

Babies understand a fundamental aspect of counting long before they can say numbers out loud, according to researchers

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When she was a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, Jinjing Jenny Wang kept wondering: How do children learn to count?

It's so basic, "but when you think about the problem, it is really difficult," she said. "There is no number in this world we can see and touch. There's no 'three-ness' in the world that is perceivable."

Linguists, philosophers and scientists have puzzled over this, Wang said. She knew decades of research had established that children typically don't fully understand numbers until they are preschoolers, but she wondered what they knew before then. "How do they know these words are associated with numbers — or quantities in the world?" she asked.