Symbolic artifacts are a ubiquitous and crucially important feature of modern life. A large proportion of the knowledge of most adults was acquired indirectly, through symbolic artifacts of various sorts. To become fully functional members of any society, children must gain competence with the symbols and symbol systems through which knowledge is acquired. Infants initially accept a wide range of entities as potential symbols and that young children are often confused about the nature of symbol–referent relations. During the first few years of life, however, children make rapid progress towards becoming competent symbol users.

**Definition:** A symbol is something that someone intends to represent something other than itself.

“Someone”: the creative and flexible use of a vast array of different types of symbols is unique to humans. The symbolic capacity irrevocably transformed our species, vastly expanding our intellectual horizons and making possible the cultural transmission of knowledge to succeeding generations.

Symbols *represent*: they refer to, they are about something. They are not merely associated with their referents. Children can interpret pictures and words symbolically, that is, as representing something else (e.g. picking a real whisk after being trained with its picture).

Symbols are general: anything can be used to represent anything else. Young children start the process of acquiring symbolic competence with a remarkably general symbolic ability (e.g. panting to refer to a dog, sniffing to refer to flowers). With experience with language, children’s initial amodal orientation to communicative labels gradually becomes focused on spoken words.

A *person’s intention* that one entity represents another is both necessary and sufficient to establish a symbolic relation. Nothing is inherently a symbol; only as a result of someone using it with the goal of denoting or referring does it take on a symbolic role. When infants and toddlers hear a novel word (or other sort of novel label), they learn it as the name for something only if they have reason to believe that the speaker intends for it to name that thing.

**Learning symbol–referent relations:** Only gradually do infants appreciate how some symbols differ from their referents. They have to figure out through experience that a depicted toy cannot be picked up. Although infants can perceive a difference between real and depicted objects, they do not understand the significance of that difference, so they investigate.

**Very young children’s use of symbolic artifacts as information:** in the model task, children observe an experimenter hide a miniature toy somewhere in a realistic scale model of a room, and they are told that a larger version of the object is hidden in the corresponding place in the room itself. There are age differences in the performance of children between 2 and 3 years of age in this task due to young children’s difficulty in achieving ‘dual representation’. Decreasing the salience of a model as an object by placing it behind a window enables 2.5-year-olds to succeed in the model task. Increasing the physical salience of the model by letting 3-year-olds play with it for several minutes before the retrieval task leads to a decrement in their performance. Eliminating the need for dual representation increases the children’s performance. Interacting with the model as an object blocks the child’s appreciation of its symbolic function.