

## **Baby's New World**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

All Cindy needed was a few more undistracted minutes to finish paying the bills. But Shelly, her eight-month-old daughter, was uncharacteristically being a pain.

Seated in her high-chair, Shelly would suck her pacifier for a few seconds, fling it to the floor, and let loose with a tearless cry. Cindy would fetch the pacifier, give it a quick wash, and hand it back to Shelly – only to see it fly through the air again.

Cindy's patience was wearing thin. What kind of game was her daughter playing?

An important one, it turns out. Tossing the pacifier and watching Mom fetch it is an exercise that would not – could not – have happened a few weeks before. The moment called for celebration, not frustration. Shelly had taken a huge mental leap forward.

A child's understanding of the world is extremely limited during the first six months of life. Unless a child is feeling, seeing, hearing, or tasting something, it doesn't exist.

But sometime between seven and nine months they take a big step. Suddenly, the world exists beyond themselves and their actions. They realize, for example, that objects still exist even after they disappear from view.

Shelly's pacifier game soon will reveal another side of her new mental awareness. She will explore the actions of others. At first, she looked for the pacifier herself. Now, she waits to see what Mom does. Later, she may throw the pacifier in different directions to see if Mom still retrieves it.

This shift from a self-centered to objective understanding of the world also can be seen by playing a game that the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget played with his children.

If, while your infant is watching, you place a rattle under a blanket, a five-month-old baby probably won't look for it. If so, try leaving part of the rattle visible, and your child is likely to reach for it. Try both – invisible and visible – again. It is shocking to see that, despite hiding the rattle while your baby watches you do it, out of sight is out of mind.

But a few months later, your child will search for the rattle under the blanket, even if it is completely covered.

Watching your baby play and playing with your baby can be fun and rewarding for both of you, and sometimes the game your baby plays is evidence of a remarkable mental achievement.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*