NSF Award from Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences

Principal investigator: Amy Booth, communication sciences and disorders
School of Communication

- **Project:** Causal Supports for Early Word Learning
- **Start Date:** September 1, 2009
- **Total Award Amount:** $484,083

**How the results of this project will benefit society:**
By the time children enter preschool, most are phenomenal word learners, adding new words to their vocabulary every single day. It is clear, however, that not all words are learned with equal ease. Dr. Booth’s project will be important both theoretically and practically. It will have implications for time-honored debates regarding the potentially special relationship between words and conceptually deep information. Moreover, by specifying the conditions that optimize the likelihood that a word will be acquired and retained, it will suggest educational strategies for maximizing the word-learning potential of young children from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, this project provides opportunities for several undergraduate and graduate students to directly participate in research, thus helping to mentor the next generation of developmental scientists.

**The problem the project is trying to solve:**
What factors determine whether, and how rapidly, a particular word becomes an accurate and lasting part of a child’s vocabulary? With support from the National Science Foundation, Dr. Amy Booth will conduct research designed to answer this question. Specifically, she will investigate the role of richly meaningful conceptual information in facilitating early word learning.

**How this project will work:**
In her research, young children will be taught made-up names for objects and animals that they have never seen before. Children will later be tested on how quickly and how well they learned the new words. Both their ability to understand the new words and to produce them on their own will be assessed. Dr. Booth’s work has already demonstrated that three- to four-year-old children are particularly likely to learn and remember new words when they refer to objects with known causal (as opposed to superficially perceptual) properties. Moving forward, Dr. Booth will work toward explaining the mechanisms underlying this effect in a socioeconomically diverse group of children. She also will attempt to specify the impact of this effect across development and across a variety of natural learning environments.

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