

Toddlers are capable of introspection

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Preschoolers are more introspective than we give them credit for, according to new research by Simona Ghetti, assistant professor of psychology at UC Davis.

Ghetti and her co-investigator, Kristen Lyons, a graduate student in psychology at UC Davis, will present their findings Friday morning, Aug. 17, at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in San Francisco.

Scientists have demonstrated that dolphins, monkeys and even rats can engage in some form of "metacognition," or an awareness of their own thought processes. But developmental psychologists have assumed that human children do not develop this capability before about age 5.

Lyons and Ghetti have toppled that assumption by teaching 3- and 4-year-olds to communicate their awareness of their thought processes using pictures rather than words.

"We've shown that even very young children can think about their thinking," Ghetti said. "The reason we haven't appreciated it before now is that the studies that have been used to test for it have been too verbally demanding."

The UC Davis researchers devised a novel method to investigate metacognition in early childhood. They taught their preschool subjects to point to a photo of a confident-looking face when they felt confident they had the right answer to a question, and to a photo of a doubtful-

looking child when they were not confident they had the right answer.

The tests showed that young children are aware of their uncertainty in the moment. Even 3-year-olds pointed to the confident face when they correctly identified, for example, a drawing of a monkey that had some features removed to make it harder to recognize. They pointed to the doubtful face if they could not come up with a correct answer.

"Even 3-year-olds are more confident when they're right than when they're wrong," Ghetti said.

How children develop the ability to experience, recognize and understand their thoughts and emotions is a topic of increasing scientific interest, since self-awareness is a prerequisite for the development of a wide range of important human traits, from a conscience to healthy relationships.

Source: UC Davis

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