FAU Study Finds Babies Learn To Speak By Watching Mouths

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Reporting Natalia Zea

MIAMI (CBS4) – Six month old Mia is one of nearly 200 babies that helped in groundbreaking research conducted by Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.

For 2 years, FAU Professor David Lewkowicz and his team studied where infants are looking, when adults like their parents are talking.

“Very few people really have considered the possibility that learning language and learning how to speak really requires not only auditory information but visual information,” said Lewkowicz.

Using a special eye-tracking device, researchers can see exactly where on the adult’s face the baby is focusing his or her eyes when the adult is speaking.

Mia watches the adult’s eyes. But the study shows babies older than 6 months, focused most of their looks on the mouth region.

“Our thinking is they’re doing it because they’re trying to access the most accurate information that represents the speech of their native language,” said Lewkowicz.

Once infants reach a year old, their attention then goes back to the adults eyes. But Lewkowicz says it’s clear babies are learning as much from the visual cues, as the audible ones during that critical six month time period.

Monica Vega’s daughter Cecilia is two years old. She told CBS4’s Natalia Zea that this study could have helped her and will help other parents.

“The more information the better, it helps us all. Now you’ll focus on them looking at their mouth, like you’ll want them to look at you more when you’re speaking,” said Vega.

The study also shows that parents may want to spend less time popping in DVDs for their little ones, and more time speaking face to face.

The study may also help diagnose autism at an earlier age. Lewkowicz said children with autism have a tougher time moving their focus away from the lips and going back to focusing on the eyes after a year of age.

But he admitted more studies need to be done in that area.