

Priming the Brain to Learn

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The human brain is skilled at categorizing. People can quickly recognize a new variation of something they've seen before, like a dog, a chair, a jacket, or a lamp. We do this even when we've received very little explicit teaching about what distinguishes such categories.

How the brain builds this category knowledge hasn't been well understood. Drs. Layla Unger and Vladimir Sloutsky from Ohio State University designed a set of experiments to learn how incidental exposure to new things shapes later learning about categories.

The experiments had two phases: an exposure phase and an explicit learning phase. In both phases, participants saw images of imaginary creatures with body parts such as heads, tails, and antennae in various shapes and colors.

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