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Where Did They Learn to Say That?

An interview with Professor Daniela O'Neill
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How do young children communicate?

Children's language is a combination of both knowing the words and how to put them together, but also other knowledge that they have: social knowledge, knowledge about themselves, their minds, other people's minds, other people's perspectives. I'm really interested in how that develops. What are children talking about? What might even be in a sense universal? What are things that all children come to talk about as they understand the world better around them? The exciting thing is that my work is already having a real world impact. I developed a tool called the Language Use Inventory which is a questionnaire that parents fill out about their children's language development and it's for children 18 months to 47 months of age, so in that early period, and it addresses an area of language for which we didn't really have tools before.

What does the future look like?

The very near future, next goal, is actually to bring the whole questionnaire online to make it even more efficient for speech path, communication professionals to use. And you know a longer term goal is that our data actually suggests that it meets some of the criteria for a screening measure. You don't want to unnecessarily worry a parent or a family; you want to have a better idea of, you know, what is a performance that is low enough that it raises a concern. We're beginning to really understand the longer term impact of a delay in language. Because language is really a combination of many different kinds of knowledge – social knowledge, cognitive knowledge – what you understand about others. When something isn't developing as it should, it really can impact all areas of life.