

What motivates preschoolers to prepare for the future

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Summary: Adults spend an average of 59 times a day thinking about the future. This helps them to cope with upcoming challenges. But what do children do?

FULL STORY

Adults spend an average of 59 times a day thinking about the future. This helps them to cope with upcoming challenges. But what do children do?

Adults find it particularly easy to prepare for the future when they imagine how they will feel. Researchers at Ruhr University Bochum, Germany, have investigated whether this is also the case with preschoolers. In a study with 90 children aged five, they showed that this cohort only prepares for a game when they imagine how bad it will feel when. The researchers conducted the study as part of the Research Training Group (DFG-Graduiertenkolleg) "Situated Cognition" at the intersection of philosophy and psychology, which is funded by the German Research Foundation. They described their findings in the journal *Emotion* on March 28, 2024.

Preschool children tend to live in the here and now

Rehearsing for a school play, getting a present for a friend's birthday and packing a book for a long car journey: Their everyday lives are full of events that children need to prepare for. "However, preschool children rarely manage to do this without the support of adults," says Dr. Babett Voigt, who led the study together with Felix Schreiber. "Even when preschool children are asked to imagine an upcoming event, their response will often be guided by their current mood. Surprisingly, it was not yet known why this is the case."

Imagine how you will feel

In the online study, the children visited two virtual rooms. In the first room, they were introduced to three games. They also learned that they would return to this room later, that there would be a test in one of the games and that they could win stickers. In the second room, some of the children were asked to imagine how good it would feel to win lots of stickers, while others were asked to imagine how bad it would feel to win just a few stickers. The third group was reminded only of the fact that the test would take place.

The researchers then presented the children with the same three games as in the first room. The children could decide which of the games they wanted to play before returning to the first room. The decisive factor for the researchers was whether the children chose the game which was

announced to be played later to win the stickers. Only the children who had imagined how bad it would feel to win only a small number of stickers were more likely to choose the game on which they would later be tested.

Pessimistic outlook is a strong motivational factor

This indicates that expectations about future events and feelings affect how children behave in the here and now. "A pessimistic outlook seems to motivate children to prepare for events," says Babett Voigt. "We suspect that preschool children rarely think spontaneously about how unpleasant something will feel." This hypothesis now needs to be tested in future studies.

Story Source:

Materials provided by **Ruhr-University Bochum**. Original written by Julia Weiler. *Note: Content may be edited for style and length.*

Journal Reference:

1. Felix Schreiber, Silvia Schneider, Albert Newen, Babett Voigt. **Negative (but not positive) affective episodic future thinking enhances proactive behavior in 5-year-old children..** *Emotion*, 2024; DOI: [10.1037/emo0001345](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001345)

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