Early studies of children's acquisition of the passive suggested that this construction is acquired late and its acquisition is semantically constrained: children comprehend actional verb (e.g. hit) passives better than non-actional verb (e.g. love) passives (see e.g. Maratsos et al. 1985). These verb classes differ in their thematic role arrangement: actional verbs have an agent (underlying subject) and patient (underlying object) whereas non-actional verbs may have an experiencer subject and theme object or a theme subject and an experiencer object. More recent production studies have shown contradictory results: Children as young as 3 or 4 years old produce passives following training (Brooks & Tomasello 1999) or priming (Huttenlocher et al. 2004), though these studies did not compare actional and non-actional verbs.

We propose that syntactic priming is an appropriate experimental paradigm for studying children's acquisition of passives: Studies with adults suggest that priming taps into a level of abstract structural representations. Priming studies with children have shown similar effects, suggesting that children have abstract syntactic representations for some structures from a young age (Branigan et al. 2006). Priming also appears to facilitate the production of infrequent or difficult constructions (Hartsuiker & Kolk, 1998). We suggest that if children have acquired an abstract representation for the passive it should be possible to elicit passives through priming; if this representation is constrained by verb type (actional) as suggested by early studies we would not expect priming from non-actional verbs. If the acquisition of the passive is not semantically constrained we would expect priming from actional and non-actional verbs, though perhaps stronger priming in the condition where the thematic roles are the same (although evidence for the part that thematic roles play in syntactic priming of sentence production is mixed (Bock & Loebell, 1990; Chang et al., 2003)).

We tested 20 pre-school children (mean age 4;6) and a control adult group in a picture description task that manipulated Prime Structure (active vs. passive) and Verb Type (actional vs. non-actional); target pictures showed an actional transitive event that had no lexical or semantic overlap with the content words of the primes:

Prime: a bear is patting/frightening a girl a girl is being patted/frightened by a bear
Target: a frog tickling a fairy

Children heard a prime description then described their own picture. We found a strong and reliable structural priming effect for children (28%) and adults (20%), and a prime by group interaction (marginal by participants, p < .07). There was no effect of Verb Type.

Our results show comprehension to production priming from both verb types, suggesting children acquire an abstract syntactic representation for the passive early on which is not necessarily semantically constrained. The priming effect was surprisingly strong in adults, though this may be related to our method, which was designed for child participants. Furthermore, priming occurred despite different thematic role arrangements of the primes and targets and was not enhanced when these overlapped, suggesting that thematic roles are not involved when priming sentence production, or their effect can be overridden.