

How babies learn – and why robots can't compete

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Deb Roy and Rupal Patel pulled into their driveway on a fine July day in 2005 with the beaming smiles and sleep-deprived glow common to all first-time parents. Pausing in the hallway of their Boston home for Grandpa to snap a photo, they chattered happily over the precious newborn son swaddled between them.

This normal-looking suburban couple weren't exactly like other parents. Roy was an AI and robotics expert at MIT, Patel an eminent speech and language specialist at nearby Northeastern University. For years, they had been planning to amass the most extensive home-video collection ever.

From the ceiling in the hallway blinked two discreet black dots, each the size of a coin. Further dots were located over the open-plan living area and the dining room. There were 25 in total throughout the house – 14 microphones and 11 fish-eye cameras, part of a system primed to launch on their return from hospital, intended to record the newborn's every move.