Infants can distinguish between sounds of different bird species, as discovered at the University of Nanterre

(Source: Pixabay)

Children are more perceptive than we realise - that is one of the main findings I learned during my visit to Nanterre University. Babies can even recognize bird species based on their singing. “Our results show that at birth, infants are sensitive to commonalities of different songs from the same bird species,” comments Professor Maya Gartier from the psychology department on this surprising phenomenon.

Nanterre University is unique for its BabyLab, a laboratory where students can participate in research on the cognitive functions of young children, particularly infants. However, anyone imagining a space filled with small children and researchers in lab coats would be mistaken. During my visit, I got acquainted with students who were pursuing their doctoral studies or took part in an internship, just like me. Their work mainly involved observing recordings of children and coding their reactions, I also had the opportunity to try out the activities.

An unexpected and intriguing component of the laboratory are bird cages. In Nanterre, they breed canaries and zebra finches, which they utilize for their research. Don't worry, they don't test any substances or medications on birds. Instead, they study how birds think and react to various stimuli. Furthermore, the animals are well taken care of and appear content.

An interesting study with birds was conducted by Professor Maya Gratier, who is the founder of BabyLab, along with her colleague Bahia Guellai. The researchers investigated how newborns react to the sound of bird songs. The aim of the study was to test whether newborns are able to perceive the commonalities between the songs of the same versus a different bird species.

The experiment was conducted on forty infants, to whom they played different songs from the same species of birds, as well as various songs from different species of birds. Results showed that at birth, infants are sensitive to commonalities of different songs from the same bird species.

What can we infer from these results? The fact that children can distinguish between different bird songs indicates their developing auditory discrimination skills. It suggests that they are capable of perceiving and discerning subtle differences in sound patterns, pitch, and rhythm. Differentiating between bird songs also involves cognitive processing, including memory, attention, and pattern recognition.

Children's interest in and ability to differentiate bird songs can foster a sense of curiosity about nature and its diverse elements. It provides an opportunity for them to learn about different bird species, their habitats, and their unique vocalizations.

Johana Ryšavá