

MATERNAL GESTURAL INPUT TO YOUNG CHILDREN: THE ROLE OF AGE,
LANGUAGE ABILITY, CONTEXT, AND PRAGMATIC FUNCTION

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ABSTRACT

As language learners, young children are required to extract and interpret segments from a continuous communication stream. Interpreting the information provided by adults is essential to increasing infants' understanding of their world and the language it contains. Previous research confirms that when speaking to young children, adults modify their speech compared to when they are speaking to another adult (e.g. Bekken, 1989; Brand, Baldwin, & Ashburn, 2002; Fernald, 1991; Hoff-Ginsburg & Shatz, 1982; Iverson, Capirci, Longobardi, & Caselli, 1999) and that these modifications might aid a child's attention to the speaker and subsequent language learning. Adding to the existing child-directed speech literature, our study focused primarily on the nonverbal behaviors of mothers with their children in everyday activities. We chose to look at gesture because communicative information to be segmented during interaction is provided not only in verbal utterances but is highlighted through visual means as well. Our study contributes to a better understanding of the visual properties of communication by establishing that there are differences in the way mothers use gesture with their children based on age, expressive language ability, and context.