

CLUES TO MEANING: EXPLORING POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF PAIRED,
CONGRUENT CUES ON TODDLERS' WORD LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Although many researchers believe that toddlers use multiple cues to map words to meanings, most empirical studies of word learning focus on toddlers' use of single cue types in isolation and on developmental trends in the use of those cues. Thus, little is known about children's ability to process and integrate multiple cues simultaneously. The current study explored toddlers' use of single cues and paired, congruent cues for fastmapping and retention of fastmapped words. Forty-eight toddlers (12 each at ages 18, 24, 30, and 36 months) participated in six fastmapping trials to assess their ability to infer the referents of novel nouns. Three of the trials provided single cues to word meaning and the other three provided paired, congruent cues. We assessed children's retention of the words they had fastmapped correctly 24 hours later. All age groups except the 18-month-olds used the single and the paired cues to map words to referents at significant levels. The two older age groups showed significant retention of the word-referent associations. We found no significant differences between the single or paired cue conditions for fastmapping or for retention of items, suggesting that children are not integrating the two cues. Children's fastmapping ability improved with age, but recall remained static. Children demonstrated better retention of the first three word-referent pairings than the last three, indicating that a ceiling might exist on the number of words that can be retained when they have been fastmapped in one intense session.