to the baby?', and just like, speak to your baby, and just feel naturally, whatever comes to you.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 23:45

So, I think we can safely say that baby talk or no baby talk, just talking to your baby in any capacity will go a long way to ensuring a language rich learning environment.

Speaker 5 (Adele) 23:57



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So often, we'll just be like, "I can't believe how clever they are". And like, it's that comprehension. It's like, it's not just that they've got these big words, because I think a big thing as well, as we have never talked down to them. It's like, we'll just talk, you know, the big words. And if they don't understand them, they'll they'll ask then we'll explain it. Like, it's something that my parents did with me. And I was like, I'm gonna do that with my kids. Because I know that my vocabulary was huge thanks to them. So, I was like, I'm just gonna keep doing what they do. And it's like if they don't understand you just explain it.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 24:28

In your experience in your house, what are the most important or effective things that you've seen that's been able to give your children that application of language?

Speaker 5 (Adele) 24:38

I think, singing to them, like I sing to them daily, whether it's like when they wake up in the morning, I have a special song that I sing.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 24:45

That's nice. Can you give us a rendition?

Speaker 5 (Adele) 24:48

Yeah, sure. It's not something I've made up though.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 24:50

No, that's fine.

Speaker 5 (Adele) 24:51

Good morning. Good morning. It's time to rise and shine. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. Hope you're feeling fine. Gotta get up get out of it. Gotta get up you sleepyhead doo, doodydoo, doodydoo, doodydoo.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 25:02

Does this come with a dance as well?

Speaker 5 (Adele) 25:06

No, it comes with a, a shake them awake.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 25:07

A shake of the bed



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Speaker 1 (Emma) 25:09

In terms of giving your children at home a very positive environment, but also something that's rich and opportunity to acquire language. What are some other activities that you know your partner and yourself are actually applying at home.

Speaker 5 (Adele) 25:23

Play. So playing games with them, reading books, so we, we'll read. They tend to choose their books that they bring to us. But like at the moment now Kaysanne's reading to the kids, which is so cute. Yeah. And then like the other day, she came home from school with three novels. And I was like, "you think you're gonna read that in a week?" She read two of them and I was very impressed.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 25:42

(Wow).

Speaker 5 (Adele) 25:43

Yeah. So yeah, I'm just seeing how much that early application of nursery rhymes, storybooks, songs, play. Like quite often we'll dance and sing and do lots of craft. And yeah, quite often Michael and I, are just like in awe of our kids. Like they're just incredible with the way that they can take on new language and apply in new scenarios and you see it play out when they're playing together. Kaysanne loves to just like sing and I think, especially having Samara. She just loves to sing and make up these songs to her. And you can just see her pulling out these different words that she's been exploring with us. Yeah, it's just, it's pretty awesome.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 26:27

What other strategies can parents use to invite a very language rich household into their lives?

Speaker 4 (Antonia) 26:34

And one thing is, of course, music. You can play different music. Also, not only Western music, maybe. But also, whatever kind of music you want to play. We encourage parents to use the language that they feel most confident with. So that means in most of the cases, or in the case of bilingual children, that, for example, the mother is speaking one language, and the father is speaking in a different language. So that's one of the strategies. Be consistent. Try to speak with the baby in your dominant language. You can read a lot to the baby, using multiple books and different languages. Also, when we think about language, it's not only auditory language, but we also have gestures, we have mimics. So, I'm moving my eyebrows, for example, to highlight something. I'm smiling, I'm shrugging my shoulders or something. It's all



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about kind of like communication because we know communication is not only the language, so the auditory information, but it's also the visual information. And for example, by opening my mouth or closing my mouth, I can highlight some of the visual aspects.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 27:45

Language is a broad term, encompassing multiple modes of communication, not just speaking. And all of these modes of communication develop based on one core principle, exposure, exposure, exposure. Yes, we know our parents listening have sometimes spent hours researching the best ways to talk to their baby, or whether or not they should have access to screens. But if you take away one thing from this episode, then let it be this. If you just engage with your baby, and spend time together, talk to them, show them the world, then they're already learning. Their brains are powerful, and fully equipped to soak in all that information, and to continue their developmental journey. On the next episode,

Speaker 6 28:41

They start small with their little limited experience in the world. And then socialization is truly the process of making that world a little bit bigger and a little bit bigger. So first, it starts with parents, then it might include another family member, the dog, could include a whole bunch of things.

Speaker 1 (Emma) 28:59

You guessed it, we're talking socialization. That's next time on BabyLab. The BabyLab podcast is a LiSTNR production brought to you in partnership with the MARCS BabyLab at Western Sydney University. Hosted by me Emma Watkins, audio by Kelli Foulstone executive producer is Todd Stevens and producer is Thomas Thexton. LiSTNR.