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Thinking Ahead: How Children Reason About the Future

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Abstract: Episodic future thinking relies heavily on self-projection, i.e., projecting oneself into the future. It involves the use of episodic and semantic memory in order to plan and anticipate future need. In our study, we focused on understanding the role of self in episodic future thinking in 3- and 4-year old children. Children were asked to make choices either for their own future need (self group) or for another individual's future need (other group). Including these groups allowed us to directly manipulate the role of self. Participants were shown a 3-D model of a neighborhood with several locations (houses and stores) and were asked to navigate around the neighborhood to achieve a future goal requiring a two-step action (go to toy store to buy present and then go to friend's house to give present). In one version of the study, children were given only a few choices of locations in the neighborhood in order to achieve their goal. Preliminary results suggest that both 3- and 4-year-old children demonstrate episodic future thinking by accurately following the actions to achieve the future goal. In the second version of the study, 2 additional choices of location were added to the neighborhood, while keeping the goal the same. These additional items served as distracters in the environment. Results show that while 4-year-old children still demonstrate episodic future thinking skills, 3-year-old children are no longer able to accurately follow the actions necessary to achieve the future goal. Further research on optimal performance by 3-year-old in such visual working memory and episodic future thinking tasks is necessary.