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How Do They Know That? The 411 on Infant Studies

By Marissa Miller



Infant studies discover important information about babies.

How to find and enroll in study and what you can expect.

Local parents participate in studies for many reasons.

You may have heard that violence on television and in video games leads to increased aggression in children. Or maybe you saw a news headline declaring that music increases students' general success. But what you might not know is where this information is coming from. Who's tossing out these ideas about today's children?

Some of it comes from companies that gather their information from surveys, but a lot of information comes straight from researchers who study children and adolescents.

Dr. Tracy Riggins is one such researcher. She operates the Neurocognitive Development Lab at the University of Maryland, where she studies memory and brain development. Labs like Dr. Riggins', however, aren't just scientists going over data in dark rooms; their research wouldn't even be possible without the help of parents and their children.

How to participate, what to expect

About 150 children, most of whom come from areas in Prince George's, Howard and Anne Arundel Counties have participated in research in Dr. Riggins' lab since it opened in February 2009, and she and her colleagues are always looking for more people to help them out.

Parents "can give us their name and information about the age of their child, and we can keep that information on file, and then when we have a study that's age-appropriate for their child, then we contact them and describe that specific study," Riggins said. "We explain the study in a way that's understandable to anyone, and answer any and all questions that families have... throughout the whole entire process."

Thorough explanations can be important when researchers are using words like "novel action sequence" or talking about recording sensors, but overall, a study is far less complicated than one might think. In Dr. Riggins'

lab, she and other researchers learn what exactly is going on inside young children's heads mainly by using two methods- first, they simply ask children what they remember, and second, they use something called an electroencephalogram (EEG), which records electrical activity in the brain.

Parents sometimes worry about studies that involve EEGs or computer screens and young children, so it's up to each individual family whether they'd like to bring their children to participate in the different types of studies. Quite a few studies involve little to no interaction between the child and technology at all.

Still, Dr. Riggins likes to clarify what exactly the technology is doing, as all researchers should when a parent has a concern. "[The EEG] is just recording like you would record your voice with a microphone: You hold the microphone up real close to the sound signal [your voice], but you don't even have to touch the microphone to your lips," she explained. "The same is true for our little recording sensors. They sit in the little cap that's close to the head, but they actually don't touch the scalp."

Chaula Butterworth, a stay-at-home mom in Rockville, has been bringing her three children to studies for six and half years. "The atmosphere is very laid-back, the researchers kid-friendly, [and] the offices are often chock-full of toys or books," she said. "The most challenging part is not influencing the children's responses" and making time to get into the study, which she admits can get tricky when coordinating her schedule and her children's schedules with study availability. Still, Butterworth said that she "absolutely" recommends study participation to other parents.

Find a study

If you're interested in bringing your child or children to a study, or even in participating in studies for adults,

you don't have to wait for an invitation. Many labs offer registration by phone or online.

Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center, for example, maintains a website with lists of studies that need participants. The researcher's contact information and the requirements to participate in a study, which range from age to medical condition to past experiences, accompany each listing.

It's not hard to find a study; just know what you're looking for. Hospitals like Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland Medical Center often run studies, but large universities in Maryland, like the University of Maryland Baltimore County and Towson University, also have faculty and graduate students who conduct studies.

Once you're involved, you can always tell researchers when you'd like to take a break or stop attending studies, but it isn't hard to continue if you had a good time.

Participants in Dr. Riggins' studies, for example, can continue to be called about studies in her lab, but they may also be notified about studies in the university's language labs and infant studies lab. The Maryland Infant Studies Lab alone typically has about seven studies looking at different aspects of infant cognition.

Why study infants?

Without research in children, "guesswork" is all we have, said the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute's website on Children and Clinical Studies. "We need to think about how a child's brain and body are developing... as well as the way that medicines and other treatments are handled in a child's body over time."

And in addition to that, many of the results are simply interesting.

"What I think fascinates me are studies that show even young infants' and young children's amazing capabilities. That's probably not surprising to any parent who thinks that their child is, of course, a genius," Dr. Riggins said. "[Young children] might not have the language to tell us or the words to say it, but it's really interesting when people come up with [new] methods or tools to look at what actually do young babies and children know?"

Riggins urged the importance of thinking critically about research and its results. Really look at it "from all angles," she said. "Does it make sense? You hear something on the news or read it in some magazine and you think really? This gene causes this?"


It's important to be careful to check how reliable the lab and the results are before you bring your child in for a study. Some questions you should ask are:

Does the lab report to an Institutional Review Board? IRBs hold researchers to ethical and organizational standards that are important for safe and helpful research.

Where were the results published? Dr. Riggins pointed out that reliable results are originally published in journals, as opposed to magazines or even newspapers. Dr. Riggins, for example, has had study results published in *Developmental Science* and *Developmental Neuropsychology*. Other popular journals include the *Journal of Adolescence* and *Pediatrics*.


If you can find a great study to participate in, the benefits can extend even beyond medicinal or psychological knowledge for some families.

"I want my children to grow up knowing what it's like to help others," Butterworth said. "This is one way."



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