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DR. DEAN EDELL

print story | email story last updated: 2/8/2005

Is It Possible To Achieve Perfect Pitch?

Feb. 8 (ABC7) — Absolute perfect pitch is something you're born with, but new research finds some people can learn a form of perfect pitch. Dr. Dean Edell reports on a new study finding the ability may have a strong correlation to the language you speak.

[Research Summary](#)

Can you identify a musical note just by hearing it? People who can have the musical ability known as perfect pitch.

Diana Deutsch: "When they hear a note they immediately name it, they don't need a reference note."

It was once thought that this talent was something people were born with. But now, new research shows it may be something that can also be learned.

Diana Deutsch, psychology professor: "All babies are born with the ability to acquire perfect pitch. But they have to be given the opportunity to do so very early in life."

Why is it that some people have perfect pitch? Well researchers are now noticing that people who speak certain Asian languages have a higher rate of perfect pitch. Learning to identify the tones of each word, for instance in Chinese, seems to train the speaker to recognize each note, so perfect pitch may be partially learned.

Psychologists compared American students with Chinese students who spoke Mandarin. Mandarin is a so-called 'tone language,' meaning the same word can mean different things, depending on the tone in which it's spoken.

Diana Deutsch, PhD: "If you take the word 'ma' in the first tone it means mother, in the second tone it means hemp in the third tone it means horse and in the fourth tone it's a reproach. So, pitch is very important in Mandarin in conveying meaning. "

Babies who learn to differentiate tones in language have a better chance of also differentiating tones in music.

Diana Deutsch, PhD: "It will be for them like acquiring the tones of

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If you'd like to ask Dr. Dean Edell a question, please call him on his radio show at 1-800-548-TALK. He's on Monday - Friday, 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. on KGO-AM Talk Radio 810 AM.

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another language."

This study looked at students who had been through musical training as children. Fifty-one percent of those who spoke Mandarin had perfect pitch compared with 6 percent of Americans.

Diana Deutsch, PhD: "So, the difference is really enormous."

So how can English-speaking families help their babies develop perfect pitch without changing languages?

Diana Deutsch, PhD: "You could give babies toys that do associate pitches with verbal labels."

Mandarin isn't the only language that uses musical tones. Vietnamese and other tonal language speakers may also have a greater chance of developing perfect pitch.

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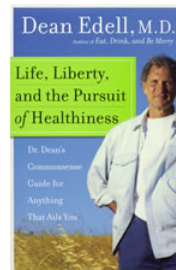
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