MedicalXpress

Infantile amnesia: Gauging children's earliest memories

May 11 2011

The inability of individuals to remember the very earliest years of their lives, called infantile amnesia, has been studied for many years in adults, who seem to recall very little before ages 3 or 4. But children also experience infantile amnesia—and a new study out of Canada explores their experiences.

The study was conducted by researchers at Memorial University of Newfoundland and appears in the journal *Child Development.*

In the longitudinal study, researchers asked 140 children ages 4 to 13 to describe their three earliest memories. Two years later, they asked the children again about their earliest memories. The children were also asked to estimate how old they were at the time of each memory. Parents confirmed that the events happened and provided their own estimates of how old their children were at the time of the memories.

Children who were between 4 and 7 at the first interview showed very little overlap between the memories they recalled the first time and those they remembered two years later, suggesting that very early memories of young children are fragile and vulnerable to forgetting. In contrast, a third of the 10- to 13-year-olds described the same memory as their very earliest when asked two years apart, and more than half of all the memories they provided were the same at both interviews.

"Younger children's earliest memories seemed to change, with memories from younger ages being replaced by memories from older ages,"

according to Carole Peterson, professor of psychology at Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada, who led the study. "But older children became more consistent in their memories as they grew older."

"As we lose those memories of those early years, years that we previously could recall, we're losing part of our childhood—in essence, we're losing all or almost all of those events that occurred to us then," notes Peterson. "So our 'psychological childhood' begins much later than our real childhood. And most or all of those events that previously were talked about, that caused laughter or tears, are no longer accessible if they occurred in our preschool years."

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

Citation: Infantile amnesia: Gauging children's earliest memories (2011, May 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-05-infantile-amnesia-gauging-children-earliest.html

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