

Is your baby brighter than you think?

Researchers are learning more about babies' perception as they work away in a laboratory at Egham's Royal Holloway campus of the University of London. **AMY PATE** reports

Daniel Roberts is just seven months old, but already he has made his mark on the world of science.

The Staines tot has been visiting Royal Holloway, University of London's baby laboratory – an innovative research facility that aims to explore how, as babies, we develop the skills we all use in daily life.

And before any reader imagines the babies are hooked to wires and beeping monitors, it should be made clear that the scientists disguise the tests they give to their young subjects as simple games – no machinery involved.

Dr Jeanne Shinskey, a lecturer in psychology and founder of the baby lab, said: "We are mainly interested in whether babies realise objects still exist when they can't see them. Some people say they are born able to do this, but just can't show it."

"It comes back to the nature vs nurture debate – are babies born with this ability or do they learn it?"

She added: "To symbolise something that is not in front of you requires major mental ability for humans."

Simple tests include showing babies toys and then hiding them, and seeing at what age they start to reach for them.

They also carry out the same tests in the dark – and have discovered babies do not develop a fear of the dark until they are

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two or three years old.

Dr Shinskey says she believes babies develop much faster than is commonly supposed, and they can grasp the concept that things can exist outside of their vision as young as two or three months old.

Sarah

Hardesty of Victoria Street, Englefield Green, took part when her son Toby, now 10 months, was seven months old.

She said: "I think the tests have shown babies can do more than you think they can. I was surprised that he was able to find toys that had been hidden. I wouldn't have thought he was able to do that."

"It was fascinating. I think that, as parents, we don't always test our children's boundaries."

Maria Lange, of Blays Lane, Englefield Green, took her 18-month-old daughter Chiara to take part last year.

She said: "I've found it fascinating. The researchers seem to be challenging current thinking on the way babies react to the world around them and with each other."

"They think babies are more aware and capable of more things than people generally believe."

Dr Shinskey says her research can be slow and laborious. "Babies will start crying halfway through and if that happens, we can't use the data."

"Research that my colleagues can do in two weeks with adult volunteers can take a year."

Luckily, Daniel, who visited with mum Rachel on Friday, was a model test subject.

Rachel, of Rosefield Road, Staines, said: "He loved it. I would definitely bring him back if they want me to."

TOYS OF THE TRADE: LEFT, Dr Jeanne Shinskey with her 'equipment'

Photo C20320-5



MODEL SUBJECT: Seven-month-old Daniel Roberts enjoyed doing the tests, according to mum Rachel. **INSET:** Dr Shinskey watches as Rachel Roberts guides Daniel through one of the tests (Photo C20320-2 & photo C20320-1)

BABY LAB TESTS YOU CAN TRY AT HOME

Royal Holloway's suggestions for exploring what babies know about the existence of hidden objects:

■ At the age of about two months, hold a rattle or other noise-making toy just out of your baby's sight and see whether they turn their head towards the sound to see what's causing it

■ After about three or four months, see whether your baby follows with his eyes the path of a falling toy.

■ Between about four to six months, have your baby hold a toy in its hand and then cover the hand with a cloth. See whether they then drop the toy, which might suggest 'out of sight is out of mind'

■ Between about five to eight months, cover up a toy only halfway with a cloth and see whether your baby retrieves it

Try covering more and more of it each time to see how much needs to be visible in order for them to reach for it. During this age, your baby may also start playing peek-a-boo. See whether he uncovers his own face before he uncovers yours

■ Between about seven to 10 months, cover a toy completely and see whether your baby reaches for it at all

■ Between about nine and 12 months, put out two cloths next to one another. Hide a toy repeatedly under one cloth (location A) so that your baby successfully finds it there several times. Then hide it under the second cloth (location B)

Most babies this age will make the mistake of going back to location A even though they just saw you hide the toy in location B. This suggests that babies think the hidden toy's existence is linked with only one specific place



HELPING TO CHALLENGE CONVENTION: ABOVE, Maria Lange and Chiara
Photo C20320-6

CLEVER CHAP: LEFT, Sarah Hardesty with Toby – she was surprised by how much he could do
Photo C20320-7

All photos by Bill Bemister

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