

ABSTRACT

Swerlander, A. (2001). *Imitation in early childhood*. Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, Sweden

The general aim of this thesis was to explore different aspects of imitation, such as prevalence, stability and the importance of temperament factors on the tendency to imitate in early childhood. The thesis comprises four empirical studies. The first two studies focused on the prevalence of facial imitation during the first three and four months both among normally developed children and among children with Down's syndrome. The second two studies dealt with children who were followed from 9 to 38 months of age. The main question in study three was whether imitativeness is stable over time and across different dimensions. The question in the final study was whether temperamental factors might influence children's imitative behaviour.

Study I examined the development of facial imitation in eight infants with Down's syndrome at one month, three months and four months of age. All the children observed at one month imitated tongue protrusion. No clear imitation was, however, found at three months of age

Study II explored the imitation of tongue protrusion in newborn and three-month-old infants during free face-to-face mother-infant interaction. The results showed that imitation was rare, was seen in both mothers and infants and appeared to persist over the first three months.

Study III investigated whether children demonstrated a general pattern of stability in imitative performance across dimensions and over time from 9 to 38 months of age. The results did not indicate any stability over time and only a few instances of consistency across dimensions were seen.

Study IV examined whether temperament factors might explain part of the variability in children's imitative performance at 9, 20 and 38 months of age. No relationships between children's tendency to imitate and their temperament were found.

The overall results indicate that imitation is to be found during the neonatal period in children with Down's syndrome and the performance of these infants is similar to what has been found among healthy infants. Moreover, neonatal facial imitation seems to appear not only in strictly controlled situations but also in more free mother-infant interaction. However, imitative behaviour appears neither to be stable over time or across dimensions, nor to be influenced by temperamental factors.

Key words: Imitation, Down's syndrome, individual differences, stability, temperament

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