



# Newsletter

Issue 2: August 2025

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## Who we are

Before they start talking, babies have learned a surprising amount of knowledge about the sounds, words, and grammar of their language. Within the first year of life, infants start to learn and recognize words in the spoken language around them.

At our centre in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Dalhousie University, we want to understand the mechanisms that support language acquisition.

We are always **looking for new participants** (aged 0 - 8) and would love to have your family participate!

Contact & check us out!

[Website](#)

**[GCLL@dal.ca](mailto:GCLL@dal.ca)**



**[Cognition.languange.learning](https://www.facebook.com/cognition.languange.learning)**



**[@gcll\\_babygroup](https://www.instagram.com/gcll_babygroup)**

[General Sign-up](#)

## Bringing Up Baby podcast



DREW WEATHERHEAD  
GUEST



ASHLEY COOLEY  
HOST

### How Babies Learn Language

Episode 107  
JULY 1, 2025



## #107 How Babies Learn Language

This summer, our lab director Dr. Drew Weatherhead had the incredible opportunity to be a guest on the podcast *Bringing Up Baby*! It is hosted by Ashley Cooley, owner and operator of Birth Baby Sleep Education & Support Services in Halifax, NS. Drew and Ashley talked about language acquisition, social and cognitive factors, and some frequently asked questions parents may have.

**Listen HERE!**

Thank you to Ashley for this opportunity!

# THE SUMMER TEAM



**Dr. Drew Weatherhead**  
**Lab Director**



**Madison MacLachlan**  
**Clinical Psychology**  
**MSc/PhD Student**



**Maura Whitman**  
**MSc Experimental**  
**Psychology Student**



**Vanessa Ritsema**  
**Lab Manager/Research**  
**Coordinator**



**Luke Forsyth**  
**Research Assistant**



**Amelia MacEachen**  
**Research Assistant**



**Ayush Saha**  
**Volunteer**



**Heather Carr**  
**Volunteer**



# Team Updates

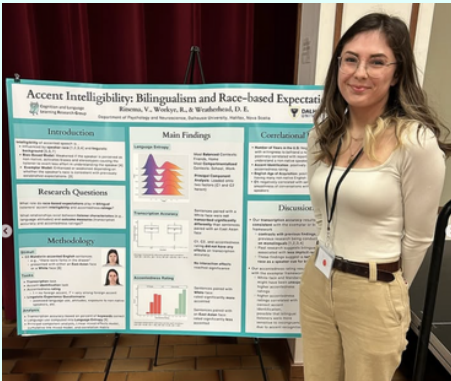


## Saying Goodbye, and Hello!



**Vanessa Ritsema**

Honours Student - Sept. '23 - April '24  
Research Assistant - April '24 - Aug. '24  
Lab Manager - Sept. '25 - Aug. '25



Vanessa joined the GCLL lab in 2023. She completed her honours thesis with us, entitled “Accent intelligibility: Understanding the effects of race-based expectations and linguistic background”.

Vanessa also got her first publication with the GCLL, called “Language Experience Influences Sociolinguistic Development: The Role of Speaker Race and Language Attitudes on Bilingual and Monolingual Adults’ Accent Processing”!

Vanessa graduated with her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in 2024, and earned the CPA Certificate of Academic Excellence. Once graduated, Vanessa worked as a research assistant for the following summer and transitioned to lab manager / research coordinator for the 2024-2025 year. She was involved in the coordination of multiple research projects in sociolinguistic development across the lifespan, including adults, children, and infants. She was actively involved in leading our fNIRS experimental research on infant word processing.

We thank Vanessa for all her hard work in everything she did over the past few years. Her kindness went a long way. We will miss her, but we wish her the absolute best in her upcoming masters/PhD studies in School Psychology at Western University in the IAASP Lab!

Taking over Vanessa’s role as lab manager is Ayush! Ayush has been a volunteer in the lab since January of 2024. In the past he has mainly been involved in the project “Cultural Familiarity and Word Learning”, or as we sometimes refer to it as, Professor Parsnip! This summer, Ayush played a big role in the various recruitment events we’ve held—including our waterfront pop-up and our Baby Talk presentation. This May, he graduated from Dalhousie with his Bachelor of Science in Neuroscience.

We look forward to having Ayush as the new lab manager. He brings a lot of enthusiasm and friendliness to the GCLL! Here’s to a great year!



**Ayush Saha**

Volunteer Research Assistant - Jan. '24 - Aug. '25  
Lab Manager - Aug. '25 - Onward



Congrats to our recent graduates!



**Nicole Robinson (Hons.)**

Thesis: The Influence of Canadian Cities on Preschooler's Affiliative Behaviours Towards Unfamiliar Accented Speakers.



**Emma Reeves (Hons.)**



**Alexander Oxner (Hons.)**

Thesis: Neural Correlates of Infant Word Processing.

**Thank you for all your dedication, contributions, and knowledge you brought to the lab.  
We wish you the best in your future!**



**Joe Stephen**



**Ankana Boruah**



**Paige Lavoie**



**Ayush Saha**

## Owlbert



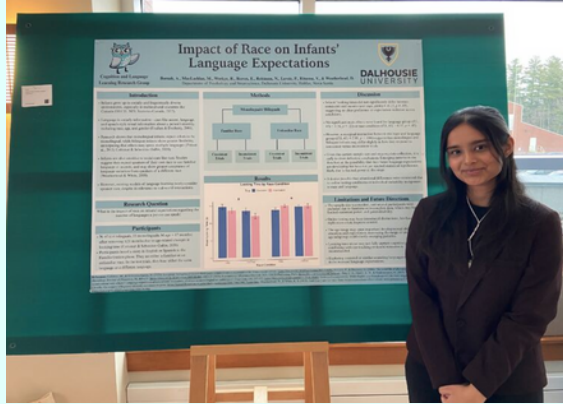
Our lab mascot, Owlbert, had a couple redesigns this summer from one of our research assistants. Welcome to the team **Pridebert**, for June's pride month, and Owlbert participating in an fNIRS study!






# What we've been up to:

## Conferences



### Science Atlantic

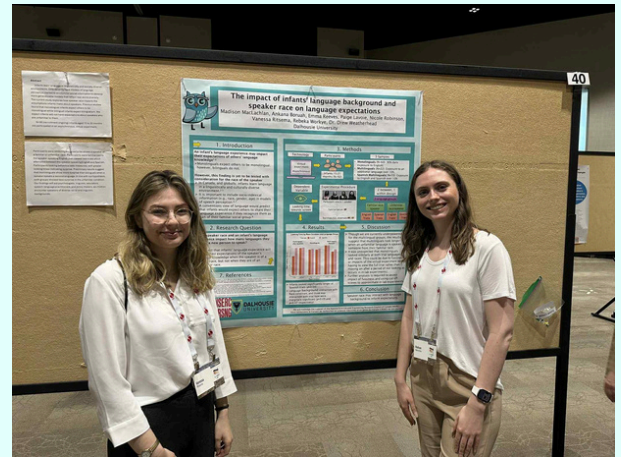
 May 2nd

Ankana had the opportunity to present her research at the Science Atlantic Psychology Conference held at St. Thomas University. She presented a poster for her Directed Research Project conducted during her third year in the GCLL lab, supervised by Madison MacLachlan and Dr. Drew Weatherhead! Her topic was "Impact of Race on Infants' Language Expectations". Well done Ankana!


### CPA National Convention June 12th-14th

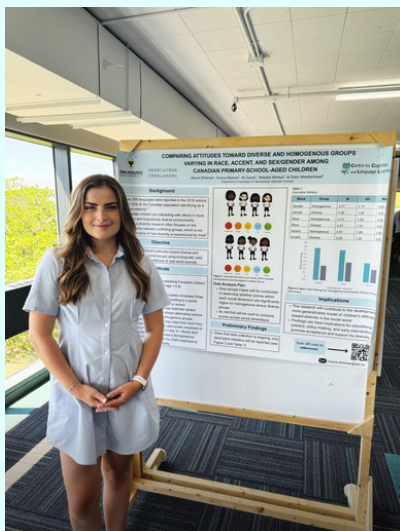
Vanessa, Madison, and Maura (not pictured) attended the 2025 Canadian Psychological Association's Annual National Convention in St. John's, Newfoundland! They had the opportunity to engage in Psychology research and listen to other researchers from across the country present their research.

Madison showcased a poster entitled "The Impact of Infants' Language Background and Speaker Race on Language Expectations". Way to go Madison!



### Graham Goddard In-House Conference

 June 20th



Maura had a poster set up for her study "Comparing Attitudes and Homogenous Groups Varying in Race, Accent, and Sex/Gender Among Canadian Primary-School-Aged Children". Way to go Maura!



For Madison's first presentation, she shared key insights and preliminary findings regarding her study investigating "the impact of language background and prosocial behaviors on preschoolers' affiliation preferences towards unfamiliar accented speakers". She did an incredible job!



Dr. Weatherhead with her colleague (and friend) Dr. Sean MacKinnon!



Vanessa, Amelia, and Luke enjoying the conference!

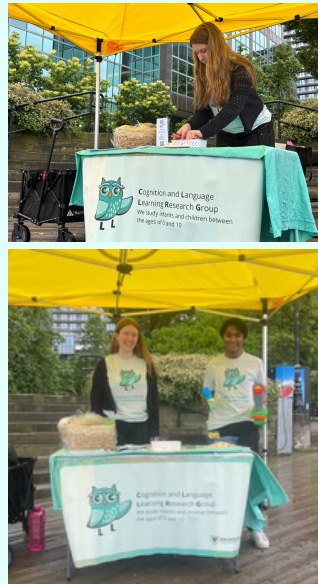


# Recruitment



June 28th

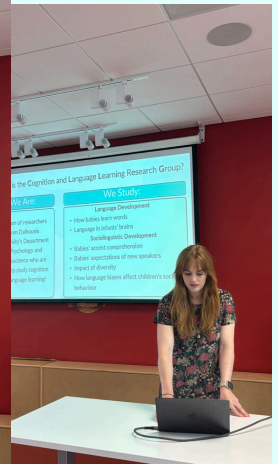
Halifax Waterfront



Halifax Central Library



July 7th



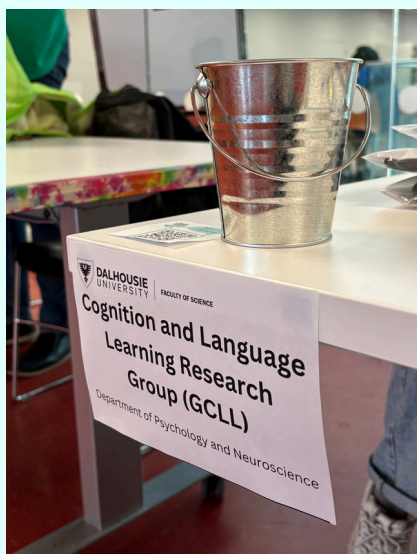
The GCLL hosted a few events this summer, including a pop-up event at the Halifax waterfront (with stickers, bubbles, a gift basket, and more), a presentation about language development at the Halifax Central Library, and the Meet a Scientist event organized by Dalhousie's Faculty of Science where we got to show off our fNIRS machine!

Thank you to everybody who stopped by any of our events to learn more about what we do here in the lab!

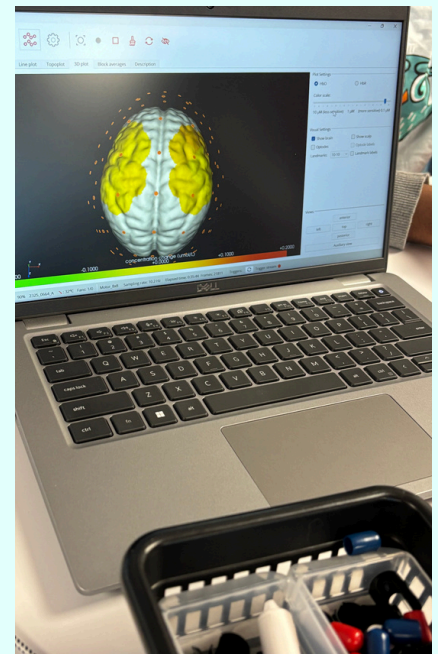


July 28th

Meet a Scientist!




Halifax Central Library





# Fun!

 April 10, 2025

**Activate**



Back row: Joe, Ayush, Luke, Nicole, Vanessa  
Front row: Drew, Paige, Ankana



To celebrate another successful academic year, some of our team members headed to Activate- an interactive gaming facility in Dartmouth filled with problem solving, technology, and adrenaline!

Afterwards . . . ice cream!

 June 25th **Dalhousie Studley Quad**



Dalhousie  
employee fun  
day!

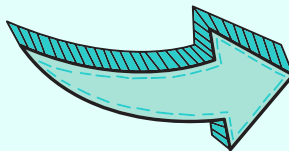


## New Kitchen Space!

This new space was a summer-long process. With some teamwork, heavy lifting, and dedication, we did eventually get it comfortable! There is still a little more to do, but so far so good.



**GCLL  
KITCHEN**





# Current Studies

## Language Expectations



Virtual  
Study



15 - 20  
months  
old

Primary Researchers: Dr. Drew Weatherhead, Madison MacLachlan

The aim of this study is to investigate how social properties (e.g., race) influence toddlers' assumptions about unfamiliar individuals.

How many languages do toddlers expect others to speak?

We are looking for 15-24 month-old toddlers **learning English and another language** to participate in an online study on how many languages babies expect others to speak!

Participating families will be entered for a chance to win a \$150 CAD gift card.

[Click here to learn more and register!](#)

## Baby fNIRS

Primary Researchers: Dr. Drew Weatherhead, Vanessa Ritsema, Luke Forsyth

How do babies process words?

We are looking for families with babies between the ages of **10 to 13 months old** who speak primarily English at home to participate.

After participating in the study, families will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card and a free storybook!



In-person  
study



10 - 13  
months  
old

We will measure how babies process these words by tracking their eye movements and measuring brain activity with a **safe, non-invasive neuroimaging method called fNIRS**.



fNIRS works by shining gentle, invisible light into the scalp and measuring changes in oxygen, the brain's source of fuel.

It tolerates movement, and doesn't require the baby to stay still in a scanner - instead, your baby can sit on your lap!

Think of fNIRS as a **tool that allows for safe exploration of brain activity during critical developmental stages**, all while ensuring that your baby's experience is as comfortable as possible.

[Click here to learn more and register!](#)

## Diversity and Social Reasoning

Primary Researchers: Dr. Drew Weatherhead, Maura Whitman, Emma Reeves

How do children reason about social groups and how does diversity influence this reasoning?

This study aims to look at how how children **aged 5-8 years old** reason about diversity in their environment.

Each participating family will receive a \$10 CAD Amazon gift card!



Virtual Study



5 - 8 years old

Through this study, we look at three different aspects of children's social reasoning:

- 1) Their beliefs about diversity in a group setting,
- 2) How learning a language might influence what people think about us
- 3) How the clothing we wear is a cue to the types of things we know.

[Click here to learn more and register!](#)

## Cultural Familiarity and Word Learning



In-person study



4 - 6 years old

Primary Researchers: Dr. Drew Weatherhead, Ava Khan

We are recruiting children in the HRM between the ages of **4 to 6 years old** who are receiving school instruction in English.

Participating families will receive a \$10 CAD Amazon gift card.

What is the effect of cultural familiarity on word learning?

Reading is central to children's academic and life outcomes; even in elementary school, teachers expect children to be able to learn from what they read. In this study, we are looking at **how cultural context plays a role in children's word learning**.

[Click here to learn more and register!](#)



Cognition and Language  
Learning Research Group

# Research Referral Program

Earn entries for a chance to win a **\$100 CAD gift card** to  
Indigo or Barnes & Noble\*\*

How to enter:



**Participate in one of our studies.**  
If you were referred, let us know  
who referred you.



**2 entries** each for  
you and your friend!



<https://languagedev.wixsite.com/gcll>



GCLL@dal.ca



@GCLL\_babygroup



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**DALHOUSIE**  
UNIVERSITY

\*\*Only one available. Selection of gift card is  
based on the winner's location (Canada or  
US).